

**Gender Differences and Impact of Academic Pressure:  
The Experiences of Taiwanese High School Students**

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# **Gender Differences and Impact of Academic Pressure: The Experiences of Taiwanese High School Students**

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Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages, 2026

## **Abstract**

Under Taiwan's highly competitive educational system, high school students commonly faced significant academic pressure. Although academic pressure is a widespread phenomenon, students of different genders experienced and coped with it differently due to the influence of gender stereotypes on the formation of their academic self-concept. Research also indicated that gender played a key moderating role in academic pressure. However, studies focusing on gender differences in this experience among Taiwanese high school students remained limited. This study aimed to fill this gap by exploring how gender influenced Taiwanese high school students' perceptions of academic pressure and its effects on their academic performance. It also examined students' experiences with gender expectations and their coping strategies. In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 students in Kaohsiung City, selected through purposive and quota sampling. The findings revealed subtly gender differences in the sources of and responses to academic pressure. Ultimately, this research sought to enhance understanding of academic pressure in the context of Taiwan's education system and promote the well-being and academic success of all students.

Keywords: Academic pressure, Gender differences, Gender stereotypes, Taiwanese high school students.

## 摘要

在台灣競爭激烈的教育體系下，高中生普遍面臨顯著的學業壓力。雖然學業壓力是一種普遍現象，但不同性別的學生可能因性別刻板印象對其學業自我概念的影響，而在經驗與因應方式上有所不同。研究也指出，性別在學業壓力中扮演關鍵的調節角色。然而，針對台灣高中生在此經驗上的性別差異之研究仍相當有限。本研究旨在填補此研究缺口，探討性別如何影響台灣高中生對學業壓力的看法及其對學業表現的影響，並進一步了解學生在面對性別期待時的經驗與因應策略。研究採用了立意取樣與配額取樣方式，於高雄市進行了十三位學生的深度訪談。研究結果顯示在學業壓力的來源與反應上存在微妙的性別差異。最終，本研究期望能深化對台灣教育體系中學業壓力的理解，並促進所有學生的福祉與學業成功。

關鍵詞：學業壓力、性別差異、性別刻板印象、台灣高中生

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## INTRODUCTION

### Background

#### **The Weight of Expectations: Academic Pressure in Taiwan**

In Taiwan's highly competitive educational environment, academic pressure is a common issue faced by most students, particularly high school students. This pressure stems from multiple factors, including the entrance examination system, educational culture, and societal expectations, which might affect students of different genders in distinct ways. Not all students perceived or responded to stress in the same manner; gender might play a crucial role in shaping these experiences, leading to diverse patterns of behavior and responses among male and female students. Since such gender-based differences were often overlooked in policy and educational practice, gaining a deeper understanding of how gender influences academic pressure is a meaningful research endeavor. Recognizing these differences can help educators and policymakers design more equitable support systems and address the unique challenges faced by students of different genders. This study aimed to contribute to the creation of a more inclusive and supportive educational environment and to challenge the negative effects of traditional gender norms, ultimately fostering healthier learning conditions for the next generation of students.

#### **Social and Cultural Context**

In Taiwan, the exam-oriented education system places increasing academic pressure on students from elementary through high school, with the high school stage marking the peak due to crucial university entrance examinations. Taiwan ranks among the highest in terms of student school hours, and the prevalence of cram school culture makes learning feel never-ending. The subject ranking system intensifies competition, as students strive for top positions in class and school rankings. This relentless pursuit is

not only driven by students' own expectations but also by the pressures to meet the demands of their families, schools, and broader society.

A report from the Children's Welfare League on academic pressure reflected the anxiety of parents, students and society.<sup>1</sup> Parents worried that their children would lose at the beginning, so they constantly help their children with tutoring and arrange talent classes. They were highly uncertain about the future, so they pass the pressure on to their children. Students were under double pressure from family and school, and often worry about grades, exams and further studies. Some even have physical and mental problems. Learning has become a burden rather than a process of self-growth. The whole society emphasizes academic qualifications and competition. After major exams, media outlets frequently report on high-achieving students and promote the myth of prestigious schools, further deepening anxiety.

In Taiwan, education model has been reinforced since the 1990s. While the government has introduced reforms such as diversified admission pathways and the new 2019 curriculum (Curriculum Guidelines of 12-Year Basic Education, also known as the 108 Curriculum) to reduce pressure and challenge single-value educational norms, mainstream society continues to emphasize academic performance and entrance results. Media headlines frequently highlight top exam scorers or perfect test results, reinforcing the idea that “grades equal success” and exacerbating psychological pressure on students.

These social expectations were often accompanied by gender stereotypes. For example, girls were expected to be quiet and diligent, while boys were supposed to be rational and strong. Girls were seen as more suited to the humanities, whereas boys were considered more appropriate for the science and engineering fields. If a girl excels

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<sup>1</sup> 中華民國兒童福利聯盟基金會（兒盟），〈學生過勞又迷惘 怎麼逃離課業壓力鍋?!〉，2023年10月22日，[https://www.children.org.tw/news/news\\_detail/3004](https://www.children.org.tw/news/news_detail/3004)。

in a STEM subject, she was often viewed as exceptional; if a boy performs poorly in math or science, he might be seen as lacking the potential for success. These gendered assumptions not only shape students' self-identity and aspirations but also influence how they emotionally and behaviorally cope with academic pressure. In such a cultural context, boys who express emotions or vulnerability may be seen as "lacking masculinity," while high-achieving girls may face doubt or excessive expectations.

Gender stereotypes were also clearly reflected in students' choices of academic tracks. In a news report, Yu-Cheng Kuo pointed out that Taiwan's high school "arts vs. science streaming system" has long been influenced by gendered perceptions. Many students, when choosing their track, consider not only their personal interests and abilities but also the social expectation that "boys should study science and engineering, while girls are better suited for the humanities." The article mentioned that boys who choose the humanities track may be questioned by their peers for being "too soft," while girls who opt for the science track were often seen as "particularly impressive" or "not very feminine." This demonstrated how societal expectations around gender roles not only shape students' self-perceptions but also had a tangible impact on their academic and career choices.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, students of different genders experience and cope with academic pressure in different ways. Research suggested that female students were more likely to feel pressure due to personal expectations and sensitivity to relationships, while male students often face pressure from social expectations of achievement yet were less encouraged to express stress or seek help. These gender differences not only shape the experience of pressure but also affect mental health and coping outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> 沙珮琦，〈女生選文組，男生念理組？性別對高中生選組的影響——逢甲大學郭祐誠專訪〉，《科技大觀園》，2021年3月15日，<https://scitechvista.nat.gov.tw/Article/C000003/detail?ID=823f89bd-55f6-4ebf-a767-e5eaa28f0adb>。

In recent years, gender-related social movements in Taiwan have received increasing attention. For example, Taiwan not only became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, but gender equality initiatives have also continued to gain prominence. These changes have not only altered societal values regarding gender roles but also indicate that expectations for men and women are gradually shifting, thereby influencing social interactions as well as the pressures and opportunities students face in the educational process. Building on these societal changes, although the new curriculum seeks to break away from traditional values through learning portfolios, diverse elective courses, and more, it remains constrained by the overwhelming pressure of college admissions. In practice, parents, schools, and students inevitably refocus on grades and acceptance results. This revealed under the dual influence of educational systems and social culture, gender roles and academic pressure remain tightly intertwined, deeply shaping the learning and developmental experiences of Taiwanese high school students.

## **Linking Gender and Academic Pressure**

Based on the social and cultural context outlined above, this section will introduce some key concepts to illustrate how students of different genders experience academic stress differently. Rather than viewing academic pressure as a uniform experience, this study draws on concepts such as gender role socialization, academic self-concept, coping strategies, and gender inequality in education to better understand how gender affects students' perceptions of academics in the Taiwanese educational context.

### Academic Pressure in Competitive Systems

Academic pressure generally referred to the psychological and physiological stress responses that students experience while striving for academic performance,

dealing with evaluations, or meeting external expectations (Liu and Lu 2012)<sup>3</sup>. In Taiwan's educational system, this pressure was often closely linked to the competition for university entrance, the examination system, parental expectations, and peer comparison. Students may feel pressure from multiple sources such as family, school, and society, and this pressure could manifest differently depending on personal backgrounds and gender.

### Gender as Social Construct

In this study, gender did not merely refer to biological sex but emphasizes social gender. Social gender highlighted that gender was a social construct, meaning that society has established expectations and norms regarding how "men should be" and "women should be" in terms of behavior, abilities, and emotional expression (Li and Luh 2015).<sup>4</sup> For example, society often expects men to be strong and rational, while women were expected to be gentle and nurturing. These gender ideas were reinforced throughout the educational and developmental process, influencing students' understanding of their roles and their learning styles.

### Gender Role Socialization & Emotional Expression

One relevant theory was gender role socialization theory, which posits that individuals learn gender-appropriate behaviors and coping strategies through social interactions in families, schools, and media. This means that students of different genders may exhibit significant differences in their pressure responses and coping strategies. For example, boys may be more likely to suppress stress and strive for

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<sup>3</sup> Yangyang Liu and Zuhong Lu, "Chinese high school students' academic stress and depressive symptoms: gender and school climate as moderators," *Stress and Health* 28, no. 4 (2012).

<sup>4</sup> 李奕瑩 and 陸偉明, "單一性別或男女合班: 公立高中數理資優生的學業自我概念, 性別刻板印象與心理健康," *Journal of Educational Research* 11, no. 4 (2015).

competitive performance, while girls may tend to express stress and sought support (Bang, 2009; Bernstein and Chemaly 2017).<sup>5</sup>

### Gendered Academic Self-Concept

This study will also address gender expectations, which refer to societal assumptions about the traits, interests, and fields of achievement appropriate for each gender. For example, girls were often expected to excel in language and humanities, while boys were expected to be strong in math and science. These stereotypes not only affect students' academic self-concept but may also increase the pressure they feel when performing in certain subjects.

Moreover, academic self-concept referred to students' subjective evaluation of their academic abilities and performance, which could be significantly influenced by gender stereotypes (Li and Luh 2015).<sup>6</sup> For instance, girls may underestimate their abilities in math, seeing it as a "male domain," which led to more frustration and pressure. On the other hand, boys may experience increased pressure to perform well due to expectations, even if their actual performance did not align with those expectations (Lee and Kung 2018).<sup>7</sup>

### Coping Strategies and Mental Health

Coping strategies are also a crucial aspect of understanding the relationship

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<sup>5</sup> Eun-Jun Bang, "The effects of gender, academic concerns, and social support on stress for international students" (University of Missouri--Columbia, 2009); Colleen Bernstein and Chanel Chemaly, "Sex role identity, academic stress and wellbeing of first-year university students," *Gender and Behaviour* 15, no. 1 (2017).

<sup>6</sup> 李奕瑩 and 陸偉明, "單一性別或男女合班: 公立高中數理資優生的學業自我概念, 性別刻板印象與心理健康." *Journal of Educational Research* 11, no. 4 (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Ching-Yi Lee and Hsin-Yi Kung, "Math self-concept and mathematics achievement: Examining gender variation and reciprocal relations among junior high school students in Taiwan," *Eurasia Journal of Mathematics, Science and Technology Education* 14, no. 4 (2018).

between gender and pressure. Students of different genders tend to adopt different coping strategies for managing stress. Research indicated that girls were more likely to express emotions and sought social support, while boys may be more inclined to suppress emotions or handle stress independently (Bang 2009).<sup>8</sup> These coping patterns reflected the outcomes of gender role socialization and may further influence the accumulation of stress and mental health.

### Institutional Gender Inequality in Education

Finally, gender inequality in education provides a structural framework for understanding these issues. As part of the social system, schools may unconsciously reproduce traditional gender roles and subject classifications through curriculum content, teacher interactions, and the allocation of resources for further education (Diniz et al 2018).<sup>9</sup> These structural factors could exacerbate gender differences in academic pressure experiences. For example, girls may face higher self-doubt and external criticism in STEM fields, while boys may experience stereotype-related pressure in language or expression courses.

### Demographics & Trends

In Taiwan's educational system, academic pressure is not only widespread but also deeply embedded in students' everyday experiences, shaped by institutional, familial, and cultural forces. Gender plays a moderating role in how this pressure was perceived, internalized, and managed, affecting its sources, intensity, and the coping strategies students adopt. In recent years, curriculum reforms and shifting societal

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<sup>8</sup> Bang, "The effects of gender, academic concerns, and social support on stress for international students." (University of Missouri--Columbia, 2009)

<sup>9</sup> António M Diniz et al., "Gender differences in first-year college students' academic expectations," *Studies in Higher Education* 43, no. 4 (2018).

attitudes have introduced new dynamics, further shaping the gendered patterns of academic stress among high school students. To illustrate how these dynamics manifest in real life, the following section draws on recent demographic data and trends to provide concrete evidence supporting the conceptual claims outlined above.

### Academic Pressure in Competitive Systems<sup>10</sup>

In Taiwan's competitive academic environment, high school students faced tremendous pressure from many aspects. According to the Child Welfare League Foundation 2023 report, despite the implementation of 108 curriculum guidelines in 2019 to promote "adaptive development" and "diverse learning", 82.6% of students still reported facing academic pressure. Instead of reducing students' pressure, these reforms have brought new requirements, such as preparing learning portfolios (76.1%), planning independent learning (47.9%), and planning future career paths (40.1%), which have become a huge source of stress for students.

This pressure was exacerbated by the examination culture of daily life. About 52.1% of students take exams more than four days a week, including assessments in cram schools. Some students even face more than four or five exams a day. After-school tutoring is also common: nearly 60% of students attend cram schools, rising to 72.4% in urban areas, and 23.1% of students go home after 10 pm. The study time is usually more than 10 hours a day, more than 90% of students sleep less than 8 hours, 37% sleep 5-6 hours, and even 12.6% sleep less than 5 hours. These data reflected that despite the change in policy concepts, the mentality of "exam-oriented study" is still deeply rooted.

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<sup>10</sup> 兒童福利聯盟，2023 年臺灣兒少學習狀況調查報告（台北：中華民國兒童福利聯盟基金會，2023），取自 [https://www.children.org.tw/publication\\_research/research\\_report/2655](https://www.children.org.tw/publication_research/research_report/2655)。

## Gender as Social Construct<sup>11</sup>

While academic pressure affects almost all students, gender differences led to different ways of experiencing stress, which was reinforced through family and school expectations. 39.9% of students said that their parents would compare their grades with others, and 15.7% said that they were verbally humiliated for poor grades. These behaviors often carry implicit gender expectations, for example, girls were expected to be obedient and hardworking, while boys were required to compete and achieve excellent grades. In addition, 22.1% of students believed that their parents only care about academics and ignore emotional or personal needs. These attitudes reflected how gender roles were socially constructed and perpetuated in daily interactions in family and school settings; these social expectations also shape how students respond emotionally to pressure.

## Gender Role Socialization & Emotional Expression<sup>12</sup>

Gender not only affects students' educational attainment, but also their emotional responses to academic stress. The Child Welfare League Foundation reported that 66.6% of students felt unhappy with their performance, 60.7% worried about falling behind their peers, and 48.6% felt frustrated all day because of poor grades on tests or homework. These responses were not uniform: girls may be more likely to internalize stress, leading to self-doubt and emotional exhaustion, while boys may be reluctant to express vulnerability.

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<sup>11</sup> 兒童福利聯盟，2023 年臺灣兒少學習狀況調查報告（台北：中華民國兒童福利聯盟基金會，2023），取自 [https://www.children.org.tw/publication\\_research/research\\_report/2655](https://www.children.org.tw/publication_research/research_report/2655)。

<sup>12</sup> 兒童福利聯盟，2023 年臺灣兒少學習狀況調查報告（台北：中華民國兒童福利聯盟基金會，2023），取自 [https://www.children.org.tw/publication\\_research/research\\_report/2655](https://www.children.org.tw/publication_research/research_report/2655)。

This emotional burden could have serious consequences for mental health. The survey found that 15% of students experienced insomnia, 13.8% experienced physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach aches, and 10.3% experienced eating disorders. Most worryingly, 24.8% of students reported having thoughts of self-harm or suicide, an increase from 21.3% in 2017 to 28.1% in 2023. These statistics highlight the psychological toll that academic expectations could take, especially in the context of gender norms that may limit emotional expression or help-seeking behavior.

### Gendered Academic Self-Concept

Gender stereotypes could also affect students' perceptions of their own academic abilities and future aspirations. A study by Hong et al. (2003) surveyed 1,672 high school students and found that boys were more likely to hold strong gender stereotypes than girls, especially in academics. Boys were considered to excel in science and logic, while girls were superior in verbal and emotional intelligence. These stereotypes could affect students' academic self-concepts, reduce girls' achievement motivation or discourage them from pursuing certain fields.<sup>13</sup>

The study found that students with academic difficulties held more rigid gender concepts about behavior and ability, while students with excellent grades showed more fixed concepts about personal traits and social roles. At the same time, Child Welfare League Foundation 2023 report data showed that 30.6% of students lacked interest in learning, and 25.6% of students believed that studying so much now would be of no use in the future.<sup>14</sup> This showed that gender expectations not only affect students' goals but also affect how they evaluate the meaning of education itself.

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<sup>13</sup> Zuway-R Hong, Patricia McCarthy Veach, and Frances Lawrenz, "An investigation of the gender stereotyped thinking of Taiwanese secondary school boys and girls," *Sex roles* 48 (2003).

<sup>14</sup> 兒童福利聯盟，2023 年臺灣兒少學習狀況調查報告（台北：中華民國兒童福利聯盟基金會，2023），取自 [https://www.children.org.tw/publication\\_research/research\\_report/2655](https://www.children.org.tw/publication_research/research_report/2655)。

## Institutional Gender Inequality in Education<sup>15</sup>

Despite the emphasis on reducing academic pressure and promoting all-round development in the 108 curriculum guidelines, the current education system still puts academic performance above students' physical and mental health. This gap between the policy and practice environment exacerbates structural inequality. According to a survey by the Child Welfare League Foundation in 2023, more than 90% of students sleep less than 8 hours, 37% of students sleep less than 5-6 hours, and even 12.6% of students sleep less than 5 hours. The median time for students to exercise outdoors per week is only 1 hour, which is obviously insufficient and worrying.

Family and school expectations further exacerbate this imbalance. 39.9% of students said that their parents often compared their grades with others, 22.1% of students believed that their parents only focused on academic performance, and 15.7% of students suffered verbal humiliation when they did not perform well. These pressures reflect that the education system focuses too much on academic performance and ignores the physical and mental health of students.

In addition to parental expectations, students' self-expectations were also a source of pressure. 66.6% of students were dissatisfied with their academic performance, 60.7% worried about falling behind their peers, and 48.6% felt unhappy all day because of poor test or homework scores. These findings suggested that students' psychological needs were systematically ignored, and that these needs may be experienced and expressed differently by gender. In this context, the disconnect between curriculum concepts and actual practices highlights not only the failure of the education system to support the holistic development of students, but also the lack of gender-sensitive

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<sup>15</sup> 兒童福利聯盟，2023 年臺灣兒少學習狀況調查報告（台北：中華民國兒童福利聯盟基金會，2023），取自 [https://www.children.org.tw/publication\\_research/research\\_report/2655](https://www.children.org.tw/publication_research/research_report/2655)。

teaching methods.

## **Gaps or Debates in the Field**

In Taiwan's highly competitive education system, academic pressure has become a common and serious issue for high school students. The entrance examination system, which centers around tests and emphasizes grades and admission to prestigious universities, places students under immense stress throughout their long-term preparation process. In recent years, growing concern over students' mental health has sparked public debate about whether the current system is excessively competitive. However, existing research on gender and academic pressure mainly focuses on students in China or Western countries, with limited exploration of Taiwanese high school students' experiences within their local cultural context. Moreover, most studies rely on quantitative analysis, which captures statistical trends between gender and stress but tends to overlook students' subjective feelings and everyday experiences. This may result in an incomplete understanding of the sources of pressure and how students respond to them.

Given this context, the interaction between academic pressure and gender roles is a topic that warrants further attention. In recent years, Taiwanese society has shown increasing interest in education reform and gender issues. With the implementation of the new curriculum guidelines, the Ministry of Education has promoted diversified learning, reduced anxiety over entrance exams, and encouraged students to develop based on their interests. However, a gap remains between policy ideals and actual practice. Some parent groups worried about a "decline in academic standards" or that students may lose their competitiveness. Media coverage continues to focus on exam results, reflecting a society that still places high value on academic achievement. This

further intensifies students' anxiety and peer comparisons.

In recent years, there has been growing global attention on males' low achievement in education. A New York Times article about 2025 highlighted how boys lag girls in GPA, literacy, graduation rates, and even mental health.<sup>16</sup> These trends had sparked debate about whether existing gender norms and school systems were inadvertently disadvantaged boys. How does Taiwan fit into these global trends? In Taiwan, academic achievement remains highly valued, and traditional gender expectations continue to shape students' school experiences. Gender plays a key role within this context. Although Taiwan has made progress toward gender equality in laws and policies, deeply rooted gender stereotypes persist in schools and society. Male students were often expected to be rational, resilient, and excel in math and science, while female students were encouraged to be gentle, attentive, and perform well in language or the arts. These gender norms may influence students' subject choices and self-expectations, as well as their coping strategies and psychological responses to pressure. Some studies suggested that girls were more likely to express anxiety and self-blame, while boys may respond to pressure through suppression or behavioral issues. However, do these patterns also appear among Taiwanese high school students? And how are they intertwined with academic pressure and cultural expectations? There is a notable lack of qualitative data to answer these questions.

In addition, student voices were often marginalized in education policy and academic research. Policies frequently overlook students' subjective experiences and cultural positions, making it difficult for the system to meet their actual needs. Without understanding how students of different genders experience and respond to pressure, we risk underestimating the long-term impact of institutional factors on their

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<sup>16</sup> *The Upshot, The New York Times*, "It's Not Just a Feeling: Data Shows Boys and Young Men Are Falling Behind," May 13, 2025, [https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/13/upshot/boys-falling-behind-data.html?unlocked\\_article\\_code=1.L08.CkbU.vDUT352tD\\_nh&smid=url-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/13/upshot/boys-falling-behind-data.html?unlocked_article_code=1.L08.CkbU.vDUT352tD_nh&smid=url-share).

development.

Therefore, this study aims to fill these gaps by using qualitative interviews to gain deeper insight into how Taiwanese high school students negotiate and adapt to academic pressure in relation to gender roles. The research center on students owns voices and analyze their experiences within Taiwan's unique cultural, social, and educational context. Through this, the study seeks to reveal the heterogeneity of pressure experiences across genders and promote a deeper understanding and practical response to gender and cultural differences in educational practice, ultimately supporting more inclusive and culturally sensitive education reform.

### **Link to Research Question**

Considering the above social and cultural context, gender theory, and the widespread nature of academic pressure, it is evident that gender plays a significant role in shaping the academic pressure experiences of Taiwanese high school students. Gender not only influences how students perceive stress but also affects their coping strategies and emotional responses. In Taiwan's highly competitive education system, gender norms have a profound impact on students' learning behaviors, psychological states, and academic performance. However, existing studies mainly focus on quantitative analyses and rarely explore the lived experiences where gender and academic stress intersect. Therefore, this study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how Taiwanese high school students negotiate the relationship between gender roles and academic pressure, particularly how they adapt within the framework of cultural and social expectations. The research focuses on students' subjective experiences and investigate how their perceptions of gender influence both their experience of academic pressure and their coping mechanisms, thereby revealing the multiple roles that gender

plays in academic stress.

## **Motivation**

Academic pressure has long been a significant issue for students, particularly in Taiwan's high-pressure academic environment. Gender plays a role in shaping academic pressure, as societal norms often create expectations based on gender, such as the belief that boys excel in science and girls in the humanities. Many students experienced gendered expectations, which raises questions about whether such values continue to influence students today. This study therefore investigates how gender affects academic pressure among Taiwanese high school students. While the findings might not immediately bring about practical changes in schools or society, the research contributes to filling a gap in the academic literature on the connection between gender and academic pressure. By exploring this topic, the research raises awareness of how gender expectations continue to shape students' academic experiences, encouraging future discussions and potential improvements in education and policy.

## **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to explore how gender influences the academic pressure experiences of Taiwanese high school students. By conducting in-depth interviews, this study aims to understand the ways in which gender shapes students' perceptions, responses, and interpretations of academic expectations within the broader cultural and societal context.

## **Research Questions**

How is gender perceived by Taiwanese high school students as influencing their academic pressure?

## **Contribution**

This study contributes to the limited body of research exploring how gender shapes the academic pressure experiences of Taiwanese high school students, a topic that has received little direct attention. High school students were at a critical stage where gender expectations could heavily influence their academic self-perception and decision-making. While immediate practical impact on educational policies may be limited, the findings offered valuable insights that encourage reflection on how traditional societal values shape academic experiences. By highlighting these patterns, this study lays a foundation for future research to further examine how cultural expectations impact not only academic stress but also broader issues such as subject choice and career planning, potentially contributing to gradual social change.

## **Limits**

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size of 13 students might not fully represent the diverse experiences of all Taiwanese high school students. The study relied on students who were willing to share their thoughts, which may result in a sample biased toward more expressive individuals. Additionally, the depth of responses could vary, potentially limiting the richness of the data collected. Since each student is an individual with unique experiences and perspectives, the findings might not be generalized to the entire population of Taiwanese high school students. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the results.

## **Delimits**

This study focuses on high school students in the Kaohsiung area, with no restrictions on grades or school. Due to accessibility and time constraints, Kaohsiung was selected, and qualitative interviews were chosen to explore how gender shapes students' experiences of academic pressure. Other factors, such as family background or mental health, were beyond the study's scope. Additionally, this research did not aim to assess educational policies or school-based interventions. Interviews were conducted during July and August in 2025, which might influence students' responses based on the academic calendar.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

In Taiwan's highly competitive educational system, high school students commonly experience intense academic pressure. Although academic pressure is a widespread phenomenon, gender may influence how students of different genders perceive and cope with this pressure. Studies have suggested that gender could play a moderating role in the relationship between academic stress and student well-being. This review aims to explore how gender shapes the academic pressure experiences of Taiwanese high school students, drawing on relevant literature to highlight the importance of examining this issue within Taiwan's local context.

Scholars offer various perspectives on the relationship between gender and academic pressure. One view emphasized how gender stereotypes embedded in sociocultural contexts were internalized by students, shaping their self-concept, academic choices, and perceived stress. For example, traditional beliefs such as "boys are good at STEM, girls are better at humanities" may influence students' academic confidence and contribute to subject-specific stress. Another perspective considered gender as a moderator between stress and mental health, with some studies indicating that female students were more likely to experience emotional distress under academic pressure. Additionally, gender expectations from school environments and teachers may affect students' learning experiences and stress levels. To fully understand the complex relationship between academic pressure and gender among Taiwanese high school students, it is crucial to integrate these perspectives within the context of Taiwan's unique sociocultural factors.

## **Gender as a Moderator in Academic Stress and Well-being**

Recent research consistently identified gender as a significant moderate factor in the relationship between academic stress and student well-being. Gender influenced not only how students perceived and responded to academic pressure, but also shaped their mental health outcomes, self-concept, and coping strategies. Rather than functioning as a mere demographic category, gender dynamically interacted with institutional structures, cultural norms, and identity development.

### **Gender and Academic Stress Vulnerability**

Liu and Lu (2012) provided direct evidence of gender's moderating role by studying Chinese high school students. They found that academic pressure correlated more strongly with depressive symptoms among female students, especially in environments emphasizing academic excellence. These findings suggested that gender interacted with institutional expectations, such as teacher pressure and competitive classroom climates, to heighten psychological vulnerability. Although the study focused on Chinese students, its relevance extends to Taiwan due to shared Confucian-rooted educational cultures.<sup>17</sup> The authors emphasized the need for gender-sensitive interventions in high-pressure academic settings where girls may be disproportionately affected.

Building on this perspective, Bang (2009) examined international students and found that gender also influenced coping behavior. Female students tended to seek emotional support, while male students were more likely to suppress emotions or cope independently. These patterns in coping strategies may further shape long-term mental health outcomes. Students with limited access to effective coping mechanisms, whether

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<sup>17</sup> Liu and Lu, "Chinese high school students' academic stress and depressive symptoms: gender and school climate as moderators."

due to gender norms or lack of resources, increased risks of psychological strain.<sup>18</sup> Understanding these gender-based behavioral differences, such as female students' tendency to seek emotional support, and male students' tendency to suppress emotions is essential for designing targeted mental health interventions that address these distinct coping styles.

### Gender Role Identity as a Mediating Factor

Bernstein and Chemaly (2017) add another dimension by focusing on gender role identity and its impact on academic resilience. In their study of college freshmen, students who held a strong and positive gender identity, such as confidence in traditionally masculine or feminine traits showed greater psychological adjustment under academic pressure. Notably, students with androgynous identities (balanced masculine and feminine traits) exhibited the highest adaptability to stress.<sup>19</sup> These findings are particularly relevant in the Taiwanese context, where traditional gender norms intersect with modern educational pressures. Girls socialized to be achievement-focused and compliant may internalize academic failure more deeply, while boys may suppress vulnerability due to masculine ideals, leading to underreported stress and reluctance to seek help. The research suggested that educators must consider students' internalized gender roles when assessing academic adaptation and well-being.

### Classroom Gender Composition and Self-Concept

Shifting the focus to academic identity, Li and Lu (2015) studied mathematically and scientifically gifted Taiwanese high school students and found that classroom

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<sup>18</sup> Bang, "The effects of gender, academic concerns, and social support on stress for international students."

<sup>19</sup> Bernstein and Chemaly, "Sex role identity, academic stress and wellbeing of first-year university students."

gender composition significantly impacted male students' academic self-concept. Boys in single-sex classrooms reported significantly higher academic confidence than those in coeducational settings, even after controlling for prior achievement. Interestingly, this effect was not observed in female students. The researchers suggested that boys in coeducational environments may feel constrained by gender norms, while single-sex settings offer greater freedom for academic expression. This pointed to the important role that classroom dynamics played in reinforcing or mitigating gendered academic experiences, particularly in gifted education programs.<sup>20</sup>

The following synthesis highlighted the implications of these findings for educational practice. These studies demonstrated that gender shaped academic pressure experiences in diverse and significant ways: Liu and Lu (2012) and Bang (2009) highlighted gender differences in stress vulnerability and coping mechanisms. Bernstein and Chemaly (2017) illustrated how gender role identity influences psychological adaptation under academic pressure. Li and Lu (2015) showed that classroom structures could either reinforce or relieve gendered constraints on academic self-concept. Overall, prior studies underscored that gender played a central role in shaping students' academic stress experiences (Liu and Lu 2012; Bang 2009; Bernstein and Chemaly 2017; Li and Lu 2015).

In Taiwan's high-pressure educational landscape characterized by intense competition and deeply embedded gender norms, recognizing the gendered nature of academic pressure is essential. By designing gender-sensitive interventions, promoting adaptive coping strategies, and rethinking classroom dynamics, educators and policymakers could better support students' academic development and mental well-being.

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<sup>20</sup> 李奕瑩 and 陸偉明, "單一性別或男女合班: 公立高中數理資優生的學業自我概念, 性別刻板印象與心理健康."

## **The Impact of Gender Stereotypes in Education**

Building on the discussion of gender moderating role in academic stress and coping, it is also important to examine how gender stereotypes within educational contexts shape students' academic experiences and expectations. Gender stereotypes were deeply rooted in both cultural traditions and institutional structures, influencing how Taiwanese high school students perceived their academic abilities, made subject choices, and experienced academic pressure. These stereotypes reinforced traditional gender roles, often limiting students' confidence and freedom to pursue academic paths based on genuine interest. Multiple studies showed how these norms shape educational trajectories and contribute to academic stress in gendered ways.

### **Gender-Stereotyped Academic Abilities and Self-Confidence**

One of the most prominent ways gender stereotypes manifest was in students' beliefs about their academic abilities. Hong, Veach, and Lawrence (2003) in a large-scale study of 1,672 Taiwanese high school students (779 boys and 893 girls), found that boys tended to perceive themselves as stronger in mathematics and science, while girls see themselves as more capable in language and liberal arts. These beliefs reflected traditional gender stereotypes that associate analytical thinking and logic with masculinity, and verbal or expressive strengths with femininity. Notably, students from higher-achieving schools were more likely to reinforce these stereotypes, suggesting that academic competition may intensify gendered patterns in self-perception.<sup>21</sup>

International research also sheds light on the link between gender stereotypes and academic self-confidence. Aidi et al. (2021) although not focused on Taiwan, demonstrate that in many cultural contexts, fathers often held traditional views about

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<sup>21</sup> Hong, Veach, and Lawrence, "An investigation of the gender stereotyped thinking of Taiwanese secondary school boys and girls."

gender roles and tended to encourage sons to pursue STEM fields while subtly guiding daughters toward the humanities.<sup>22</sup> This pattern of parental influence may have parallels in Taiwan, where Confucian-influenced family structures often assign different academic expectations to boys and girls. These gendered expectations could shape students' academic identities, particularly discouraging girls from fully participating in STEM fields due to internalized self-doubt.

Rakib (2024) and Igbo et al. (2015) further confirm the impact of internalized gender stereotypes on students' confidence and participation. Rakib (2024) showed that gender assumptions often exclude girls and women from academic spaces, particularly in science and technology, leading to reduced self-esteem.<sup>23</sup> Igbo et al. (2015) found that boys, benefiting from positive stereotypes about male academic ability, often reported higher self-confidence, especially in math and science regardless of actual performance.<sup>24</sup> These findings underscored how stereotypes distort students' self-perceptions and shaped their willingness to engage in different academic domains.

### Subject Preferences and Gendered Academic Pressure

Stereotypes also played a critical role in shaping students' subject choices, often pressuring them into gender-conforming academic paths. In the study by Aidy et al. (2021), boys were more likely to choose STEM fields while girls gravitated toward the humanities and social sciences, a trend that mirrors global patterns of gender academic

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<sup>22</sup> Christina Lapytskaia Aidy et al., "Examining adolescent daughters' and their parents' academic-gender stereotypes: Predicting academic attitudes, ability, and STEM intentions," *Journal of Adolescence* 93 (2021).

<sup>23</sup> Md Rakib, "Exploring the Impact of Gender Stereotypes on Academic Pursuits among Students," *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science* 8, no. 6 (2024).

<sup>24</sup> JN Igbo, VC Onu, and NO Obiyo, "Impact of gender stereotype on secondary school students' self-concept and academic achievement," *Sage Open* 5, no. 1 (2015).

preferences.<sup>25</sup> Although this study did not focus on Taiwan, similar dynamics were observed in Taiwanese schools, where subject selection often reflected entrenched cultural beliefs about gender and intellectual aptitude.

This division was more than a reflection of personal preference; it contributes to academic pressure. Girls may feel pressure to excel in “feminine” subjects, even if they are interested in STEM, while boys may experience stress when expected to succeed in “masculine” subjects like science or math, regardless of aptitude. Hong et al. (2003) highlighted how such expectations intensify academic pressure when students feel they must live up to stereotypical ideals. For example, a girl struggling in math may internalize the belief that she simply “isn’t suited” for the subject, which increases anxiety and undermines performance. Conversely, boys who face challenges in language or the humanities may experience shame or fear of being judged as inadequate.<sup>26</sup>

### Cultural and Institutional Reinforcement of Gender Norms

Gender stereotypes in Taiwan were reinforced by both cultural traditions and educational institutions. Culturally, Confucian values continue to shape family expectations about appropriate academic and career paths for sons and daughters. While not all families upheld rigid gender norms, there remains a general societal tendency to view STEM careers as more suitable for boys and social sciences or humanities as more appropriate for girls. This often leads to differing levels of parental encouragement, which in turn affects students' academic confidence and aspirations.

Institutionally, Taiwan's education system still exhibits structural gender bias

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<sup>25</sup> Aidy et al., "Examining adolescent daughters' and their parents' academic-gender stereotypes: Predicting academic attitudes, ability, and STEM intentions." *Journal of Adolescence* 93: 90–104 (2021)

<sup>26</sup> Hong, Veach, and Lawrenz, "An investigation of the gender stereotyped thinking of Taiwanese secondary school boys and girls."

despite formal commitments to gender equity. Academic streaming frequently channels students into gendered paths, with STEM fields remaining male-dominated and humanities attracting more female students. Moreover, classroom dynamics often subtly reinforce these divisions. According to Hong et al. (2003), teachers tended to encourage boys more in technical and analytical subjects, while offering girls more support and praise in language-based areas. These differences in teacher expectations and interactions could compound students' internalized beliefs, making gendered academic identities feel "natural" rather than constructed.<sup>27</sup>

Heyder et al. (2021) further complicate this picture by examining how gender identity stress affects boys' engagement with school. Their research showed that boys who feel pressured to conform to masculine norms, such as emotional stoicism and competitiveness, may exhibit behavioral problems or withdraw from academic pursuits.<sup>28</sup> While this study is not based in Taiwan, its implications are relevant in a society where masculinity is still tied to academic success in STEM and career prestige. The internal conflict between authentic interests and gender expectations could contribute to disengagement, frustration, or increased academic stress.

### The Consequences: Gendered Stress and Long-Term Impact

Taken together, these findings demonstrated how gender stereotypes created academic pressure by shaping self-perception, subject selection, and institutional expectations. Girls may face heightened anxiety when entering male-dominated fields due to fears of underperformance or social rejection. Boys may feel unable to express struggles or interest in traditionally "feminine" subjects, leading to suppressed emotions

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<sup>27</sup> Hong, Veach, and Lawrenz, "An investigation of the gender stereotyped thinking of Taiwanese secondary school boys and girls."

<sup>28</sup> Anke Heyder, Margriet Van Hek, and Mieke Van Houtte, "When gender stereotypes get male adolescents into trouble: A longitudinal study on gender conformity pressure as a predictor of school misconduct," *Sex roles* 84, no. 1 (2021).

or misaligned educational choices. These pressures could significantly affect academic well-being and future aspirations.

Beyond high school, the long-term impact of gender stereotypes could lead to occupational segregation, skill mismatches, and unequal representation in various academic and professional fields. Early interventions in educational settings were therefore essential to reduce these disparities and promote student well-being.

Gender stereotypes profoundly influence Taiwanese high school students' academic experiences. While international studies offer valuable insight, Taiwanese research such as Hong et al. (2003) confirms that local educational environments were not immune to the effects of gendered norms. These stereotypes affect how students view their academic strengths, the subjects they pursue, and the pressure they feel to succeed. To address these issues, educators and policymakers must implement culturally responsive and gender-sensitive practices that challenge stereotypes, diversify role models, and ensure that academic guidance is based on individual potential rather than social expectation. Only through such reforms can students be empowered to explore their interests and abilities free from the constraints of gender norms.<sup>29</sup>

### **Gender Differences in Academic Self-Concept, Expectations, and Stress**

The relationship between gender and academic outcomes was shaped by several interrelated factors, including gendered academic self-concept. Both Diniz et al. (2018) and Li and Kung (2018) examined these factors, providing valuable insights into how gender influences Taiwanese students' academic experiences, particularly in the context of mathematics and science.

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<sup>29</sup> Hong, Veach, and Lawrenz, "An investigation of the gender stereotyped thinking of Taiwanese secondary school boys and girls."

## Academic Self-Concept and Gender Stereotypes

Li and Kung's (2018) study showed that Taiwanese junior high school male students reported a higher self-concept in mathematics than their female peers. This disparity could be traced to cultural norms that associate mathematics with male ability, reinforcing the stereotype that math is a "male domain." While female students slightly outperform males in math achievement, their lower self-concept may limit their participation in math-intensive subjects, perpetuating gender inequality in STEM fields. This suggested that enhancing female students' confidence in their mathematical abilities is crucial to closing the gender gap in these areas.<sup>30</sup>

Diniz et al. (2018) also highlighted gender differences in self-concept among college freshmen, noting that male students tended to choose science and engineering majors, while female students often pursue social sciences or humanities. These choices, influenced by societal expectations and gendered perceptions of "appropriate" careers, could impact students' academic trajectories and the pressures they face in their studies. For example, male students may experience more academic pressure in STEM fields due to higher societal expectations, while female students may face challenges in pursuing their desired career paths due to the lack of gender diversity in these fields.<sup>31</sup>

## University and Career Expectations

Gendered expectations about university and career aspirations contribute significantly to academic pressure. Diniz et al. (2018) found that male students had higher expectations regarding their university education, particularly in fields like engineering and technology, which were traditionally associated with male achievement.

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<sup>30</sup> Lee and Kung, "Math self-concept and mathematics achievement: Examining gender variation and reciprocal relations among junior high school students in Taiwan."

<sup>31</sup> Diniz et al., "Gender differences in first-year college students' academic expectations."

Female students, on the other hand, often face societal pressure to pursue careers in fields considered more "feminine," such as social sciences or humanities. These expectations could lead to stress, particularly when students feel pressured to conform to gendered career paths that may not align with their personal interests or abilities.<sup>32</sup>

In Taiwan, where academic success is highly valued, the mismatch between gendered expectations and students' academic aspirations could lead to significant stress. Male students may feel obligated to excel in traditionally male-dominated fields, while female students may struggle to gain recognition in STEM areas despite their potential. These pressures could lead to frustration and academic burnout, as students try to meet the expectations imposed on them by society, their families, and themselves.

### Mismatch Between Aspirations and Reality

Finally, the mismatch between students' academic expectations and their actual experiences could lead to substantial stress. As Diniz et al. (2018) note, students' academic self-concept and expectations often diverge from the reality of their academic experiences, creating stress when they feel they could not meet the high standards set for them. For example, a female student interested in STEM may feel discouraged by the lack of female role models and societal pressure to pursue other fields. Similarly, a male student who does not excel in traditionally "male" subjects may feel inadequate, exacerbating stress.<sup>33</sup>

These mismatches contributed to academic burnout, lower self-esteem, and a diminished sense of academic competence. In Taiwan's competitive educational system, the pressure to conform to gendered academic expectations can have profound effects on students' mental health and overall well-being. The stress arising from these

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<sup>32</sup> Diniz et al., "Gender differences in first-year college students' academic expectations."

<sup>33</sup> Diniz et al., "Gender differences in first-year college students' academic expectations."

mismatches can negatively impact students' academic performance and long-term career satisfaction.

The studies by Diniz et al. (2018) and Li and Kung (2018) shed light on the significant role of gender in shaping students' academic self-concept, expectations, and stress. These gendered differences in academic self-concept and expectations created challenges that impact students' academic experiences and contribute to academic pressure. Understanding these dynamics, particularly within the context of Taiwanese high school students, is crucial for designing educational interventions that address gender disparities, provide targeted support, and promote more equitable educational practices.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, while gender may not be the sole determinant of academic pressure, it significantly shaped how students experienced, perceived, and cope with such pressure. Existing studies on gender and academic pressure were mostly conducted in China or Western countries, with relatively few focusing on Taiwanese high school students. Moreover, most adopt quantitative methods, paying limited attention to students lived experiences and personal narratives, which may result in an incomplete understanding of their stress experiences. In the Taiwanese context, cultural factors such as a highly competitive education system, strong family and societal expectations, and persistent gender norms may interact with gender and influence how students perceive and respond to academic pressure. Gender differences in how students navigate these cultural dynamics remain underexplored, this is the key research gap that this study aims to address. By centering students' voices and situating their experiences within Taiwan's unique cultural context, this research seeks to inform more equitable and culturally responsive educational practices. In doing so, it not only addresses a critical

gap in the literature but also amplifies the perspectives of a group often overlooked in academic discourse.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The literature review of this study revealed that previous research on academic pressure and gender differences had predominantly adopted quantitative survey methods, focusing mainly on analyzing the relationships between variables. However, as this study aimed to explore how gender influenced Taiwanese high school students' subjective experiences and interpretations of academic pressure, a qualitative exploratory approach is employed. This method not only captures personal experiences and cultural contexts but also addressed methodological gaps in previous research, which had largely relied on quantitative measures.

This chapter outlined the methodological framework adopted in this research to ensure transparency, credibility, and rigor throughout the research process. Through a systematic description, readers gained a clear understanding of the research design rationale, data sources and collection tools, analytical procedures, and ethical considerations.

A qualitative exploratory design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews to deeply investigate participants' understandings and interpretations of the role gender plays in academic pressure. This design not only helped present diverse and rich perspectives from participants but also uncovered the cultural meanings and personal significance behind academic pressure, fully aligning with the research question and goals.

The following sections of this chapter elaborated on the rationale behind the research design, the research setting and participant recruitment strategy, data collection tools and procedures, data analysis methods, and finally, the ethical considerations and limitations of the study, aiming to comprehensively present the methodological framework.

## **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of how Taiwanese high school students perceived the role of gender in their experiences of academic pressure. Unlike quantitative research, which measured the relationships between specific variables through standardized questionnaires, qualitative research emphasized subjective experiences and contextual understanding, making it particularly suitable for exploring highly personal and culturally nuanced topics such as gender and stress.

The study was inherently exploratory in nature, as there was a lack of qualitative research in Taiwan specifically addressing how high school students understood the connection between gender and academic pressure. The goal of an exploratory design was not to test specific theories, but rather to uncover participants' perspectives through open-ended data collection and inductive analysis, thereby laying the groundwork for future conceptual frameworks and theoretical development. To address the research question: How is gender perceived by Taiwanese high school students as influencing their academic pressure? This study used semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. This approach balanced structure with flexibility, enabling the researcher to maintain focus while also delving deeply into participants' genuine thoughts and personal experiences.

Overall, the qualitative exploratory design allowed for a deeper revelation of the cultural, social, and personal contexts underlying the data, enabling researchers to understand how participants interpreted and experienced phenomena within specific situations. Rather than offering merely surface-level descriptions, this approach facilitated meaningful engagement with the complexity and diversity of the issue, thereby contributing a valuable foundation for future related research.

## **Sources of Data**

This study was conducted in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, with the location chosen primarily based on the feasibility of transportation and time. Although the regional context was not a core variable of the study, collecting data in an environment familiar and convenient to participants helped improve recruitment efficiency and foster trust and interaction between the researcher and participants. All interviews were conducted online during the summer break and were scheduled flexibly according to participants' availability.

The participants were 13 Taiwanese male and female high school students aged 15 to 18. Recruitment was carried out using a combination of purposive and quota sampling to ensure that participants had relevant experiences related to the research topic and to maintain a balanced gender distribution. Priority was given to students who had experienced academic pressure and were able to clearly articulate their perspectives and experiences. This approach was intended to gather in-depth and insightful data relevant to the research question. The study aimed to recruit 10 to 15 participants, with the final number determined based on the principle of data saturation. A roughly equal number of male and female participants was maintained to facilitate the exploration of gender-based differences.

Inclusion criteria included being currently enrolled in a high school in Taiwan (preferably in Kaohsiung), willingness to participate and sign the interview consent form, and the ability to reflect on and express their academic pressure experiences. Exclusion criteria included refusal to sign the consent form, unwillingness to be recorded, or not being a currently enrolled high school student.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, covering topics such as sources of academic pressure, the influence of gender roles, and students' coping

strategies. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to serve as the basis for subsequent thematic analysis.

### **Research Instrumentation and Data Collection**

The data collection instrument for this study was a semi-structured interview guide, designed based on the research topic and research questions. The guide was refined and optimized through mock interviews to enhance the clarity, relevance, and feasibility of the questions, ensuring their appropriateness for the participants' age and cultural context.

The interview guide consisted of three main sections: The first section included warm-up questions aimed at establishing rapport and helping participants recall their experiences of academic pressure and make initial connections to gender-related factors. The second section contained core questions that explored in depth how gender influenced students' experiences of academic pressure, including its sources, emotional responses, and interpretations. The third section comprised concluding and reflective questions that encouraged participants to share their coping strategies and reflect on the broader gender-related implications of their experiences.

All interview questions were open-ended to encourage participants to describe their specific experiences and perspectives in their own words, thereby avoiding biases that may result from restrictive question formats. Probing questions were also prepared and used as needed to clarify responses or uncover deeper meanings, thus enhancing the richness and depth of the data.

To ensure the validity of the research instrument, the researcher conducted mock interviews, repeatedly reviewed the questions, and examined interview notes to verify the alignment between interview content and research objectives, and to ensure that the language and concepts were appropriate for high school students.

The reliability of the study was established through several qualitative research strategies, including maintaining research neutrality during interviews, avoiding leading language, preserving original data through audio recordings and verbatim transcripts, and using thematic analysis to ensure consistency and traceability in interpretation. All interviews were conducted online during the summer vacation (July to August in 2025), with flexible scheduling and platform selection based on participant availability, aiming to balance convenience with participants' psychological comfort. Each interview was 20 to 30 minutes, with actual durations adjusted according to participants' expressiveness and data saturation. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

### **Data Analysis Technique**

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, employing systematic coding and thematic analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of how participants perceived and experienced the influence of gender differences on academic pressure.

The specific steps of analysis were as follows:

**Step 1: Data Preparation and Familiarization.** Interview recordings were first transcribed verbatim. The researcher repeatedly read the transcripts to become thoroughly familiar with the data and ensure a comprehensive grasp of the participants' intended meanings.

**Step 2: Open Coding.** Key words and phrases from the transcripts were annotated and categorized, with initial conceptual labels assigned. This marked the beginning of data exploration, aiming to capture diverse perspectives and meanings.

**Step 3: Axial Coding.** Initial codes were compared, integrated, and grouped to identify relationships among concepts. A more structured categorization system was developed, revealing underlying connections and contexts within the data.

Step 4: Selective Coding. Based on the results of axial coding, core themes and categories were selected to construct a coherent theoretical framework that centered on the study's core inquiry, how gender shaped experiences of academic pressure.

Step 5: Thematic Analysis. Through cross-case comparison and synthesis, recurring and representative themes were identified, allowing for an in-depth examination of both shared and divergent participant experiences. This step highlighted the interactive effects between gender roles and academic pressure.

Step 6: Data Validation and Reliability Maintenance. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the coding and thematic structure, engaging in ongoing discussion and revision to enhance the consistency and reliability of data interpretation.

By following this rigorous analytical process, the study ensured that its findings faithfully reflected the participants' perspectives and experiences, offering a nuanced understanding of how gender differences influenced academic pressure among Taiwanese high school students.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before data collection began, all participants were clearly informed of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, how the data would be used, and the principles of confidentiality. Participants had the right to join or withdraw from the study at any time without facing any pressure or negative consequences. They could also choose not to answer specific questions without needing to provide a reason.

A formal interview consent form was designed, which included details about the study's purpose, participation procedures, interview duration and format, a statement regarding audio recording, and the principle of anonymity. Participants were required to sign the written consent form to confirm their willingness to participate and to indicate

clearly whether they agreed to be recorded, ensuring transparency and legality in data collection.

This study placed high importance on protecting participants' privacy and personal data. All identifiable information was anonymized. Audio recordings were used solely for research analysis and were deleted upon completion of the study. All data was stored in encrypted, password-protected electronic folders accessible only to the researcher. Additionally, interviews were conducted in secure and private settings, where the researcher fostered a respectful and supportive atmosphere. This environment aims to encourage participants to share their experiences and thoughts comfortably, reducing potential psychological stress or discomfort.

### **Limitations of Methodology**

This study acknowledged several limitations. First, self-selection bias, participants who agreed to be interviewed may have been more articulate, reflective, and interested in the research topic than the general student population. In practice, the number of students willing to participate was significantly lower than expected, reflecting the recruitment challenges of qualitative interviews. Although this bias could not be completely avoided, the researcher made efforts to explain the purpose of the interviews and the protection of participants' rights during recruitment to attract students from diverse backgrounds. Second, the findings were not generalizable. Due to the small-sample qualitative approach, the results could not be extended to all Taiwanese high school students. Mock interviews also revealed that some responses were similar, and this may have occurred during actual interviews. While similar responses were common in qualitative research, the researcher examined the nuanced differences across participants and presented a range of perspectives to avoid oversimplifying the conclusions. Lastly, interviewer influence: although the researcher strived to remain

neutral, the phrasing of questions and overall interview demeanor may still have affected participants' responses. To minimize this influence, the researcher received interview training and used a semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistency throughout the process.

## **Summary**

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how gender differences shaped the academic pressure experiences of Taiwanese high school students. Given the research focus on subjective interpretations and meaning-making, semi-structured interviews were employed to gather in-depth insights. Participants, aged 15–18, were recruited through purposive and quota sampling in Kaohsiung, aiming for gender balance and data richness. Interviews were conducted online during the summer and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Data was examined using thematic analysis, following systematic coding procedures (open, axial, and selective coding) to identify recurring themes and patterns. Ethical safeguards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly upheld throughout the research process.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction to Data Analysis**

This chapter presented the analysis of the interview data in relation to the research question: How is gender perceived by Taiwanese high school students as influencing their academic pressure? The aim was to highlight how participants described their experiences and to reveal the broader patterns that emerged from their accounts.

The analysis proceeded in a systematic way. First, the interview transcripts were coded to capture meaningful statements relevant to the research focus. These codes were then compared across cases to identify recurring patterns. From these patterns, broader themes were developed to reflect commonalities and differences in students' perspectives. Finally, these themes were linked back to the research question to illustrate how gender influenced the ways students experienced and interpreted academic pressure.

This step-by-step organization, from codes, to patterns, to themes, and finally to connections, ensured that the analysis moved clearly from raw data toward meaningful interpretation. The following sections presented these findings in detail.

### **Coding Process**

After transcribing and carefully reviewing all interview data, I conducted a systematic coding process to identify recurring patterns related to academic pressure and gender. Starting with open coding, I annotated key phrases and ideas line by line. These initial codes were then compared, refined, and merged through axial coding, which allowed me to identify links between concepts. In the final stage, selective coding highlighted the most central categories, which were further developed into themes that directly addressed the research question.

The finalized codes were grouped into several broad categories. First, students described sources and contexts of academic pressure, such as exams, coursework, and parental expectations, along with their subjective perceptions and emotional experiences. Many participants emphasized that academic pressure stemmed not only from internal expectations but also from external forces like family and peer competition. As one student explained, “Overall, my academic pressure comes from three sources: myself, my family’s expectations, and competition with classmates. The external pressure from others feels heavier than the pressure I give myself.” This suggested that while self-motivation played a role, external expectations, especially from family and peers, were often perceived as the dominant source of stress.

Second, participants discussed gender-related aspects, including whether gender made a difference in academic pressure, how stereotypes shaped expectations, and how gender influenced subject choices and future directions. Some students felt that gender did not create noticeable differences in their academic pressure, viewing pressure as a universal experience shared by all students. One participant stated, “I haven’t experienced any different academic pressure because of my gender.” However, others acknowledged the persistence of gender stereotypes that could indirectly shape expectations. As another student mentioned, “I’ve heard people say that males should be good at math and science, and females should be good at humanities.” These comments suggested that while many students do not feel directly pressured by gender, they still recognized the social beliefs that might influence how others perceived academic ability.

Third, the analysis captured coping and support strategies, where both peers and teachers were seen as important in helping students manage pressure, particularly when it was linked to gender expectations. Some students emphasized the importance of emotional support and open communication when facing conflicts between personal

goals and family expectations. As one participant explained, “I would tell them that respecting their own thoughts is more important. If their parents really disagree, they can try to communicate. But if that doesn’t work, they should still stick to their own ideas.” Teachers were also viewed as potential sources of help, especially in promoting students’ freedom to make their own choices. One student suggested, “As a teacher, you can use all available resources to help students, allowing them more freedom in their choices.” These reflections indicated that both peer encouragement and teacher guidance played vital roles in reducing gender-related academic pressure.

Detailed descriptions of each code, including their definitions and illustrative quotes from participants, are presented in Appendix. The appendix provides a full overview of how the data were categorized, ensuring transparency and allowing readers to trace the connection between raw data and analytical themes.

### **Identifying Patterns**

Through the process of coding and comparing participants’ responses, five recurring patterns were identified from the interview data. These patterns reflected how Taiwanese high school students experienced and interpreted academic pressure, including the role gender may have played in shaping these experiences. The five patterns were: Sources and Perceptions of Academic Pressure, Gender Differences in Academic Pressure Experiences, Gender Stereotypes and Academic Expectations, Teacher Influence on Gendered Academic Pressure, and Coping Strategies and Stress Expression. These patterns provided a foundation for understanding how students confronted and interpreted academic pressure in their daily learning and revealed how gender shaped these experiences.

## **Pattern 1: Sources and Perceptions of Academic Pressure**

Regarding the sources of academic pressure, most interviewees (nine out of thirteen) consistently pointed to exam performance, expectations from teachers and family, peer comparisons, and self-demand as the main factors. However, a few students described different experiences. For instance, one interviewee explained that her pressure did not come from grades or exams but rather from being in a romantic relationship, which led teachers to place stricter expectations on her. Another student mentioned that her pressure stemmed from struggling to understand lecture material; despite repeatedly asking questions and reviewing, she still could not absorb it, while grades or peer comparisons were not her primary sources of pressure. One student regarded extracurricular talent training and schoolwork as similar sources of pressure. Notably, only one interviewee stated that after entering high school, she almost no longer felt academic pressure and was able to approach exams and grades with a calm mindset.

In terms of perceptions and feelings toward academic pressure, the interviewees expressed more diverse understandings. Some female interviewees believed that the pressure mainly came from parental and teacher expectations, peer competition, and heavy coursework and exams. One female interviewee viewed academic pressure as part of the learning process, a kind of psychological burden where others expected you to improve, but you may not have been able to achieve it. In contrast, two male interviewees indicated that the academic pressure they experienced in their high schools was not significant, since many of their peers were not focused on academics, which indirectly influenced their own level of engagement in learning. Finally, one student frankly admitted that she did not even know what academic pressure really meant.

## **Pattern 2: Gender Differences in Academic Pressure Experiences**

In examining gender differences in academic pressure, nearly all participants stated that they did not experience pressure that was different from others because of their gender. Only two participants indicated that they had no thoughts on this issue, suggesting that gender was not considered a primary factor shaping academic pressure. When asked about peers, most participants similarly reported that they had not observed classmates experiencing different levels of academic pressure due to gender. However, two participants provided alternative perspectives. One noted that she had seen peers experience gender-related pressures, but these were not directly tied to academics. Another described how a male friend who wanted to pursue Japanese studies faced resistance from his family, who believed that language studies were not appropriate for males and instead encouraged him to choose a field more consistent with traditional expectations. These cases illustrated that while gender may not have been perceived as a dominant factor for most, it could still create challenges in particular contexts.

When asked to imagine how academic pressure might change if they were of a different gender, participants expressed a range of views. Four participants believed that pressure would remain the same, as academic goals and expectations for higher education would not differ. One participant highlighted that her perception of gender equality in her environment shaped this view. Yet, others imagined that gender would make a significant difference. One male participant suggested that if he were female, he might face expectations to pursue humanities subjects, even if he lacked interest or ability in those areas. At the same time, one male respondent speculated that female students might also face less pressure because of the socially acceptable option of becoming a housewife. Female participants, in contrast, generally felt that being male would increase their academic burden, as traditional values often place greater emphasis

on men's academic and career achievements, leaving them with less flexibility.

Interestingly, one female participant believed that if she were male, she might actually feel less constrained, as society tends to afford male more freedom in their development.

Overall, while most participants downplayed gender as a direct source of academic pressure, both peer observations and hypothetical scenarios revealed that gender roles and societal expectations still subtly influenced how students think about their academic experiences.

### **Pattern 3: Gender Stereotypes and Academic Expectations**

In terms of perception and impact of gender stereotypes, all interviewees stated that they had often heard the idea that males should be good at math and science, while females should excel in the humanities. Although this belief still existed in the everyday experiences of high school students, most of them felt it does not directly translate into explicit comparisons or pressure. Interviewees pointed out that whether it created pressure depends more on family and personal factors, for example, whether parents held conservative views, which could add extra pressure. Some interviewees also believed that the reality often contradicted the stereotype, with some females excelling in math and science, while some males performed better in the humanities. For certain students, the influence of stereotypes was restrictive, making them feel they could only pursue success in specific fields, limiting their opportunities to explore other possibilities.

Regarding peer experiences, some interviewees mentioned that their friends had been compared by their parents based on the idea that males should be good at math and science. Others shared that even when her female friend excelled in science, her families forced her to focus on English, which created additional pressure. These cases showed that gender stereotypes still influenced subject choices and perceptions of

pressure in some families.

With respect to gender-based subject expectations and their impact, most students reported that they were not required to excel in certain subjects specifically because of their gender. Some felt that such stereotypes had only limited influence, at most making certain subjects seem more aligned with expectations. Others mentioned that their families gave them the freedom to explore, which reduced pressure and even had a positive effect. However, there were exceptions: one interviewee, who performed well in mathematics, was expected to maintain that level, and any underperformance in exams resulted in scolding. This experience led him to give up on subjects he was less skilled at, which further increased his pressure.

As for gender differences in academic expectations, most interviewees believed that teachers, families, and society do indeed hold different expectations for male and female students, with boys often carrying higher expectations. Many interviewees also noted that they mainly felt pressure from family expectations, which made them more nervous about their performance. However, a few interviewees stated that they did not perceive such differences, possibly because their families held the same expectations for both sons and daughters, or because they lacked relevant experiences to observe such distinctions.

#### **Pattern 4: Teacher Influence on Gendered Academic Pressure**

Regarding whether teachers treated students differently based on academic performance, almost all interviewees believed that teachers did not display clear gender bias. Eight interviewees pointed out that teachers' attention depended more on students' academic performance and behavior rather than gender. Some interviewees observed that teachers tended to focus on students who were struggling academically or who were more mischievous; others felt that teachers were more inclined to pay attention to high-

achieving students, while those performing at an average level received less attention. Only one interviewee perceived a gender difference, noting that teachers gave male students more room for growth, whereas female students were expected to follow the teachers' ideal path, for example, studying diligently and choosing suitable fields of study. Overall, while most interviewees viewed teachers as fair, subtle differences might still emerge due to academic performance and gender expectations.

As for whether gender influenced future directions and subject choices, interviewees expressed divided opinions. About half of the students believed gender did have an impact, citing reasons such as families rejecting certain choices due to gender, gender imbalance in fields leading to discouragement, and traditional social values limiting roles. The other half felt that gender would not affect their decisions, emphasizing that personal interest and suitability were the most important factors, even if society disapproved. Interestingly, one interviewee who partly chose in line with traditional expectations still felt criticism from society toward women in science or men in the humanities. She admitted that such stereotypes seemed impossible to break, suggesting that gender stereotypes continued to shape academic choices.

### **Pattern 5: Coping Strategies and Stress Expression**

In terms of coping strategies for dealing with stress, there appeared to be no significant differences between genders. Most interviewees believed that although males and females might handle stress in different ways, these differences were mainly influenced by individual traits and personal attitudes toward stress rather than gender itself. However, a few interviewees expressed different opinions. One participant suggested that males tended to face and solve problems directly, whereas females preferred to calm their emotions before dealing with them. Another held the opposite view, saying that males are more likely to avoid stress, while females made greater

efforts to resolve it. She further explained that in today's society, women are often more motivated by external criticism, whereas men cared less about others' opinions. Interestingly, across all responses, there was no single coping strategy shared by both genders.

As for the expression of stress, interviewees also presented varying perspectives. Four interviewees believed that males are more likely to suppress their emotions and avoid showing vulnerability, while females tended to express their stress more openly. However, five interviewees thought the opposite, arguing that males often released stress more directly, whereas females tended to conceal it. In addition, three participants emphasized that whether one suppressed or expressed stress depended mainly on personality rather than gender. They noted that both males and females might repress stress due to social expectations, showing others only their more positive sides.

Regarding support in dealing with gender-related academic pressure, most interviewees stated that if someone around them felt pressured due to gender or family expectations, they would suggest communicating with their family or standing firm in their own choices. Some emphasized that one's future belonged to oneself and should not be determined by family opposition. Several participants also mentioned that there are limited practical ways to address such stress; besides family discussions, teachers can play an important role as mediators or sources of support, helping students pursue the paths they desire through available resources. This highlighted the crucial role teachers played in helping students cope with both gender-related and academic pressures.

## Connecting Themes

### Introduction to Themes

After completing the coding and pattern analysis, three overarching themes were identified to capture how Taiwanese high school students experienced and interpreted academic pressure through a gendered lens. These themes were developed by connecting related codes and patterns that emerged during the analysis. The first theme, The Roots and Experiences of Academic Pressure, combined students' descriptions of academic pressure sources and their subjective perceptions of stress. The second theme, Gendered Dimensions of Academic Pressure, explored gender-related differences and expectations, highlighting how stereotypes shaped students' academic experiences. The third theme, Gender and Coping Strategies, integrated coping and support mechanisms, illustrating how students managed stress within social and gendered contexts. Together, these themes provided a holistic understanding of how gender interacted with academic pressure in the everyday lives of Taiwanese high school students.

### Thematic Relationships

The following sections demonstrated how these themes interrelated to form a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences.

#### Theme 1: The Roots and Experiences of Academic Pressure

This theme originated from how students identified and interpreted the sources of academic pressure in their everyday school lives. The interview results revealed that nine out of the thirteen participants generally regarded exam performance, parental and teacher expectations, peer comparison, and self-demand as the main sources of pressure. These factors often overlapped in students' responses, as many mentioned more than

one source simultaneously. However, not all students experienced pressure from these aspects, suggesting that academic pressure was not a single or fixed phenomenon but rather a psychological experience that varied among individuals and was shaped by both environmental and personal factors. Therefore, this theme aimed to explore the roots of academic pressure and how students understood and responded to it within Taiwan's highly competitive educational system.

### After School, Still Under Pressure

For most interviewees, exams and grades were the most direct sources of pressure. Students commonly viewed grades as symbols of ability and self-worth, meaning that their fixation on scores often outweighed their understanding of the actual learning content. One student mentioned, “When everyone around me gets good grades, I feel a lot of pressure.” This sentiment revealed how peer comparison subtly created a mindset of “there is always someone better than you,” turning academic pressure into a continuous cycle of competition and reflecting the strong social comparison mechanism embedded in the educational environment.

Beyond school-related pressures, expectations from parents and teachers further intensified students’ psychological burden. Academic pressure thus stemmed from an interconnected “expectations ecosystem” in which performance, behavior, and future goals were all closely linked. Many students noted that their academic pressure did not come from a single cause but from multiple overlapping factors, highlighting both the persistence and pervasiveness of academic pressure. Two students said the pressure even extended into extracurricular life, such as cram schools or talent training, making “after school” simply another continuation of academic life.

### Contrasting and boundary cases

However, not all students experienced pressure in the same way. One female student noted that her pressure did not stem from exams but from the extra scrutiny she faced from teachers because she was in a romantic relationship. She felt that teachers raised their expectations for her academic performance, which made both her and her partner feel overly monitored. Another student shared that her pressure mainly came from difficulty understanding lessons rather than from poor grades, suggesting that even without external competition, stress could arise from an internal sense of inadequacy. These individual cases reminded us that academic pressure was not solely determined by systems or scores, it was also closely tied to how students were perceived by others and how they evaluated themselves.

Interestingly, two male students reported that they did not feel significant academic pressure during high school. They attributed this to the general school atmosphere, where peers did not place much emphasis on grades, which in turn reduced their sense of pressure. This indicated that stress was not merely a psychological reaction of individuals but also a social and cultural phenomenon, when competition was no longer a shared value, pressure naturally diminished. One student also admitted that she did not fully understand what “academic pressure” meant and felt that she rarely experienced it. This ambiguity highlighted the diversity and subjectivity of “pressure” among students.

### Where Pressure Takes on Gender

This theme revealed the roots and diverse forms of academic pressure, laying the groundwork for further exploration of how gender shaped students’ stress experiences. While most students associated academic pressure primarily with grades and expectations, a closer look showed that the formation and interpretation of such pressure

were not entirely neutral, they were subtly influenced by gender, sociocultural context, and interpersonal interactions.

For example, female students often described their stress as stemming from others' judgments and expectations, whereas male students tended to view stress as the result of environmental or external factors. This suggested that gender not only affected how students perceived academic pressure but also how they interpreted its meaning. In other words, although the surface sources of academic stress appeared similar across students, the underlying experiences and coping mechanisms may have been shaped by gender roles and societal expectations.

These findings directly connected to the next theme, "Gendered Dimensions of Academic Pressure." That chapter further explored how students perceived the role of gender in their experiences of stress, how gender stereotypes influenced academic expectations, and how teachers and families may have unconsciously reproduced these gendered experiences. Through this progression, academic pressure could be understood not merely as a learning-related phenomenon but as a complex issue deeply embedded within gender and sociocultural contexts.

## Summary

Overall, this theme revealed how Taiwanese high school students navigated multiple sources of pressure and constructed their understanding of academic pressure within a highly competitive educational environment. The stress students experienced was not caused by a single factor but rather emerges from the intersection of various influences, including school systems, family expectations, peer comparison, and personal goals. While most students identified exams and grades as the core sources of stress, some interviewees' experiences showed that pressure could also arise from relationship dynamics, teacher-student interactions, or self-doubt about one's abilities.

This suggested that academic pressure is a dynamic and individualized experience shaped by environmental and interpersonal contexts. More importantly, students' gender, social roles, and group culture may have further influenced how they perceived and interpreted these pressures.

### Theme 2: Gendered Dimensions of Academic Pressure

Building on the previous findings, this theme laid an essential foundation for a deeper exploration of how students of different genders experienced, interpreted, and responded to academic pressure. In Taiwan's education system, academic pressure was often regarded as a common phenomenon. In a society that valued examination success and family expectations, many students felt pressure to achieve good grades, enter top universities, and secure promising careers, often viewed as symbols of success. Traditional family beliefs might still have held gender expectations, with some parents expecting different roles or achievements from sons and daughters. Although modern attitudes had become more open, traces of these conservative views remained embedded in family and social values. However, the interview findings revealed that gender played a subtle yet profound role in shaping students' experiences of academic pressure. This theme focused on exploring the differences between male and female students in how they perceived academic pressure, responded to external expectations, and formed self-perceptions under gender stereotypes. Through students' narratives, it became clear that gender not only influenced the intensity and nature of stress but also affected how students behaved and psychologically responded when facing pressure.

### Not About Gender—Yet Always About Gender

According to the interview findings, most students (eleven out of thirteen)

reported that they did not experience noticeably different academic pressure based on gender. Both male and female students generally perceived that stress primarily stemmed from exams, grades, and parental expectations, rather than gender itself. However, one case revealed that gender could still play a role in specific contexts. For example, one student mentioned that her male friend wanted to pursue a major in Japanese, but his family opposed it, arguing that language-related fields were unsuitable for males and insisted that he choose a field that aligned with traditional expectations. This experience highlighted that, while gender may not be an overt source of stress, masculinity norms could still constrain students' choices and academic autonomy.

Students also noted that although academic pressure seemed unrelated to gender, its form could change if they were of a different gender. One male student felt that, if he were female, he might be expected to pursue humanities subjects, while six female students thought that, if they were male, they would be expected to bear more academic and future responsibilities. These hypothetical scenarios suggested that even when students outwardly denied gender differences, they remained aware of how social norms subtly shaped their experiences of stress.

Gender stereotypes also continued to play a role in students' learning processes. All interviewees reported hearing statements such as "male should be good at math and science; female should be good at the humanities." While six students said these beliefs did not directly cause obvious pressure, they still indirectly shaped the expectations of families and teachers. For example, one interviewee mentioned that her female friend, despite excelling in science, was still required by her family to focus on English, creating additional stress. Another male student shared that after performing well in mathematics, he was expected to maintain a high level; any decline in grades led to reprimand, and he would often give up on subjects he found difficult. These cases illustrated that gender stereotypes, even if not consciously felt by every student, still

shaped distinct forms of emotional labor. Female students often managed the pressure of over-expectation, while male students struggled with the fear of under-performance.

Teachers also played a key role in these gendered experiences. Teachers appeared neutral in policy but often reproduced gendered expectations in practice. Eight students said that teachers' attitudes toward students depended primarily on performance rather than gender, but subtle differences remained. One interviewee noted that teachers generally gave male students more room to grow and allowed them to progress gradually, whereas female students faced higher expectations, being encouraged to be diligent, obedient, and follow a structured path. Although these differences were not always obvious, over time they could affect students' self-perception and sources of stress. This suggested that gender operated as an invisible influence, subtle, not universal and indirect, yet still impactful.

Gender also affected future directions and subject choices. About half of the students believed that gender influenced their own or their peers' academic decisions, citing reasons such as family expectations regarding gender roles, gender imbalances in certain fields, and societal biases toward particular disciplines. For example, one female student mentioned that, despite her strong interest in science, societal discouragement toward females in STEM influenced her experience; some male students faced opposition and disapproval from their families when choosing humanities. These examples showed that, while academic pressure originated from academic demands, gender shaped students' psychological burden and self-expectations through cultural frameworks and traditional social norms.

In summary, gender was not a stress source that every student consciously recognized; more often, it subtly permeated daily learning and decision-making, including the influence of family beliefs and traditional societal norms. From subject choices and family expectations to teacher interactions, gender norms quietly shaped

students' understanding of and responses to academic pressure, making it difficult for any student to be entirely unaffected by gender factors.

### Beyond Roles: How Gender Shapes Ways of Coping

Together, these findings showed how gender shaped the manifestation and internalization of academic pressure, producing meaningful differences in how male and female students perceived and responded to stress. Although they may face similar external demands, gender roles and societal expectations led to significant differences in how they experienced it. These differences reflected the subtle gendered structures within the educational system, which were not explicitly embedded in curricula or policies but were continuously reproduced through teacher attitudes, parental expectations, peer interactions, and the lingering influence of traditional societal norms.

The significance of this finding lay in emphasizing gender as a social construct that permeated students' experiences of academic pressure. Gender not only affected the intensity of pressure students felt but also shaped how they view success, effort, and personal choices. For example, female students tended to demonstrate ability through diligence and perfectionism, whereas male students might maintain their self-image by appearing relaxed or avoiding pressure. These patterns revealed the deep influence of gendered socialization on students' psychological processes and academic behaviors. These differing internalizations led to distinct coping orientations, setting up Theme 3.

### Summary

This theme highlighted the influence of gender on students' experiences of academic pressure. Although most students did not identify gender as a primary source of stress, social expectations, gender stereotypes, and the expectations of family and teachers subtly shaped their psychological responses and self-perceptions. This

indicated that gender not only affected the forms of pressure students experienced but also influenced their patterns of thinking and behavior when facing stress.

Furthermore, these gendered experiences of pressure provided context for understanding students' coping strategies. Students of different genders may adopt distinct approaches to manage stress, for example, female students might tend to reduce anxiety through effort and planning, whereas male students may cope by projecting a relaxed attitude or seeking support from peers. These findings laid the foundation for the next theme and underscored the importance of recognizing the role of gender in students' stress management within educational settings.

### Theme 3: Gender and Coping Strategies

Building on gendered experiences of pressure, this theme examined how those expectations shaped coping and emotional expression. When facing academic pressure, or observing others experiencing it, students' coping strategies might be influenced by multiple factors. It explored both the differences and similarities between male and female students in handling stress, including how they expressed pressure, choose coping methods, and sought support within the context of gender roles and social expectations. Interviews indicated that while gender did not determine coping strategies absolutely, social norms, individual characteristics, and external pressures subtly shaped students' patterns of response.

### From Gendered Expectations to Personal Resilience

For some students, gender might still play a key role in shaping how they coped with academic pressure. However, based on the interview data, most respondents believed that gender was not the primary factor determining coping strategies. Personal traits, individual values, and one's understanding of pressure were more influential in

determining how they handled challenges. For example, one student felt that males tended to address problems directly while females first regulated their emotions before acting; the other one held the opposite view, suggesting that males were more likely to avoid pressure while females actively tackled it. This reflected that even within a gender framework, coping strategies remained highly individualized, with no single approach applying to everyone; the influence of gender largely depended on personal perspective and experience.

Regarding the expression of stress, opinions among respondents were similarly divided. Four students believed that males tended to internalize pressure while females more readily express emotions; in comparison, five students argued that males released stress more directly, while females tended to hide their feelings. The interview responses suggested that contemporary high school students' views differ from traditional societal gender stereotypes, such as males being expected to be strong and emotionally restrained, and females being gentle and expressive. Respondents generally emphasized that differences in emotional expression were driven more by personality and individual factors than by gender alone. These diverse perspectives also indicated a gradual weakening of societal stereotypes about how males and females should display stress, although such notions may still subtly influence whether students choose to suppress or express their pressure. This suggested that gender norms still serve as reference points, even when students resist them.

When facing gender-related academic pressure, respondents typically suggested coping through communication with family or asserting personal choices. In addition to family discussions, teachers also played a key role by providing emotional support, resources, and guidance to help students pursue their desired academic or career paths. This underscores the importance of social support systems, especially in contexts where gender roles intersect with academic expectations, as teachers, family, and peers could

serve as resources or buffers for students. However, respondents also acknowledged that completely disregarding family opinions when making decisions is nearly impossible, highlighting the significant influence of family in students' choices. Students may feel compelled to choose fields that do not align with their interests due to their family's conservative views on gender roles.

### Integrating Gendered Experiences and Coping Responses

Together, these findings showed how gender expectations translate into coping behaviors. Some students, when facing pressure, were aware of social notions such as "males should suppress emotions, females can express them" and adjust their emotional expression accordingly. This demonstrated that gender not only shaped the sources and perception of pressure but also deeply influenced how students coped and sought support.

Importantly, these findings showed that students gradually develop a coping perspective that transcends gender, with nearly all respondents emphasizing that personal traits and values matter more than gender in determining how they managed stress. This viewpoint, to some extent, responded to the societal expectations and internalized pressures highlighted in the previous two themes. While understanding and experiencing gender pressure, students also attempted to find solutions that work for themselves. This autonomy and reflective capacity reflected a reinterpretation and adjustment of gender roles, symbolizing the students' gradual development of self-positioning in the midst of stress.

Overall, the three themes together form a coherent framework: Theme One established the roots and personal perception of pressure, Theme Two demonstrated how gender shaped the formation and experience of stress, and Theme Three focused on how students responded through actions and support networks. This continuity not only

strengthens the research framework but also emphasizes that gender in academic pressure was not merely a passive background variable, it is an integral factor that influences students' thinking, feelings, and actions throughout the entire experience.

## Summary

In summary, students' coping strategies in response to academic pressure exhibited a high degree of individual variation, and while gender did have an influence, it is not the dominant factor. Most students believed that personal traits, values, and upbringing were the key determinants of how they handle stress. Nevertheless, gender still indirectly shapes students' actions and choices under pressure through social expectations, family beliefs, and cultural frameworks. For example, some students' emotional expression or help-seeking behaviors remained influenced by traditional notions such as "male should be strong" or "female should be sensitive." This indicated that even though contemporary high school students were becoming more open-minded about gender, the implicit norms of gender roles in society and family have not entirely disappeared.

Overall, students' coping strategies reflected not only their understanding of stress but also the negotiation and balance they maintain between gender frameworks and social expectations. This balancing process illustrated that gender was not a singular determining force but a dynamic factor that interacts with personal traits and the social environment, continuously shaping students' thinking, behaviors, and self-positioning in the context of academic pressure.

Theme	Focus	Link to other themes
Theme 1: Sources and Perceptions of Academic Pressure	Identifies where academic pressure comes from and how students perceive it.	Provides the foundation for understanding how gender shapes these experiences (Theme 2).
Theme 2: Gendered Expectations and Interpretations	Explores how gender influences students' understanding and reactions to academic pressure.	Builds on Theme 1 and leads to how students cope with gender-related pressure (Theme 3).
Theme 3: Gender and Coping Strategies	Examine how students manage and seek support under gendered academic pressure.	Connects back to Theme 1 and 2 by showing the outcomes of perceived and gender pressure.

Table 1. Connections among the Three Themes

### Overall Interpretation

Taken together, the three themes provided a comprehensive understanding of how Taiwanese high school students perceived gender as shaping their academic stress experiences. Theme 1 revealed that students interpreted academic pressure through multiple social and personal lenses, while Theme 2 highlighted how gendered expectations further color these interpretations, influencing how students evaluate their abilities and responsibilities. Building on this, Theme 3 showed how students responded to these pressures through coping and support strategies that reflected both individual traits and social norms. Altogether, these themes suggest that gender does not operate as a fixed determinant of stress but as a fluid influence, shaping how students think, feel, and act in academic contexts. This holistic view underscores that while gendered expectations remain present, many students were actively negotiating and redefining what those expectations mean in their own lives.

## **Discussion of Findings**

This study explored how gender was perceived by Taiwanese high school students as influencing their academic pressure, extending previous research by integrating students lived experiences into an area previously dominated by quantitative analysis. Through the three identified themes: The Roots and Experiences of Academic Pressure, Gendered Dimensions of Academic Pressure, and Gender and Coping Strategies, this chapter provided a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of how gender interacted with academic pressure in Taiwan's educational setting.

### **Relating the Themes to Existing Literature**

The first theme, The Roots and Experiences of Academic Pressure, supported and expanded upon findings by Liu and Lu (2012), who highlighted that both male and female students in Confucian-influenced societies experienced significant academic pressure due to institutional and parental expectations. Like Liu and Lu's findings, this study found that students' stress largely stemmed from competitive environments and family pressure. However, the present research contributed an important qualitative dimension by revealing how students internalized these expectations differently. Rather than viewing stress as a uniform experience, participants described a range of emotions, the expectation from parents, pressure from peers' competition, and concern about future uncertainty, showing that academic pressure was deeply personal and socially constructed. This contextual insight added depth to previous studies that relied primarily on survey data.

The findings from Theme two aligned closely with major strands in the literature emphasizing the role of gendered expectations and stereotypes in shaping students'

academic experiences. Hong et al. (2003) documented widespread beliefs that boys were expected to be stronger in mathematics and science while girls were steered toward language and the humanities; echoing this, our participants reported hearing the same stereotypes and described how such ideas occasionally translated into family or teacher expectations that shaped subject choices and self-expectations. Where Hong et al. noted that higher-achieving schools might intensify these perceptions, our interviews similarly suggested that competitive educational contexts could magnify the pressure to conform to gendered academic roles.

Liu and Lu (2012) and related work in the review framed gender as a moderator of stress and well-being in Confucian-influenced educational contexts. Although many of our participants initially denied that gender was a primary cause of differential stress, their narratives, especially about family resistance to non-traditional subject choices and differential expectations after strong performances supported the idea that gendered norms could shape how pressure was experienced and internalized. In other words, our qualitative data complicates purely quantitative accounts by showing that gender's effect might be subtle and context-specific rather than uniform across students.

Classroom and institutional dynamics described by Li and Lu (2015) in literature review mapped onto our data. Li and Lu's finding that classroom gender composition could affect boys' self-concept suggested that social context modulated gendered experiences of schooling; similarly, participants in our study pointed to peer culture and school atmosphere as factors that could either amplify or mitigate pressure tied to gender expectations. Finally, broader syntheses in the literature about parental influence and cultural reinforcement of gender norms provided a backdrop for interpreting individual cases in data where family expectations in some cases indeed constrained subject choice or intensified pressure.

Taken together, then, Theme two both corroborated and refines existing

literature: it corroborated that gendered stereotypes and social expectations remained influential in Taiwanese schooling, but it also refined our understanding by showing these influences often operated indirectly, variably, and in interaction with school climate and individual identity, rather than as a single, uniform driver of stress.

The findings from Theme Three, Gender and Coping Strategies, both aligned with and extended previous research on gender and academic pressure. Prior studies, such as Liu and Lu (2012), emphasized that academic pressure among East Asian students was often shaped by cultural and social expectations, suggesting that coping behaviors are influenced by students' perceptions of pressure within highly competitive educational environments. This resonated with the present study's finding that students' coping strategies were not only personal choices but also shaped by social norms.

The insights from this theme corresponded to and extended findings from prior studies on gendered coping behaviors. Research such as Bang (2009) and Bernstein and Chemaly (2017) found that male students often coped with stress through avoidance or externalization, while female students were more likely to engage in emotion-focused or help-seeking strategies. While some interviewees in this study echoed these tendencies, many also rejected the idea that gender alone dictated coping style. Instead, they attributed differences to personal values and individual temperament. This challenges earlier generalizations, suggesting that among contemporary Taiwanese high school students, gender coping distinctions were becoming more fluid and individualized.

However, while previous research often described gender differences as relatively fixed, this study found that students were increasingly aware of individuality and agency in how they managed pressure. Most participants viewed coping as a matter of personality and values rather than gender, indicating a gradual shift toward more flexible understandings of gender roles. This contributed to existing literature by showing that contemporary Taiwanese high school students actively reinterpreted

gender expectations, seeking coping methods that better fit their own identities and experiences.

## **New and Significant Contributions**

A key contribution of this study lay in its re-examination of gender's role in academic pressure through the lens of students' subjective perceptions. Existing literature, such as Hong et al. (2003) and Li and Kung (2018), often treated gender as a fixed variable that explained differences in self-concept, subject choice, or achievement. In contrast, this study showed that many students themselves questioned or resisted these gendered expectations. Several participants expressed that they did not perceive stress responses or coping strategies as inherently masculine or feminine. Instead, they emphasized individuality and self-awareness as more decisive factors. This suggested a generational shift in how gender was understood away from rigid stereotypes and toward a more flexible, self-defined identity.

Another significant finding was the importance of teachers as emotional and practical support in gender-related academic pressure. While previous literature primarily emphasized family and societal expectations, this study revealed that teachers in Taiwan could act as crucial mediators who helped students navigate conflicting pressures. This insight broadened the understanding of social support systems in academic settings and underscored the potential of teacher guidance as an intervention point for reducing gendered stress.

Furthermore, this research highlighted the interplay between tradition and modernity in Taiwanese students' perceptions of gender and pressure. Although traditional norms still influenced family expectations, such as the belief that boys should pursue STEM fields and girls should focus on humanities, many students reported critically reflecting on these ideas. This reflective process indicated that Taiwanese

youth were not merely passive recipients of gender norms but active participants in reshaping them. Such findings contributed to the growing body of literature that saw gender as a fluid and negotiated aspect of identity, rather than a fixed determinant of behavior.

Lastly, the study provided an important methodological contribution by using qualitative interviews to capture emotional and narrative depth often absent in quantitative studies. While previous research provided statistical evidence of gender differences, the present study gave voice to students lived realities, how they made sense of these pressures in their own words. This approach not only humanized the data but also revealed contradictions and ambiguities in students' thinking, offering a richer and more authentic understanding of the relationship between gender and academic pressure.

### **Conclusion to Data Analysis**

In summary, this study extended existing scholarships by illustrating that gender's influence on academic pressure among Taiwanese high school students was neither uniform nor deterministic. Instead, it operated through a complex interaction of cultural expectations, personal interpretation, and institutional support. The findings emphasized a gradual cultural transition, where students increasingly viewed gender as secondary to individuality in shaping their stress experiences. This evolving perception held meaningful implications for educators and policymakers: rather than focusing solely on gender-based differences, educational interventions should prioritize creating supportive, communicative environments that respected students' autonomy and diverse coping styles.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore how gender was perceived by Taiwanese high school students as influencing their academic pressure. The findings indicated that while students generally perceive academic pressure as stemming from exams, expectations, and competition, gender subtly shaped how they interpreted, experienced, and responded to these pressures.

The analysis revealed that academic pressure was not a singular experience but rather the result of interactions between social expectations and self-perceptions, as well as external and internal factors. Theme One highlighted that although grades and expectations were the primary sources of stress, the ways students understood and responded to these pressures often reflected gendered assumptions about effort, ability, and responsibility. Theme Two showed that gender roles and stereotypes influenced students' perceptions of success and failure, female students often feel pressure to meet others' expectations, while male students were expected to appear confident and capable. Theme Three demonstrated that gender also shaped coping strategies and emotional expression; although many students had begun to challenge traditional norms, emphasizing individuality and personal values over gendered expectations.

Overall, gender was not a direct or primary cause of academic pressure but rather a subtle social lens through which students interpreted and acted upon their experiences. Academic pressure, therefore, is not merely an issue of performance but reflected how the young generation in Taiwan's highly competitive educational culture negotiated social roles, identity, and self-worth.

The findings of this study had several implications. For students, understanding that academic pressure was not only a personal challenge but also shaped by gender and cultural influences could help them better manage their emotions and develop healthier coping strategies. Encouraging self-awareness and open discussions about stress could

also reduce feelings of isolation and competition, contributing to a more supportive learning atmosphere.

For educators, the results suggested that schools could provide more gender-sensitive support, such as through collaboration with counseling services or organizing workshops on related topics to address the psychological dimensions of stress. Teachers could also work to challenge gender stereotypes in the classroom and create environments that valued effort, individuality, and emotional well-being, allowing students to feel respected and genuinely supported.

For families, the greatest support parents could offer their children was not only academic assistance but also understanding and encouragement. Although parental expectations often came from care, replacing pressure with acceptance and trust could become a powerful source of motivation. Such change might not come easily, but even small steps could inspire broader positive effects within families and communities.

In conclusion, this study revealed that the impact of academic pressure arose not only from academic demands themselves but also from the gender expectations and external pressures students encountered in their daily school lives. Frankly, I don't believe this problem can truly be solved. Perhaps we have to admit that academic pressure and the stereotypes behind it are inevitable. No matter how much effort we put, there will always be students affected by these factors. This is not because the culture behind these expectations has been shaping us for a long time, but also because culture itself is difficult to change. Maybe what we can do is keep asking why and encourage more people to explore the cultural meanings behind academic pressure and gender stereotypes.

## APPENDIX

### Interview Question

#### 暖身問題

Q1. 有些人說，在台灣當高中生壓力很大。你自己覺得「學業壓力」是什麼？什麼時候會讓你感覺有學業壓力？

是什麼事情最容易讓你有壓力？考試？成績？還是別的？

那種壓力是來自你自己，還是別人給你的？

Q2. 你有沒有聽過像『男生應該要數理好』、『女生文科好』這樣的說法？你怎麼看？你覺得這樣的觀念會不會讓學生產生壓力？

你自己有沒有因為這種說法而被比較過？

你有沒有聽同學講過類似的經驗？

#### 核心問題

Q3. 你有沒有被說過因為「你是男生／女生」，應該要在某個科目比較厲害？這帶給你什麼樣的感覺？

是誰說的？

你有試著符合那個期待嗎？還是反而有點抗拒？

那對你之後的學習有什麼影響嗎？

Q4. 你覺得老師、家庭或社會對男生和女生在學業上的期待有差別嗎？這樣的期待會不會讓你感受到壓力？

你在家裡有感覺到這種期待嗎？例如家長說些什麼？

你有沒有感覺老師對男女生的態度不太一樣？

這種期待會不會讓你在表現上更緊張？

Q5. 你在想像未來方向或選科系的時候，有沒有發現自己會在意別人怎麼看你？

你覺得性別會不會有影響？

有沒有哪一個選擇是你想做但覺得不被看好？

你有聽過別人怎麼評論像你這樣性別選擇那個科系嗎？

你會不會因此考慮改變自己的選擇？

Q6. 你還記得有哪一次，因為自己的性別，面對的學業壓力和別人不一樣嗎？

你當時怎麼處理的？

如果你是另一個性別，壓力會一樣嗎？

你有曾經看過其他同學因為性別而感受到不同的壓力嗎？

### 反思與收尾

Q7. 你覺得男生和女生在面對學業壓力時，有不同的應對方式嗎？你自己觀察到的情況是怎樣的？

你自己或朋友有沒有什麼特別的處理方式？

你覺得男生／女生比較容易表現出壓力，還是壓抑起來？

有沒有什麼壓力處理的方法，是你覺得男生女生比較常用的？

Q8. 如果你以後當老師，遇到一位學生因為性別而承受某種學業壓力（例如：男生被家人期待走電機，但他不想），你會怎麼幫助他？

你覺得老師可以怎麼讓學生比較自由地選擇？

當你遇到時會不會希望有老師也這樣幫助你？

如果是你的朋友遇到這種情況，你會怎麼建議他？

Q9. 有什麼想要補充的嗎？

你覺得我們剛剛的問題有沒有哪一題特別讓你有感覺？

你會希望這個研究能讓更多人知道什麼事？

你覺得性別跟學業壓力還有沒有什麼面向，是我們今天還沒談到的？

### Codes book

Codes	Definition	Example Quote
<b>Sources and Contexts of Academic Pressure</b>	It refers to the main causes and specific situations in which students experience academic pressure, such as exams, coursework, or parental expectations.	During exams I feel academic pressure because if my grades are too low, it might not turn out well. In the past, family expectations also caused me academic pressure, and I also feel pressure from myself to perform better academically.
<b>Perceptions and Experiences of Academic Pressure</b>	It captures how students understand academic pressure and their subjective psychological or emotional responses to it.	I think academic pressure is a situation where everyone wants you to do better, but you might not be able to, or you might not be able to achieve the results that others expect, which creates academic pressure.
<b>Gender differences in academic pressure experience</b>	It describes the differences and similarities between male and female students in facing academic pressure due to gender.	I don't feel my academic pressure is any different because of my gender.
<b>Gender differences in academic pressure experience – peer's perspectives</b>	It highlights Peers' experiences of differences and similarities between male and female students in facing academic pressure due to gender.	I haven't seen other classmates or friends feel different academic pressure because of their gender.
<b>Hypothetical Pressure in Another Gender</b>	It reflects students' perceptions of how academic pressure might differ if they were a different gender.	If I were another gender, I think the pressure would be greater. People might focus more on which subject I have to take or which direction I have to follow in the future. This would limit flexibility and make my future more defined.
<b>Perception of gender stereotypes</b>	It refers to how students perceive, recognize, or describe existing societal gender stereotypes.	I've heard the saying that male students are supposed to be good at math and science, and female students good at

		humanities.
<b>Impact of Gender Stereotypes</b>	It captures how these stereotypes affect students' own thoughts or pressures.	Saying male students are good at math and science and female students good at humanities might cause some pressure on students, influencing them to think they should excel in certain subjects. However, I haven't personally been compared because of this.
<b>Impact of Gender Stereotypes – peer's perspectives</b>	It highlights Peers' experiences about how stereotypes influence their thinking.	My friend's mother told her that girls should be better at English, which made her feel a lot of pressure. Since she is better at science subjects and was constantly forced to study English, she felt uncomfortable and stressed.
<b>Gender Subject Expectations and Impacts</b>	It refers to academic expectations based on gender in specific subjects and how these expectations affect students.	No one has told me that I should excel in a certain subject because of my gender. But some of my classmates have experienced this; for example, their family told them they must be good at Chinese.
<b>Gender differences in academic expectations</b>	It describes different academic expectations placed on students by family, society, and school based on gender.	I feel that teachers, families, or society have slightly different expectations for male students and female students in academics. Traditional teachers might expect male students to do better in science, but I personally haven't really encountered this.
<b>Differential treatment of teachers based on academic performance</b>	It refers to differences in teacher attention or evaluation based on gender or academic performance.	I feel that teachers treat male students and female students differently. In our class, teachers sometimes pay more attention to students who are naughty or don't study, while those who study seriously are less closely monitored.

<b>Gender Influence on Future Direction and Subject Choice</b>	It captures how gender roles or societal expectations affect students' future academic and career decisions.	When I imagine my future direction or choosing a subject, I care about how others view me. I want to follow choices that society generally associates with male, but these choices also make me happier. I feel gender doesn't have much influence, but sometimes I hesitate whether I really fit.
<b>Gender differences in stress coping strategies</b>	It refers to the different ways male and female students cope with academic pressure.	Regarding how male students and female students cope with academic pressure, female students might go out for a walk or hang out, while male students tend to handle it themselves. I usually go out to eat with friends and chat, which helps me cope.
<b>Gender Differences in Stress Expression</b>	It captures gender differences in behavioral or emotional expressions of stress.	I feel male tend to release their stress outwardly, while females tend to keep it inside. Females usually don't complain about their psychological pressure, while male show it more. That's what I see around me.
<b>Strategies for helping others with gender pressure</b>	It refers to strategies used to support someone who experiences gender-related academic pressure.	When someone experiences academic pressure because of their gender and their choices differ from family expectations, I first point out the advantages of the family's suggestion. If they still don't want to follow it, I can communicate with their family or suggest other options.
<b>Teachers support strategies for gender pressure</b>	It highlights how teachers can provide support to students experiencing gender-related pressure.	I think teachers can use all available resources to help students, allowing them more freedom in their choices.

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