

An Exploration of the Causes and Coping Strategies for Psychological Inertia in College Students

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ABSTRACT

In the era of rapid globalization and the accelerated development of information technology, society's demand for highly qualified and innovative talents has become increasingly urgent. However, in practice, a considerable number of college students exhibit psychological characteristics of inertia, such as procrastination, vague goals, and declining motivation, which have become significant obstacles to their academic success and overall personal development.

KEYWORDS

College students; Psychological inertia; Coping strategies

1 Introduction

Based on empirical data from 483 undergraduates at two universities, this study systematically illustrates the manifestations of psychological inertia among college students across four dimensions—learning, daily life, social interaction, and career planning. From a multi-dimensional perspective, the study deeply explores the internal logic and external inducements underlying the formation of inertia, arguing that it is a complex outcome of the interaction among social environment, family upbringing, school education, and individual traits.

Finally, the study constructs an integrated, multi-level intervention framework from the perspectives of society, family, school, and the individual, and proposes targeted and practical strategies to help overcome psychological inertia. The goal is to provide scientific references for educators, families, and college students themselves, thereby enabling them to effectively address the challenges posed by inertia and promote the healthy growth and holistic development of college students.

With the popularization of higher education, college students have become a large and highly visible youth group in contemporary society. They are entrusted with high expectations, as society anticipates them to grow into knowledgeable and capable builders of the future. However, an undeniable phenomenon has emerged: after entering the relatively free environment of university life, many students gradually exhibit a pervasive sense of psychological fatigue and behavioral sluggishness, a condition that scholars and the public commonly refer to as “psychological inertia.”

Psychological inertia is not a strict clinical diagnosis but rather a descriptive concept referring to a negative mental state in which individuals, when confronted with tasks or goals, exhibit a lack of intrinsic motivation, sluggish action, and avoidance of challenges. Its core feature lies in the “knowing–doing gap”—individuals are aware of the need for action but, due to weak willpower or insufficient motivation, find it difficult to initiate or sustain effort. This state manifests in multiple ways, including academic procrastination, disorganization in daily life, withdrawal from social activities, and apathy toward future planning. Such a mindset not only directly affects students’ academic performance but, more profoundly, hinders the development of critical thinking, creativity, and sound personality traits, running counter to the fundamental objectives of higher education in cultivating talent.

Most existing research approaches negative behaviors among college students from isolated perspectives—such as procrastination or academic burnout—yet systematic investigations into the more comprehensive phenomenon of inertia remain scarce. Therefore, this study holds significant theoretical and practical value. Theoretically, a multi-dimensional empirical depiction and causal analysis of psychological inertia among college students will deepen our understanding of young people’s social adaptation and psychological development. Practically, the research aims to provide a systematic analytical framework and feasible strategic recommendations for higher education reform, family education guidance, and student self-regulation, thereby helping college students overcome inertia and unlock their intrinsic potential.

2 Basic Information of Survey Respondents

This study employed a questionnaire survey method to collect data. The participants were full-time undergraduate students from two universities, covering all four academic years from freshman to senior. A total of 500 questionnaires

were distributed, with 483 valid responses received, yielding a valid response rate of 96.6%. Among the 483 respondents, 208 were male (43.06%) and 275 were female (56.94%), indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution. The student distribution across different academic years was fairly even, as shown in the table below.

Table 1 Distribution of Survey Participants

Grade	Male (n)	Female (n)	Total (n)	Percentage (%)
Freshman	57	66	123	25.5%
Sophomore	51	71	122	25.3%
Junior	49	71	120	24.8%
Senior	51	67	118	24.4%
Total	208	275	483	100%

The questionnaire covered various aspects, including college students' understanding of the characteristics of psychological inertia, their learning attitudes and behaviors, daily life habits, interpersonal relationships, and career planning. All questions were closed-ended, with some allowing multiple selections. The collected data were processed using statistical software, and descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to summarize the manifestations and distribution characteristics of psychological inertia among college students.

3 Survey Results and Analysis

The survey first examined college students' understanding of the characteristics encompassed by "psychological inertia." The results revealed that the vast majority of students recognized multiple features associated with psychological inertia. The specific distribution of their responses is illustrated in the figure below :

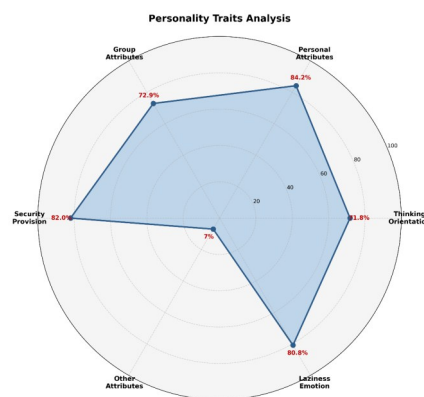


Figure 1 Distribution of Psychological Inertia Characteristics

It can be seen that "being content with the status quo and lacking motivation for self-improvement" is regarded as the most typical characteristic of psychological inertia, selected by 86.96% of the students. This is followed by "feeling a lack of passion for life, reduced creativity, and physical and mental exhaustion," identified by 80.75% of respondents. More than 70% of students believed that psychological inertia manifests as "indecisiveness and laziness in behavior" (71.64%) or "group inertia—passively following the majority" (72.88%). About half of the students (48.24%) recognized inertia as a general human tendency that contrasts with proactive ambition. In addition, 4.6% of students selected other manifestations, such as internet addiction or shirking responsibility.

Overall, the findings indicate that college students perceive psychological inertia as a multidimensional phenomenon, encompassing both individual-level laziness and negativity as well as group-level passive conformity. These tendencies primarily manifest in academic learning, daily life, interpersonal communication, and career planning.

4 Manifestations of Inertia in College Students

4.1 Manifestations of Inertia in the Learning Process

Table 2 Responses to the Question: "Do You Exhibit Any of the Following Attitudes or Behaviors in Your Learning Process?"

Option	Number of Students (n)	Percentage (%)
A. Last-minute exam preparation with a "60-points-is-enough" mindset	399	82.61%
B. Avoiding competition, unwilling to improve oneself, and declining desire for knowledge	316	65.42%

As shown in Table 2, in terms of interpersonal communication, psychological inertia causes some college students to exhibit tendencies of social withdrawal and passivity. The survey revealed that 69.57% of students adopt a detached "not my business" attitude and are unwilling to participate in various student activities organized by the university. This

indicates that the vast majority of students take on the role of observers rather than participants, failing to actively engage in collective campus life. In addition, low classroom participation is another significant manifestation of learning inertia. As shown in Figure 2, the survey on students' "classroom sharing inertia" revealed that over 60% of respondents believed that the lack of cutting-edge content and engaging materials (65.63%), as well as insufficient interaction and a dull classroom atmosphere (63.15%), were the main reasons they were unwilling to actively speak or share in class. Furthermore, 39.75% of students admitted that they tended to conform to the majority's opinions rather than engage in independent thinking or active expression.

These findings indicate that when teaching content and instructional methods fail to stimulate students' interest, learners are likely to adopt a passive and perfunctory attitude in class, which in turn reinforces their learning inertia and hinders the development of initiative and critical thinking.

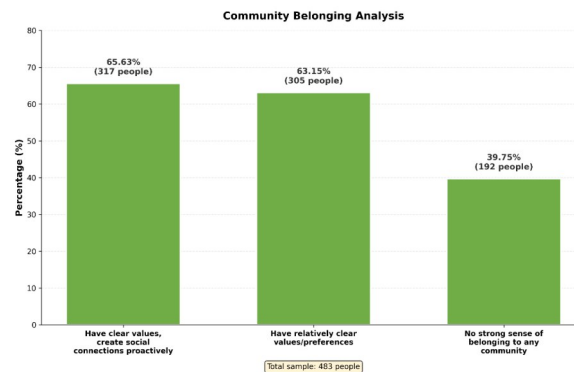


Figure 2 Proportional Distribution of External Factors Contributing to College Students' Psychological Inertia

4.2 Manifestations of Inertia in Daily Life

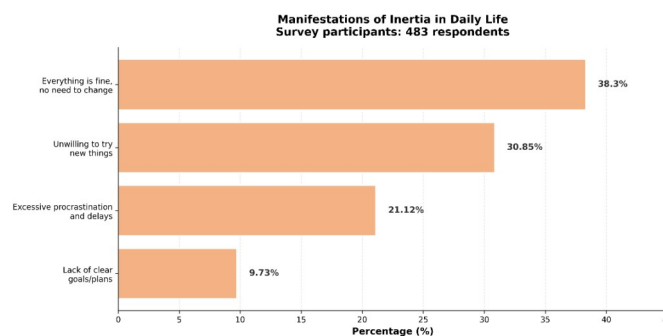


Figure 3 Responses to the Question: "What Do You Consider to Be the Most Prominent Manifestation of Inertia in Your Daily Life?"

Psychological inertia is also prominently reflected in the daily lives of college students. The survey results show that procrastination is the most common manifestation of inertia. As illustrated in Figure 3, 38.30% of students admitted that they "tend to procrastinate and only take action at the last possible moment." In addition, 30.85% of students reported that they "struggle to persevere and have difficulty controlling their emotions and behaviors," indicating a lack of willpower and self-discipline. Around 21.12% of students stated that they "overly rely on the help and guidance of parents and teachers," revealing insufficient independence in daily life. Only 9.73% of students believed that they did not display any obvious signs of inertia in their everyday routines. These findings suggest that a significant portion of college students experience problems such as laziness, procrastination, lack of perseverance, and overdependence on others, reflecting clear deficiencies in self-management and self-discipline.

4.3 Manifestations of Inertia in Interpersonal Communication

Table 3 Responses to the Question: "What Is Your Primary Difficulty in Interpersonal Communication?"

Option	Number of Students (n)	Percentage (%)
A. Unwilling to participate in group activities, adopting a bystander attitude	336	69.57%
B. Feeling inferior and lacking the confidence to express oneself	228	47.20%

As shown in Table 3, in terms of interpersonal communication, psychological inertia causes some college students to exhibit tendencies of social withdrawal and passivity. The survey revealed that 69.57% of students adopt a detached "not my concern" attitude and are unwilling to participate in various student activities organized by the university. This

indicates that the vast majority of students act as observers rather than participants, failing to actively integrate into collective campus life.

Furthermore, 47.2% of students reported that they “believe others perform better than themselves and therefore hesitate to express themselves in front of others,” demonstrating a clear lack of social confidence and avoidance tendencies. The underlying causes of this phenomenon include both active inertia—such as reluctance to participate due to inconvenience or lack of interest—and passive psychological barriers, such as inferiority complexes that prevent engagement. Regardless of the reason, inertia in interpersonal communication restricts students’ social circles and horizons, hindering their social development and the enhancement of their comprehensive qualities.

4.4 Manifestations of Inertia in Career Planning

Career planning is a crucial stage in the transition of college students from campus life to society; however, the survey results are far from optimistic. In terms of sense of responsibility, 69.57% of students admitted that they “lack a strong sense of responsibility and a serious attitude toward accomplishing their current tasks,” often taking a perfunctory attitude toward their studies and assignments. Even more concerning, 75.16% of students reported that they have no specific plans for their university learning or future careers, intending to drift through their four years without clear direction.

It can therefore be concluded that many college students exhibit significant psychological inertia in career planning, lacking both the awareness and initiative to plan for their futures. As shown in Figure 4, this condition is specifically manifested in several ways: lack of clear goals, with 84.68% of students believing that being admitted to college marks the completion of their efforts and therefore relaxing their academic standards; lack of perseverance, with 81.16% easily losing morale and giving up when facing difficulties; lack of a proactive mindset, with 81.78% showing little enthusiasm, remaining passive and lazy, and merely “getting by”; and lack of an enterprising spirit, with 67.7% adhering to conventional patterns and avoiding challenges to self-improvement.

These findings reveal that, after entering university, some students lose their sense of purpose and fail to establish new goals in a timely manner, thereby falling into a state of complacency, apathy, and inertia.

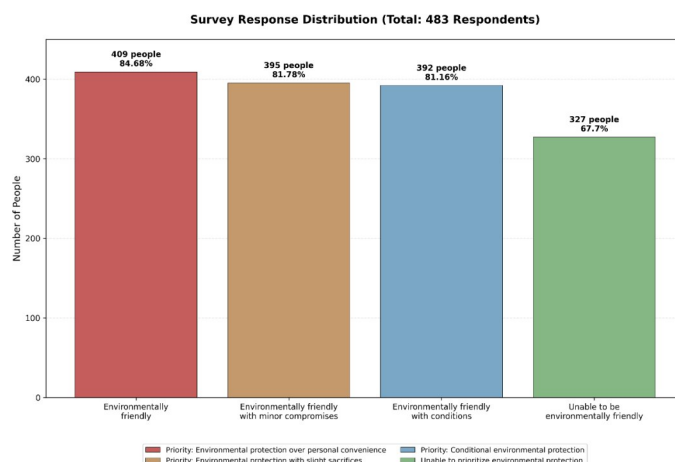


Figure 4 Proportional Distribution of Internal Factors Contributing to College Students' Psychological Inertia

5 Analysis of the Causes Behind the Formation of Psychological Inertia Among Contemporary College Students

5.1 Societal Level: The Impact of Instant Gratification Culture and Negative Subcultures

In today’s society—particularly one shaped by the rapid development of the internet—instantaneity has become a defining characteristic, fostering in young people a strong psychological dependence on immediate gratification. When this mindset is transferred to university learning, which requires long-term effort and delayed rewards, it creates a sharp conflict. As a result, many students choose procrastination, engage only superficially in their studies, or lose patience when outcomes are not immediate.

Meanwhile, the widespread popularity of online subcultures such as “lying flat” (tang ping) and “Buddhist-style” (fo xi) attitudes provides a seemingly legitimate excuse for laziness and inaction. These subcultures glorify detachment and passivity, gradually eroding young people’s sense of purpose and perseverance. Consequently, some college students experience value confusion and a decline in achievement motivation, weakening their willingness to strive for personal growth and societal contribution.

5.2 Familial Level: Misguided Transformation of Parenting Styles

Many parents regard “getting into college” as the ultimate goal of family education. Once their children are admitted, they shift abruptly from “full supervision” to “complete withdrawal.” This improper retreat neglects the transitional period during which students need guidance to move from externally managed to self-managed learning and living.

Moreover, as most contemporary college students are only children, they tend to have been overprotected throughout their upbringing, resulting in a lack of independence and responsibility. This “proxy-style” parenting model fosters dependency and inhibits the development of self-regulation skills. Consequently, when students face the challenges of university life on their own, the long-accumulated “competence deficit” becomes evident, leaving them uncertain and prone to avoidance behaviors rooted in helplessness and learned dependence.

5.3 School Level: Structural Problems in Management and Teaching

The transition from the highly structured environment of high school to the relatively free atmosphere of university presents a significant challenge to students’ self-regulation abilities. However, most universities lack a systematic transitional education mechanism to help new students adapt effectively to this change in roles and responsibilities.

In addition, many institutions face structural issues in teaching and management. Course content often updates slowly, and teaching methods still rely heavily on one-way lecturing, which fails to meet students’ needs for autonomy, engagement, and competence. When students perceive learning as both “uninteresting” and “useless,” their intrinsic motivation naturally declines, leading them to adopt passive or avoidant learning behaviors.

This structural mismatch between traditional instruction and students’ developmental needs contributes significantly to the formation and reinforcement of psychological inertia within the university context.

5.4 Individual Level: Failure of Internal Goal Setting and Self-Regulation

After achieving the major external goal of college admission, many students experience a profound sense of loss and disorientation. As the survey indicates, 84.68% of respondents agreed that “getting into college means the task is complete.” Without timely goal resetting and the establishment of new personal objectives, students easily fall into a state of psychological suspension, lacking both direction and motivation.

The key to overcoming inertia lies in effective self-regulation, including time management, emotional control, and attention allocation. However, many college students demonstrate clear weaknesses in these areas. Even when they express the desire to change, they often find themselves unable to translate intention into sustained action, ultimately succumbing to inertia.

Research further shows a significant negative correlation between psychological resilience and learning inertia, suggesting that enhancing psychological resilience is an essential pathway to improving self-regulation and combating psychological inertia among college students.

6 Strategies for Overcoming Psychological Inertia Among Contemporary College Students

In response to the causes underlying the formation of psychological inertia among college students, comprehensive intervention measures must be implemented. The following sections propose corresponding strategic recommendations from four perspectives: society, family, school, and the individual.

6.1 Optimization of the Social Environment: Fostering a Positive and Upward Cultural Atmosphere

The media and public opinion should actively promote positive and healthy values, highlighting exemplary stories of young people who realize their potential through perseverance and effort. Such narratives can help counteract the negative influence of subcultures such as “lying flat” and other defeatist attitudes. At the same time, it is essential to diversify the social evaluation system to provide young people with broader definitions of success. In addition, all sectors of society should create high-quality platforms for social practice and volunteer service, enabling college students to find meaning in learning by solving real-world problems, honing their abilities, and cultivating a strong sense of responsibility.

6.2 Adjustment of Family Education: Acting as “Scaffold” Supporters

Parents must shift their perspectives and recognize that family education during the college years does not mean withdrawal but transformation. They should transition from being managers to becoming supporters and advisors. Through open and equal communication, parents should show concern for their children’s mental well-being and developmental challenges. When signs of inertia appear, encouragement and guidance should be prioritized. Parents can help students analyze problems, seek out resources, and provide “scaffold-like” support—offering assistance when needed but gradually stepping back as students become more capable, ultimately nurturing their independence and problem-solving abilities.

6.3 Reforming University Education: Deepening Student-Centered Teaching

This represents the fundamental approach to addressing learning inertia. Universities should establish adaptive

educational systems that bridge the gap between high school and college, offering compulsory courses or workshops on learning strategies, time management, and goal setting. Furthermore, institutions should deepen student-centered teaching reforms, broadly adopting project-based learning, flipped classrooms, and other interactive approaches to enhance engagement and academic challenge. Evaluation methods should also be reformed to incorporate process-oriented assessment, encouraging students to devote consistent effort throughout the semester and shifting the learning attitude from “I have to learn” to “I want to learn.”

In addition, strengthening campus cultural development and mental health services is crucial. Universities should organize high-quality activities to enrich student life and provide professional counseling for those experiencing severe inertia or psychological distress.

6.4 Optimization of Personal Mindset: Resetting Goals and Practicing Self-Discipline

College students must take the initiative to reset their goals. Through self-exploration and career assessment, they should gradually clarify both short-term and long-term objectives, formulating them concretely according to the SMART principle (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound). In addition, they should deliberately practice self-regulation to build habits of self-discipline—starting with time management techniques such as the Pomodoro method, environmental control to minimize distractions, and positive reinforcement mechanisms by rewarding themselves for goal completion.

Finally, maintaining a positive mindset is essential. Students should actively seek social support, surround themselves with diligent peers, and, when facing difficulties, seek help from teachers, family members, or counselors.

The existence of psychological inertia among college students not only affects individual growth and success but also bears upon the quality of higher education and the future development of society. Through empirical investigation, this study systematically depicts the widespread phenomenon of inertia among contemporary college students and explores its complex formation mechanism involving social, familial, educational, and personal factors.

Theoretically, this study integrates multi-dimensional perspectives to construct a comprehensive analytical framework for explaining psychological inertia in college students. Practically, it proposes a four-dimensional collaborative intervention system, emphasizing the necessity of multi-stakeholder participation. However, overcoming psychological inertia is a systematic and gradual process, not one that can be achieved overnight.

Future research could adopt longitudinal designs and incorporate qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews to capture students' internal experiences more precisely, thereby providing richer insights for intervention design. In conclusion, helping college students overcome psychological inertia is essential for promoting their holistic personal development and enhancing the quality of higher education, a goal that deserves continuous attention and sustained efforts from all sectors of society.

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