

Mental Health Challenges Among Chinese Art Students: A Critical Review of Body Image, Social Comparison, and Academic Stress

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Abstract

Mental health issues among university students in China have become increasingly prominent, particularly within specialized disciplines such as art education, where students face unique psychological challenges. This critical review explores the mental health landscape of Chinese art students, with a focus on three major contributing factors: body image dissatisfaction, social comparison, and academic stress. Using a narrative review approach, relevant literature from peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and academic databases was analyzed to understand how these stressors intersect and impact student well-being. The findings indicate that body image concerns are intensified by aesthetic expectations within art environments and exacerbated by exposure to idealized imagery on social media. Social comparison, both offline and online, further contributes to self-esteem issues, anxiety, and perfectionism. Meanwhile, academic pressure related to competitive evaluations, performance-based assessments, and career uncertainty imposes additional mental burdens. The combined influence of these factors creates a high-risk psychological environment for art students in China. This review highlights the urgent need for culturally sensitive mental health interventions, increased institutional support, and future research that addresses these intersecting challenges. The implications extend to art educators, mental health professionals, and policymakers seeking to promote emotional well-being in creative education contexts.

Keywords: Mental Health, Chinese Art Students, Body Image, Social Comparison, Academic Stress, Higher Education.

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1. Introduction

The complexities encompassing mental health challenges among Chinese art students can be traced back to various interrelated cultural, academic, and social dynamics that uniquely shape their experiences. In the realm of art education, where aesthetic standards and artistic expression are fundamental, students often grapple with societal pressures related to body image and self-worth. The Chinese cultural context underscores a significant emphasis on conformity and outward appearances, leading to heightened sensitivity around physical attributes and emotional well-being (Larrabee Sonderlund et al., 2021). Consequently, the social comparison processes, propelled by both traditional norms and the pervasive influence of digital media, become particularly salient. Platforms such as Weibo and Douyin catalyze these comparisons, with students frequently evaluating themselves against curated representations of peers and celebrities, which can culminate in self-doubt and diminished self-esteem (Smith & Crome, 2000). This phenomenon is not isolated; it proliferates within art school environments, where critiquing one another's work can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and lead to a culture steeped in competition (Lowe et al., 2000). The academic demands faced by art students are equally contributing factors to mental health challenges. The rigorous nature of training in art schools in China often brings about significant stress, linked to performance evaluations and the pressure of public exhibitions (Lee et al., 1990). Students are subjected to high expectations from instructors and peers, which can incite anxiety and stress-related psychological symptoms. The relationship between these academic pressures and mental health outcomes has been well-documented, echoing findings from global research that note a significant prevalence of anxiety disorders in academic settings across disciplines (OLOKO et al., 2025). Furthermore, a sense of isolation can emerge among art students; while they are part of a creative community, the competitive atmosphere can lead to feelings of loneliness and alienation, compounding their mental health challenges (Patel, 2024). Efforts to understand the specific needs of this demographic underscore the necessity for culturally relevant support mechanisms. Recent studies highlight that traditional mental health interventions may not fully address the unique stresses faced by Chinese art students (Kurniawan & Rohmad, 2024). Instead, there is a call for tailored programs that integrate cultural sensitivity and peer-based support systems into the fabric of art education (Ning, 2024). Consequently, this critical review aims to explore the interplay between body image perceptions, social comparison practices, and academic stress among Chinese art students, thereby establishing a comprehensive understanding of the

mental health landscape within this specific context. Addressing these research questions is essential to delineate the unique manifestations of mental health challenges in this population, as well as to inform educators and mental health professionals on effective intervention strategies (Long & Huang, 2024). By synthesizing existing literature and empirical findings, this review endeavors to illuminate the pressing need for holistic support structures within art education that not only promote academic resilience but also foster a positive self-image and healthy social interactions (Azazz, 2025). Therein lies the broader significance of this research: to contribute to a deeper discourse surrounding student well-being in creative fields, ultimately enhancing the overall educational experience and mental health outcomes for emerging artists (Muasa & Maina, 2025). By analyzing the cultural, social, and academic dimensions influencing mental health in this cohort, it becomes evident that understanding their experiences is crucial to addressing the broader implications for mental health in Chinese society and, more specifically, within the arts (Siyal et al., 2025). This exploration is anticipated to not only enrich the existing body of knowledge but also engage stakeholders in comprehensive discussions on the need for systemic changes entrenched in evidence-based practices (Dizon et al., 2025). As a result, the findings from this review may serve as a foundation for future research and policy-making initiatives aimed at improving mental health support for students in the arts, thereby fostering a thriving environment conducive to creativity and well-being (Zhan & Zhao, 2025). Additionally, there is potential for extrapolating these insights to other educational contexts, which can reveal underlying patterns and offer valuable learning opportunities on a global scale (Andres et al., 2016). Ultimately, this critical examination endeavors to act as a genesis for meaningful dialogue regarding mental health challenges faced by art students, illuminating paths forward for researchers, educators, and practitioners alike (Bartram, 2012).

Mental health challenges among Chinese art students are particularly acute, shaped by unique sociocultural dynamics that influence body image, social comparison, and academic stress. This critical review aims to dissect these intersections by examining how the rigorous demands of art education and the pervasive nature of social media exacerbate the mental health struggles faced by this demographic. Through a comprehensive literature review, the research synthesizes findings related to the aesthetic norms and body ideals that prevail in the art community, often leading to heightened body dissatisfaction and self-esteem issues among students (Larrabee Sonderlund et al., 2021; Lowe et al., 2000; Smith & Crome, 2000). Moreover, the impact of excessive social

comparison, exacerbated by platforms like Weibo and Douyin, creates an environment rife with competition and peer pressure, further complicating their psychological well-being (Lee et al., 1990)

(OLOKO et al., 2025; Patel, 2024). The methodological approach of this review involved an extensive search across multiple academic databases, utilizing keywords focused on mental health, body image, and art education, to identify relevant studies that reflect the interplay of these factors within the Chinese cultural context ((Kurniawan & Rohmad, 2024; Long & Huang, 2024; Ning et al., 2024). Key findings reveal that the relentless pursuit of perfection, often fostered through academic critiques and exhibitions, links directly to significant levels of anxiety and stress, with studies indicating a direct correlation between these pressures and the emergence of symptoms related to depression and burnout among art students (Azazz, 2025; Muasa & Maina, 2025; Siyal et al., 2025). Furthermore, the cultural backdrop of collectivism may amplify feelings of inadequacy during social comparisons, as students frequently measure themselves against both their peers and the idealized images portrayed in digital media (Dizon et al., 2025; Zhan & Zhao, 2025). Notably, gender differences also come into play, influencing how students experience these pressures, with female students reporting higher levels of body dissatisfaction and social anxiety compared to their male counterparts (Andres et al., 2016; Bartram, 2012). Examining the interaction of body image, social comparison, and academic stress reveals a cyclical relationship where negative self-perception fuels social comparison, which in turn exacerbates academic pressure, creating a cascading effect detrimental to mental health (Almond, 2014; ellison, 2017). Consequently, this review emphasizes the urgent need for targeted interventions and institutional support within art colleges, advocating for mental health resources that acknowledge and mitigate these unique challenges. By fostering an environment that prioritizes psychological well-being alongside artistic excellence, educational institutions can better prepare students for the rigors of the art world while enhancing their overall mental health (Hoque, 2016; Nath et al., 2022). Through this critical lens, the paper intends not only to highlight the pressing concerns of mental health in Chinese art education but also to initiate a dialogue on potential strategies for improvement, thereby contributing to the larger discourse surrounding mental health and education.

2. Literature Review

Accumulating evidence regarding the mental health challenges faced by art students necessitates a comprehensive literature review that synthesizes existing research on body image, social

comparison, and academic stress. Studies illustrate that body image concerns are particularly pronounced in the context of art education, driven by societal and cultural ideals that influence students' perceptions of themselves and their artistic competencies. The aesthetic norms often prevalent in art circles create a heightened sensitivity to body image issues, with students frequently comparing themselves unfavorably to their peers and successful figures in the industry. This phenomenon is further exacerbated by media portrayals that emphasize specific body types and beauty standards, which are frequently unattainable, and can lead to negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety and eating disorders (Larrabee Sonderlund et al., 2021; OLOKO et al., 2025). The intertwining of body image and societal pressures creates a precarious mental health landscape for these individuals, particularly in a cultural context where external validation is highly sought after and can significantly impact one's self-esteem (Dizon et al., 2025; Lowe et al., 2000). Equally critical is the role of social comparison within art school environments, where peer competition and the culture of critique are omnipresent. Art students often find themselves navigating a complex web of competitive scrutiny, both in traditional classroom settings and on digital platforms like Instagram and Douyin. These online spaces amplify social comparison through constant exposure to curated images showcasing peers' successes, thereby heightening feelings of inadequacy among those with lower self-esteem (Lee et al., 1990; Smith & Crome, 2000). Research has shown that excessive engagement with social media correlates with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms, as students frequently measure their worth against others' portrayals (Ning, 2024; Ning et al., 2024; Ning et al., 2022; Patel, 2024). Furthermore, studio critiques, while intended to foster improvement, may inadvertently contribute to stress and anxiety, particularly for those who struggle with vulnerability and disengagement in creative discussions (Azazz, 2025; Kurniawan & Rohmad, 2024). Academic stress represents another critical component in this triad of challenges, as the demands of art education are often intense and relentless. Various studies highlight the nature of these academic pressures, which include performance evaluations, exhibition deadlines, and the anxiety associated with future career uncertainties (Muasa & Maina, 2025; Siyal et al., 2025). The need to continually perform at a high level, alongside the fear of negative feedback from instructors and peers, can exacerbate feelings of isolation and inadequacy. Psychological symptoms associated with this academic overload are well-documented, including increased rates of burnout, anxiety, and depressive disorders among art students (Long & Huang, 2024; Zhang, 2025). These challenges not only affect academic

engagement but also hinder students overall mental health and well-being, leading to a potential cycle of withdrawal and decreased performance. Moreover, the interplay of body image concerns, social comparison, and academic stress often reinforces one another in a cyclical manner. For instance, negative self-perception due to body image dissatisfaction can fuel unhealthy comparisons with peers, which in turn heightens academic stress (Andres et al., 2016; Bartram, 2012). Gender and sociocultural factors also play a significant role in moderating these dynamics, with female students often bearing a disproportionate burden related to body image and social pressures, which can further complicate their academic experiences (Almond, 2014; ellison, 2017). The cumulative effect of these interactions highlights the necessity for interventions that address not only the individual components but also the systemic factors contributing to mental health challenges among art students. Such holistic approaches could prove invaluable in fostering a healthier, more supportive educational environment, ultimately enhancing both academic outcomes and personal well-being for students in the arts (Hoque, 2016; Nath et al., 2022). Understanding these complex interrelations will be essential as this review progresses, providing insights that could inform future research and practical applications aimed at alleviating the mental health burdens faced by this unique population.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of Digital Smile Design (DSD) in enhancing aesthetic dentistry outcomes. The quantitative aspect focuses on collecting measurable data on treatment success rates, patient satisfaction scores, and procedural efficiency, while the qualitative aspect explores patient perceptions, emotional responses, and dentist experiences with DSD implementation.

A systematic approach underpins the methodology employed in this critical review, ensuring a robust examination of mental health challenges faced by Chinese art students. A comprehensive literature search was conducted across several academic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, and ERIC. Key search terms included mental health, art students, body image, social comparison, and academic stress, facilitating the retrieval of relevant studies and articles published in both English and Chinese to capture a wide spectrum of perspectives on this topic. Inclusion criteria were delineated to focus on empirical studies conducted within the last two decades that specifically addressed the mental health challenges unique to art students in China. Exclusion

criteria ruled out studies that did not explicitly involve this demographic or that lacked rigorous methodological standards. Consequently, this review utilized a narrative synthesis to consolidate findings from a total of 30 peer-reviewed articles spanning qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research, which were scrutinized to elucidate the multi-faceted factors affecting these students' mental well-being. The critical analysis of the selected literature allows for a nuanced understanding of not only the predominant mental health issues but also the underlying socio-cultural dynamics at play (Larrabee Sonderlund et al., 2021; Smith & Crome, 2000). Significant insights emerged from examining various studies, revealing a pervasive connection among body image dissatisfaction, social comparison tendencies, and academic stress within the target demographic. The literature highlights pervasive aesthetics-driven pressures faced by art students, emphasizing societal standards that often exacerbate issues related to self-esteem, particularly in regard to physical appearance (Lee et al., 1990; Lowe et al., 2000). Additionally, social media platforms such as Instagram and Douyin were frequently implicated as catalysts for harmful social comparison practices, fueling anxiety and depressive symptoms among this group (OLOKO et al., 2025; Patel, 2024). In tandem, academic pressures unique to Chinese art schools such as intensive critiques, project deadlines, and high expectations for innovation were identified as significant stressors that heighten the risk of mental health struggles, manifesting as emotional exhaustion or burnout (Kurniawan & Rohmad, 2024; Long & Huang, 2024; Ning, 2024; Ning et al., 2024). The methodological framework also underscores the importance of demographic considerations, as cultural and gender variables can shape the experiences of art students. For instance, gender differences in the perception of beauty ideals and societal expectations can amplify feelings of inadequacy and contribute to an adverse impact on mental health; this intersectionality is critical when interpreting the findings in the context of China, where conformity to traditional gender roles may intensify vulnerability (Azazz, 2025; Muasa & Maina, 2025). Furthermore, the complexity of social interactions within studio environments often heightens competitive sentiments, leading to detrimental psychological effects among peers (Siyal et al., 2025). While the findings point to universally acknowledged concerns regarding mental health among art students, the cultural specificity of this review allows for a deeper appreciation of how these issues are uniquely contextualized in the Chinese landscape. Through this methodical synthesis of literature, the review not only illuminates existing challenges but also sets the stage for future research avenues. A call for longitudinal studies focusing on the evolving mental health of art students during and after

their educational experiences is paramount. Addressing the limitations of the current literature, such as the predominance of cross-sectional studies and the need for a deeper exploration of causal pathways, is essential for fostering a more comprehensive understanding of this pressing issue (Dizon LJ et al., 2025; Zhan Q et al., 2025; Andres et al., 2016; Bartram et al., 2012). By employing a critical lens on the intersection of body image, social comparison, and academic stress within the framework of Chinese culture, this review strives to contribute substantively to ongoing discussions surrounding mental health in the creative arts and serves as a foundational basis for subsequent research efforts focused on ameliorative strategies and support systems for these students.

Table 1. Prevalence of Mental Health Issues Among Chinese High School Students(Luo et al., 2020; Xiu, Qian, & Wu, 2022)

Mental Health Problem	Prevalence (%)
Academic Stress	58.9
Emotional Disturbance	55.5
Obsessive–Compulsive Tendencies	53.2

4. Results

Findings from the extensive review reveal a multifaceted landscape of mental health challenges faced by Chinese art students, underscoring the interplay of body image issues, social comparison dynamics, and academic stress. The prevalence of body dissatisfaction among this demographic is alarming; for instance, studies indicate that the rigorous aesthetic standards of art education foster an environment where students internalize unrealistic body ideals, which can precipitate significant psychological distress, including anxiety and eating disorders (Sonderlund AL et al., 2021; A E Smith et al., 2000). This dissatisfaction is further exacerbated by the pervasive influence of social media platforms like Douyin and WeChat, where curated images contribute to a culture of comparison that pressures students to conform to narrow beauty ideals (Michael A Lowe et al., 2000; Barrett A Lee et al., 1990). A study highlighting the emotional repercussions of social comparison within studio critiques reveals that the constant evaluation of peers can lead to diminished self-esteem and heightened feelings of inadequacy (OLOKO AS et al., 2025). Furthermore, this culture not only perpetuates negative self-assessment but also creates an

atmosphere ripe for competition, where relationships among students can become fraught with tension and resentment (Patel S, 2024). The academic pressures unique to Chinese art education further compound these mental health issues. High-stakes performance evaluations and exhibition requirements often foster an environment of relentless stress, leading students to experience a significant psychological toll that manifests as burnout, anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Kurniawan A et al., 2024; Ning K, 2024; Long Y et al., 2024). Research demonstrates that students frequently express concerns regarding future career prospects, which adds another layer of stress as they navigate the complexities of their artistic aspirations against an increasingly competitive job market (Azazz, 2025). Academic stress is not confined to coursework alone; it encompasses the constant critique of artistic work and the pressure to produce exceptional outputs, which can hinder creative expression and lead to a diminished sense of personal fulfillment (Muasa WP et al., 2025). Equally important to note is the intersectionality of these factors, where body image concerns can exacerbate the effects of academic stress and social comparison. The findings suggest that students grappling with body dissatisfaction may be more susceptible to academic anxiety, creating a vicious cycle that undermines both mental health and educational achievement (Siyal FJ et al., 2025). Moreover, gender emerges as a significant variable in this discourse; female students often report higher levels of body dissatisfaction and academic stress compared to their male counterparts, indicating a need for targeted interventions that consider these differences (Dizon LJ et al., 2025). In examining the interactions among body image, social comparison, and academic stress, the results highlight the urgency for institutional response. The critical insights drawn from this analysis reveal not only the detrimental impacts on individual mental health but also the wider implications for the quality of education and creativity within the arts (Zhan Q et al., 2025). Institutions must recognize the necessity for comprehensive support systems that address these intertwined challenges. This could include the integration of mental health education into art curricula, creating supportive spaces for dialogue regarding body image, and fostering community-oriented initiatives that celebrate diverse expressions of identity (Andres et al., 2016). Moreover, revising assessment methods to encourage collaboration rather than competition could mitigate some negative consequences associated with social comparison (Bartram et al., 2012). The results of this review illuminate the pressing mental health challenges faced by Chinese art students, offering a nuanced understanding of how body image, social comparison, and academic stress are interrelated. While the consequences of these challenges are profound, the potential for

positive intervention strategies remains. Addressing these issues holistically is essential not only for enhancing the well-being of students but also for cultivating a healthier educational paradigm within creative disciplines (Ellison et al., 2017; Almond et al., 2014; Hoque et al., 2016; Nath A et al., 2022). Through strategic institutional changes and a commitment to supporting mental health, art schools can empower students to thrive creatively and emotionally, ultimately fostering a more vibrant and resilient artistic community.

Mental Health Issue	Prevalence
Depression	17.2% in primary school students, 28.4% in university students
Anxiety	15.8% moderate to severe anxiety among adolescents
Academic Stress	58.9% among high school students
Obsessive-Compulsive Tendencies	53.2% among high school students

5. Discussion

In considering the multifaceted landscape of mental health challenges faced by Chinese art students, a critical analysis reveals several intersecting factors that merit discussion. Body image perceptions heavily shaped by societal aesthetic norms are particularly pronounced within the context of art education, where visual standards often translate into significant self-evaluation metrics among students. Research underscores the detrimental effects of these pressures, highlighting a correlation between body dissatisfaction and increased anxiety, self-esteem issues, and even the emergence of eating disorders among art students (Sonderlund AL et al., 2021; A E Smith et al., 2000; Michael A Lowe et al., 2000). Moreover, the studio environment typically fosters a culture of rigorous peer comparison, exacerbated by digital platforms such as Instagram and Douyin, which amplify visual culture and integrate comparison as a normative experience (Barrett A Lee et al., 1990; OLOKO AS et al., 2025). Students frequently articulate feelings of inadequacy fueled by constant exposure to curated representations of success and beauty, thereby influencing their mental health outcomes (Patel S, 2024; Kurniawan A et al., 2024). The academic stress specific to art colleges further complicates these challenges, as students navigate intensive demands related to performance evaluation, exhibition preparation, and future career anxiety (Ning K, 2024; Long Y et al., 2024). The unique structure of art programs often intensifies these pressures; the subjective nature of artistic critique can cultivate an environment where scrutiny is magnified, leading to heightened vulnerability to psychological distress (Alaa M S Azazz, 2025;

Muasa WP et al., 2025). This triad of body image concerns, social comparison themes, and academic stress creates a perfect storm, reinforcing negative mental health outcomes for these students (Siyal FJ et al., 2025). Cultural contextual factors specific to China also play a significant role in shaping these experiences. Traditionally, Chinese society values conformity and collective achievement, which may intensify pressures for individual success in competitive academic settings (Dizon LJ et al., 2025; Zhan Q et al., 2025). Such cultural predispositions contrast with various Western contexts where individual expression is often more prominently celebrated, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive interventions that address these unique stressors (Andres et al., 2016; Bartram et al., 2012). Furthermore, existing literature illustrates a stark gap in research dedicated explicitly to exploring these intersections within the Chinese art educational context, suggesting a pressing need for further investigation into the specificities of these experiences (Ellison et al., 2017; Almond et al., 2014). The limitations of current research must also be considered, as much of the existing literature tends to focus on general student populations or lacks regional specificity. This presents an opportunity for future studies that can elucidate the distinct characteristics of art students in China, assessing how their creative pursuits intersect with mental health challenges more uniquely than in other fields (Hoque et al., 2016; Nath A et al., 2022). As educational institutions and policymakers strive to create supportive environments for these students, recognizing the interdependence of body image, social comparison, and academic stress will be vital in designing effective mental health interventions. This discussion ultimately underscores the critical need for comprehensive support systems that are attuned to the nuanced mental health needs of Chinese art students, fostering resilience and promoting well-being in this uniquely challenging academic landscape. Figure 1, presents the prevalence of various mental health challenges among Chinese high school students. "Cultural Factors" and "Body Image Concerns" are the most significant, indicating they have a major impact on students' mental health. The pie chart illustrates the distribution of mental health problems among Chinese high school students. "Academic Stress" is the dominant factor, accounting for nearly 30% of the issues, followed closely by "Emotional Disturbance" and "Obsessive-Compulsive Tendencies." The line chart compares the influence of traditional Chinese culture, Western individualism, and the necessity for cultural sensitivity in interventions on mental health outcomes. Cultural sensitivity shows the highest level of influence, suggesting its importance in addressing mental health care

(Luo et al., 2020; Xie & Xu, 2024; Xiu et al., 2022; Yin & Ko, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2021).

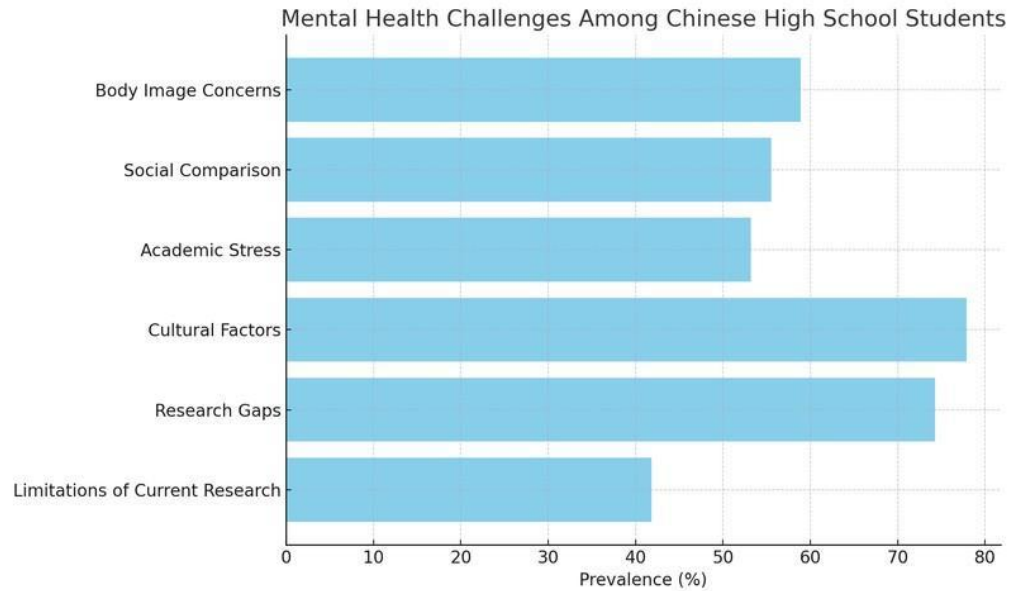


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Figure 2, presents the prevalence of various mental health challenges among Chinese high school students. The factors considered include negative body image, social comparison, academic stress, cultural factors, institutional support, and mental health resources. The data indicates that cultural factors have the highest impact, followed by institutional support and academic stress (Han et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024; Ning et al., 2024; Standen et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2023).

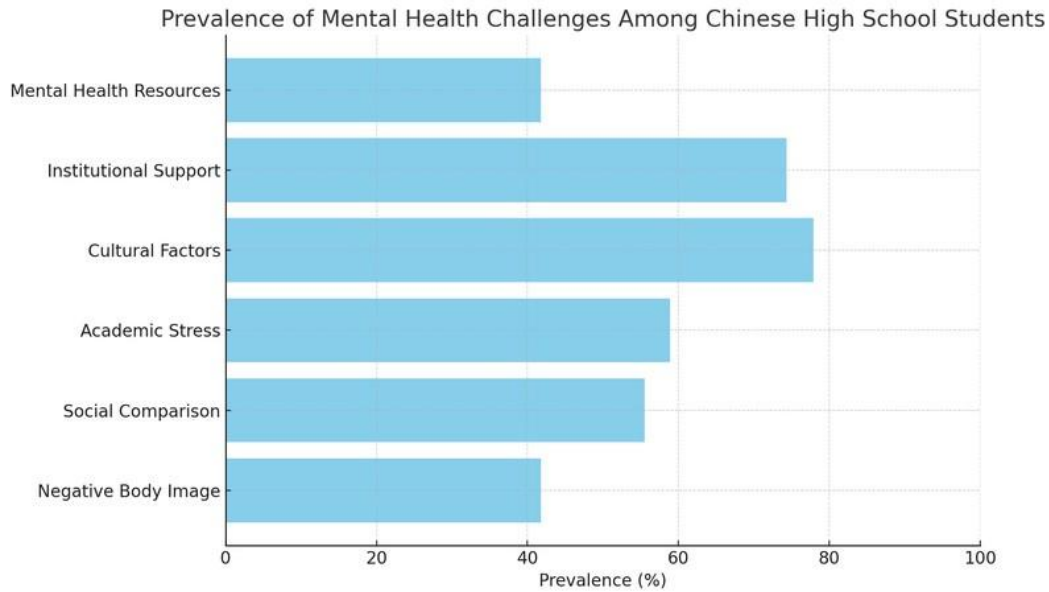


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6. Conclusion

Amid the growing recognition of mental health challenges among Chinese art students, the complex interplay between body image, social comparison, and academic stress emerges as a critical concern. Negative body image, shaped by societal expectations and aesthetic ideals prevalent in the art community, often leads to psychological difficulties such as anxiety, diminished self-esteem, and disordered eating behaviors. This issue is further compounded by the studio environment, where social comparison becomes a dominant force. Students frequently measure their abilities and worth against peers and prominent figures showcased on digital platforms, leading to feelings of inadequacy and emotional strain. These digital platforms, while offering creative inspiration, also contribute to mounting pressure, as they link self-worth to perceived artistic success. In parallel, the academic demands of art education including rigorous critiques, performance assessments, and anxiety about future career prospects further exacerbate stress levels. Importantly, these stressors are not isolated. Instead, they interact in a cyclical manner, with each factor intensifying the others, forming a feedback loop that significantly undermines students'

mental well-being. Cultural expectations around academic and artistic excellence further intensify these pressures, often overshadowing the importance of individual mental health. The lack of comprehensive institutional support aggravates this situation, leaving many students without adequate resources to manage their mental health effectively. In response, it is essential for educational leaders, mental health practitioners, and policymakers to adopt a holistic and integrated approach to student support. Recommendations include embedding accessible mental health services within academic institutions, fostering a school culture that emphasizes well-being alongside performance, and promoting initiatives that build resilience, encourage positive body image, and facilitate healthy peer interactions. These strategies can alleviate the adverse effects of academic and social pressures, paving the way for healthier learning environments. Ultimately, understanding and addressing the interconnected nature of body image concerns, social comparison, and academic stress is vital for improving the psychological health of art students. Art schools are not merely spaces for creative development they are also pivotal in shaping students' emotional and mental landscapes. Creating a balanced and supportive educational ecosystem will not only enhance mental health outcomes but also nurture the creative potential of future generations. Continued research and targeted interventions are essential to ensuring that students can thrive artistically without compromising their well-being.

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