LIFE ATTITUDE PROFILES AMONG CHINESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A SURVEY STUDY OF POSITIVE, LYING-FLAT, BUDDHA-LIKE, AND NEGATIVE MINDSETS

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Abstract: Introduction: Amid the massification of higher education and rapid social transformation in China, university students face intensified academic competition, uncertain mobility prospects, and heightened psychosocial stress. These conditions make "attitudes toward life" a consequential construct for understanding how students evaluate life circumstances and translate such evaluations into coping and action tendencies. However, existing studies often examine positive functioning and distress-related outcomes separately, with limited integration of co-existing orientations such as engagement, withdrawal, and goal attenuation. Objectives: This study aims to develop a context-sensitive Life Attitude Scale (LAS) and to map the overall pattern and subgroup differences of college students' life attitudes across four co-existing orientations: positive mindset, lying-flat mindset, Buddha-like mindset, and negative mindset. Methods: A cross-sectional, on-site paper-and-pencil survey was administered to students from nine colleges at a university in Guangzhou, yielding 287 valid responses (effective rate 89.69%). The LAS comprised 19 items across four subscales (5, 5, 5, and 4 items, respectively) rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale; survey data were analyzed in SPSS 27.0 with psychometric screening and nonparametric group comparisons, supplemented by interview materials for contextual interpretation. Results: Descriptive results showed that the positive mindset was highest (M = 4.093), while the lying-flat mindset (M = 2.419) and the negative mindset (M = 2.190) remained comparatively low; the Buddha-like mindset was near the midpoint (M = 2.987). Kruskal-Wallis tests indicated statistically significant differences across selected background variables, including discipline-related variation in positive mindset, as well as gender- and family-background-related variation in low-desire orientations and negative mindset. Discussion: The findings depict an overall positive life orientation among contemporary Chinese university students, alongside meaningful heterogeneity in withdrawal-style and low-desire coping patterns. The four-dimensional LAS provides a measurement basis for differentiated educational guidance and mental health promotion. Future research should extend validation to multi-site samples and longitudinal designs, and further test mechanism pathways linking structural stressors, relative deprivation, and life-attitude configurations.
Keywords: University students; Life attitudes; Current situation analysis; Cognitive differences

1 INTRODUCTION

Amid the massification of higher education and rapid social transformation in China, college students' psychological adaptation and value orientations have increasingly become public concerns. As a transitional cohort moving from "learners" to future workers and citizens, students must navigate layered demands involving academic competition, career planning, and social comparison. Their overarching evaluation of life circumstances and prospects, and the action tendencies derived from such evaluations, can be meaningfully captured by the construct of attitudes toward life. Recent synthesis evidence suggests that mental health burdens among Chinese university students remain substantial, underscoring the need to interpret students' attitudes and choices through an experience-near psychosocial lens [1,2].

Psychologically, attitudes toward life can be conceptualized as relatively stable evaluative orientations toward one's life conditions, perceived future possibilities, and the perceived value of action. Such orientations not only affect experiences but also concrete behaviors via goal setting, effort investment, and coping strategies. In this sense, life attitudes encompass judgments about whether life feels meaningful and assessments of whether continued investment is worthwhile. Empirically, variations in meaning-related orientations among Chinese college students have shown systematic links with life satisfaction as well as depression and anxiety [3].

Importantly, contemporary youths' life attitudes cannot be reduced to a simple positive–negative dichotomy; rather, they have become increasingly differentiated amid structural pressures and shifting opportunity structures. On the one hand, congested graduate labor markets and uncertain mobility prospects heighten sensitivity to the perceived return on effort. Research indicates that experiences such as personal relative deprivation can suppress self-improvement motivation, fostering withdrawal from competition and sustained effort [4]. On the other hand, vernacular repertoires such as tang ping ("lying flat"), bai lan ("let it rot"), and a "Buddha-like" stance of goal attenuation can function as interpretive frames and coping styles under high pressure and uncertainty. In Chinese college student samples, such attitudes have been incorporated into empirical models and linked with behavioral outcomes [5–8].

Prior research has substantially advanced our understanding of mental health and stress mechanisms among Chinese

university students. However, at the level of life attitudes, which is closer to young adults' everyday narratives and consequential choices, two gaps remain salient. First, many studies focus on single symptoms or isolated positive constructs, while less frequently integrating co-existing orientations such as active engagement and pressure-driven withdrawal/goal attenuation within one analytical framework. Second, systematic evidence on how life attitudes differ across gender, academic year, and disciplinary backgrounds remains limited in terms of both measurement comparability and contextual interpretability [1].

To address these gaps, this study investigates Chinese college students using a mixed-method design combining questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews. We develop and examine a four-dimensional structure of life attitudes: positive mindset, lying-flat mindset, Buddha-like mindset, and negative mindset. Quantitatively, we describe overall distributions and test demographic differences across key student subgroups; qualitatively, we use interview evidence to illuminate students' meaning-making and action logics under pressure. The study ultimately aims to provide actionable evidence for more targeted student development support and values-oriented guidance within universities.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

College students' life attitudes can be conceptualized as a relatively stable orientation system for appraising and coping with salient developmental tasks, integrating value–motivational commitments (for example, meaning in life, purpose, and life goals) with cognitive, affective, and behavioral adaptation patterns [9]. Recent work in positive and developmental psychology increasingly treats meaning and purpose as pivotal resources during emerging adulthood, showing robust associations with lower psychological distress and better mental health [9]. Importantly, person-centered evidence suggests that meaning-related functioning is heterogeneous and clusters into distinct profiles rather than varying only along a single linear continuum [10]. Evidence from Chinese university populations further indicates that these profiles exhibit meaningful stability and transition over time, and that both the configuration and change of meaning-related profiles are systematically associated with mental health outcomes. [3].

Against the backdrop of social transformation and post-pandemic uncertainty, psychological distress and stress exposure among Chinese university students remain salient. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis on depression among university students in China underscores both the substantive burden and the multi-layered nature of associated factors, calling for integrative models that connect contextual stressors with individual mechanisms [1]. Complementarily, qualitative evidence in the post-pandemic era highlights sleep difficulties, anxiety, and stress as prominent challenges, with perceived academic pressure, peer influence, and social-acceptance pursuits as key explanatory themes [11]. In this context, academic involution—a form of escalating, inefficient competition under perceived scarcity—has moved from public discourse to psychometrically grounded research. Empirical studies show that an academic involution atmosphere predicts students' stress responses via relative deprivation and involution behavior in a chain-mediated pathway [12]; related models link involution atmosphere to mental exhaustion through deprivation and perceived academic pressure [13]; and recent scale-development efforts provide validated instruments for assessing involution tendencies and involutional behaviors among college students [14]. Closely related "low-desire" orientations, such as lying flat and Buddha-like coping, are also entering quantitative scholarship: social-comparison research explains lying-flat motivation via personal relative deprivation; a validated "lying flat tendency" scale has been developed for Chinese youth [15]; and emerging evidence suggests that Buddha-like characteristics may relate to social responsibility in a conditional manner depending on self-efficacy and social support [5].

Intervention-oriented literature indicates a shift from solely problem-focused counseling toward scalable promotion–prevention approaches, with digital delivery becoming increasingly prominent. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of digital mental health interventions for university students reports medium effects on depression and anxiety symptom severity and suggests that intervention format (e.g., fully automated vs guided) may matter for outcomes [16]. In parallel, meaning-oriented coping appears protective for college students' mental health, operating partly through school connectedness—an actionable pathway for campus-based education and support design [17]. Nevertheless, prior studies rarely operationalize life attitudes as an integrated spectrum that simultaneously captures "positive," "lying-flat," "Buddha-like," and "negative" orientations, nor do they routinely test these orientations within a unified mechanism linking involution atmosphere, relative deprivation, and exhaustion-related processes. This motivates context-sensitive measurement and mechanism research to inform targeted, differentiated educational guidance and mental health promotion in higher education.

3 RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Participants

Participants were recruited from a university in Guangzhou via an on-site paper-and-pencil survey. The sampling frame covered students from nine colleges within the university. A total of 320 questionnaires were collected through in-person completion. After data screening, 287 valid questionnaires were retained, resulting in an effective response rate of 89.69% (287/320). Eligibility criteria specified that respondents must be currently enrolled students from the nine participating colleges. Questionnaires were excluded if they exhibited signs of careless responding (e.g., random or inattentive response patterns) or contained aberrant/extreme values indicating invalid entries. The final sample consisted of 154 males (53.66%) and 133 females (46.34%). In terms of academic standing, master's students accounted for 28.92% (n = 83), followed by third-year undergraduates at 27.18% (n = 78). First-year undergraduates constituted

24.74% (n = 71), while second-year undergraduates and fourth-year undergraduates made up 8.01% (n = 23) and 5.92% (n = 17), respectively. Doctoral students represented the smallest proportion at 5.23% (n = 15).

3.2 Scale Development

To capture contemporary Chinese university students' life attitudes in a social-transition context, this study developed a context-sensitive Life Attitude Scale (LAS) consisting of four co-existing orientations: positive mindset, lying-flat mindset, Buddha-like mindset (foxi mentality), and negative mindset. Item generation followed established scale-development principles emphasizing conceptual definition, item pool expansion, iterative refinement, and psychometric evaluation [18]. In addition to synthesizing relevant work on attitude measurement and student psychosocial functioning, the wording and content were informed by recent empirical efforts to operationalize emergent youth cultural-psychological tendencies such as "lying flat", thereby improving contextual fidelity and content coverage [15].

The resulting LAS includes 19 items across four subscales: positive mindset (5 items), lying-flat mindset (5 items), Buddha-like mindset (5 items), and negative mindset (4 items). All items were administered in Chinese and rated on a 5-point Likert-type agreement scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) [19].

To strengthen content validity and response-process validity, we adopted a multi-stage item refinement procedure. First, an expert panel systematically evaluated each item's relevance, clarity, and representativeness, and items were revised, merged, or removed to align the scale content with the target construct definition [20,21]. At the decision-making level, CVI-type quantification was used to summarize expert judgments, providing a transparent and replicable basis for item retention and revision [22]. Second, cognitive interviewing and comprehension probing were conducted during pretesting to detect semantic ambiguity, culturally loaded wording, and unintended interpretations, thereby improving item interpretability and face validity [18,23]. This iterative process yielded the final item set used in the formal survey.

3.3 Data Processing

This study primarily relied on survey-based quantitative data, supplemented by interview materials, to profile the overall pattern of college students' life attitudes and examine between-group differences. All items were measured using 5-point Likert-type response formats and were aggregated according to the predefined scoring rules. After on-site paper-and-pencil collection, responses were digitized and analyzed using SPSS 27.0; data cleaning removed invalid cases showing clear indications of careless responding and aberrant values, consistent with recommended practices for improving survey data quality [19].

Psychometric screening focused on internal consistency and factorability diagnostics. Internal consistency was evaluated with Cronbach's alpha (overall scale α = 0.775), and factorability was assessed using the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's test of sphericity (overall KMO = 0.871, with Bartlett's test supporting non-identity of the correlation matrix) [24]. Because the study relied on single-source self-reports, we also assessed the potential risk of common method bias using procedural standardization and a post hoc Harman's single-factor test (unrotated EFA with all items). Four factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were extracted, explaining 62.591% of total variance, and the first factor explained 33.433%, which did not indicate a dominant single method factor; however, given accumulated evidence that Harman-type diagnostics are often underpowered and design-dependent, the result was treated as a conservative check rather than definitive proof [25].

4 RESULTS

4.1 Overall Status of College Students' Life Attitudes

Based on the descriptive statistics reported in Table 1, this study outlines the overall profile of college students' life attitudes. The Life Attitude Scale comprises four dimensions: positive mindset, lying-flat mindset, Buddha-like mindset, and negative mindset. Overall, the mean score for the positive mindset was clearly above the scale midpoint, whereas the lying-flat mindset and negative mindset were below the midpoint. A Buddha-like mindset was close to the midpoint. This pattern indicates a predominantly positive profile, accompanied by a moderately neutral regulation orientation, while still suggesting meaningful individual differences in low-investment and negative tendencies.

For a positive mindset, the mean was 4.093, and the median was 4.200, with a standard deviation of 0.825, indicating a high level with relatively limited dispersion. The skewness was -1.098, suggesting that scores clustered toward the upper end of the scale, and the kurtosis was 1.692, implying a comparatively peaked distribution and substantial convergence in positive orientation. In contrast, the lying-flat mindset showed a mean of 2.419 and a median of 2.400, both below the midpoint, indicating generally low endorsement of low-investment tendencies. Its standard deviation was 0.885, and its skewness was 0.471, reflecting noticeable heterogeneity with a smaller subgroup reporting higher lying-flat tendencies. The kurtosis of -0.025 suggests a relatively flat distribution without pronounced concentration.

Buddha-like mindset had a mean of 2.987 and a median of 3.000, approximating the midpoint and reflecting an overall neutral tendency that may represent moderation-oriented psychological regulation under stress. The standard deviation was 0.933, with skewness of -0.075 and kurtosis of -0.462, indicating an approximately symmetric and relatively flat distribution. Negative mindset yielded a mean of 2.190 and a median of 2.000, suggesting low overall negative orientation; however, the standard deviation of 0.940 and skewness of 0.656 indicate that a non-negligible subset

reported elevated negative tendencies. Taken together, the results portray a positive dominant profile with differentiated variation in lying-flat and negative tendencies, warranting further subgroup-focused analyses in subsequent sections.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of College Students' Life Attitudes

Statistic	Positive mindset	Lying flat mindset	Buddha-like mindset	Negative mindset
Mean	4.093	2.419	2.987	2.190
Median	4.200	2.400	3.000	2.000
Standard deviation	0.825	0.885	0.933	0.940
Variance	0.681	0.783	0.87	0.883
Skewness	-1.098	0.471	-0.075	0.656
Std. error of skewness	0.144	0.144	0.144	0.144
Kurtosis	1.692	-0.025	-0.462	0.098
Std. error of kurtosis	0.287	0.287	0.287	0.287

4.2 Analysis of Positive Mindset Among College Students

At the overall level, the positive mindset dimension demonstrated consistently high scores (Table 2), indicating that participants tended to endorse constructive orientations regarding meaning in life, subjective well-being, self-acceptance, coping with setbacks, and the perceived value of effort. The item means ranged from 4.02 to 4.22, all above the scale midpoint, suggesting that positive orientation is broadly prevalent in the sample.

Item-level distributions further clarify this pattern. The statement "I believe life is beautiful and meaningful" showed the strongest endorsement, with 52.26 percent selecting "strongly agree" and a mean of 4.22, reflecting pronounced meaning affirmation. The item capturing happiness and energetic engagement in daily life yielded a mean of 4.02, with a high combined proportion of "agree" and "strongly agree," indicating generally sustained positive affect and engagement. Self-kindness and health concern also received strong support, with a mean of 4.08, suggesting relatively clear endorsement of self-acceptance and well-being awareness. The items on viewing setbacks as opportunities for learning and endorsing effort as a pathway to happiness had means of 4.05 and 4.09, respectively, indicating constructive appraisal and effort valuation in most respondents. Meanwhile, standard deviations were close to 1.00 across items, and a nontrivial share of "uncertain" responses appeared in several items, such as 14.98 percent for setback appraisal and 19.16 percent for happiness and engagement, implying meaningful heterogeneity and an identifiable subgroup with less consolidated positive orientation.

Regarding subgroup variation, the Kruskal-Wallis test indicated a statistically significant difference in positive mindset across major categories (p = 0.03), suggesting that positive orientation varies by disciplinary background. The difference by student leadership status was marginal (p = 0.057), implying a potential association that warrants further verification in subsequent analyses. Other grouping variables, including gender, grade level, and political status, did not show significant differences (p values greater than 0.05), indicating comparatively limited explanatory power for positive mindset in this dataset.

Table 2 Positive Mindset Among College Students

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
I believe life is beautiful and meaningful.	3.48%	3.83%	11.85%	28.57%	52.26%	4.22	1.03
I often feel happy and engage in daily life, work, and study with enthusiasm.	2.79%	4.53%	19.16%	34.49%	39.02%	4.02	1.01
I treat myself kindly, accept myself, and pay close attention to my physical and mental health.	2.09%	5.57%	16.72%	33.45%	42.16%	4.08	1.00
I view temporary setbacks or failures as opportunities for learning and growth.	2.44%	6.97%	14.98%	34.49%	41.11%	4.05	1.03
I believe happiness can be achieved through persistent effort and striving.	2.44%	7.67%	11.50%	35.19%	43.21%	4.09	1.03

4.3 Analysis of Lying-flat Mindset Among College Students

Using the item-level descriptive statistics reported in Table 3, this section examines the lying-flat mindset among college students. Overall, item means ranged from 1.99 to 2.63, all below the scale midpoint, indicating generally low endorsement and suggesting that lying-flat orientation is not dominant in the sample. Meanwhile, standard deviations ranged from 1.14 to 1.26, implying meaningful heterogeneity and indicating that a subgroup of students reported relatively higher endorsement on specific lying-flat indicators.

Item distributions provide additional nuance. The highest mean was observed for the fatalistic statement indicating limited personal intervention and control, with a mean of 2.63 and a standard deviation of 1.22, and 28.57 percent selecting "uncertain," suggesting ambivalence regarding personal agency. The item "I have no specific goals or pursuits"

yielded a mean of 2.45 and a standard deviation of 1.15, with a combined 54.71 percent selecting "strongly disagree" or "disagree," indicating that most students retained goal orientation. The statement about severe involution and the limited effect of personal effort showed a mean of 2.54 and a standard deviation of 1.26, reflecting differentiated appraisals of competitive pressure. The item capturing reluctance to undertake tasks requiring substantial effort had a mean of 2.48 and a standard deviation of 1.20, suggesting a tendency among some respondents to reduce investment under high-demand conditions. Importantly, the item describing habitual minimal effort and perfunctory completion had the lowest mean of 1.99 and a standard deviation of 1.14, with 44.25 percent selecting "strongly disagree," indicating that most students did not endorse a fully disengaged behavioral orientation.

Subgroup analyses further revealed structured variation in lying-flat orientation. The Kruskal-Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences in lying-flat mindset by gender (p less than 0.0001), political status (p equals 0.0096), and father's occupation (p equals 0.0376), suggesting that lying-flat tendencies are not randomly distributed and may relate to social roles and family background. By contrast, grade level, region, and mother's occupation did not show significant differences (p values greater than 0.05), indicating comparatively limited explanatory relevance in this dataset. Taken together, the findings suggest a generally low level of lying-flat endorsement alongside meaningful subgroup differentiation that warrants further mechanism-oriented interpretation.

Table 3 Lying-flat mindset among college students

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
I tend to accept fate and believe everything is predetermined, so I should not intervene or control too much.	20.56%	28.22%	28.57%	12.89%	9.76%	2.63	1.22
I have no specific goals or pursuits in life and study.	24.74%	29.97%	24.74%	16.38%	4.18%	2.45	1.15
I think academic involution is severe, and personal effort cannot change much.	25.44%	26.48%	26.13%	12.54%	9.41%	2.54	1.26
I am unwilling to do things that require great effort to accomplish.	25.09%	28.92%	26.48%	12.20%	7.32%	2.48	1.20
No matter what it is, I do not make efforts and only complete what I should do perfunctorily.	44.25%	28.57%	15.68%	6.62%	4.88%	1.99	1.14

4.4 Analysis of Buddha-like Mindset Among College Students

According to the item-level descriptive statistics reported in Table 4, this section examines the Buddha-like mindset among college students. Overall, item means ranged from 2.62 to 3.44, indicating a moderate level that clustered around the scale midpoint. In contrast to the high level observed for positive mindset, Buddha-like mindset appears to reflect a moderation-oriented regulation tendency under pressure and uncertainty rather than a clearly positive or negative orientation. Standard deviations ranged from 1.18 to 1.34, indicating substantial heterogeneity in this mindset within the sample.

Item distributions further illustrate this pattern. The highest mean was observed for the relational stance item, "In love and friendship, I do not initiate, I do not force, and I do not settle," with a mean of 3.44 and a standard deviation of 1.34. The combined proportion of "agree" and "strongly agree" was 52.26 percent, suggesting that many students endorse a restrained and non-compulsive approach to close relationships. The lifestyle preference item, emphasizing slowing down and relaxing as an ideal way of living, yielded a mean of 3.26 and a standard deviation of 1.23, with notable endorsement levels, indicating broad acceptance of a low-intensity lifestyle orientation. By comparison, the item stating that future development should be left to "go with the flow" showed a lower mean of 2.85 with a relatively high "uncertain" response rate of 27.18 percent, suggesting ambivalence regarding applying this stance to long-term planning. The items reflecting competition avoidance and achievement de-emphasis produced means of 2.77 and 2.62, respectively, and both showed uncertainty rates around one quarter, indicating that students were more divided and less uniform on performance- and competition-related issues.

Subgroup analyses revealed structured differentiation. The Kruskal-Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences in Buddha-like mindset by gender (p equals 0.0024) and father's occupation (p equals 0.0460), suggesting that moderation-oriented regulation tendencies vary across social roles and family background. In contrast, grade level, political status, and region did not show significant differences (p values greater than 0.05), indicating comparatively limited explanatory relevance for these variables in this dataset. Overall, the results suggest a moderate level of Buddha-like orientation alongside meaningful heterogeneity, warranting further mechanism-oriented interpretation with attention to gender and family background.

Table 4 Buddha-like Mindset Among College Students

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
For my future development, I think it is fine to go with the flow.	17.42%	24.04%	27.18%	19.16%	12.20%	2.85	1.26

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
There is no better way of living than slowing down, relaxing, and being natural and easygoing.	11.50%	14.29%	27.53%	29.97%	16.72%	3.26	1.23
I am satisfied with my current state and do not want to be drawn into too much competition to prove myself.	16.72%	26.48%	27.53%	21.60%	7.67%	2.77	1.19
In work or study, good achievements are nice, but having no achievements is also acceptable.	19.16%	31.36%	25.44%	16.72%	7.32%	2.62	1.18
In love and friendship, I do not initiate, I do not force, and I do not settle.	11.85%	12.89%	23.00%	24.04%	28.22%	3.44	1.34

4.5 Analysis of Negative Mindset Among College Students

On the basis of the item-level descriptive statistics reported in Table 5, this section examines the negative mindset among college students. Overall, item means ranged from 1.87 to 2.40, all below the scale midpoint, indicating generally low endorsement of negative orientation and suggesting that negative experiences were not dominant in the sample. However, standard deviations ranged from 1.11 to 1.29, implying meaningful heterogeneity and indicating that a subset of students reported elevated negativity in areas such as perceived meaninglessness, interpersonal distrust, low frustration tolerance, and future-oriented anxiety.

Item distributions provide additional detail. The statement "I often feel that everything in life seems meaningless" yielded a mean of 2.20, with 63.06 percent selecting "strongly disagree" or "disagree," suggesting that most students retained a sense of meaning and motivation, while 23.69 percent selecting "uncertain" indicates a notable subgroup with less consolidated meaning orientation. The item on perceived lack of sincerity and kindness in others had a mean of 2.30, and 17.42 percent endorsed "agree" or "strongly agree," pointing to reduced social trust among a minority of students. The lowest mean was observed for the frustration tolerance item, "I can hardly bear any setbacks or failures," with a mean of 1.87, and 77.35 percent selecting "strongly disagree" or "disagree," indicating relatively strong perceived coping capacity in most respondents; nevertheless, 11.15 percent endorsed "agree" or "strongly agree," suggesting a vulnerable subgroup. The highest mean was found for "I often feel frustrated and am worried and anxious about the future" (mean equals 2.40), with 21.95 percent endorsing "agree" or "strongly agree," indicating that future-related anxiety was comparatively more salient and more differentiated in this sample.

Subgroup analyses further revealed structured variation. The Kruskal-Wallis test indicated statistically significant differences in negative mindset by political status (p equals 0.045), mother's occupation (p equals 0.046), and student leadership status (p equals 0.025), suggesting that negative orientation may be associated with social identity, family background, and role experiences. In contrast, gender, grade level, and region did not show significant differences (p values greater than 0.05), indicating comparatively limited explanatory relevance for these variables in this dataset. Overall, the results suggest low average negativity alongside meaningful differentiation, particularly regarding future anxiety, interpersonal trust, and frustration tolerance, warranting further mechanism-oriented interpretation in subsequent analyses.

Table 5 Negative Mindset Among College Students

Item	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Uncertain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
I often feel that everything in life seems meaningless.	35.19%	27.87%	23.69%	8.36%	4.88%	2.20	1.15
I often feel that people around me lack sincerity and kindness.	31.36%	29.97%	21.25%	12.54%	4.88%	2.30	1.18
I can hardly bear any setbacks or failures.	50.52%	26.83%	11.50%	7.67%	3.48%	1.87	1.11
I often feel frustrated and am worried and anxious about the future.	34.15%	21.25%	22.65%	14.63%	7.32%	2.40	1.29

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Interpreting the Overall Profile and Differentiated Patterns of College Students' Life Attitudes

The present study depicts a clearly differentiated four-dimensional profile of college students' attitudes toward life. At the aggregate level, a positive mindset was markedly above the scale midpoint, whereas the lying-flat mindset and negative mindset were both below the midpoint; the Buddha-like mindset clustered around the midpoint. This pattern suggests that, within this sample, a generally constructive orientation toward life coexists with two non-mainstream but consequential tendencies, namely low-investment withdrawal and negative meaning-related distress. Theoretically, these results support the argument that contemporary youth life attitudes are not adequately captured by a simple

positive–negative continuum; rather, they are better conceptualized as a configuration of co-existing orientations that reflect meaning affirmation, effort valuation, pressure-related goal attenuation, and vulnerability-linked negativity.

First, the dominance of a positive mindset is consistent with person-centered evidence indicating that meaning-related orientations among Chinese university students are heterogeneous but, for many individuals, remain stable and protective for mental health outcomes [3]. In a broader mental-health landscape where depression, anxiety, and sleep problems remain salient among Chinese university students [1,2,11], a high average level of positive mindset can be interpreted as a form of adaptive meaning maintenance and effort-based agency. Importantly, the item-level distributions also indicate meaningful heterogeneity, as a nontrivial share of respondents selected "uncertain" on core meaning and coping items. This nuance aligns with recent network-oriented findings showing that meaning in life and depressive symptoms may be intertwined with perceived social support in student populations, implying that meaning affirmation may coexist with localized vulnerabilities rather than functioning as a uniform protective shield [6].

Second, the moderate endorsement of a Buddha-like mindset appears to reflect a regulation-oriented stance under pressure and uncertainty, rather than a uniformly disengaged orientation. Empirically, "foxi" characteristics have begun to enter psychological scholarship as a culturally specific coping repertoire whose implications may vary by resource conditions. For instance, evidence suggests that Buddha-like characteristics may relate to social responsibility through conditional pathways involving self-efficacy and social support [5]. In this study, the relatively higher endorsement of relational restraint and low-intensity lifestyle preferences, alongside lower endorsement of "go with the flow" in long-term planning and achievement de-emphasis, suggests that a Buddha-like mindset may function as selective de-intensification: students may reduce relational and lifestyle pressures while still maintaining instrumental commitments in study and career domains. This interpretation is compatible with stress-process perspectives, emphasizing that young adults may adopt partial disengagement strategies to preserve psychological balance without fully abandoning achievement goals.

Third, the generally low but heterogeneous lying-flat mindset resonates with recent theoretical and measurement advances that locate "lying flat" in perceived scarcity and low return on effort. A validated "lying flat tendency" scale has been developed for Chinese youth [15], and integrative theory has framed lying flat as the outcome of multiple social-psychological pathways, including perceived unfairness, diminished efficacy of effort, and withdrawal from competitive escalation [6]. Complementary evidence indicates that personal relative deprivation can suppress self-improvement motivation, thereby legitimizing disengagement from competitive striving [4]. Within higher education, the rise of academically "involutional" climates provides a plausible contextual driver: involution atmosphere has been linked to students' stress responses and mental exhaustion through relative deprivation and perceived academic pressure [12–14]. Against this backdrop, the present finding that most students reject fully perfunctory effort, while a minority shows higher endorsement of fatalism and reduced willingness to invest in difficult tasks, may reflect a threshold process: a lying-flat mindset emerges more strongly when students perceive effort as unlikely to be rewarded and when competitive escalation becomes psychologically inefficient.

Finally, the pattern of subgroup differentiation provides further interpretive leverage. Positive mindset varied significantly by major category, suggesting that disciplinary cultures and opportunity structures may shape meaning affirmation and effort valuation, while leadership status showed a marginal association that may reflect role-based agency and structured engagement. By contrast, the lying-flat mindset differed by gender, political status, and father's occupation, and the Buddha-like mindset differed by gender and father's occupation, highlighting the relevance of social roles and family background in shaping pressure-coping repertoires. Negative mindset differed by political status, mother's occupation, and student leadership status, indicating that social identity, family resource contexts, and role experiences may be consequential for vulnerability-linked negativity. Taken together, these findings extend current literature by demonstrating that low-investment and negative tendencies are not randomly distributed: they may be socially patterned responses to perceived pressure, relative deprivation, and resource security. This differentiated structure is consistent with calls for integrative models that connect contextual stressors with individual meaning and coping mechanisms in Chinese university populations [1,11], and it strengthens the case for targeted, subgroup-sensitive student development and support strategies rather than one-size-fits-all guidance.

5.2 Research Significance

This study offers significance at theoretical, methodological, and practical levels by clarifying the structure of college students' life attitudes in contemporary China and by providing evidence on how such attitudes are socially patterned.

At the theoretical level, the study advances a multidimensional understanding of life attitudes. Rather than treating students' orientation toward life as a single positive–negative continuum, the findings support a four-dimensional configuration in which positive mindset, lying-flat mindset, Buddha-like mindset, and negative mindset can coexist within the same population and reflect distinct psychological functions. This framing helps reconcile seemingly contradictory public narratives that portray today's students as simultaneously aspiring and disengaged, and it provides a conceptually tractable basis for integrating meaning-related orientations, coping preferences, and withdrawal tendencies into a unified explanatory perspective.

At the methodological level, the study contributes a structured operationalization of life attitudes through a concise scale with acceptable psychometric performance and clear interpretability at the item and dimension levels. By combining descriptive profiling with nonparametric group comparisons, the analysis offers a replicable template for

mapping attitudinal distributions and identifying differentiated subgroups, which can inform subsequent theory testing and mechanism-oriented modeling in student development research.

At the practical level, the results provide evidence for more targeted, subgroup-sensitive educational and support strategies in universities. The overall dominance of a positive mindset suggests a solid foundation for developmental education, while the nontrivial presence of lying-flat and negative tendencies points to specific risk segments that may require differentiated interventions. Moreover, the observed differences across disciplinary background, political status, family occupational background, and leadership experience underscore that life attitudes are embedded in social and institutional contexts. Universities may therefore improve effectiveness by aligning ideological and psychological education with students' lived pressures and resource conditions, strengthening meaning construction and agency, and offering tailored support for those exhibiting elevated withdrawal or future-oriented anxiety.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was drawn from a single university in Guangzhou using on-site offline administration, which limits external validity across regions, institutional types, and student populations. Second, the evidence is largely cross-sectional and self-reported, constraining causal interpretation and leaving the temporal dynamics of life attitudes unresolved. Third, although the scale showed acceptable internal consistency and factorability, the current manuscript does not yet provide a full psychometric validation package, such as confirmatory factor analysis on an independent sample, measurement invariance tests across key subgroups, and convergent and discriminant validity against established constructs.

Future research should therefore broaden sampling and strengthen design and measurement rigor. Multi-site studies covering different university tiers and regions, combined with longitudinal or repeated-measures designs, would clarify whether a positive mindset is stable and protective over time, whether a lying-flat mindset emerges under effort–reward imbalance, and whether a Buddha-like mindset functions as short-term regulation or an enduring orientation. Methodologically, future work should test measurement invariance before interpreting subgroup mean differences and should extend validation through test–retest reliability and external validity checks (for example, associations with meaning in life, perceived stress, academic burnout, and social support). Mechanism-oriented models, such as mediation and moderation analyses incorporating perceived academic involvement, employability expectations, and institutional support, would further explain why subgroup differences arise and how universities can design more targeted interventions.

6 CONCLUSION

This study contributes to a clearer and more nuanced understanding of how contemporary Chinese college students orient themselves toward life in a period marked by intensified competition, accelerated social change, and heightened uncertainty. Rather than reducing students' life attitudes to a single positive–negative spectrum, the findings support a differentiated structure in which constructive agency, moderation-oriented regulation, low-investment withdrawal, and vulnerability-linked negativity coexist as distinct but interrelated orientations. Conceptually, this multidimensional framing helps reconcile seemingly contradictory public narratives about youth as both striving and disengaged, and it offers a more analytically precise language for discussing students' psychological adaptation under structural pressures.

Beyond describing attitudinal patterns, the study underscores that life attitudes are socially embedded and therefore educationally actionable. The observed differentiation across disciplinary contexts, role experiences, and family background implies that students' orientations are shaped by how they perceive effort–reward expectations, the availability of support resources, and the credibility of future pathways. This has broader implications for higher education governance and student development: effective educational responses should move beyond uniform exhortations toward "positivity" and instead strengthen meaning construction and agency while addressing the concrete conditions that foster disengagement and anxiety. By providing a structured lens and empirical grounding for identifying both protective orientations and vulnerable segments, this research supports more targeted, context-sensitive strategies in ideological education and student support, and it lays a foundation for future multi-site, longitudinal, and mechanism-focused work on youth adaptation in the evolving landscape of Chinese modernization.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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