



Exploring the Lived Experiences of University Students: The Influence of Parental, and Peer Expectations and Mental Health in Lusaka, Zambia

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ABSTRACT: University students globally navigate significant expectations from parents and peers, which can profoundly impact their mental health. While these expectations can motivate, they often generate stress and anxiety, particularly when perceived as unrealistic. Existing literature highlights this dual effect, but there is a scarcity of qualitative, in-depth research on this topic within the African, and specifically Zambian, higher education context. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of university students in Lusaka, Zambia, regarding the influence of parental and peer expectations and mental health. Its specific objectives were to: explore parental expectations and mental health based on students' experiences; explore peer expectations and mental health based on students' experiences; and determine whether students perceive these expectations as contributing positively or negatively to their overall mental health.

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of university students in Lusaka, Zambia, regarding the influence of parental, peer expectations and mental health. Utilizing a phenomenological research design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 university students, of which 11 students were from the University of Zambia, and 9 students were from Levy Mwanawasa Medical University. A focus group discussion was utilized as a second data collection method, with 8 university students from the initial group of students that participated in the interview process, 3 university students of which were from Levy Mwanawasa Medical University, and 5 university students were from the University of Zambia. All university students who participated, were aged 18–27. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data.

Findings reveal that parental expectations are a pervasive and powerful influence, often centered on academic and career success. While these expectations were sometimes described as motivating and linked to improved academic performance, they more frequently generated significant psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, feelings of being overwhelmed, and a loss of autonomy, particularly when perceived as unrealistic or misaligned with the student's own goals. Peer expectations primarily manifested as pressure to perform academically and conform socially. Their impact was more varied; some students reported resilience and motivation from positive peer influence, while others experienced anxiety and social pressure to meet group norms. Overall, the study concludes that expectations act as a double-edged sword. Their effect on mental health is contingent on their nature, source, and the individual's perception. The study highlights the critical role of balancing high expectations with emotional support and autonomy to safeguard student well-being. It recommends enhanced university support services and culturally sensitive interventions to help students navigate these pressures and promote mental health in the Zambian higher education context.

KEYWORDS: Lived Experiences, Mental health, Parental expectations, Peer expectations.

INTRODUCTION

University students tend to experience more pressure to work towards a better life for themselves, and are exposed to ideas imposed by sources such as the people who surround them. These sources include parents and peers, regarding who they should become, what they should do, and the life they should live. According to Curran & Hill (2022), expectations imposed on university students may include parental expectations and peer expectations, which influences university students by either motivating them to excel in their academics and career, or resulting in university students having to manage excessive pressure and stress in their attempt to meet these expectations when they are unrealistic. According to Almroth et al. (2019), these expectations from peers and parents may also affect university student's expectations of themselves, as the expectations imposed from others may not align with their own expectations from themselves. Expectations from others have an impact on the individual, in terms of their well-being, the manner in which they perceive their lives, as well as their mental health (Almroth et al., 2019). According to Master Counselling (2025), it is crucial to differentiate between realistic and unrealistic expectations in order to understand their influence on mental



health. Realistic expectations are those expectations which are in alignment with an individual's capabilities, which make these expectations achievable and also a source of motivation (Masters Counselling, 2025). Unrealistic expectations are those which ignore the limitations of individual's, causing them extreme exhaustion, disappointment and burnout in an attempt to achieve these expectations that are out of their capacity (Masters Counselling, 2025). The various types of expectations have varying connections to different aspects of mental health, some being positive, and others being negative (Almroth et al., 2019). Curran & Hill (2022) explain in their study that parental expectations that are high or unrealistic, have a negative connection to mental health, as it leads to perfectionism in university students, specifically due to the increased pressure and anxiety imposed by these expectations, whereas, Almroth et al. (2019) explain that parental expectations have a positive connection to mental health amongst university students, as it instills motivation, determination, and a decent self-concept. According to the Newport Institute (2022), among university students, the prevalence of peer expectations regarding academics, career and social life, contributes to poor mental health outcomes. The stress, anxiety, and insomnia they experience are often driven by fears of lost academic opportunities and the anxiety of not fulfilling peer-influenced standards (Newport Institute, 2022). This study focused on exploring parental expectations, peer expectations, and mental health of university students in Lusaka, Zambia. It sought to explore the lived experiences of university students. This study specifically delved into the university students lived experiences regarding parental and peer expectations, and how these expectations have contributed to certain aspects of the student's mental health.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Expectations are imposed on individuals from a young age, although, when individuals reach young adulthood, when they enter university, these expectations become more impactful on their mental health, as they begin to take them into consideration more frequently (Rief and Glombiewski, 2017). Some of these expectations include parental expectations, and peer expectations. Each of the expectations have varying connections with mental health in university students, some being positive and others being negative (Rief and Globiewski, 2017). Various aspects of mental health in university students are also affected, depending on the expectation being focused on (Rief and Glombiewski, 2017). The following literature review will focus on information and sources that will assist in exploring parental expectations, peer expectations and mental health. Since expectations affect university students' mental health most frequently globally, this review aims to gain insight on whether there are negative or positive experiences regarding expectations and the mental health in university students. Themes including parental expectations and the mental health of university students, and peer expectations and the mental health of university students, will be discussed in the chapter.

Parental Expectations and Mental Health

According to Almroth et al. (2019), it is crucial to firstly differentiate between 'parental aspirations' and 'parental expectations', in order to fully grasp and understand the experiences of parental expectations and the mental health of university students. Parental aspirations refer to how far parents desire their child to go in life, in the case of university students, parental aspirations refer to the extent to which they want their child to progress in terms of life and their academics whereas, parental expectations refer to the 'belief' that parents have, regarding how far their child will go in life (Almroth et al., 2019). Parental expectations are derived based on the realistic abilities and socioeconomic status, whereas parental aspirations remain constant, regardless of the unfavorable circumstances.

Almroth et al. (2019) explain that in a few studies, parental expectations are found to have a positive connection with mental health in university students. In a qualitative study that was carried out by Iqbal et al. (2024), the role of parental expectations and pressures on student's academic performance and mental health was explored. The results of this study revealed that parental expectations have a significant contribution to the academic performance, motivation and emotional health of the participants, positively (Iqbal et al., 2024). As stated by Tatlah et al. (2019), a study carried out in Pakistan, investigating the impact of parental expectations and students' academic self-concept on their academic achievements, revealed that parent's expectations for their children's academics, increase their source of motivation, their determination to aim for better results in their studies and life choices, meaning that these expectations have a positive impact on the mental well-being of the university student. As stated by Xu et al. (2022), parental expectations can significantly boost a student's motivation and self-esteem by fostering self-efficacy and confidence through belief in their abilities. This support encourages intrinsic motivation, where students develop a genuine desire to learn, and helps them internalize higher aspirations and a stronger work ethic (Xu et al., 2022). By providing structure, emotional support, and guidance



in goal-setting, parents create a positive environment that helps students feel capable and accomplished as they navigate academic challenges (Xu et al., 2022).

As stated by Curren (2022), the academic aspects such as schooling and further education is central to parental expectations, and often these expectations involve criticism by the parents, which creates room for a negative connection between parental expectations and the mental health of university students. Parental expectations seem to increase when individuals are in university, specifically due to competition in tertiary education, lack of occupational opportunities after university, and parent's determination for their children to be successful in life and their career (Almroth et al., 2019). Based on a study carried out in Zambia, it was found that university students experience many mental health issues that are mainly caused by academic pressure, which is exacerbated by the expectations of parents (Chabili & Simuyemba, 2020). According to Haider (2022), a study carried out in Karachi, investigating parental expectations and effect of perceived academic stress on student performance, utilized a sample of 100 university students selected from Rawalpindi University and questionnaires to collect data. The results of this study revealed that parental expectations most often contribute to their children's academic and life outcomes, and parents may have unrealistic and unachievable expectations of their children which can lead to the university student feeling like a failure or incapable because they are unable to achieve these expectations (Haider, 2022). Shriharsha et al. (2021) explain that, it is crucial for there to be a mutual understanding and agreement regarding the academic expectations, between the university student and the parent, because if the university student does not believe that the expectations are realistic or appealing, this could lead to them becoming discouraged or demotivated to work towards fulfilling these expectations, eating disorders could develop, low academic performance by the student due to the other stressors of life, lack of confidence in their abilities to fulfill the expectations, and insomnia could develop due to stress (Shriharsha et al., 2021)

Peer Expectations and Mental Health

According to Copeland et al. (2023), university students are frequently surrounded by their peers, especially during their university years when they attend lectures at their university, and this can have a great impact on the individual's perspectives, habits and imposes another form of expectations, known as peer expectations (Copeland et al., 2023).

Mohr et al. (2023) explain in a study, that peer expectations can have a positive connection with the mental health of university students, considering that the relationships the students foster with their peers are healthy, including motivational, including competition without jealousy and encouragement, which could in-turn have a positive effect on the manner in which the university students interpret and perceive these peer expectations. According to a mixed method study done by Adeyemi et al. (2019) in Nigeria, investigating the peer group influence on academic performance of undergraduate students in Babcock University, Ogun State, revealed that peer expectations can have a positive relationship with the mental health of university students, if the student is surrounding themselves with peers who are ambitious and motivated to do better, the expectations that these peers have, will be beneficial to the university student, and have a positive impact on the mental health of the individual, and also give them motivation to strive to achieve more in a healthy manner (Adeyemi et al., 2019). Therefore, the university students had positive experiences regarding peer expectations and their mental health, if there was a healthy relationship between the peers and the university student (Mohr et al., 2023).

On the other hand, university students have been found to have negative experiences regarding peer expectations and their mental health in some studies, relating to factors such as role and educational attainment, marital status and employment (Copeland et al., 2023). According to Long et al. (2020), peer expectations such as role attainment, employment and education attainment can have a negative impact on the mental health of university students, as some university students do not have the opportunity or resources to obtain a further education and get proper paying job opportunities, or they have a low socio-economic status, which can lead to them experiencing intense psychological distress, disappointment, depressed feelings and even anxiety, due to their inability to fulfill these peer expectations (Long et al., 2020). According to Adeyemi et al. (2019), peers also play an influential role in the risky behavior that university students may partake in, meaning that if university students are surrounded by peers who thrive on rebellious behaviors, indulging in substances, are uninterested in academics and improving their lives, their peers will have expectations for them, which may cause them to partake in behaviors and activities that are detrimental to their well-being, or cause them to feel a sense of disapproval, stress or anxiety, for not living up to these expectations.

The literature review has established that both parental and peer expectations constitute a significant, multifaceted influence on the mental health of university students globally. The evidence presents a dualistic nature of these expectations: they can serve as sources of motivation, enhanced self-concept, and positive emotional self-efficacy when perceived as realistic and supportive.



Conversely, when expectations become unrealistic, overly critical, or misaligned with a student's own goals, they are strongly associated with detrimental outcomes, including excessive stress, anxiety, depression, and perfectionism. Methodological limitations in the studies cited in the literature review can significantly shape their findings and implications. Quantitative studies relying on surveys or standardized scales, such as those by Haider (2022) and Tatlah et al. (2019), may capture broad trends but often lack the depth needed to understand the subjective and contextual nuances of students lived experiences. Conversely, qualitative studies like Iqbal et al. (2024) offer rich insights but are limited by small, non-representative samples, reducing generalizability. The reliance on self-report measures across many studies introduces the risk of social desirability bias and recall inaccuracy, potentially skewing results. Furthermore, the scarcity of mixed-methods research in this area, particularly within African contexts, means that existing findings may not fully capture the complex interplay between expectations and mental health, underscoring the need for more nuanced and culturally sensitive methodological approaches. This review has also highlighted some of the gaps in literature, such as there were more international studies of a quantitative nature, than that of a qualitative nature, meaning there is a lack of in-depth knowledge on the subject. The studies were also largely undertaken in majority of the non-African countries, which means there is a lack of information on this topic in terms of the African context. The lack of information regarding this topic can be noticed by the fact that only 2 studies were done in the context of Africa, which were the studies by Adiyemi et al. (2019) carried out in Nigeria, and the study by Chabili & Simuyemba (2020) which was carried out in Zambia. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps in literature, as this study undertook a qualitative approach to obtain more in-depth knowledge regarding the topic and university student's experiences, which was lacking in the existing literature, as well as this study was conducted in Zambia, which assisted in adding to the small pool of knowledge regarding this topic in this specific context.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design, specifically drawing on the principles of descriptive (transcendental) phenomenology. The aim was to explore the lived experiences of university students in Lusaka, Zambia, regarding the influence of parental and peer expectations on their mental health.

Participants

Participants consisted of 20 university students from two institutions in Lusaka: the University of Zambia (UNZA) and Levy Mwanawasa Medical University (LMMU). The sample included 13 females and 7 males, aged 18–27 years. In terms of academic progression, 9 were in their second year, 6 in their fifth year, 4 in their sixth year, and 1 in their fourth year.

Sampling and Recruitment

A non-probability convenience sampling method was used. Participants were recruited through digital messages circulated via student networks and through direct, in-person recruitment on campus. Inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled at UNZA or LMMU and aged 18–27. Exclusion criteria included students outside this age range or from other universities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through two methods, in-depth semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion. A total of 20 individual face-to-face interviews were conducted using an interview schedule with 15 open-ended questions. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. One FGD was held with 8 participants from the original interview group. The discussion was guided by a structured topic guide and lasted 30–45 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview and FGD transcripts. The analysis followed a structured process using Microsoft Excel:

1. Transcripts were organized into tables with columns for participant ID, verbatim responses (meaning units), condensed meaning units, codes, sub-themes, and themes.
2. Codes were generated inductively from the data and grouped into sub-themes.
3. Sub-themes were further synthesized into overarching themes that addressed the research objectives.



4. The analysis aimed to identify patterns in how expectations were perceived and their reported impact on mental health.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional committees. Written informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by not collecting personal identifiers and storing data in a password-protected digital repository. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative analysis, structured around the three primary research objectives. The data, derived from in-depth interviews with twenty university students and a subsequent focus group discussion (FGD) with six participants, reveal a complex and multifaceted landscape of expectations and their psychological impact. Thematic analysis, as detailed in the methodology chapter, was employed to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within both datasets. The findings are organised into three main sections, each corresponding to a research objective.

Demographics

The study participants comprised 20 university students from the University of Zambia (UNZA) and Levy Mwanawasa Medical University (LMMU). The sample consisted of 13 female students and 7 male students, with ages ranging from 18 to 24 years. In terms of institutional distribution, 11 participants were from UNZA and 9 from LMMU. The participants' academic progression was varied, with the majority being in their second year of study (9 participants), followed by fifth year (6 participants), sixth year (4 participants), and one participant in their fourth year. This demographic profile indicates a focus on undergraduate students across middle to senior academic years within the two selected institutions in Lusaka.

Parental expectations based on university student's lived experiences

Parental expectations emerged as a pervasive force, shaping students' mental and emotional worlds through distinct yet interrelated themes. The most dominant theme across all data was the overwhelming focus on 'academic expectations'. For most participants, this was framed not as encouragement but as a non-negotiable standard of excellence. This was articulated by P6 as the demand to be "not a mediocre A student but maybe a star student," and echoed in the focus group by P10 as a "flawless student... an A-class student" and by P19, the expectation to simply "do what I'm supposed to do".

The pressure to meet these standards often led to significant emotional and psychological struggles. A critical finding was the profound 'ambivalence' students felt. While 55% of participants reported 'unpleasant emotions', many also acknowledged a motivating aspect rooted in parental belief. As P14 noted, expectations can be "good in a sense because it makes me feel like I could actually do it because they think I can". However, this motivational aspect frequently coexisted with distress. Participants like P9 described it as a "weight on my shoulder", and P2 powerfully framed it as "more of an obligation... I just have to do it." P9 explained that stress could become extreme: "Sometimes the stress gets so intense that I don't know how I can explain it in words, but it gets too extreme". This constant push-and-pull between feeling supported and feeling crushed under the weight of demands emerged as a central psychological challenge.

The issue of 'personal choice and autonomy' was a major flashpoint. Anguish was expressed over pursuing courses chosen by parents, with participants explicitly stating that having more power over decisions would reduce stress. Conversely, 'open communication' emerged as a crucial protective factor. Students such as P19 who engaged in 'joint resolution' with parents, actively sharing pressures to gain support and bridge the "generational gap", were better able to transform pressure into a more collaborative endeavour.

Peer expectations based on university student's lived experiences

The most dominant theme regarding peer expectations was 'academic performance pressures', mentioned by 45% of interview participants. Within this sphere, peers became a constant reference point for social comparison, creating pressure "to keep up your grades" as mentioned by P9, and fostering a perceived "hierarchy of academic performance." This was reinforced by P15, who explained: "all my friends are medical students so you all have that expectation to do well, to pass, to pass well. I think that maybe



puts a kind of peer pressure on you." The focus group discussion revealed this could manifest as an "inward type of pressure" and "deep sense of want" as mentioned by P20, when peers progressed academically while others were held back.

Beyond academics, peer expectations governed social behaviour, creating tension between belonging and authenticity. While 50% of students expressed 'resistance to conformity' rooted in individuality—with P13 stating "I don't think one needs to conform... because people come from different places"—others such as P1 and P10 described pressure to adopt a "bougie lifestyle" or like P7 found themselves "conforming naturally because you're trying to fit in".

The most significant finding is the fundamentally 'dualistic nature' of peer expectations. Peers could act as either a crucial support system or a significant source of distress. On the positive side, 'peer expectations as a driver of academic motivation' was present in 55% of responses. P4 captured this: "peer expectation kind of motivates you to live up to people's expectations. It motivates you to show people that, okay, I think I can do this. I can push myself to do this." Friends were described as understanding by participants like P6—"a problem shared, is a problem halved"—with different strengths that "complement each other more". Conversely, negative impacts included feelings of being judged and unworthy, with 60% of participants reporting an 'absence of impact' on their mental health, suggesting that for many, peer expectations neither significantly helped nor harmed their psychological wellbeing.

The positive or negative contribution of expectations to the overall mental health of university students

Regarding 'parental expectations', 40% of interview participants described negative impacts on their mental health. Students articulated how unrelenting pressure took its toll, with P4 explaining: "a lot of pressure is put on you... pressure isn't something that's pleasing. So when there's a lot of pressure on you, your mental health is a shadow." A recurring source of distress was the perceived disconnect between parental understanding and student reality. P15 captured this tension: "Parents don't understand what we go through here... there's other things surrounding the lectures and other circumstances, so I think definitely negatively."

For **peer expectations**, 50% of participants reported a 'negative influence on mental health'. The drive for social approval emerged as a central mechanism, with P13 observing: "It all comes to pleasing our friends sometimes... if you have to please your friends, even if it's a wrong thing, it's okay." P1 noted that peers "are easily pushed or influenced to do things that are not right... so that ends up affecting you." Focus group data revealed a more nuanced picture, with responses spanning three themes: 'affects mental health depending on the case', 'affects mental health positively', and 'negatively affects mental health'. P19 articulated this duality: expectations "are supposed to contribute positively... when someone is expecting you or believing you can achieve highly is a good thing. It then becomes negative when there is negative pressure applied." Others like P6 described transforming negativity into motivation—"I take those negative things as fuel"—while P2 illustrated the psychological toll of conflicting expectations: studying psychology while peers expect expertise in a field where interests lie elsewhere, leading to constant "reconsidering... think and filter is this relevant, is this not."

The most consistent finding was that expectations exist in a paradoxical relationship with student mental health, simultaneously acting as a primary source of debilitating stress and a key engine of motivational drive. On the stress side, the data is unequivocal. Expectations were linked to chronic anxiety, feelings of being overwhelmed, and emotional distress. P9 stated plainly, "*the stress gets so intense.*" The focus group discussion demonstrated that multiple participants rating stress at 7/10, citing obligation and fear of disappointment. Therefore, some participants believed expectations to contribute negatively, and others believed them to contribute positively to their overall mental health.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the intricate connection between parental expectations, peer expectations, and the mental health of university students in Lusaka, Zambia, through their lived experiences. The findings reveal an often paradoxical point where expectations act as both a significant source of motivation and a profound cause of psychological distress.

The findings indicate that parental expectations are a pervasive and powerful force in the lives of Zambian university students. The themes identified—'Academic expectations', 'Level of expectations', and 'Life expectations'—paint a picture of parents who are highly invested in their children's educational and long-term success, often equating it with financial security and familial honour. This aligns with Baumrind's conceptualization of authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles, with many students experiencing a blend of both. On one hand, expectations were frequently described as a "Driving force" and "Motivational", leading to improved academic performance. Participants expressed that their parents' belief in their capabilities fostered confidence and resilience,



characteristics nurtured by an authoritative style that is demanding but also supportive. Just as Iqbal et al. (2024) explained, parental expectations play a significant positive role in academic performance, motivation and emotional health of participants.

On the other hand, a significant portion of the data points to the negative consequences of an authoritarian style, characterized by high demands with low responsiveness to the child's emotional needs. The pressure to meet rigid, often "unrealistic expectations" led to intense emotional strain. Students reported feelings of being "pressurised", "overwhelmed", and under "obligation", resulting in "emotional & psychological struggles" such as anxiety, sadness, and a loss of personal identity. This was particularly acute when parental expectations clashed with the student's own passions or capabilities, leading to a state of internal conflict and diminished autonomy—a core concept in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Cherry, 2024). As Tatlah et al. (2019) explain, even though parental expectations may play a positive role in student well-being, they can also be negative when they impose stress that students cannot achieve. Shriharsha et al. (2021) state that mutual understanding of these expectations is crucial, because without it, expectations may exceed the student's capability, causing stress, demotivation, and affecting emotional health. The connection between parental expectations and mental health was explicitly negative for many, with students describing how constant pressure led to "psychological distress". As Curran (2022) states, high and unrealistic parental expectations that university students face regarding their academics and life choices can be daunting, stressful, and increase anxiety.

The findings revealed that peer dynamics are a crucial, albeit more varied, social factor. A key finding was that many participants reported an "absence of impact", suggesting a well-developed sense of individuality. However, for those who were impacted, peer expectations manifested primarily as "academic performance pressures" to maintain high grades and a certain social status. The theme of "pressure to conform" was evident, as students described the need to fit in, sometimes adopting expensive lifestyles or attending social events at the expense of their studies.

As stated by Adeyemi et al. (2019), the company students keep greatly impacts their choices. When a student's social circle engages in risky behaviours, the pressure to fit in is powerful. The impact on mental health was highly dependent on the nature of the peer group. "Positive influence" was reported when peers were "like-minded", supportive, and created a collaborative environment for academic motivation. According to Adeyemi et al. (2019), peer expectations are positively correlated with student mental health when those peers are ambitious and motivated. This aligns with SDT's relatedness need, where positive social connections can foster motivation and well-being (Worley et al., 2023).

Conversely, a "negative influence" was strongly felt when peers were perceived as competitive, demoralizing, or when peer expectations led to social exclusion—what participants termed "Peer exclusion". The need to constantly please peers and fulfil social obligations created significant anxiety and unhappiness, demonstrating how negative social feedback can prevent the fulfilment of psychological needs.

The data revealed that parental expectations have an overall negative connection with the mental health of university students, which participants explained is due to the pressure they endure to fulfil these expectations, the disappointment they experience when unable to fulfil them, and the feeling of having to pretend to be someone they are not. However, some participants reported positive or neutral connections, as expectations could be motivating at times and overwhelming at others. Half of the participants believed there is a negative connection between peer expectations and their mental health, as they felt unable to be authentic among peers simply to fit in. This highlights SDT once again: in the case of peer expectations, university students experience a loss of autonomy over their decisions, as most choices become influenced by peers, even when those decisions are harmful (Cherry, 2024). The findings strongly support the tenets of Self-Determination Theory. Expectations were perceived as positive and motivating when they supported the three basic psychological needs: 'autonomy'—when students felt they had a "choice" and their goals aligned with parental expectations; 'competence'—when expectations were "realistic" and "aligned with capabilities"; and 'relatedness'—when supportive communication conveyed that expectations came from a place of love and belief, making challenges feel shared rather than isolating.

Conversely, expectations were detrimental to mental health when they prevented the fulfilment of these needs: when imposed without discussion (affecting autonomy), when impossibly high (affecting competence), or when delivered with criticism and conditional regard rather than support (affecting relatedness). This resulted in "unpleasant emotions", stress, and psychological struggles—classic indicators of poor mental health stemming from need frustration.

The analysis reveals a paradoxical relationship between expectations and mental health among university students. On one hand, expectations are frequently described as motivating and necessary, driving academic performance, providing structure, and fostering



purpose. Many respondents reported that high expectations—particularly from parents—pushed them to work harder and remain focused. This aligns with themes such as pleasant emotions, realistic expectations, and positive impacts. On the other hand, these same expectations are often linked to significant psychological distress. Students described feeling pressured, overwhelmed, and obligated to meet external standards, contributing to stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. The data shows that when expectations are perceived as unrealistic, misaligned with personal goals, or excessively demanding, they can undermine mental well-being, leading to feelings of inadequacy, social isolation, and burnout.

Thus, expectations function as a double-edged sword: they can be both a source of motivation and a catalyst for mental strain. The connection between expectations and mental health is not linear but context-dependent, influenced by factors such as the student's relationship with their parents, the realism of expectations, the degree of personal autonomy, and the supportive or competitive nature of peer dynamics. This paradox underscores the need for balanced, communicative, and flexible expectation-setting to promote both academic success and psychological resilience.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study set out to explore parental and peer expectations, and the mental health of university students in Lusaka, Zambia, through the rich, detailed lens of their lived experiences. The findings paint a complex picture where expectations act as a powerful double-edged sword, capable of both motivating academic excellence and inflicting psychological distress. The journey through the participants' narratives reveals that the effect of these expectations is not monolithic; it is deeply contingent on their nature, their source, the individual's perception, and the broader socio-cultural context in which they are embedded.

The research successfully addressed its objectives, uncovering that parental expectations are a pervasive and potent force, predominantly centered on academic and career success. While these expectations were sometimes described as a motivating "driving force" that fostered resilience and improved performance- parenting styles were not assessed in this study, however this aligning with an authoritative parenting style outline in the Parenting style theoretical framework, characterized by support and communication—they more frequently generated substantial negative outcomes. For many students, parental pressure manifested as overwhelming stress, anxiety, feelings of being trapped by obligation, and a profound loss of autonomy, particularly when expectations were perceived as unrealistic or misaligned with the student's own aspirations. This aligns with the detrimental aspects of an authoritarian parenting style, leading to emotional and psychological struggles that directly impair mental well-being.

Regarding peer expectations, the study found a more varied impact. While a significant number of students demonstrated resilience and a strong sense of individuality, effectively resisting negative conformity, peer pressure was still a notable factor. It primarily manifested as pressure to perform academically and to conform to certain social behaviors and timelines. Positive, supportive peer groups could enhance motivation and provide a sense of relatedness. However, competitive or socially exclusive peer environments exacerbated stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy, forcing students to sometimes compromise their authenticity to fit in.

Ultimately, when students were asked to evaluate the overall contribution of these expectations to their mental health, the consensus leaned towards a negative impact, particularly from parental sources. The constant pressure to meet high standards, the fear of disappointment, and the internal conflict between personal desires and external demands were identified as key drivers of psychological distress. These findings are powerfully framed by the theoretical lenses of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Baumrind's Parental Styles. Expectations were perceived positively only when they supported the fundamental psychological needs for 'autonomy' (having a choice), 'competence' (feeling capable of meeting realistic goals), and 'relatedness' (feeling supported and understood). When expectations thwarted these needs, they became a significant source of mental health challenges.

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