

# *Assessment of Fear of Failure among Chinese College Students*

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**Abstract:** Fear of failure refers to the inclination to assess potential threats and experience anxiety in situations that carry the risk of failure. A total of 288 participants were surveyed using the revised fear of failure scale to evaluate the level of fear of failure among college students in Guangzhou. The study found that (1) the results showed that college students' total score of fear of failure is relatively high, and the average score is above the critical value of 3 points; (2) female college students scored significantly higher than male students on the subscales of “upsetting important others” and “losing social influence”; (3) college students who majored in liberal arts scored significantly higher than those who majored in science on the subscale of “losing social influence”.

## 1. Introduction

Fear of failure is characterized as “a tendency to appraise threats and experience anxiety in situations that carry the potential for failure.” (Conroy, 2001[1]; Conroy et al., 2007[2]). When individuals encounter failure, they often exhibit negative self-evaluation accompanied by feelings of shame and low self-esteem. Therefore, some college students are prone to fear failure. From the cognitive-motivational-relational perspective, failure can pose a threat to individuals who have developed associations between failure and undesirable consequences. As an avoidance motivation, fear of failure may cause negative effects and affect college students' career motivation and orientation. The results of a study of dental university students showed that academic curriculum immensity, examinations regularly, low test scores, and fear of failure were the main stressors for college students (Srivastava et al., 2020[3]). According to research among college music students, 35% of students have a fear of failure (Conroy, 2001[4]). Although numerous studies have consistently demonstrated the detrimental impact of fear of failure on individuals (Li, 2011[5]), certain empirical findings also indicate the potential for fear of failure to evoke motivating and inhibitory responses. (Mitchell & Shepherd, 2011[6]; Martin & Marsh, 2003[7]).

Most researchers mainly discuss college students' success motivation, personality characteristics, self-confidence, and other aspects, while there are few studies about the fear of failure. The fear of failure in recent years has received considerable critical attention for college students facing relatively large study pressure. Investigating college students' psychological condition from the perspective of fear of failure may give us new inspiration. This study aimed to investigate the fear of failure among college students in Guangzhou, China. Hence, it is essential to comprehensively

examine and describe the phenomenon of fear of failure from the perspective of college students. We present the results from empirical research, enabling us to interpret the fear of failure from college students' perspectives.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Participants ( $N = 335$ ) in this study were randomly recruited from four universities in Guangzhou, China. Forty-seven invalid questionnaires were excluded from the analysis, resulting in a recovery rate of 85.97%. The college students' ages ranged from 19 to 25, including 59.03% girls and 40.97% boys. 54.51% of students were in the second year, 32.29% were in the second year, and 13.19% were in the first year. Among the student population, 88.19% constituted the sole children of their respective families, whereas 11.81% had siblings. Moreover, 53.47% of the participants hailed from rural areas, while the remaining 46.53% originated from urban regions. 71.18% of students majored in liberal arts, and 28.82% majored in science.

### 2.2 Measures

The fear of failure was evaluated by employing a revised Chinese version of the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI) scale (e.g., "When I fail, I feel that all my previous efforts are in vain"). The 28-item scale has six subscales: (1) experiencing negative emotions, (2) repudiating one's past efforts, (3) reducing one's self-efficacy, (4) losing social influence, (5) upsetting important others, and (6) devaluing one's self-estimate. A five-point scale ranging from 1 (totally inconsistent) to 5 (totally consistent) was used to evaluate each item, with higher scores indicating greater levels of fear of failure. The total scale in this study exhibited a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91.

### 2.3 Procedure

Table 1 presents the findings of the descriptive statistical analysis conducted on the fear of failure among college students. During the questionnaire collection process, the requirements were disclosed to all participants, and the questionnaires were collected and administered according to voluntary answers. The questionnaire had standard instructions, and all the college students were assured that the responses would be confidential. Upon data collection, statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.0.

## 3. Results

The results of the descriptive statistical analysis of the fear of failure among college students are presented in Table 1 below. The table shows that college students' total score of fear of failure is relatively high, and the average score is above the critical value of 3 points. The subscales' scores of "experiencing negative emotions", "repudiating one's past efforts", "losing social influence", and "upsetting important others" are above the medium level. The score of the subscale of "devaluing one's self-estimate" is at the medium level. However, the subscale score of "reducing one's self-efficacy" is below the medium level.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Fear of Failure

	N	Mean	SD
Experiencing negative emotions	288	3.04	0.68
Repudiating one's past efforts	288	3.51	0.74
Reducing one's self-efficacy	288	2.85	0.59
Losing social influence	288	3.46	0.68
Upsetting important others	288	3.16	0.76
Devaluing one's self-estimate	288	3.00	0.63
Fear of failure	288	3.11	0.52

The differences of fear of failure between males and females are shown in Table 2. No significant difference was observed in the overall score for fear of failure between male and female participants. However, female college students scored significantly higher than male students on “losing social influence” ( $F(1,286)=14.92, p<0.05$ ) and “upsetting important others” ( $F(1,286)=6.65, p < 0.05$ ).

Table 2: Analysis of Fear of Failure between Male and Female

	Male		Female		F
	M	SD	M	SD	
Experiencing negative emotions	14.84	3.45	15.41	3.39	1.96
Repudiating one's past efforts	14.13	3.07	13.98	2.87	0.18
Reducing one's self-efficacy	20.09	4.37	19.84	3.98	0.27
Losing social influence	9.84	1.80	10.76	2.13	14.92**
Upsetting important others	9.06	2.22	9.76	2.29	6.65*
Devaluing one's self-estimate	17.77	3.69	18.18	3.86	0.80
Fear of failure	85.73	14.38	87.92	14.46	1.61

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

The differences of fear of failure among different majors are shown in Table 3. There was no significant difference in the overall score for fear of failure between majors. However, college students who majored in liberal arts scored significantly higher than those who majored in science on the dimension of “losing social influence” ( $F(1,286) = 8.38, p < 0.05$ ).

Table 3: Analysis of Fear of Failure among Different Majors

	Majored in liberal arts		Majored in science		F
	M	SD	M	SD	
Experiencing negative emotions	15.30	3.36	14.87	3.58	0.96
Repudiating one's past efforts	14.10	2.95	13.89	2.97	0.29
Reducing one's self-efficacy	19.97	4.41	19.87	3.39	0.04
Losing social influence	10.60	2.03	9.84	2.02	8.38*
Upsetting important others	9.57	2.24	9.24	2.39	1.19
Devaluing one's self-estimate	18.21	3.92	17.52	3.43	1.97
Fear of failure	87.75	14.72	85.23	13.67	1.81

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

#### 4. Discussion

This research used the revised fear of failure scale to investigate the fear of failure of college students in Guangzhou. The results showed that college students' total score of fear of failure is relatively high, and the average score is above the critical value of 3 points. The results indicate that the average score of Guangzhou college students' fear of failure has reached a critical value and is relatively high.

Analysis of fear of failure between genders showed that female college students scored significantly higher than male students on “losing social influence” ( $F(1,286)=14.92, p<0.05$ ) and “upsetting important others” ( $F(1,286)= 6.65, p< 0.05$ ). The difference in role orientation and expectations of males and females may be the main reason for this difference. Men are usually expected to be strong, hard-working, and successful. Our society has relatively higher requirements and expectations for males than females. Compared to men, women receive less recognition in our society. Female college students who have received higher education have higher achievement motivation. They want to achieve success to enhance their social value, and they are more worried about the consequences of failure. Therefore, females are generally more worried than males about “losing social influence” and “upsetting important others”.

Analysis of fear of failure between majors showed that college students who majored in liberal arts scored significantly higher than those who majored in science on the dimension of “losing social influence” ( $F(1,286) = 8.38, p< 0.05$ ). An explanation for this might be that liberal arts and science students have different ways of thinking due to the different natures of subjects. Compared with science students, liberal arts students are more sensitive to emotions and pay more attention to their emotional experiences. External feedback makes their evaluation of themselves easier to be affected, and they are more inclined to deny their ability once they fail. On the other hand, science students are more rational, independent thinkers, motivated to achieve, and more willing to try. Therefore, college students who majored in liberal arts are generally more worried than those who majored in science about “losing social influence”.

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