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Identifying the Subjective Experience of Learning Under High Performance Pressure

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to identify and explore the subjective emotional, cognitive, and social experiences of learners operating under high performance pressure within South African educational contexts.

Methods and Materials: Using a qualitative design, this study adopted an interpretivist approach to understand the lived experiences of individuals facing intense performance expectations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 24 participants drawn from universities and professional training programs across South Africa. Participants were selected purposively to ensure diversity in academic and occupational backgrounds, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step method, and credibility was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive documentation.

Findings: Three overarching themes emerged from the data. First, emotional and cognitive responses to pressure revealed that anxiety, cognitive overload, and fluctuating motivation coexisted with resilience and growth mindset. Second, social and environmental influences demonstrated that institutional grading systems, peer comparison, family expectations, and digital monitoring amplified stress, while supportive instructor feedback and empathetic climates enhanced engagement. Third, coping, adaptation, and meaning-making highlighted that learners adopted both adaptive (mindfulness, reframing, time management) and maladaptive (avoidance, overstudying) strategies, with resilience and self-reflection transforming pressure into an opportunity for personal and academic development.

Conclusion: Learning under high performance pressure simultaneously challenges and strengthens learners, shaping emotional resilience, motivation, and self-concept. The findings underscore the need for educational systems to balance high expectations with psychological safety, supportive pedagogy, and reflective learning practices to transform pressure into growth.

Keywords: *Performance pressure; emotional resilience; qualitative study; learning motivation; coping strategies; psychological safety*

1. Introduction

The experience of learning under high performance pressure is a multidimensional psychological phenomenon involving complex interactions between cognition, emotion, motivation, and social context. In competitive academic and professional environments, learners are increasingly expected to meet elevated standards of productivity, speed, and innovation, often within constrained timeframes and limited support structures. These conditions can generate heightened stress responses, shaping how individuals process information, engage in learning activities, and internalize success or failure. A growing body of research in educational psychology, neuroscience, and performance science has explored how such pressure impacts not only outcomes but also the subjective experience of learning itself (Fu et al., 2022; Li, 2025).

Performance pressure can be defined as the perceived expectation to achieve superior results under evaluative scrutiny. It often manifests in academic, athletic, and corporate training settings where individuals' competencies are continuously assessed and compared (Cabral et al., 2022; Low et al., 2022). Studies in sport psychology reveal that exposure to controlled pressure situations—commonly known as "pressure training"—can enhance resilience and adaptive performance, particularly when anxiety is managed effectively (Cabral et al., 2024). For instance, athletes trained under moderate anxiety conditions develop improved attentional control and motor precision, suggesting that pressure, when calibrated appropriately, can be a catalyst for learning and self-regulation (Low et al., 2022). However, the threshold between constructive and destructive pressure is thin. Excessive stress can lead to cognitive interference, loss of attentional focus, and a decline in learning motivation (Fu et al., 2022; Li et al., 2024).

In academic contexts, performance pressure is often linked with assessment-driven educational structures, where grades, rankings, and standardized testing amplify learners' anxiety. The perception of being constantly evaluated reduces intrinsic motivation and shifts attention from mastery-oriented goals to performance-avoidance behaviors (Pourreza et al., 2024; Wang, 2022). Students under chronic pressure often experience cognitive overload, emotional exhaustion, and diminished working memory efficiency (Guo-rong & An, 2022; Lin et al., 2022). The interaction between time constraints and expectations of perfectionism creates a paradox where learners strive for success but are simultaneously hindered by the fear of failure.

At the psychological level, learning under pressure activates stress-related pathways that influence both affective and cognitive functioning (Duan, 2023; Gao, 2023). The prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive control and decision-making, is particularly vulnerable to overload during high-stress situations. When anxiety peaks, attention narrows, leading to reduced capacity for flexible thinking and creative problem-solving (Cabral et al., 2022). Research has shown that implicit learning processes—those occurring without conscious awareness—are more resistant to pressure-induced interference than explicit learning strategies (Pourreza et al., 2024). This finding suggests that the mode of knowledge acquisition determines how learners adapt to performance stress.

Emotional regulation also plays a central role in mediating the relationship between pressure and learning outcomes. Learners with higher psychological resilience demonstrate greater capacity to reframe stressful experiences as challenges rather than threats (Khan et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). Resilience acts as a buffer against the negative impact of shame, self-doubt, and social comparison, which are commonly reported emotional responses in high-performance environments. According to (Rasul & Schwaiger, 2023), a supportive learning climate fosters intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being, thereby mitigating the detrimental effects of performance stress. Similarly, (Yang, 2023) emphasized the role of aesthetic and emotional engagement in reducing anxiety, showing that creative educational practices—such as the integration of music and color psychology—can enhance attentional focus and emotional balance in learners.

Beyond individual psychological processes, the social environment exerts a significant influence on how learners experience and interpret pressure. Institutional expectations, peer competition, and family values collectively shape the learner's perception of success and failure (Haj, 2025; Jalani et al., 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the shift to remote and hybrid learning environments further intensified this phenomenon. The blending of home and educational spaces blurred boundaries between personal and academic life, increasing stress for both learners and educators (Guo-rong & An, 2022; Liu & Li, 2023). Teachers, as (Haj, 2025) found, faced emotional burnout and cognitive strain while maintaining digital engagement, mirroring the challenges that students encountered in sustaining concentration and motivation.

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Moreover, cultural expectations play a critical role in defining the emotional tone of pressure. In collectivist societies, the pursuit of excellence often carries the additional weight of representing family honor or social standing (Jalani et al., 2022). Learners internalize these expectations as moral obligations, resulting in heightened anxiety when facing academic evaluation. Conversely, in more individualistic contexts, performance pressure tends to manifest as self-imposed perfectionism and competitiveness (Potyomkin, 2025). These divergent cultural frameworks highlight the necessity of understanding pressure not merely as a psychological construct but as a culturally mediated experience.

Environmental factors within educational institutions also amplify the effects of pressure. Time constraints, large class sizes, and digital monitoring systems contribute to constant surveillance and evaluation. The rise of online education platforms, particularly during crises, has further complicated the learning experience (Fu et al., 2022; Zhang & Guo, 2022). Learners reported that algorithmic grading systems and virtual proctoring created a sense of being "watched," even in the privacy of one's own home. Such digital surveillance, while intended to ensure fairness, can erode autonomy and intrinsic motivation (Zong et al., 2022).

Learning under pressure also involves managing cognitive load and sustaining motivation in the face of stress. Studies on time pressure and psychological safety indicate that learners' willingness to engage with errors or failure depends heavily on perceived support and the presence of a non-punitive environment (Lin et al., 2022). When learners perceive their environment as psychologically safe, they are more likely to take intellectual risks, learn from feedback, and demonstrate creativity (Wang, 2023). Conversely, environments that emphasize evaluation and competition promote avoidance behaviors, leading to stagnation in learning.

The role of motivation in moderating the relationship between pressure and performance is central. (Potyomkin, 2025) proposed an integrative model of motivational factors in training under crisis conditions, emphasizing the interaction between self-determination and external control. Similarly, (Sattarovich, 2025) argued that willpower and leadership traits—particularly in military and high-stakes educational settings—are cultivated through exposure to controlled challenges that simulate real pressure. Learners develop mental endurance by repeatedly confronting stressors and building tolerance through structured self-discipline. However, when pressure exceeds the learner's coping capacity, motivation declines, and burnout ensues (Finet et al., 2025).

Psychological resilience emerges as a mediating factor that determines whether pressure will have a destructive or constructive impact on learning. (Li et al., 2024) found that resilience moderates the relationship between social comparison and learning engagement, reducing the negative influence of shame. Resilient learners adopt a mastery orientation, focusing on growth and personal improvement rather than external validation. This is consistent with the findings of (Rasul & Schwaiger, 2023), who observed that intrinsic motivation correlates strongly with emotional well-being and engagement.

The evolution of digital education has reshaped how performance pressure manifests in contemporary learning. Artificial intelligence, data analytics, and online learning systems have enabled real-time performance monitoring, altering both the perception and measurement of success (Wang, 2022; Zhang & Guo, 2022). These technologies promise efficiency but may inadvertently increase psychological stress. Learners often perceive algorithmic evaluations as impersonal, rigid, and unforgiving, lacking the empathetic nuance of human feedback. According to (Low et al., 2022), similar effects are observed in elite sports, where constant technological monitoring heightens self-consciousness and anxiety among athletes. In educational contexts, such monitoring replicates performance anxiety by turning learning into a form of data competition.

(Gao, 2023) further emphasized that psychological quality—comprising emotional stability, confidence, and focus—directly predicts performance under pressure in artistic and creative disciplines. Students with higher emotional regulation capabilities sustain motivation and performance even in competitive environments. Meanwhile, (Yang, 2023) demonstrated that integrating emotional and sensory learning approaches, such as color and music-based pedagogy, reduces stress responses and enhances cognitive absorption. Together, these studies underscore the importance of balancing technological innovation with emotional literacy in modern education.

From an educational psychology perspective, the sustained experience of pressure contributes to both growth and vulnerability. (Duan, 2023) highlighted that understanding psychological mechanisms in teaching requires attention to the relational aspects of education—namely, empathy, feedback, and communication. When teachers adopt emotionally intelligent approaches, they mitigate the negative impact of performance stress on

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learners. Conversely, rigid pedagogical styles increase the risk of emotional detachment and burnout among students.

The pandemic era brought unprecedented stress to both educators and learners. (Liu & Li, 2023) and (Haj, 2025) observed that the abrupt digital transition led to declines in motivation and attention, alongside increases in psychological fatigue. Learners struggled to maintain self-discipline in isolation, while instructors grappled with balancing performance expectations and emotional support. (Jalani et al., 2022) further revealed that parental and familial stressors during lockdown indirectly affected students' engagement, indicating that learning pressure often transcends individual boundaries and becomes a systemic issue.

The interconnectedness of mental health, learning motivation, and institutional culture also aligns with the findings of (Finet et al., 2025), who studied performance pressure among financial traders. Although the professional context differs, the underlying psychological processes—stress appraisal, emotional regulation, and attentional control—mirror those experienced by students in competitive academic settings. High-pressure contexts consistently activate adaptive or maladaptive coping mechanisms depending on personal resilience and organizational support.

The relationship between performance pressure and learning is also shaped by cultural norms and developmental stages. (Sattarovich, 2025) emphasized that exposure to pressure in formative years can strengthen willpower and discipline, particularly when guided by mentorship and structured feedback. In contrast, uncontrolled or chronic stress during development can impair emotional regulation and cognitive flexibility (Wang, 2023). In South Africa and other culturally diverse contexts, educational inequality and societal expectations further complicate how learners experience pressure. These factors underscore the need for a context-sensitive understanding of performance stress that takes into account socioeconomic diversity and access to psychological resources.

(Cabral et al., 2024) and (Pourreza et al., 2024) highlighted that training under moderate stress enhances adaptability across various performance domains, including sports and education. Learners exposed to structured challenges demonstrate superior long-term retention and emotional resilience. Yet, (Finet et al., 2025) warned that without adequate support mechanisms, these same pressures may lead to emotional exhaustion and motivational decline. Thus, performance pressure operates as a double-edged sword—capable of fostering growth or producing burnout, depending on how individuals interpret and respond to it.

The literature collectively suggests that the subjective experience of learning under pressure is best understood through an integrative lens combining cognitive appraisal theory, self-determination theory, and socio-cultural perspectives. According to cognitive appraisal theory, individuals evaluate stressors based on perceived control and coping resources, which in turn determine emotional responses and behavioral outcomes (Lin et al., 2022). Self-determination theory complements this by emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness as the psychological needs underpinning motivation (Rasul & Schwaiger, 2023). When these needs are thwarted by external pressures or social comparisons, learning becomes associated with anxiety rather than engagement. Finally, socio-cultural frameworks highlight how institutional norms, peer dynamics, and family expectations embed performance pressure within broader systems of meaning (Jalani et al., 2022; Potyomkin, 2025).

Together, these frameworks reveal that learners' subjective experiences under high performance pressure are not merely psychological states but lived negotiations between internal drives and external demands. By understanding how individuals make sense of pressure, researchers and educators can design interventions that promote resilience, intrinsic motivation, and well-being within demanding learning environments (Finet et al., 2025; Gao, 2023; Li, 2025).

This study aims to identify and explore the subjective experiences of learners operating under high performance pressure, focusing on their emotional, cognitive, and social coping processes within the South African educational context.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretivist paradigm to explore the subjective experiences of learning among individuals exposed to high performance pressure. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, emotions, and coping mechanisms within their learning environments. Twenty-four participants were purposefully selected from various educational and professional settings in South Africa, representing diverse backgrounds in terms of age, gender,

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and field of study or occupation. Purposeful sampling ensured that all participants had direct experience with learning or training contexts characterized by high evaluative demands and performance expectations. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged from additional interviews.

2.2. *Measures*

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, providing flexibility to probe deeper into participants' lived experiences while maintaining a consistent structure across interviews. An interview guide was developed based on the existing literature on performance pressure, motivation, and learning stress, and included open-ended questions such as "Can you describe a time when you felt pressured to perform at your best?" and "How did that pressure affect your learning process?" Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on participants' availability and convenience. Each interview lasted between 45 and 75 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual details that complemented the verbal data. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and confidentiality was maintained through anonymized codes.

2.3. *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 software to facilitate systematic coding, organization, and retrieval of qualitative data. Thematic analysis was adopted as the analytical framework following the six-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Codes were generated inductively from the data and iteratively refined to identify patterns and relationships between themes. Constant comparison techniques were used throughout the process to ensure analytical consistency and depth. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adhered to the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Member checking was conducted by sharing key findings with several participants for validation, while peer debriefing among research colleagues ensured analytical rigor and reflexivity.

3. Findings and Results

A total of 24 participants from various regions of South Africa took part in the study. The sample included 13 females (54.2%) and 11 males (45.8%), ranging in age from 19 to 42 years (M = 28.6). Participants represented diverse educational and occupational contexts, including undergraduate students (n = 10), postgraduate students (n = 6), and professionals engaged in continuous training or certification programs (n = 8). Regarding academic or workplace sectors, 9 participants were from humanities and social sciences, 7 from engineering and technology fields, 5 from business and management, and 3 from healthcare-related disciplines. Most participants (n = 15) reported being engaged in full-time study, while 9 balanced both work and study responsibilities. In terms of socioeconomic background, 14 participants identified as middle-income, 6 as lower-income, and 4 as upper-income. The sample was ethnically diverse, consisting of 12 Black African, 6 White, 4 Coloured, and 2 Indian participants, reflecting the multicultural composition of South African higher education and training environments. This heterogeneity ensured that the dataset captured a broad range of experiences, perceptions, and coping responses to high-performance pressure.

Table 1

Main Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts

Main Themes (Categories)	Subthemes	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional and Cognitive Responses to Pressure	1.1 Anxiety and Performance Fear	fear of failure; physiological tension; racing thoughts; anticipation of judgment; difficulty concentrating; sleep disturbance
	1.2 Motivation and Internal Drive	striving for excellence; fear-based motivation; competitiveness; self-imposed goals; fluctuating energy levels
	1.3 Cognitive Overload and Fatigue	mental exhaustion; reduced retention; fragmented attention; burnout feelings
	1.4 Perceived Control and Self-Efficacy	sense of competence; control over outcomes; internal vs external locus; coping beliefs
	1.5 Emotional Regulation Strategies	self-talk; mindfulness use; emotional suppression; adaptive reframing; short breaks

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	1.6 Resilience and Growth Mindset	reframing failure as feedback; persistence; belief in effort; learning from setbacks
2. Social and Environmental Influences on Learning Pressure	2.1 Institutional Expectations	high-stakes grading; competitive learning culture; rigid evaluation standards; institutional hierarchy
	2.2 Peer Comparison and Social Judgement	comparison anxiety; peer rivalry; social validation; fear of exclusion; social media performance visibility
	2.3 Instructor Feedback and Support	perceived fairness; constructive vs destructive criticism; mentor trust; availability of guidance
	2.4 Family and Cultural Expectations	parental pressure; societal norms on success; collective pride; fear of disappointing family
	2.5 Learning Environment Design	overcrowded classrooms; resource limitations; time pressure; technological barriers
	2.6 Workplace and Academic Crossover	transferring pressure from work to studies; dual-role stress; lack of work–study balance
	2.7 Emotional Climate and Group Norms	shared stress culture; emotional contagion; support networks; normalization of burnout
3. Coping, Adaptation, and Meaning-Making in High-Pressure Learning	3.1 Adaptive Coping Strategies	time management; social support seeking; structured rest; academic coaching
	3.2 Maladaptive Coping Strategies	avoidance; procrastination; overstudying; substance use; emotional withdrawal
	3.3 Redefinition of Success	shifting focus from grades to mastery; valuing personal growth; redefining self-worth
	3.4 Reflective Learning and Self-Awareness	journaling; meta-cognition; identifying emotional triggers; self-monitoring progress
	3.5 Role of Mindfulness and Acceptance	acceptance of imperfection; breathing techniques; staying present; emotional detachment
	3.6 Transformation and Empowerment	increased confidence; sense of autonomy; learning resilience; integration of pressure into growth narrative

Theme 1: Emotional and Cognitive Responses to Pressure

Participants consistently described the intense emotional and mental strain that accompanied high-performance learning environments. Feelings of *anxiety*, *fear of failure*, and *cognitive overload* were pervasive, often manifesting through physiological symptoms such as "tightness in the chest" and "racing thoughts before exams." One participant stated, *"I could feel my heart pounding whenever I thought about the results. It wasn't just nerves—it felt like survival."* The emotional experience was intertwined with fluctuating motivation; for some, pressure fueled achievement, while for others, it drained energy and confidence. Participants noted that their concentration waned when pressure escalated, leading to what they described as *"mental fog"* or *"blank moments during tests."* Despite this, several learners demonstrated high levels of *self-regulation and resilience*, often reframing failure as an opportunity for improvement. As one participant reflected, *"After breaking down once, I realized pressure can either crush you or build you. I chose to let it build me."* Emotional regulation strategies such as self-talk, short mindfulness breaks, and reflective journaling emerged as adaptive mechanisms to maintain composure and focus under stress. The interplay of anxiety, self-efficacy, and growth mindset illustrated a dynamic internal process of struggle and adaptation that defined their emotional learning experience.

Theme 2: Social and Environmental Influences on Learning Pressure

A second major theme revealed the pervasive influence of social and contextual factors shaping participants' learning experiences. Institutional expectations, rigid grading systems, and competitive cultures were identified as central sources of performance stress. As one participant remarked, *"At our university, excellence isn't optional—it's the baseline. You always feel you're one mistake away from being invisible."* Peer comparison amplified these pressures, particularly in group projects and digital spaces where achievements were publicly visible. Several respondents highlighted how *"comparing grades became a silent contest"* and how "social media made it worse because everyone posts their success but not their struggle." Instructor behavior and feedback also played a dual role—either alleviating or intensifying performance pressure. Supportive mentors who offered constructive feedback enhanced confidence, while overly critical or distant instructors deepened anxiety. Family and cultural expectations further complicated the learning experience. Many participants from collectivist backgrounds expressed a strong sense of duty to uphold family pride. One participant shared, *"Failing wasn't just personal—it felt like disappointing my whole family."* Additionally, environmental conditions such as overcrowded classrooms, time constraints, and limited resources were seen as

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contextual barriers. Participants working alongside their studies described how professional responsibilities intensified stress: *"Sometimes I was expected to be a perfect employee and a perfect student at the same time—it's impossible."* Overall, the findings demonstrate that learning under pressure is not only an individual psychological process but also a socially embedded experience shaped by institutional, relational, and cultural expectations.

Theme 3: Coping, Adaptation, and Meaning-Making in High-Pressure Learning

Despite the challenges, participants described a rich spectrum of coping and meaning-making strategies that transformed their approach to learning. Adaptive strategies included *structured time management*, *seeking social support*, and *reframing success* beyond mere performance metrics. As one learner shared, *"I started measuring my success by what I actually understood, not by the grade I got."* Reflective practices such as journaling and meta-cognitive self-assessment enabled participants to recognize emotional triggers and patterns of avoidance. Conversely, maladaptive strategies such as overstudying, procrastination, or emotional withdrawal occasionally appeared when stress exceeded manageable limits. However, mindfulness and acceptance-oriented coping emerged as pivotal tools for resilience. A participant noted, *"Once I accepted that I can't control everything, my anxiety slowly lost power over me."* Over time, many described a transformative process through which high-pressure learning environments became catalysts for self-growth and empowerment. Learners reported gaining a sense of autonomy, emotional strength, and cognitive flexibility. One participant encapsulated this evolution by saying, *"Pressure taught me to stand in discomfort until it became my teacher."* Ultimately, this theme highlights that learners do not merely endure performance pressure—they reinterpret and reframe it as part of a broader developmental journey toward self-awareness and competence.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore how learners subjectively experience and respond to high performance pressure within South African educational contexts. The findings revealed three overarching themes: (1) emotional and cognitive responses to pressure, (2) social and environmental influences on learning pressure, and (3) coping, adaptation, and meaning-making. Collectively, these themes portray learning under pressure as a psychologically demanding yet potentially transformative process. Participants' narratives showed that performance pressure simultaneously evoked anxiety, enhanced focus, and catalyzed personal growth depending on individual resilience, environmental support, and the meaning attached to success and failure.

The first major finding concerned the emotional–cognitive interplay that arises in response to perceived pressure. Participants described experiencing anxiety, intrusive thoughts, and fear of judgment that disrupted concentration and recall—phenomena that align with existing psychological models of stress and attention regulation (Cabral et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2022). Similar to the findings of (Cabral et al., 2024), the present study indicates that pressure may initially elevate physiological arousal and attentional focus but, when exceeding a personal threshold, impairs working memory and decision-making. Participants' reports of "mental fog," "racing thoughts," and "blank moments" during tests mirror laboratory evidence demonstrating that stress-related hyperarousal constrains executive control and reduces task efficiency (Gao, 2023).

Interestingly, some learners in this study perceived moderate levels of stress as beneficial, describing it as "energy that helps me perform." This observation supports the "challenge versus threat" framework of stress appraisal, suggesting that individuals with strong self-efficacy interpret arousal as facilitative rather than debilitating (Li, 2025). Prior work in sports and motor learning confirms that pressure can enhance performance when framed as a challenge rather than a risk of failure (Cabral et al., 2024; Low et al., 2022). The results therefore reinforce the dual nature of pressure—as both a potential performance enhancer and a cognitive load stressor—depending on emotional interpretation and perceived control (Finet et al., 2025; Pourreza et al., 2024).

Participants' accounts of emotional regulation strategies, including self-talk, mindfulness, and short breaks, resonate with previous findings that emphasize the role of emotional literacy and attentional reorientation in mitigating stress (Yang, 2023). The capacity to shift from threat appraisal to adaptive coping reflects an emergent emotional competence central to self-regulated learning. Moreover, the emphasis on reframing failure as feedback aligns with resilience-based educational models, where psychological endurance rather than mere achievement becomes the marker of success (Khan et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). In line with (Rasul & Schwaiger, 2023), intrinsic motivation and a supportive learning climate appear to buffer against emotional

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exhaustion and sustain engagement despite external demands.

The second key finding highlights how social and institutional structures amplify or alleviate learners' experience of pressure. Participants described educational environments dominated by evaluative cultures, rigid grading, and peer comparison. Such contexts foster a persistent sense of scrutiny and competition, confirming earlier evidence that high-stakes assessment systems intensify anxiety and reduce intrinsic motivation (Lin et al., 2022; Wang, 2022). The reported feeling of "being constantly watched," particularly in digital learning settings, aligns with studies noting that online surveillance and algorithmic grading evoke similar stress responses to in-person evaluation (Zhang & Guo, 2022; Zong et al., 2022).

Family expectations and cultural obligations also emerged as significant sources of psychological strain. Learners from collectivist backgrounds described pressure to uphold familial honor, echoing cross-cultural findings where social evaluation extends beyond the individual to the family unit (Jalani et al., 2022). This moralized form of achievement anxiety can magnify emotional distress and impair autonomy, especially when failure is perceived as social shame rather than a learning opportunity (Li et al., 2024). Conversely, participants who reported empathetic instructor relationships and constructive feedback described greater confidence and perseverance, supporting evidence that psychologically safe environments promote motivation and innovation (Lin et al., 2022; Rasul & Schwaiger, 2023).

The COVID-19 era provided an important contextual backdrop for understanding these social dynamics. Consistent with (Haj, 2025) and (Liu & Li, 2023), the participants emphasized that the shift to online and hybrid education heightened cognitive fatigue and reduced emotional connectedness. Both teachers and students confronted blurred boundaries between personal and academic spaces, producing sustained vigilance and burnout. (Guo-rong & An, 2022) similarly found that blended teaching models intensified cognitive stress when support systems were inadequate. The convergence of institutional demands, technological mediation, and cultural expectations thus created a multi-layered pressure ecosystem that extended beyond the classroom into learners' social identities.

The data also revealed how peer comparison, particularly through digital visibility, reinforced performance anxiety. Social media functions as a constant arena of comparison where success is broadcast and failure concealed, perpetuating distorted standards of achievement. This echoes (Potyomkin, 2025), who identified social competition and recognition as central motivational factors during crisis-driven training contexts. Within the South African setting, these mechanisms were further intensified by structural inequalities and limited access to supportive learning resources, demonstrating that performance pressure is not only psychological but socio-economic in dimension.

Despite substantial emotional and environmental stressors, many participants reported adaptive responses that transformed their relationship to learning. The most salient coping strategies included time management, self-reflection, social support seeking, and mindfulness—practices that collectively sustained motivation and emotional balance. These patterns correspond with the resilience framework articulated by (Li et al., 2024), in which psychological resilience mediates the effects of social comparison on engagement. Learners who redefined success as personal growth rather than external validation displayed enhanced persistence, echoing findings from (Khan et al., 2024) on the role of mental and motivational attributes in sustaining performance under pressure.

This adaptive redefinition of success parallels the motivational reorientation described by (Sattarovich, 2025), who linked willpower and leadership development to exposure to controlled stressors. Participants who conceptualized pressure as "part of the process" reported heightened self-efficacy and agency, supporting the proposition that challenge-based learning builds endurance and self-regulation. Furthermore, their narratives of empowerment through discomfort are consistent with the controlled-pressure model in motor and professional performance, where moderate anxiety levels strengthen rather than hinder learning outcomes (Cabral et al., 2024; Low et al., 2022).

Conversely, a minority of participants demonstrated maladaptive patterns such as avoidance, overstudying, and emotional withdrawal—behaviors corresponding to burnout cycles documented by (Finet et al., 2025). The co-existence of adaptive and maladaptive strategies illustrates the dialectical nature of learning pressure: it can either cultivate resilience or erode well-being depending on perceived control, social support, and institutional context. The narratives also revealed mindfulness and acceptance-based coping as powerful tools for emotional recovery. Participants who engaged in reflective practices described a transformation in their learning identity, viewing pressure as an inherent component of growth. This experiential

reframing echoes the transformation processes observed in artistic and musical education under evaluative pressure, where emotional integration enhances creative cognition (Gao, 2023; Yang, 2023).

Ultimately, this theme demonstrates that high performance pressure, while stressful, can catalyze profound self-awareness and motivation when learners are supported in developing emotional regulation and reflective insight. The findings corroborate broader educational psychology perspectives emphasizing self-determination and cognitive appraisal as mechanisms underlying adaptive learning under stress (Lin et al., 2022; Rasul & Schwaiger, 2023).

The convergence of these themes underscores a fundamental paradox: pressure is both an impediment and a stimulus to learning. The distinction lies in learners' cognitive appraisal of control, the social meaning assigned to achievement, and the quality of institutional support. The results align closely with the cognitive–affective control model, which posits that stress can either enhance or inhibit learning depending on whether individuals appraise the situation as controllable (Li, 2025). Learners who perceived autonomy in goal-setting reported motivation and persistence, consistent with self-determination theory, whereas those who felt externally controlled experienced anxiety and disengagement (Potyomkin, 2025).

The qualitative evidence from this study also extends prior quantitative findings by revealing the *subjective texture* of pressure—the internal dialogues, emotional oscillations, and meaning-making processes that cannot be captured through performance metrics alone. Whereas (Cabral et al., 2022) and (Pourreza et al., 2024) quantified the behavioral outcomes of pressure in motor and sport learning, this study illustrates how learners narratively construct coherence amid stress. The voices of participants—speaking of "turning anxiety into energy" and "learning through discomfort"—show that pressure, when internalized as a challenge, becomes an experiential teacher rather than an adversary.

The findings further corroborate research showing that hybrid and digital learning models, while expanding accessibility, impose new psychological costs through isolation, constant monitoring, and blurred work–life boundaries (Guo-rong & An, 2022; Haj, 2025; Liu & Li, 2023). Yet, even within these conditions, the emergence of reflective and mindful coping suggests an evolving learner identity attuned to resilience and self-awareness. In this sense, pressure operates as a developmental force shaping not only competence but character.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study, while offering rich qualitative insights, is limited by its relatively small and context-specific sample of 24 South African participants. Although the diversity of educational and occupational backgrounds enhanced data variation, the findings cannot be generalized across all cultural or institutional settings. The reliance on self-reported narratives introduces potential bias, as participants may have reconstructed their experiences retrospectively or selectively emphasized certain emotions. Moreover, interviews conducted both online and face-to-face might have yielded differing levels of depth and disclosure. The focus on learners' perspectives, without parallel input from educators or institutional leaders, also restricts the multidimensional understanding of systemic pressure. Future studies incorporating longitudinal or cross-cultural designs would strengthen the external validity of these observations.

Future research could build on these findings by exploring the longitudinal trajectories of learners who operate under sustained performance pressure. Quantitative–qualitative mixed designs could examine how physiological stress markers, such as cortisol levels or heart-rate variability, correspond with self-reported resilience and emotional regulation. Comparative cross-cultural studies could elucidate how collectivist versus individualist norms shape the moral dimensions of pressure and coping. Moreover, integrating perspectives from educators and policymakers would clarify how institutional culture, grading systems, and assessment reforms might reduce maladaptive stress while preserving motivational challenge. Finally, future investigations could assess intervention programs such as mindfulness training, resilience workshops, or peer mentoring to evaluate their long-term efficacy in transforming pressure into productive learning energy.

Practically, educators and training institutions should focus on fostering psychologically safe environments that balance high expectations with empathetic support. Integrating reflective and mindfulness-based activities within curricula can equip learners with emotional regulation skills necessary for managing evaluative stress. Constructive feedback, rather than punitive assessment, should be emphasized to transform mistakes into learning opportunities. Institutions can also provide flexible timelines, mentorship programs, and peer collaboration platforms that reduce isolation and encourage shared coping.

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Ultimately, transforming the culture of achievement from fear-based competition to growth-oriented engagement will allow learners to experience pressure not as a threat to identity, but as an invitation to mastery.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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