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ACADEMIC BURNOUT EXPERIENCES OF UNDERGRADUATES SINCE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This qualitative research investigates the academic burnout experiences of undergraduates since the COVID-19 pandemic using a phenomenological qualitative approach. Seven undergraduates were selected based on specific criteria. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. Findings revealed four main themes of their experiences. The first theme is multiple waves of academic burnout. This theme includes fluctuating feelings of powerlessness and recovery, experiencing exhaustion and an inability to continue, a lack of energy to study, a loss of self-control, avoidance of studying, and the sense that life feels ruined. The second theme is characteristics contributing to stress. These include being easily stressed, having high expectations, being inflexible, striving for stability and perfection, and having high expectations for academic performance while being unable to adapt to other areas of life. The third theme is cumulative stress, sleep deprivation, and poor time management. Participants reported experiencing cumulative pressures, stress, inadequate rest, and difficulty managing time or maintaining a coherent schedule. The fourth theme is coping with burnout and seeking support. This theme involves reflecting and building self-confidence, addressing the root causes of problems, and seeking support from friends and family. These results underscore the need for targeted interventions and support mechanisms to address academic burnout and promote student well-being in post-pandemic educational environments.

Keywords: Academic Burnout, Phenomenological Study, Undergraduates

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Introduction

The global spread of emerging infectious diseases—such as avian flu, SARS, and most recently, COVID-19—poses significant threats to personal health and well-being (Htay et al., 2021), with extensive effects on economies, societies, and the environment. These outbreaks have been classified as public health emergencies of international concern by major organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO). In Thailand, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and lasting impact on various aspects of daily life, as noted by the Department of Disease Control, Ministry of Public Health. The pandemic unfolded in three major waves: the first wave from January to November 2020, the second from December 2020 to March 2021, and the third from April 2021 to November 27, 2021 (Thitichai & Taweewigyakarn, 2021). Each wave presented unique challenges and required tailored responses to curb the virus's spread. On October 1, 2022, the Ministry of Public Health reclassified COVID-19 under the Communicable Diseases Act of 2015, marking a significant transition from an emergency response to a monitored communicable disease. This change reflects the pandemic's evolving nature and underscores the need for ongoing vigilance and management in accordance with public health regulations (Name and Key Symptoms of Dangerous Communicable Diseases (3rd Edition) 2020).

On March 18, 2020, Thailand's higher education sector implemented an online learning initiative in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, paralleling efforts in other countries. The transition through the pandemic's first to third waves, along with various coping measures, has resulted in cumulative stress and persistent physical and mental exhaustion among students. An observational study conducted across 92 countries revealed that out of 1,392 surveyed students (80.7% at the undergraduate level), 1,346 (96.7%) reported negative impacts on their studies since the pandemic began. Academic stress has emerged as a significant contributor to burnout during this time (Abraham et al., 2024). Research highlights several factors exacerbating this stress, including unsupportive learning environments, difficulties in maintaining focus, experiences of "Zoom fatigue," boredom, isolation, and a lack of support (Abraham et al., 2024; Maneewongse, 2021; Irawan et al., 2020). While some institutions shifted back to in-person learning as COVID-19 restrictions eased, the pandemic's effects on students' well-being remain evident. Ongoing studies continue to document elevated levels of burnout and stress among students since the pandemic's onset (Abraham et al., 2024; Amin et al., 2024; Andrade et al., 2023; Fernández-Castillo, 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023). This prolonged academic burnout, characterized by unstable educational conditions and sudden shifts between learning formats, underscores the need for further investigation. Developing effective strategies to address this gap is essential for future preparedness and mental health support, ensuring students receive adequate assistance in managing their academic and psychological challenges.

This research aimed to address the significant gap in understanding academic burnout by employing a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of undergraduate students since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of burnout's nuanced and subjective nature, focusing on how students perceive and navigate challenges during this unprecedented time. By delving into the specific characteristics of burnout—such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of accomplishment—this study provides a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to students' experiences. This understanding is crucial for developing effective strategies for future preparedness and mental health prevention, ensuring that students receive robust support in navigating their academic and psychological challenges. By gaining deep insights into the specific factors contributing to academic burnout, educators and policymakers can create tailored interventions that address the root causes of stress and exhaustion among students.

Literature Review

Academic Burnout

Since the 1970s, burnout has been increasingly recognized as a significant concern in the workplace, profoundly impacting employees' emotional well-being and mental health. Initially identified in helping professions, such as healthcare and education, burnout is now understood to affect a wide range of occupations. This phenomenon not only compromises individuals' health but also detrimentally affects their performance and effectiveness at work. Employees experiencing burnout often face challenges such as diminished motivation, reduced productivity, and a lack of engagement, which can lead to increased absenteeism and turnover rates. Over the years, burnout has been conceptualized as a negative psychological state characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2017).

Maslach's original concept of burnout, articulated in her seminal work with Jackson in 1986, defined burnout as a psychological response to chronic work-related stress. This model identified three core components: Emotional Exhaustion, which refers to feelings of being emotionally drained and depleted; Depersonalization or Cynicism, characterized by a negative, detached attitude toward one's work and colleagues; and Reduced Personal Accomplishment or Inefficacy, which involves feelings of incompetence and a diminished sense of achievement. This framework suggested that burnout could lead individuals to disengage from both personal and professional aspects of their lives, ultimately resulting in decreased performance and lower overall life satisfaction. Building on Maslach's foundational model, Schaufeli et al. (2019) expanded the understanding of burnout by categorizing symptoms into two sets. The first set includes four core symptoms: Exhaustion, which encompasses physical and emotional fatigue; Mental Distance, indicating a withdrawal from work-related responsibilities; Cognitive Impairment, referring to difficulties in concentration and decision-making; and Emotional Impairment, which affects emotional regulation and responsiveness. The second set includes three secondary symptoms: Depressed Mood, which can manifest as feelings of sadness or hopelessness; Psychological Distress, encompassing anxiety and stress-related symptoms; and Psychosomatic Complaints, which involve physical symptoms that arise from psychological distress, such as headaches or gastrointestinal issues. This expanded framework deepens the understanding of burnout as a multifaceted phenomenon and highlights its impact on various aspects of an individual's mental and physical health. By identifying these symptoms, researchers and practitioners can better recognize burnout in its early stages and implement more effective interventions tailored to address both the psychological and physical aspects of this pervasive issue. When examining academic burnout through the lens of existing research, scholars like Gadoh (2019) and Schaufeli et al. (2019) characterize it as a psychological response to cumulative academic stress, leading to profound feelings of exhaustion and reduced motivation. This form of burnout often leaves students feeling disengaged, bored, and emotionally depleted, struggling to balance their academic responsibilities with their personal lives.

The consequences of academic burnout are significant and can have lasting effects on students' educational experiences. One immediate impact is increased absenteeism, as students may struggle to attend classes due to fatigue or lack of motivation. This leads to a decline in motivation and withdrawal from activities that were once engaging, resulting in reduced participation in class discussions, procrastination on assignments, and reluctance to seek help. Over time, these behaviors contribute to deteriorating academic performance and, in severe cases, can lead to dropping out of school altogether (Mostafavian et al., 2018). Recent studies further highlight the link between academic burnout and engagement. Students with high levels of burnout typically show lower academic engagement, which includes diminished participation and effort in their coursework (Alarcon et al., 2011; Schaufeli et al., 2002). This

disengagement creates a cycle where declining performance heightens feelings of inadequacy and stress, making it increasingly difficult for students to reconnect with their studies and find fulfillment. Addressing academic burnout is crucial for fostering a more resilient and engaged student body that can thrive academically and personally.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research utilized a phenomenological approach to explore the academic burnout experiences of undergraduates in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on phenomenology, we aimed to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences, delving into their perceptions and feelings about burnout during this challenging time. Using Giorgi et al.'s (2017) framework, we systematically identified and analyzed themes that emerged from the interviews. This approach allowed us to uncover not only the individual experiences of burnout but also the shared patterns and structures that characterize this phenomenon among students. This in-depth exploration contributes valuable insights to the existing literature on academic burnout and its broader implications for student well-being in crisis situations.

Participants

Seven undergraduate students who experienced burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic participated in this study. According to Giorgi et al. (2017), phenomenological qualitative research typically involves five to ten participants, facilitating an in-depth exploration of individual experiences. This approach prioritizes quality over quantity, enabling researchers to derive meaningful insights from a smaller sample size. By focusing on fewer participants, the study can delve deeply into each individual's unique experiences, capturing the nuances of their academic burnout during the pandemic. This methodology enhances the overall validity and relevance of the research by providing a richer understanding of the phenomenon. Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific criteria. Each participant reported experiencing academic burnout during the pandemic and scored 2.96 or higher on the BAT-12 test developed by Schaufeli et al. (2019). Participants reporting mental illness were excluded from this study to prioritize their safety and well-being. Excluding these individuals also helps ensure that the findings accurately reflect the experiences of undergraduates specifically facing academic burnout without the potential confounding effects of other mental health issues. All participants volunteered to take part in this study.

Research Instruments

A Thai version of the BAT-12 (BAT-12-TH) was used to screen participants, translated from the original by Schaufeli et al. (2019) using a forward-backward method, with permission for its use. The BAT-12-TH is a self-report measure utilizing a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (never) to 5 (always). This study focused on the core symptoms of exhaustion, mental distance, cognitive impairment, and emotional impairment to understand academic burnout among undergraduates during the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights aim to inform interventions and support strategies. The Cronbach's alpha for the BAT-12-TH was .87 (Suttichainimit & Tuicomepee, 2024)

The semi-structured interview questions for this research were developed to address gaps in the literature on academic burnout. After reviewing existing studies, an initial draft was created, followed by a pilot interview to refine the questions. Researchers then discussed insights from the pilot and made edits for clarity and relevance. The goal was to enable participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely. A primary research question was, "Could you please tell us about your experiences related to academic burnout since the COVID-19 pandemic?" This was complemented by probing questions such as:

- "How do you describe your feelings of exhaustion?"
- "Do you feel apathetic about engaging with others in academic activities?"
- "Have you noticed mood issues, like irritability during learning tasks?"

- "Do you struggle with cognitive challenges, such as distraction?"

These questions aimed to explore various aspects of academic burnout and encourage comprehensive sharing of experiences.

Data Collection

Following approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Participants, Health Sciences Group, Chulalongkorn University (COA No.019/2023), data collection was conducted over three months, from February to April 2023. Participant recruitment targeted university instructors, staff, and personnel from the psychological service unit to ensure a diverse and relevant pool. Burnout syndrome was assessed using the Thai version of the BAT-12 through online questionnaires distributed via Qualtrics, facilitating efficient data collection while maintaining participant anonymity. Participants with high burnout scores were contacted for follow-up interviews. One participant was excluded during screening due to reported mental illness and ongoing treatment, ensuring the safety and well-being of all involved. The remaining participants signed informed consent forms before participating in interviews conducted either face-to-face or via Line call, based on individual preferences. Seven interviews were held—one in person and six via Line call—lasting from 50 to 101 minutes each. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The researchers employed phenomenological methods to analyze the transcripts, focusing on capturing the essence of participants' lived experiences with academic burnout. Findings were summarized narratively, providing a rich understanding of the phenomenon within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data saturation was achieved, as no new themes emerged, confirming that this sample size was sufficient to capture diverse experiences of academic burnout.

Data Analysis

The researchers conducted the data analysis following the steps of phenomenological analysis as outlined by Giorgi et al. (2017). First, the researchers read all interviews multiple times to develop a deep understanding of the participants' lived experiences, grasping the essence of the data. Second, the texts were systematically broken down into meaning units by highlighting significant statements that captured core aspects of the participants' experiences related to academic burnout. Third, the researchers categorized these meaning units into thematic groups based on their psychological significance. The data were carefully analyzed for how different meaning units related to each other, identifying overarching themes that emerged from the data. Fourth, new categories were created to reflect evolving themes, allowing for flexibility and a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences. Fifth, the researchers engaged in a detailed interpretation of these categories, examining the psychological meanings and underlying structures among the themes. Throughout the analysis, the researchers worked to bracket their own biases and preconceptions, ensuring that interpretations accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences. By following these steps, the researchers aimed to provide a rich and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of academic burnout, grounded in the participants' perspectives.

Research Findings

Seven participants (5 females and 2 males), currently enrolled as undergraduates, were specifically chosen for their experiences with academic burnout. Their scores on a Thai version of the BAT-12 ranged from 3.00 to 4.15, with a cut-off point of 2.96 indicating significant burnout levels. Table 1 provides detailed background information about each participant.

Table 1 Background Information and Academic Burnout Experiences of Participants (n = 7)

ID	Background	BAT-12 score	Academic Burnout Experiences
01	19, female, 2 nd year science student	3.42	I often felt bored and struggled to concentrate for even three hours, leading to deep frustration and a sense of inadequacy.
02	21, male, 2 nd year arts student.	3.33	I once had a deep passion for my studies, but I reached a point of intense physical and mental exhaustion that disrupted my organization and discipline.
03	20, female, 3 rd year education student.	3.75	I lost my enthusiasm and felt bored and uncertain. Despite having tasks to complete, I lacked the motivation to tackle them.
04	21, female, 2 nd year science student.	3.00	I was exhausted and stressed, easily bored by my work, and lacked the energy to stay organized. I often felt overwhelmed and was frequently late.
05	20, male, 2 nd year science student.	3.75	I was physically and mentally exhausted from lack of sleep, feeling discouraged and unmotivated.
06	19, female, 2 nd year arts student.	3.58	I often lacked focus during classes, and fatigue caused me to lose interest. At times, I struggled to grasp the material, fostering a negative view of the subject.
07	23, female, 4 th year science student.	4.17	I was less active and overwhelmed by disinterest, struggling to find motivation for activities I once enjoyed.

The analysis of academic burnout experiences among the seven undergraduate participants revealed four main themes. Below, each theme is briefly outlined to illustrate the challenges faced by these students.

Theme 1: Multiple Waves of Academic Burnout

This theme includes fluctuating feelings of powerlessness and recovery, experiencing exhaustion and an inability to continue, a lack of energy to study, a loss of self-control, avoidance of studying, and the recognition that life feels ruined. The theme consists of three subthemes:

Subtheme 1.1: Fluctuating Feelings of Powerlessness and Recovery: Participants reported experiencing burnout during the three waves of the pandemic. In the first wave, they faced the transition from preparing for university entrance exams to starting their first year of online classes. Symptoms of burnout during this period included feelings of helplessness, emptiness, boredom, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, and pressure to complete coursework. Some participants even considered dropping out to reapply to a different faculty, a process referred to as "Siu," perceiving their struggles as personal failures. These experiences are illustrated by the following accounts:

“I’ve been feeling burnt out since the first semester of my first year. The entire year was online. Staying at home without seeing friends made it feel like I was just learning content without any interactions. It became really boring as the studies went on. I lost motivation to study; it felt like whatever I was doing didn't mean anything.” (Participant 1)

“I got into the faculty and university I wanted after the entrance exam, but I didn't feel excited at all. I felt pressured to study and was internally exhausted. Eventually, I gave up my place and stayed home to prepare for the exam. During that time, not being able to meet or talk to

anyone was tough, especially seeing my friends forming new social circles. I didn't want to do anything at all." (Participant 2)

During the second wave of the pandemic, participants continued to grapple with the challenges of online learning. Nearly all subjects required assignments with strict deadlines, and group activities were sparse. Still reeling from the previous wave of burnout, participants felt increasingly disillusioned. They missed social interactions with friends and found the university environment notably quiet. Dormitory residents spent much of their time in their rooms, often engaging in gaming and staying up late. Morning classes were met with a lack of enthusiasm, as participants would often wake up just in time to log in. The minimal interaction with instructors made it difficult for students to focus during classes, leading to a decline in their academic performance. These struggles are illustrated by the following experiences:

"During the first semester, the university was very quiet, and I stayed in my dorm room for four days. I spent late nights playing games and watching movies, consistently procrastinating and working up to deadlines due to a lack of motivation. By the next semester, I took seven courses and was extremely stressed by the heavy workload and limited time. I didn't know where to start and became completely drained and burned out, resulting in poor-quality work submissions." (Participant 2)

"My routine was relaxed during the first semester of my first year, but by the first semester of my second year, I experienced burnout from the pressures of studying, exams, and low grades. This semester, I felt extremely burnt out and stuck in the same cycle, overwhelmed by constantly seeing my grades." (Participant 6)

During the third wave, participants navigated the transition to hybrid learning, which integrated both online and in-person classes. The increase in on-site learning and the resumption of university activities required them to constantly adjust to a new and evolving educational environment. This shift led to renewed challenges for many participants. As they tried to balance the demands of attending physical classes with the ongoing requirements of online coursework, some found themselves struggling to manage their time and responsibilities effectively. This imbalance resulted in a resurgence of burnout, impacting their physical and mental health as well as their academic performance. The heightened stress and fatigue from juggling multiple learning formats exacerbated their difficulties, further contributing to their overall sense of exhaustion and decreased academic efficacy.

"During the break before my second year, I started participating in activities and quickly became addicted to them. When the first semester began, I prioritized these activities over academics, leading to skipping classes for an entire week. I relied on friends for notes, but eventually, I struggled to keep up, losing focus and feeling physically exhausted." (Participant 2)

"Multiple urgent meetings seemed to coincide with each other, leaving me with little time for studying. Typically, I would allocate time for reading after classes, but last semester, all my time was consumed by activities. Unlike my usual approach of preparing in advance, I ended up cramming this time, only starting to study 2-3 days before exams." (Participant 5)

"During my first and second years, I always had assignments to submit, but I had the motivation and energy to complete them, despite feeling lost. Most of the stress came from the workload, leaving me tired and unmotivated. By the second semester of my third year, I began to lose interest in projects and struggled to complete them. I submitted work late and received lower scores. Deadlines were continuous, and even my best efforts didn't yield expected grades, causing significant stress." (Participant 7)

Subtheme 1.2: Exhaustion and Inability to Continue: Many participants described a profound sense of exhaustion that led to an inability to continue their studies, highlighting the severe impact of burnout on their academic engagement. They primarily reported feeling exhausted. Additionally, they experienced a profound sense of helplessness, physical and mental fatigue,

and a lack of enthusiasm and motivation to complete their work. Despite being aware of the negative consequences, such as missing deadlines and losing points, they often chose to neglect their academic responsibilities. These experiences are illustrated by the following accounts shared by the participants:

"I felt like I was wasting time without the energy to read or focus. I wasn't distracted by my phone or anything else; I was just sitting there, absent-minded." (Participant 1)

"I felt pressured but didn't want to do the assignments, which mostly involved calculations and memorization. As deadlines and exams approached, I hadn't started any work and felt completely unmotivated to do anything." (Participant 2)

"I wasn't as enthusiastic as I used to be. I always rechecked my work, but lately, I'd been bored... And I didn't want to do anything, even though there were loads of work to do." (Participant 3)

Subtheme 1.3: Avoidance and Perceived Ruin of Life: A notable subtheme was the tendency to avoid studying and students' perception that their lives were negatively impacted, highlighting the profound personal and academic consequences of burnout. In this context, students described their struggles to engage in activities they once enjoyed and performed routinely. Despite having once loved these activities, they now felt overwhelmed and unable to continue. Some participants noted that a lack of motivation severely disrupted their time management, causing tasks to accumulate and preventing them from adhering to their previously established schedules. This led to a growing desire to escape from academic-related activities. These experiences are illustrated by the following accounts:

"A month before exams, I could manage my time effectively, ensuring punctuality for my 9 AM classes. However, during the exam period, I found myself consistently late, often by 15-20 minutes or even half an hour for some classes. These two weeks were particularly challenging, leaving me feeling like I had lost my sense of responsibility." (Participant 4)

"During that period, I experienced complete burnout due to my poor routine. I had to cram for exams, which led to disappointment in my grades and overall negativity. After the exams, I realized I was completely overwhelmed and my health suffered as a result." (Participant 6)

"Things started to unravel when I lost motivation for projects. Additionally, encountering instructors whose teaching styles didn't resonate with me further dampened my enthusiasm for studying and working, ultimately affecting my performance in other subjects too." (Participant 7)

Theme 2: Characteristics Contributing to Stress

These include being easily stressed, having high expectations, being inflexible, striving for stability and perfection, and having high expectations for academic performance while being unable to adapt to other areas of life. The theme consists of three subthemes:

Subtheme 2.1: The Need for Steadiness and Perfection: In this subtheme, participants described their experiences having a strong desire for steadiness and perfection, and their aversion to aspects of their lives they could not control. This need for control drove them to impose stringent standards on themselves and their situations. When things did not align with their high expectations, they experienced disappointment, feelings of inadequacy, and a loss of self-confidence. These experiences are illustrated by the following accounts:

"If I had prepared earlier, I might have been able to perform better as it was planned. I felt worried about many things when my plans weren't followed, like feeling bad, and feeling like I missed out. It didn't go as planned, and I wasn't that confident." (Participant 3)

"For example, I organized a presentation, delegated tasks, and set deadlines. However, just an hour before the meeting, I discovered that no one had started their work. Consequently, I ended up completing the slides by myself. Despite waiting until the presentation day, no one submitted their contributions as expected." (Participant 5)

"At that time, my main problem was perfectionism. I wanted everything to work perfectly as I had planned, which caused stress. I was too obsessed with grades and perfection." (Participant 7)

Subtheme 2.2: High Expectations in Studies: Participants shared their experiences related to maintaining high expectations for their academic performance. These expectations encompassed their goals for grades, academic achievements, learning methods, and striving for excellence. The pressure to meet these high standards often resulted in significant stress due to the intense effort they exerted in their studies.

"I was accustomed to a competitive environment where achieving straight A's was the norm. Anything less was considered subpar. After aiming for a perfect 4.00 GPA, receiving a B in one subject during that semester left me deeply dissatisfied." (Participant 5)

"Well, being part of a Chinese family with academically successful cousins in the same academic year motivated me to excel in my studies and secure admission to a reputable university. The desire to uphold my family's reputation drove me to strive for high grades and even aspire to receive honors." (Participant 6)

Subtheme 2.3: Difficulties in Adjustment: Participants discussed the theme of struggling to adjust to various challenging situations. They faced difficulties managing themselves and adapting to the absence of classmates, which was particularly challenging during the early phases of online learning. Then came the transition from now familiar online learning environments to new on-site learning settings. This shift caught them off guard, as they were still acclimated to the online learning lifestyle. This lack of preparation led to a loss of motivation when confronted with difficulties. The adjustment process emerged as a significant obstacle in their learning experiences, as illustrated by the following accounts:

"Adjusting to new challenges without the support of friends made it particularly tough. I found myself navigating difficult subjects entirely on my own. It was a stark departure from what I was accustomed to, and the absence of familiar faces compounded the challenge." (Participant 1)

"Studying alone in my room during online classes was something I preferred. Having graduated from an all-boys school, I found it challenging to connect with my new female classmates. So, being alone during those online sessions was actually a relief." (Participant 3)

Theme 3: Cumulative Stress, Sleep Deprivation, and Poor Time Management

This theme reflects the complex interplay of factors that influenced participants' experiences with academic burnout. Participants reported experiencing cumulative pressures, stress, inadequate rest, and difficulty managing time or maintaining a coherent schedule. The theme consists of three subthemes:

Subtheme 3.1: Cumulative Stress and Pressure: during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. They faced difficulties in securing internships within tight deadlines and managing the emotional impact of acceptance or rejection. Even after securing internships, additional stressors such as familial issues and dissatisfaction with instructors whose teaching did not meet their expectations, further exacerbated their stress. While these factors were not the primary causes of burnout, they contributed to overall fatigue and diminished resilience, increasing the likelihood of recurring burnout symptoms.

"I was deeply upset to receive harsh criticism from my admired instructor, since I rarely missed class and always maintained punctuality, and focus during lectures. Despite my efforts, the feedback on my work felt unacceptable. Losing 11 points (from 20) for what appeared to be a minor issue—a simple paragraph indentation—was disheartening." (Participant 6)

"I had to navigate the internship search entirely on my own as the department offered no assistance, I received no responses from the 10 to 20 places I applied to. This lack of feedback left me feeling exhausted and disheartened. As a result, I began to doubt the quality of my work, questioning if it was truly subpar." (Participant 7)

Subtheme 3.2: Sleep Deprivation: Participants reported experiencing sleep deprivation and inadequate rest primarily due to heavy workloads from assignments, activities, and the pressure to meet deadlines, particularly during exam periods that coincided with assignment submissions. A notable symptom of this deprivation was a persistent sense of grogginess and difficulty concentrating on tasks. Some participants mentioned sleeping for up to 16 hours after extended study sessions spanning several days, yet still feeling insufficiently rested. These experiences are illustrated by the following accounts:

"I often felt exhausted and needed a break before starting work. However, this left me with only about 2 hours to work because I would become very sleepy by 11 PM. I struggled to continue and knew I had to wake up early the next day. While some nights I managed to sleep by 11 PM, most of the time I found myself going to bed around 2 AM." (Participant 1)

"On the day of the exam, I didn't sleep at all, which turned out to be a big mistake. I had important exams, including Stat 2, which carried significant weight for the final grade. Without sleep, I struggled to concentrate on long questions and found it difficult to comprehend the material. I even fell ill, likely caused by my sleep deprivation." (Participant 2)

"There were days when I struggled to even get out of bed and muster the energy for a shower. My eyes felt heavy, like I hadn't slept at all. In class, I found it nearly impossible to comprehend the lessons. This became a frequent occurrence." (Participant 4)

Subtheme 3.3: Poor Time Management: Participants described their struggles with managing time effectively due to the overwhelming number of tasks and activities they faced during their studies. The challenge was exacerbated during exam periods and by their tendency to procrastinate, often leaving assignments until the last minute. This led to a "firefighting" approach to work, where they were constantly working under pressure to meet deadlines. As a result, they frequently struggled to allocate adequate time to each task. These difficulties are illustrated by the following comments:

"During the final exams, the workload felt overwhelming with limited time. Prioritizing tasks became challenging, resulting in poor quality work submitted in the end." (Participant 2)

"Lately, things haven't been going as planned. Meeting deadlines became a challenge, causing significant stress. I found myself frequently in tears, frustrated by my inability to complete tasks and feeling utterly exhausted during this period." (Participant 7)

Theme 4: Coping with Burnout and Seeking Support

This theme illustrates the various coping mechanisms participants employed to manage and mitigate the effects of burnout. The theme consists of three subthemes:

Subtheme 4.1: Spending Time to Reminisce and Build Self-Confidence: Participants reported dedicating time to self-reflection as a means to regain interest in their strengths and set clear objectives. By allocating time for personal reflection, they were able to refocus, rebuild their confidence, and reorient themselves. This process helped them start afresh in the next semester with renewed motivation and clarity. These experiences are illustrated by the following accounts:

"Last semester was disappointing; my grades were worse than expected because I lacked focus. At the beginning of this semester, I wasn't as optimistic, but recently, I've felt the need to prioritize my studies and focus more." (Participant 1)

"I used to get stressed when things went wrong, feeling like my life was out of control. However, I learned to recover quickly and let go of past failures. Instead, I focused on what lay ahead, understanding that dwelling on the past wouldn't change anything." (Participant 4)

"I came to realize that I was constantly blaming and pressuring myself. So, this semester, I decided to shift my focus to studying. Also, something I discussed with my mom was how much I prioritized grades. If I received low scores, it felt like everything was falling apart." (Participant 6)

Subtheme 4.2: Solving Problems with Root Causes: Participants highlighted the importance of addressing problems by identifying and tackling their root causes and making realistic adjustments to their planning. For instance, they utilized calendars to visualize daily and weekly tasks, deadlines, and prioritize their workflow. They also emphasized the need to establish clear sleep-wake schedules to ensure adequate rest while maintaining balance in other areas of their lives. These strategies helped them manage their academic responsibilities more effectively and reduce overall stress. These approaches are illustrated by the following experiences:

"I adjusted time for sleep no later than 1 AM and aimed to wake up not later than 10 AM. I couldn't do it at first, but once it became a habit, I could do it. I continuously tried to sleep faster." (Participant 2)

"In the second semester of the first year I became more systematic. Last semester was somewhat terrible, so I tried to make a schedule, create a planner, study, and talk to friends to get some study techniques. It's like scheduling subjects to study before class, like a to-do list." (Participant 4)

"I didn't want to let myself down, so I tried to change my attitude this semester. My goal was to attend every class, even if I was running late. I utilized my calendar extensively, meticulously noting down all tasks and deadlines. This commitment stemmed from my determination to take this semester seriously. By mapping out my responsibilities, I gained a clearer understanding of my workload for each week, with tasks ranging from a minimum of two to a maximum of four." (Participant 6)

Subtheme 4.3: Getting Support from Friends and Family: Participants noted the significant role of support from friends and family in managing their academic challenges. Friends provided help when participants struggled to keep up with their work, offering practical assistance and encouragement. Family members, such as mothers and siblings, listened to their academic concerns and offered emotional support, helping them stay grounded. This network of support was crucial in alleviating stress and providing a sense of stability during difficult times. These experiences are illustrated by the following accounts:

"During a particularly challenging period, I discussed with my mom the possibility of switching to a different field of study. Surprisingly, she didn't dismiss the idea but rather encouraged me to consider my options carefully. She asked if I genuinely liked the prospective faculty I was contemplating switching to." (Participant 1)

"In the second year, I was very happy ... It might be the university community. In my department, there were seniors who supported me all the time." (Participant 3)

"My mom often reminded me not to push myself too hard, especially considering our past experiences with depression. She emphasized the importance of studying diligently but without overwhelming stress. Her advice was along the lines of 'Do your best with your grades' and 'Focus on completing your studies,' encouraging me to maintain determination while avoiding excessive pressure." (Participant 6)

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and enduring nature of academic burnout among undergraduate students since the COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by fluctuating levels of stress and exhaustion throughout its various waves. This aligns with previous research (Abraham et al., 2024; Amin et al., 2024; Andrade et al., 2023; Fernández-Castillo, 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2023), which similarly reported significant emotional exhaustion among university students. Key factors contributing to academic burnout include high expectations, inflexibility, cumulative stress, and poor time management. Effective coping strategies and support from friends and family are crucial for mitigating these challenges. The findings can be discussed as follows:

First, the study results, illustrated in Figure 1, link undergraduate academic burnout to the three waves of the COVID-19 pandemic.

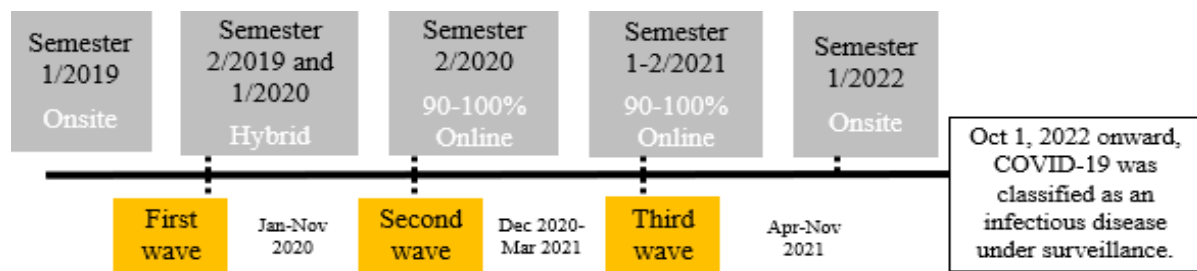


Figure 1 shows that the spread of the COVID-19 in Thailand occurred in three major waves.

The first wave of COVID-19 brought an unexpected global pandemic that lasted nearly a year and resulted in many deaths before a vaccine was available. Students experienced academic burnout stemming from disappointment with online learning and the loss of their anticipated campus life. They faced pressures from the unsupportive online environment, lack of face-to-face interaction, and absence of friends for academic support. This significant discouragement made some students question their purpose in studying, with a few deciding to drop out to pursue different faculties. The second wave of COVID-19 lasted about four months, allowing some face-to-face activities for vaccinated students. However, most learning remained online, as many preferred studying from home due to travel inconveniences. This led to challenges in maintaining focus and irregular attendance, with students relying on recorded sessions. Assessment methods shifted toward assignments instead of exams, resulting in significant academic issues, diminished self-confidence, and increased burnout, especially during exams. Additionally, students faced challenges like securing internships, family conflicts, and disagreements during group work, further exacerbating their burnout. Prominent symptoms included emotional sensitivity, exhaustion, discouragement, and frustration with ongoing changes in their learning environment. The third wave lasted approximately eight months, from late 2020 to early 2021, during which another major outbreak prompted educational institutions to encourage vaccinations for students and staff. Most teaching and learning activities remained primarily online, with some in-person sessions allowed as infection rates declined. By this time, students had already experienced cumulative burnout from prolonged online learning in unsuitable environments, resulting in fatigue and poor time management. A notable aspect of this burnout was a deep yearning for rest, as students struggled to keep up with assignments and exam preparations. Feelings of boredom and weariness toward the ongoing online learning format compounded this situation. The pandemic situation improved in the late 2021 academic semester, leading to relaxed preventive measures. Travel and group activities resumed with limited capacity, allowing for end-of-term events before the academic year transition. Eager for engagement, many students participated in university activities during this time. However, some became overly involved, neglecting self-care, which resulted in prolonged physical and mental exhaustion as they headed into the next semester. The following semester, teaching and learning shifted back to onsite formats, resuming a full range of activities. Many students, having grown accustomed to leisure during remote learning, began prioritizing activities over their studies. This shift resulted in irregular attendance, a lack of focus, personal disorganization, and diminished discipline. To cope, some turned to caffeinated beverages to stay awake at night, with a few noting that this made them feel "out of control." Additionally, some students reported health issues alongside their academic burnout.

Considering students' burnout experiences and the qualitative research data, we identified five stages of burnout based on Freudenberger's (1975) conceptual framework (De Hert, 2020). Stage 1: The honeymoon phase, characterized by a readiness to adjust to new situations. People

are motivated and prepared to tackle new activities. Stage 2: Onset of stress, where people start experiencing physical fatigue, mental exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and difficulty concentrating. Stage 3: Chronic stress, marked by increasing stress and pressure from activities. Without any support or knowing how to cope with stress, people can experience persistent physical and mental exhaustion, which results in decreased sleep quality and inability to focus on tasks until they know that they cannot control their routines as well as they did previously. Their personal life, work, family and decreased energy are affected by this stage as well. Stage 4: Burnout, where people reveal symptoms such as avoidance of responsibilities and tasks, feelings of failure, and detachment from surroundings. Attempts to solve problems may worsen the situation. Moreover, they are frustrated, numb in the way they see others or things, and have both physical and mental health issues in this stage. Stage 5: Habitual burnout, characterized by accumulated burnout leading to physical and mental health issues requiring assistance and treatment. The study revealed that students' burnout experiences since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic closely mirrored Stage 4 (Burnout) of Freudenberger's framework, with some individuals progressing to Stage 5 (Habitual Burnout). This progression indicates a significant deterioration in their mental and emotional well-being.

Second, the research findings identify key traits linked to burnout, including susceptibility to stress, high expectations, and difficulty adjusting. Students who experience burnout often invest considerable time and effort into their work, frequently working independently while also seeking a satisfying campus life. Significant contributors to burnout include cumulative stress, sleep deprivation, and poor time management. These issues were compounded by personal stressors such as relationship problems and the pressures of university entrance exams during the initial COVID-19 wave. Some students, disillusioned with their academic paths, took gap years, leading to isolation and disengagement. Even with a return to in-person learning, chaotic schedules and diminished motivation continued to exacerbate burnout, resulting in persistent sleep deprivation and overall fatigue throughout the pandemic.

Third, the qualitative research findings also reflect the methods of coping with academic burnout experiences. Students employ strategies such as goal setting, which enables them to recover quickly after failure; self-understanding, allocating personal time, time management, and having supportive people around, whether friends or family, who understand and provide help are also crucial. Participants in this study shared experiences that highlighted effective confidence-building strategies, which helped them regain motivation to persevere through challenges. Self-awareness emerged as a critical factor in problem-solving for burnout (Rellon et al., 2024). For instance, Participant 4 engaged in regular self-reflection, enabling her to better understand her emotional and mental states and navigate difficult academic situations. While many participants recognized the benefits of taking breaks, they often struggled to implement this practice, leading to higher levels of burnout. In contrast, adequate rest was noted to be beneficial in preventing burnout. Support from others also played a crucial role in mitigating burnout, as highlighted by Htay et al. (2021) and Shahwan et al. (2024). First-year students, in particular, relied heavily on peer and family support to adjust to the new learning environment. However, the challenges of online learning exacerbated feelings of isolation, and a sudden lack of support from family and friends negatively impacted their attitudes toward their studies, resulting in profound demotivation and contemplation of withdrawal early in the semester. Fortunately, increased support and encouragement from older siblings and mothers helped many participants reflect on their situations and regain enthusiasm, prompting them to continue their studies rather than withdraw in the subsequent semester. This supportive dynamic was observed across several participants, regardless of their academic year.

The findings from this study have important implications for educational institutions and relevant stakeholders as they address the diverse needs of undergraduate students. The research reveals that students' burnout experiences since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic closely

align with Stage 4 (Burnout) of Freudenberger's framework, with some individuals progressing to Stage 5 (Habitual Burnout). This progression signifies a considerable decline in their mental and emotional well-being. To support students experiencing academic burnout, institutions should provide accessible mental health resources, including mental health first aid and counseling services specifically designed for their needs. Additionally, regular awareness campaigns about available mental health resources can help reduce stigma and encourage students to seek assistance. The study identifies significant contributors to academic burnout, such as cumulative stress, sleep deprivation, and poor time management, which were further exacerbated by personal stressors like relationship issues and the pressures of university entrance exams during the initial COVID-19 wave. The findings also highlight the importance of coping strategies that students employ, such as goal setting, self-understanding, effective time management, and having supportive relationships with friends and family. To mitigate risk factors and promote protective factors, key stakeholders, including university counselors and mental health support personnel, should facilitate online events that encourage social interaction to help students rebuild connections lost during remote learning. Additionally, online workshops focused on time management, study skills, and stress management can equip students with effective strategies to balance their academic and personal lives. For academic advisors, implementing regular advising sessions can assist students in setting realistic goals and expectations for their workload. Finally, training faculty and staff to recognize the signs of academic burnout and to effectively support students is essential for fostering a supportive learning environment.

Although this study provides specific examples that illustrate the diverse experiences of academic burnout among undergraduates during the COVID-19 pandemic, it also explores the factors contributing to this issue. However, there are limitations to consider. First, the relevant factors are not limited to those identified in this study. Both positive and negative aspects, such as resilience, anxiety, and other potential influences, warrant further exploration. (Fernández-Castillo, 2021; Marzo et al., 2022). Another significant limitation is the study's primary focus on students experiencing high levels of academic burnout. While it includes students from the second to fourth years, the emphasis on second-year students who began their undergraduate studies in August 2021—primarily through online formats—may not adequately capture the experiences of those with lower levels of burnout or those who have effectively coped during this challenging period. As a result, the insights gained may not reflect a broad range of undergraduate experiences. Additionally, the study provides a snapshot of experiences at a specific point in time. During the research, educational institutions adhered to guidelines set by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation regarding monitoring the COVID-19 pandemic, with students fully engaged in online learning. The third and fourth-year students had prior university experiences, particularly the fourth-year students who had experienced full-time on-site study in their first year. Given the evolving nature of the pandemic and its ongoing impact on educational settings, students' perceptions and coping mechanisms will likely change over time. This temporal limitation suggests that the findings may not fully account for future adaptations or emerging trends in student burnout experiences as the situation unfolds. Further research in this area is recommended.

Conclusion

The study portrays the complex and enduring nature of academic burnout among undergraduate students since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It reveals that fatigue, exhaustion, and reduced energy are central characteristics of the academic burnout experienced across all waves of the pandemic. These symptoms are further exacerbated by various challenges, including chaotic schedules and poor time management, which create additional stressors for students already grappling with heightened academic demands. While the research provides specific

examples that illustrate the diverse experiences of academic burnout among undergraduates, it also identifies several key contributing factors. High expectations create an environment where students feel they must constantly perform at a high level. Additionally, cumulative stress from various sources, including academic pressures and personal issues, compounds feeling overwhelmed. The study highlights that effective coping strategies are vital in addressing these challenges. Support from friends and family emerges as a crucial factor in helping students navigate the difficulties associated with burnout. Such support systems can provide emotional reassurance, practical assistance, and a sense of belonging, essential for maintaining mental health. The findings have significant implications for educational institutions and relevant stakeholders as they strive to meet the diverse needs of undergraduate students. Key stakeholders, including academic institutions, university counselors, mental health support personnel, academic advisors, and faculty, play a vital role in mitigating risk factors and promoting protective factors. By fostering a supportive academic environment, implementing flexible policies, and providing targeted mental health resources, these stakeholders can help alleviate the burden of burnout and enhance students' overall well-being.

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