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# The Influence of Parental Psychological Control on Externalizing Behaviors Among College Students: The Mediating Role of Self-Control

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**Abstract:** Purpose: This research aims to explore how parental psychological regulation, individual self-discipline, and outward-facing behaviors are interconnected within a university student population. Methods: A sample of 334 undergraduates participated in the data collection phase, utilizing standardized instruments to assess parent-led psychological control, self-regulatory capacity, and externalized conduct. The analytical framework involved testing for common method variance, alongside descriptive and correlational statistics to evaluate the mediating pathways. Findings: (1) Notable variations in self-regulatory levels were observed depending on whether participants were only children ( $t = -5.36, p < 0.001$ ); specifically, those with siblings displayed superior self-control. Gender also played a significant role ( $t = -2.46, p < 0.01$ ), as male students generally demonstrated lower self-discipline than their female counterparts. (2) Results indicated that externalized behavioral issues among undergraduates were strongly and positively associated with restrictive parental psychological practices ( $r = 0.85, p < 0.01$ ). Conversely, self-management abilities were inversely related to both outward behavioral challenges ( $r = -0.23, p < 0.01$ ) and the psychological control exerted by parents ( $r = -0.15, p < 0.01$ ). (3) The analysis confirmed that self-regulation functions as a partial mediator in the link between parental psychological intervention and student externalizing conduct, representing a 2.35% contribution to the overall effect. Summary: (1) Individual self-discipline is significantly shaped by gender demographics and family structure. (2) Elevated levels of psychological governance from parents tend to erode student self-control while exacerbating externalized behavioral problems. (3) The mechanism through which parental control influences student behavior is partially explained by the participant's own self-regulatory skills; thus, such control not only predicts behaviors directly but also operates via an indirect internal path.

**Keywords:** parental psychological control; self-control; externalizing behaviors; college students

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research Background

Lately, the connection between externalized behavioral issues and broader campus conduct hurdles has become increasingly evident. These manifestations of distress frequently surface during specific developmental windows. While global academic interest in the mechanics of externalizing behaviors has intensified significantly, the shifting social landscape within domestic contexts has similarly

elevated the management of these behaviors to a priority status in developmental psychology research.

The psychological well-being of university students is often fostered by a supportive home atmosphere, whereas a detrimental family setting can yield the opposite results [1]. This observation is consistent with ecological systems theory, which identifies the household as the primary environment for early social integration [2]. Challenges arise when parental tension and anxiety are poorly managed, often manifesting as psychological control. In such cases, offspring—particularly those in higher education—may absorb and reflect these transmitted pressures. Historical data has consistently highlighted the link between parent-driven psychological regulation and various developmental milestones in children [3-5]. Today, the far-reaching negative consequences of this control are widely recognized, extending from internal and external adjustment difficulties to compromised scholastic achievement and strained social connectivity [6].

Furthermore, this research integrates the concept of self-regulation—a vital internal mechanism that mediates the risk of externalized responses. Conceptually, self-control involves an individual's proactive governance of their own emotional and behavioral states [7]. It is specifically characterized by the capacity to inhibit impulses, postpone immediate rewards, and direct one's actions toward achieving defined objectives [8]. This internal resource is particularly crucial for university students, who must navigate a complex array of internal and environmental stressors.

To conclude, while existing literature establishes separate associations between parental psychological influence, self-discipline, and students' externalizing behaviors, comprehensive investigations that explore the dynamic interaction among all three elements concurrently remain scarce.

### *1.2. Research Objectives*

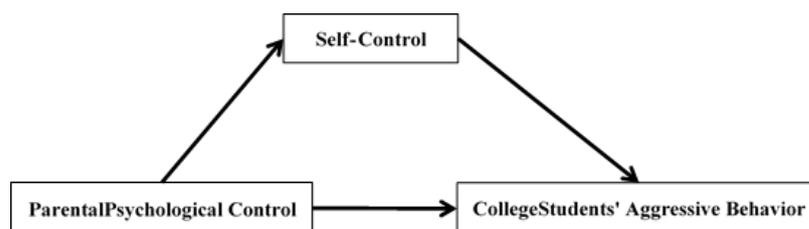
By utilizing a questionnaire-based methodology, the current investigation aims to analyze the complex associations between parental psychological regulation, self-discipline, and externalizing behaviors among university students. A core objective is to determine whether self-control functions as an intermediary mechanism in the link between parental control and these behavioral outcomes. Furthermore, the study explores how these interpersonal dynamics and psychological effects may vary according to demographic factors, specifically participant gender and their status as an only child.

### *1.3. Research Hypotheses*

Hypothesis 1: Statistically significant associations exist between the levels of parental psychological regulation, individual self-control capacity, and the externalized behavioral patterns of university students.

Hypothesis 2: The mechanism through which parental psychological control influences college students' externalizing behaviors is mediated by the students' own self-discipline levels.

Based on the preceding synthesis of theoretical frameworks and the comprehensive review of existing literature, the conceptual mediation model proposed for the current investigation is visualized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The Hypothesized Mediating Model of Self-Control between Parental Psychological Control and Externalizing Behaviors.

#### 1.4. Research Significance

##### 1.4.1. Theoretical Significance

Utilizing survey-based data, this investigation delves into the interconnectedness of parental psychological regulation, self-discipline, and externalizing conduct within the university cohort. Beyond evaluating the direct impact of parent-led control on student behavior, the study clarifies the mediatory function of self-regulatory skills in this pathway. By doing so, the current work seeks to offer fresh theoretical insights and robust empirical support for unravelling the underlying psychological drivers that govern student development during this critical life stage [9].

##### 1.4.2. Practical Implications

The outcomes of this research yield valuable applications for parental guidance and student welfare programs. First, it enables parents to identify subtle, indirect forms of control and encourages the transition toward nurturing and autonomy-supportive caregiving styles. Furthermore, these insights can be integrated into campus-based mental health services. Specifically, counseling centers can design targeted self-discipline training for students raised in highly controlling domestic environments to curb the prevalence of externalizing issues. Additionally, early intervention strategies can be prioritized for those identified with high-control backgrounds and lower self-management capacities. Ultimately, prioritizing the comprehensive physical and psychological wellness of undergraduates is of paramount importance.

#### 1.5. Innovative Contributions

While existing scholarship has primarily concentrated on identifying the various ways parental upbringing affects student behavior to provide clinical benchmarks for intervention, a significant gap remains. Prior studies, for instance, have highlighted how balanced parental oversight and constructive mentorship—coupled with the mitigation of harmful peer effects—can bolster a child’s self-discipline and minimize behavioral problems [9]. Theoretical debate has also extensively covered the dynamic interplay between parent-led psychological regulation, self-control, and adolescent development [10]. Nevertheless, there is a relative lack of focus regarding the specific mediating role of self-regulation within this tripartite framework. The current study addresses this deficiency by rigorously examining how self-control functions as an intermediary pathway between parent-child psychological dynamics and externalizing conduct, thereby mapping the intricate relational trajectories among these three variables.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Parental Psychological Control

Within the framework of parental governance, a distinction is made between behavioral management and psychological control (PPC). While the former pertains to the oversight of visible conduct, the latter involves intrusive strategies designed to exert authority over a child's internal state—such as encouraging reliance, stifling the growth of autonomy, and eroding self-perception [11]. Prolonged exposure to such environments

often predisposes individuals to identity ambiguity and impaired emotional self-regulation, potentially leading to difficulties in maintaining healthy interpersonal limits in maturity [12]. Scholars have characterized these psychological tactics as inherently invasive and coercive [13]. This pattern of intrusive upbringing is globally prevalent; parents may utilize restrictive measures to enforce compliance, frequently at the expense of the child's personal needs and subjective experiences [14,15].

### *2.2. Self-Control*

Self-control represents an individual's internal capacity to modulate impulsive reactions, cognitions, and actions to remain consistent with their personal principles, ethical standards, and community expectations. In daily functioning, this regulatory power is essential for governing one's behavioral and cognitive processes in accordance with social norms or individual intent. Robust self-regulatory skills act as a buffer against adverse environmental factors, enabling individuals to decrease their reliance on dysfunctional coping mechanisms.

### *2.3. Externalizing Behaviors Among College Students*

Externalizing conduct remains a focal point in developmental studies involving university populations. It is generally defined as outward-facing expressions of distress or interpersonal friction that negatively affect the social environment [16]. These behavioral tendencies are recognized as a high-priority research subject in the field of developmental psychology [17]. Based on social information processing theory, these actions are categorized into proactive or reactive categories, further branching into physical, linguistic, indirect, and relational forms [18]. Additionally, previous findings suggest that emotional processes play a significant role in these outcomes, a perspective supported by the General Affective Model utilized in this research [19,20].

### *2.4. PPC and Externalizing Behaviors*

Manifestations of conflict or externalized distress are often rooted in early parental discipline [9]. Positive parenting promotes balanced development, whereas high levels of psychological control exert a subtle yet pervasive influence on students, often forcing them to prioritize family expectations over their own independent agency [16,21]. Research indicates that such control is a significant predictor of hostile attribution bias [22]. Frequent reliance on psychological regulation in parenting correlates with an increased likelihood of physical behavioral problems; consequently, a strong positive link exists between restrictive control and externalized issues [15,23].

### *2.5. PPC and Self-Control*

The cultivation of self-discipline is heavily contingent on familial factors, specifically parenting styles. Aligning with the general theory of behavior, the development of self-regulatory abilities is intrinsically linked to home-based educational practices; a lack of structured support often results in diminished self-control [24]. Evidence from adolescent studies shows that intrusive psychological control actively hinders the maturation of self-regulatory skills [25]. Furthermore, a higher degree of parental interference is associated with weakened self-discipline in younger populations [26]. Thus, as an intrusive modality, intensified psychological control increasingly undermines the healthy evolution of a student's self-concept [27].

### *2.6. Self-Control and Externalizing Behaviors*

The general theory of behavior posits that a deficit in self-discipline is the primary driver of problematic conduct. Inadequate self-control is a strong predictor of rule-breaking and non-normative actions [28]. For instance, a study involving 363 undergraduates highlighted a marked negative correlation between self-management and

externalized problems, suggesting that better self-control leads to fewer behavioral issues [29-31]. Further research on college cohorts confirms that self-discipline not only directly influences these behaviors but also operates through indirect channels, such as moral disengagement [32-35].

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Subjects

A questionnaire survey was conducted among students enrolled at a university in northern China [36,37]. After excluding invalid responses, 334 valid questionnaires were collected, yielding a response rate of 92.8%. Among the participants (see Table 1): 146 were male (43.7%), and 188 were female (56.3%); 171 were urban residents (51.2%), and 163 were rural residents (48.8%); 152 were only children (45.5%), and 182 were non-only children (54.5%).

**Table 1.** General Demographic Characteristics (n=334).

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	146	43.7
	Female	188	56.3
Residence	City	171	51.2
	Rural	163	48.8
Only Child	Yes	152	45.5
	No	182	54.5

#### 3.2. Research Tools

##### 3.2.1. Parental Psychological Control Scale

The Parental Psychological Control Scale was used. It consists of 18 items scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree") [38]. Higher total scores indicate stronger psychological control. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency with a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of 0.95.

##### 3.2.2. College Student Externalizing Behavior Questionnaire

The Externalizing Behavior Questionnaire was employed. It comprises 29 items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree") [32]. Higher scores indicate higher levels of externalizing behavior. The scale's internal consistency Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient is 0.96.

##### 3.2.3. Self-Control Scale

The Self-Control Scale, comprising 19 items, was adopted. Scoring follows a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" to "completely agree" [36]. Items 1, 5, 11, and 14 are reverse-scored. Higher scores indicate greater self-control. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale is 0.86.

#### 3.3. Data Processing

Data were analyzed using statistical software for common method bias testing, descriptive statistics, independent samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and correlation analysis. Mediation models were examined using the standardized PROCESS macro.

### 4. Research Findings

#### 4.1. Common Method Bias Test

To address potential common method variance (CMV) arising from the self-reported nature of the data, Harman's single-factor analysis was performed. The exploratory factor

analysis revealed 10 distinct components with eigenvalues exceeding 1.0, collectively accounting for 68.92% of the total variance. Notably, the initial principal factor explained only 29.20% of the variance, which remains well below the widely accepted 40% critical benchmark [39]. These results indicate that common method bias does not pose a significant threat to the validity of the current findings and is within a tolerable range.

#### 4.2. Analysis of Demographic Differences

##### 4.2.1. Gender-based variations in study variables

The study utilized independent samples t-tests to examine how parental psychological regulation, self-discipline, and externalizing conduct varied by gender. As presented in Table 2, a significant disparity was identified in self-control levels ( $t = -2.46$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), where female students demonstrated higher regulatory capacities compared to their male counterparts. Conversely, no statistically meaningful gender differences were observed regarding the impact of parental psychological control or the prevalence of externalizing behaviors among the surveyed undergraduates.

**Table 2.** Analysis of Differences in Parental Psychological Control, Self-Control, and Externalizing behaviors Among College Students by Gender (M±SD).

Variable	Male (n=146)	Female (n=188)	t	p
Parental Psychological Control	53.82±19.28	52.13±17.56	0.82	0.41
Self-Control	47.03±9.59	49.65±9.81	-2.46	0.02**
College Students' Externalizing behaviors	86.72±28.37	83.52±25.97	1.06	0.29

##### 4.2.2. Analysis of Differences in Research Variables Based on Only-Child Status

Independent samples t-tests were conducted on parental psychological control, self-control, and externalizing behaviors by only-child status. Results indicate (see Table 3) that self-control exhibits a significant difference based on only-child status ( $t = -5.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), with only-child college students demonstrating lower self-control levels than non-only-child students. No significant differences were found in parental psychological control or college students' externalizing behaviors based on only-child status.

**Table 3.** Analysis of Differences in Parental Psychological Control, Self-Control, and Externalizing behaviors Among College Students Based on Only-Child Status (M±SD).

Variable	Only Child (n=152)	Non-Only Child (n=182)	t	p
Parental Psychological Control	52.79±18.90	52.93±17.88	-0.06	0.94
Self-Control	45.54±8.31	50.98±10.25	-5.36	0.00**
College Students' Externalizing behaviors	84.46±28.90	85.30±25.47	-0.27	0.78

#### 4.3. Correlation Analysis Among Parental Psychological Control, Self-Control, and College Students' Externalizing behaviors

Analysis results revealed (see Table 4) that college students' externalizing behaviors showed a significant positive correlation with parental psychological control ( $r = 0.85$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); self-control exhibited significant negative correlations with both parental psychological control and college students' externalizing behaviors ( $r = -0.23$ ,  $r = -0.15$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 4.** Correlation Analysis (r) Between Parental Psychological Control, Self-Control, and Externalizing behaviors Among College Students.

	1	2	3	4	5
1 Gender	1				
2 Only Child	0.128*	1			
3 Parental Psychological Control	-0.046	-0.004	1		
4 Self-Control	-0.133*	0.277**	-0.152**	1	
5 Externalizing behaviors Among College Students	-0.059	0.015	0.854**	-0.232**	1

Note: \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001, same below.

*4.4. The Mediating Effect of Self-Control Between Parental Psychological Control and Externalizing behaviors in College Students*

Following established academic protocols, all primary variables underwent a standardization process prior to the main analysis. To evaluate the proposed mediation model, the PROCESS macro for SPSS was utilized, designating parent-led psychological regulation as the independent factor, self-discipline as the intermediary, and outward-facing behavioral challenges as the dependent variable. As detailed in Table 5 and Figure 2, the initial regression analysis demonstrated that parental psychological control exerted a significant positive influence on student externalizing conduct ( $\beta=0.85, p<0.001$ ) while serving as a negative predictor of their self-regulatory capacity ( $\beta=-0.15, p<0.001$ ). Upon integrating the mediator into the model, the predictive power of parental control on externalized behaviors remained significant ( $\beta=0.84, p<0.001$ ). Furthermore, self-control was found to be a significant negative predictor of these behavioral issues ( $\beta=-0.12, p<0.001$ ). The analysis revealed an indirect effect size of 0.02, with a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of [0.01, 0.03]. Since this interval does not encompass zero, the mediating role is statistically confirmed, representing 2.35% of the total effect (see Table 6). These results provide robust evidence that self-control functions as a partial mediator in the association between parent-driven psychological intrusion and the externalizing behavioral patterns of university students.

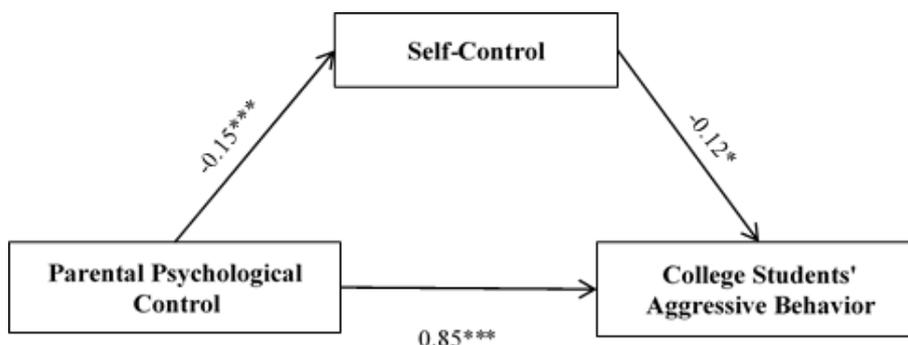
**Table 5.** Testing the mediating effect of self-control between parental psychological control and college students' externalizing behaviors.

Outcome Variable	Predictor Variable	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	$\beta$	t
Externalizing behaviors Among College Students	Gender	0.85	0.73	296.47	-0.02	-0.75
	Only child				0.01	0.52
Self-control	Parental Psychological Control	0.33	0.11	13.42	0.85	29.74***
	Gender				-0.09	1.76
College Students' Externalizing behaviors	Only child				0.26	5.07
	Parental Psychological Control	0.86	0.74	235.72	-0.15	-2.86***
	Gender				-0.01	-0.39
	Only child				0.05	1.56
	Self-control				-0.12	-3.89***

Parental Psychological Control	0.84	29.40***
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**Table 6.** Decomposition of Total, Direct, and Mediating Effects for the Mediation Model.

	Effect Size	BootSE	Boot CI	Relative Effect Size
Total Effect	0.85	0.03	[0.80, 0.91]	
Direct Effect	0.83	0.03	[0.78, 0.89]	97.65%
Indirect Effect	0.02	0.01	[0.01, 0.03]	2.35%



**Figure 2.** Mediating Pathways of Parental Psychological Control on College Students' Externalizing behaviors.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Insights into Demographic Variables

The current findings reveal a clear gender disparity in self-management, with female undergraduates demonstrating superior self-regulation compared to their male peers—a result that aligns with established academic consensus. Parental psychological regulation is often shaped by deeper home-based dynamics; for instance, diminished secure attachment and low parental self-esteem have been identified as precursors to more controlling upbringing styles [40]. Interestingly, male offspring may be particularly vulnerable to such psychological intrusion [41]. Furthermore, the prevalence of these intrusive strategies varies across different cultural landscapes, as evidenced by cross-cultural comparative research [42]. Such restrictive parenting can impede holistic development from a young age. As individuals enter adolescence, these behaviors significantly heighten the risk of internalizing distress, which, if left unaddressed, can derail long-term psychological growth. Consequently, high levels of parental control may stifle a student's autonomy and obstruct the process of self-differentiation [43], particularly within only-child households where emotional fulfillment depends heavily on parental dynamics. Critically, while behavioral oversight does not necessarily lead to externalized issues, psychological regulation remains a potent positive predictor of such challenges.

### 5.2. Correlation and Adaptation Analysis

The data confirms that parent-driven psychological control is positively associated with externalized conduct while being inversely related to an individual's self-discipline. These results support the initial research hypotheses, suggesting that heightened parental interference corresponds with weakened self-regulatory capacity and increased behavioral risks. This validates the role of self-control as a pivotal mediator within the university cohort. Moreover, while parental control negatively impacts positive

adaptation, it simultaneously exacerbates negative psychological outcomes [44]. In today's complex educational climate, bolstering the self-management skills of college students is not just beneficial but imperative [45]. Achieving this requires parents to maintain a balanced, non-intrusive involvement that respects the student's psychological boundaries [46].

### 5.3. The Modulatory Function of Self-Regulation

Existing literature underscores a robust negative link between self-regulatory capacity and the emergence of externalized behaviors [45]. Nurturing and supportive parenting frameworks not only encourage the maturation of self-control but also serve as a buffer against impulsive conduct [47], thereby refining overall self-regulation [48]. In contrast, a deficit in self-discipline can trigger a spectrum of psychological hurdles, including outward behavioral problems and addictive patterns like excessive internet use [49]. As parents increasingly recognize their children's drive for autonomy, reducing psychological pressure becomes a vital step in facilitating healthy self-regulatory development [10].

### 5.4. Methodological Constraints and Future Pathways

This investigation utilized a cross-sectional framework, which precludes the establishment of definitive causality. Future inquiries should adopt longitudinal methodologies to better capture the evolving nature of these relationships. Additionally, as the sample was concentrated within a single institution in Northern China, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. Subsequent studies should aim for greater institutional and geographic diversity, including graduate populations. Finally, integrating a broader international comparative lens would offer more nuanced insights into how these relational trajectories operate across different cultural frameworks.

## 6. Conclusion

This study offers an integrative analysis of the factors that shape the psychological and behavioral trajectories of university students, emphasizing the complex nexus between the familial environment and internal self-management. The evidence suggests that demographic profiles—specifically gender and only-child status—significantly influence self-control levels through distinct patterns rooted in family structure. Most notably, the research establishes a significant positive link between parent-led psychological regulation and externalizing conduct, alongside a significant negative association between such control and self-discipline.

Furthermore, the identification of self-control as a partial mediator clarifies the underlying mechanism: parental psychological control not only directly predicts behavioral challenges but also operates indirectly by eroding an individual's internal regulatory systems. These findings highlight the critical need for supportive, non-coercive parenting to foster self-regulation and mitigate maladaptive behaviors during the transition through higher education. Ultimately, the study confirms that enhancing internal self-discipline is a fundamental pathway to counteracting the negative effects of restrictive parenting and promoting a healthier developmental journey.

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