

THE ROLE OF EXISTENTIAL-HUMANISTIC COUNSELING TECHNIQUES IN OVERCOMING BURNOUT AMONG STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Achmad Navis Afkari¹, Mudafiatun Isriyah^{2*}, Dewi Masyitoh³

¹²³ Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: ieiezcla@mail.unipar.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Academic burnout among final-year university students is a critical issue, particularly for those balancing thesis completion with part-time employment and personal challenges. This study explores the role of existential-humanistic counseling in alleviating academic burnout experienced by students in the Guidance and Counseling Program at Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation involving ten final-year students showing symptoms of burnout. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: awareness of burnout, the impact of burnout on mental and academic well-being, and coping strategies. Findings showed that students experienced emotional exhaustion, motivation decline, and behavioral changes such as procrastination and social withdrawal. Coping mechanisms ranged from mindfulness and cognitive reframing to social engagement and creative activities. Existential-humanistic counseling was found to support students by fostering self-awareness, emotional resilience, and personal meaning, offering a deeper and culturally relevant alternative to conventional behavioral models. The study underscores the need for integrative counseling practices that address existential dimensions of student crises. It contributes to educational psychology and counseling practice by demonstrating how personal responsibility and meaning-making can transform burnout into an opportunity for growth. Future research should include diverse academic contexts and incorporate mixed-method designs to enhance generalizability and rigor.

Keywords: Academic Burnout, Counseling, Existential-Humanistic, Higher Education, Student Well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Burnout has emerged as a critical psychological issue in the realm of higher education, particularly affecting final-year university students who are struggling to complete their theses or final academic assignments (Hwang & Kim, 2022). Burnout is defined as a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Among students, burnout manifests through feelings of overwhelming stress, reduced academic motivation, and chronic fatigue. The academic burden becomes even more pronounced for those who are retaking failed courses or managing work responsibilities alongside their studies. This pressure is further exacerbated when students face additional stressors such as financial problems, family issues, or lack of academic support, making the thesis writing process particularly distressing (Roelyana & Listiyandini, 2016). These conditions result in an emotional toll that, if left unaddressed, leads to persistent psychological strain. In the Indonesian context, completing a thesis (skripsi) is commonly perceived as a daunting academic hurdle, often triggering a downward spiral of mental fatigue and academic avoidance. The gravity of this issue is underscored by tragic cases reported in the media. For instance, Malang Times (2020) reported at least three student suicides in 2020 alone due to thesis-related depression. A longitudinal review shows that between 2014 and 2020, there were at least ten reported suicide attempts caused by stress over thesis completion (Karawang Post, 2021). These alarming statistics illustrate the urgent need for psychological interventions tailored to the academic and emotional needs of students, especially those at the final stage of their education.

The core research problem addressed in this study is the experience of academic burnout among final-year students in the Guidance and Counseling Program at Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember. These students are faced with overwhelming emotional fatigue, lack of motivation, and an inability to manage

time and focus effectively due to the dual burden of working while studying. Their condition is aggravated by isolation from campus activities—given that attendance is only mandatory for thesis guidance—and personal issues that further complicate their ability to concentrate and progress academically. As a general solution, psychological counseling has been identified as an effective approach to managing mental health challenges in students. Counseling interventions help students develop coping strategies, reframe academic challenges, and restore their sense of self-efficacy (Corey, 2013). However, not all counseling approaches are equally suited to the existential crises experienced during thesis writing. This opens up the possibility of implementing a more nuanced therapeutic model: existential-humanistic counseling.

Existential-humanistic therapy is a counseling approach that addresses the core of human experience—responsibility, freedom, authenticity, and the search for meaning (Nelson-Jones, 2011). Unlike behaviorally focused counseling, existential-humanistic therapy does not merely seek to change behavior but to instill a deeper understanding of one's existence, potential, and values. It emphasizes the human capacity for self-awareness, personal responsibility, and choice, all of which are crucial in navigating academic burnout. This counseling model has been proven to enhance individual self-worth, restore inner motivation, and support personal growth (Corey, 2013). It encourages clients to take ownership of their lives and decisions, even under uncertain or stressful conditions, making it highly relevant for students facing academic stagnation or anxiety over failure. In the context of final-year students, existential-humanistic counseling can facilitate their re-engagement with their academic goals, helping them overcome feelings of despair, fatigue, and emotional paralysis. Moreover, the approach is rooted in the belief that individuals possess more positive potential than negative. It taps into human qualities such as imagination, creativity, and ethical freedom—resources that can be harnessed to overcome internal resistance and burnout (Nelson-Jones, 2011). It thus aligns well with the goals of education not only as a cognitive endeavor but also as a transformative journey of personal development.

While several studies have explored the causes and impacts of academic burnout (Orpina & Prahara, 2019; Fajriani & Septiari, 2015), few have investigated effective therapeutic interventions, particularly from a humanistic perspective, in the Indonesian educational context. Most existing research tends to focus on behavioral counseling models or cognitive-behavioral therapy, which may not fully address the existential dimensions of burnout experienced during thesis completion. Furthermore, studies such as those by Mashuri et al. (2022) emphasize the significant impact of burnout on daily routines, mental health, and academic progress. However, there is limited empirical data on how students can effectively reclaim motivation and meaning through counseling that centers on self-actualization and existential insight. This gap becomes even more critical when considering students who balance academic responsibilities with employment—a demographic largely neglected in current research. Additionally, while institutional solutions such as thesis-writing workshops or time management training have been proposed, these do not necessarily address the deep-seated psychological fatigue and emotional disconnection students feel. As such, there is a growing need to examine alternative models that can facilitate inner transformation and emotional resilience. This study therefore seeks to fill a gap in the literature by exploring the impact of existential-humanistic counseling on final-year students suffering from burnout. It focuses specifically on students from Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember, many of whom are working part-time and facing multidimensional pressures that extend beyond academics.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the role of existential-humanistic counseling in alleviating academic burnout among final-year students in the Guidance and Counseling Program at Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember. The research explores both the internal and external factors contributing to burnout and examines how existential-humanistic interventions can help students rediscover motivation and develop personal agency in completing their theses. The novelty of this study lies in its application of existential-humanistic theory within a higher education setting in Indonesia—a context where such therapeutic models are rarely explored in empirical research. Most counseling practices in Indonesian universities remain focused on problem-solving and behavioral change, overlooking the existential dimension of student crises. By integrating existential-humanistic theory into academic counseling, this study introduces a deeper, more personal approach to addressing educational stress and psychological resilience. The study is grounded in the hypothesis that existential-humanistic counseling enables students

to overcome academic burnout by fostering self-awareness, personal meaning, and emotional regulation. Specifically, it posits that students who engage in existential-humanistic counseling will experience improvements in emotional well-being, motivation, and academic focus. The scope of the study is limited to final-year undergraduate students enrolled in the Guidance and Counseling Program at Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember. The study employs a qualitative case study approach, using structured interviews and thematic analysis to explore participants' lived experiences of burnout and their response to counseling interventions. The focus is on subjective narratives and insights, aiming to capture the depth of emotional and existential challenges faced by these students. In conclusion, by addressing the urgent problem of academic burnout through a scientifically grounded, human-centered counseling model, this research aims to contribute both practically and theoretically to the fields of educational psychology, guidance and counseling, and student well-being. It offers a culturally relevant, emotionally attuned solution for one of the most pervasive challenges in higher education today.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach, which seeks to explore and interpret phenomena in their natural settings, allowing the researcher to gather rich and contextual data from participants (Moleong, 2015). The primary method used was a case study, a qualitative strategy that focuses on understanding a particular issue through in-depth exploration of individuals or groups within a bounded system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this context, the study sought to deeply investigate burnout among final-year undergraduate students who were working on their thesis in the Guidance and Counseling Program at Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember. As noted by Moleong (2017), case study research is particularly effective in capturing the complexities of psychological phenomena such as academic burnout, especially when tied to real-life experiences like thesis writing, part-time work, and personal struggles. This research was designed to understand not only the manifestations of burnout but also the coping strategies students employed, especially through existential-humanistic counseling.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 10 final-year students from the Guidance and Counseling Program, selected using purposive sampling. The primary inclusion criteria were: (1) actively working on their final project or thesis, and (2) self-reporting symptoms of academic burnout.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Initials	Age	Gender
AP	22	Female
YA	23	Female
WI	21	Male
RH	22	Female
AM	24	Male
AP	23	Female
HF	23	Male
IE	22	Male
MF	24	Male
AL	24	Male

These students were experiencing various symptoms related to burnout, including emotional exhaustion, lack of motivation, and difficulty managing time and focus due to external work and personal obligations.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three primary techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. The triangulation of these methods allowed for the validation and cross-checking of findings. The observations

in this study were non-systematic, meaning they were flexible and adaptive, allowing the researcher to identify spontaneous behaviors and contextual cues related to student stress and burnout. This form of observation is suitable in qualitative research where phenomena are fluid and embedded in real-life experiences (Moleong, 2017). Data were primarily gathered using semi-structured interviews, allowing the researcher to explore specific themes while maintaining the flexibility to follow up on unexpected insights. Interviews were conducted online via Google Meet, which ensured accessibility and comfort for participants during the COVID/post-COVID adaptation era.

Table 2. Interview Schedule and Duration

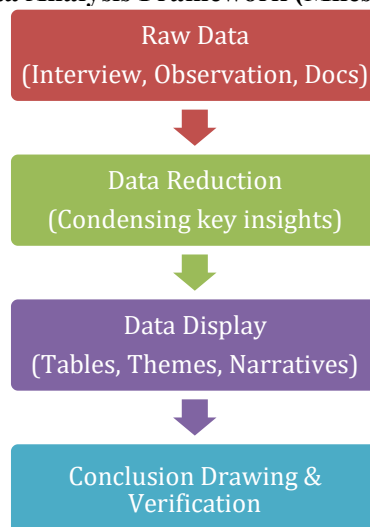
Initials	Date	Time (WIB)	Duration
AP	Jan 17, 2025	20:01	57 min 15 sec
YA	Feb 1, 2025	20:02	55 min 8 sec
WI	Mar 7, 2025	20:36	56 min 12 sec
RH	Apr 17, 2025	12:24	48 min 42 sec
AM	Apr 29, 2025	20:05	53 min 14 sec
AP	Apr 23, 2025	12:43	50 min 26 sec
HF	Apr 17, 2025	08:49	56 min 13 sec
IE	Apr 17, 2025	10:01	58 min 23 sec
MF	May 2, 2025	20:16	49 min 24 sec
AL	May 2, 2025	21:13	59 min 33 sec

Each interview explored indicators of burnout, daily challenges, emotional and physical responses, and personal strategies for coping with burnout. Documentation served as a supporting data source, including transcripts, recorded video interviews, personal notes, and emotional journals from the participants. These materials provided contextual depth and facilitated the coding process (Moleong, 2017).

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), consisting of three iterative steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

Figure 1. Data Analysis Framework (Miles et al., 2014)



This phase involved selecting, simplifying, and transforming the raw data. Key statements from participants were coded and grouped based on recurring patterns related to burnout indicators and emotional responses. Organized data were presented in thematic tables to facilitate pattern recognition and

interpretation. These displays helped clarify relationships among emotional fatigue, behavior changes, coping strategies, and external stressors.

Table 3. Key Themes and Subthemes from Thematic Analysis

Main Theme	Sub-Themes
Awareness of Burnout	Emotional Exhaustion, Behavior Changes
Impact of Burnout	Mental Health, Daily Functioning
Coping with Burnout	Internal Strategies, External Supports

Findings were interpreted to generate meaning and draw conclusions aligned with the research objectives. These interpretations were verified by comparing data across sources and seeking consistency among participant responses (Sugiyono, 2018).

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, the researcher adhered to the four essential criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and the researcher's interpretations to verify accuracy and authenticity. Triangulation was also implemented by using multiple sources of data—namely, interviews, observations, and documentation—to cross-validate findings and strengthen the study's internal validity. For dependability, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, documenting all methodological steps and decisions to ensure transparency and replicability. To uphold confirmability, the research procedures and interpretations were systematically recorded to minimize researcher bias and ensure that the conclusions drawn were grounded in participants' perspectives rather than researcher assumptions. In terms of ethical considerations, all participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember. To protect participants' identities and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all documentation and reporting. This ethical approach ensured that participants' rights, dignity, and privacy were fully respected throughout the research process..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the manifestations, impacts, and coping strategies associated with academic burnout among final-year students in the Guidance and Counseling Program at Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember. Based on the thematic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with ten participants, three overarching themes were identified: (1) Awareness of Burnout, (2) The Impact of Burnout, and (3) Strategies for Coping with Burnout.

Awareness of Burnout

Findings indicated that a majority of participants experienced significant emotional exhaustion and marked behavioral changes during the final semester of their academic journey. These manifestations often signaled the onset of burnout. Participants described feelings of fatigue, mood instability, procrastination, withdrawal, and a general decline in motivation. For instance, one participant (HF, April 17, 2025) shared,

“I suddenly stopped doing the things I used to enjoy. I started to neglect even the smallest duties, including my religious practices, and didn't feel guilty about it.”

Others reported episodes of overthinking, a psychological pattern where continuous negative thought cycles interfere with productive behavior. As YA (February 1, 2025) explained,

“I kept thinking and thinking about my thesis until I ended up doing nothing—just avoiding the problem.”

These findings align with the definition of emotional exhaustion as a key component of burnout, defined by Maslach and Jackson (1981) as the feeling of being emotionally overextended and depleted of emotional resources. The findings are consistent with the work of Schaufeli et al. (2002), who emphasized emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as dominant symptoms of student burnout. Furthermore, Salmela-Aro et al. (2011) found that emotional exhaustion in academic settings is a strong predictor of low engagement and psychological distress. In a study conducted by Lin and Huang (2014), overthinking was identified as a common precursor to academic procrastination, particularly among students with perfectionistic tendencies. Moreover, behavioral changes reported by participants—such as avoiding campus, neglecting responsibilities, or losing interest in routines—mirror the indicators described in the Maslach Burnout Inventory–Student Survey (MBI-SS) (Campos et al., 2012), where detachment and reduced efficacy are key domains. Recognizing the early signs of burnout is crucial for timely intervention. Emotional fatigue and behavioral withdrawal can act as red flags for educators and counselors, enabling them to offer support before the student’s condition worsens. In the context of existential-humanistic counseling, such awareness provides a foundation for guiding students to reflect on their inner struggles and reframe their academic journey with greater autonomy and meaning (Yalom & Josselson, 2011).

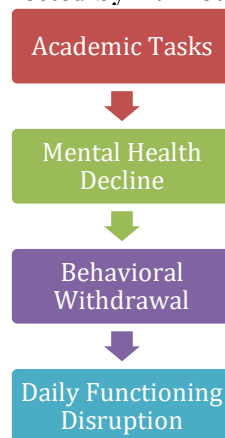
The Impact of Burnout

Students commonly reported feelings of mental distress, including anxiety, self-doubt, and perceived inferiority compared to their peers. These responses were often triggered by delayed thesis progress or the fear of extending their study period.

“I keep thinking that I’m falling behind my friends. Every time I meet my supervisor, I get suggestions, but I keep procrastinating. Then I feel guilty again,” explained AP (April 17, 2025).

Participants described a repetitive cycle of self-sabotage—receiving guidance but failing to act on it—which further contributed to guilt and hopelessness. Such findings confirm the reciprocal relationship between academic burnout and reduced academic performance identified in prior studies (Walburg, 2014; Madigan & Curran, 2021).

Figure 2. Domains Affected by Burnout Among Participants



The impact of burnout extended beyond academic life, severely affecting daily routines. Participants described irregular sleep patterns, reduced social interaction, and general fatigue. For example, HF (April 17, 2025) shared that,

“Because of stress, I often stay up late. I try to write but stop after one paragraph and end up playing games on my phone until morning.”

Other students, such as YA (February 1, 2025), noted that burnout led to social withdrawal:

“I no longer talk much with friends, and I’ve been avoiding even casual chats.”

These experiences echo the findings by Santen et al. (2010), who found that burnout symptoms among medical students were significantly correlated with sleep disturbances and social isolation. Similarly, Takahashi et al. (2019) noted that psychological strain from academic overload often spills into personal domains, leading to lifestyle imbalances. Understanding the cascading effects of burnout—from academic setbacks to emotional instability and lifestyle disruption—is essential in forming holistic interventions. Educational institutions must realize that academic failure is not merely a cognitive issue but often stems from unaddressed emotional and existential distress. Integrating emotional wellness and life balance into academic support services is vital to ensuring student retention and performance (Alqahtani & Alshahrani, 2020).

Coping with Burnout

Participants described several personal strategies they used to manage burnout. These included mindfulness, setting personal deadlines, shifting working modalities (from laptops to mobile phones), and engaging in hobbies such as playing music or meditation. AM (April 29, 2025) noted:

“I deal with burnout by doing physical activities like exercise and meditation—it really helps me refresh.”

Meanwhile, MF (May 2, 2025) shared,

“My escape is playing the guitar. When I play, I feel isolated from the stress, and it calms me.”

Such coping strategies are aligned with emotion-focused coping, which seeks to regulate emotional responses rather than eliminate the stressor (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Moreover, several participants indicated cognitive reframing—a hallmark of existential-humanistic therapy—as an effective mechanism. As IE (April 17, 2025) described:

“I started to gradually rethink my thought patterns to avoid burnout and stay in control.”

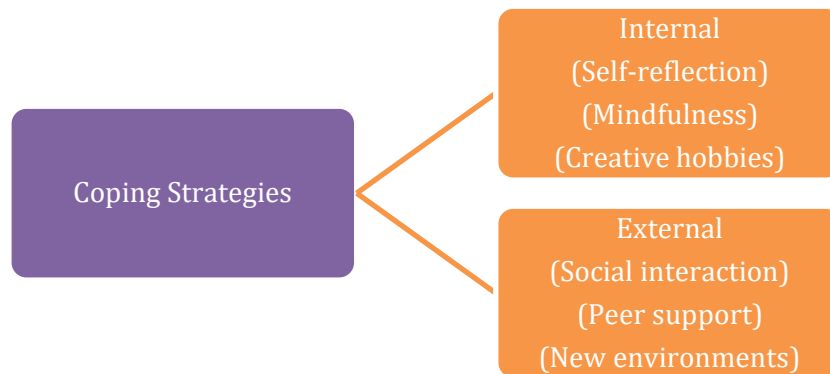
These reflections align with the findings of Shapiro et al. (2007), who demonstrated the effectiveness of mindfulness and cognitive awareness in reducing emotional exhaustion among university students. Support from the external environment played a significant role in mitigating burnout. Participants emphasized the value of social relationships, participation in extracurricular activities, and exposure to new settings. For example, RH (April 17, 2025) shared:

“Just cleaning the house while listening to music helps me relax. It’s a form of stress release for me.”

YA (February 1, 2025) reported:

“Joining scout activities or hanging out with friends to talk really helps me feel better.”

External strategies match the findings of Deasy et al. (2014), who argue that social support networks are among the most effective buffers against burnout in educational settings. Moreover, Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden-and-build theory suggests that positive emotions derived from social interactions enhance resilience by broadening thought-action repertoires.

Figure 3. Dual-Dimensional Burnout Coping Framework

The dual approach to managing burnout—through internal reflection and external engagement—is highly relevant to the existential-humanistic framework. According to Yalom (1980), meaning and resilience emerge through both self-awareness and authentic connections with others. Hence, counseling approaches must not be one-size-fits-all but must incorporate both individual and communal dimensions of healing. These findings also validate the premise that burnout is not a sign of weakness but an opportunity for transformative self-awareness when adequately addressed through appropriate therapeutic models (Corey, 2013; Nelson-Jones, 2011).

Broader Implications and Theoretical Integration

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the application of existential-humanistic counseling in educational settings, especially in addressing burnout. The existential issues faced by students—fear of failure, uncertainty about the future, and disconnection from meaning—are best addressed through a counseling model that promotes authenticity, personal responsibility, and emotional depth (van Deurzen, 2012). This study also contributes to the growing literature on student well-being by offering a culturally contextualized understanding of burnout in the Indonesian higher education setting. It echoes the works of Hwang & Kim (2022), who advocate for culturally sensitive interventions that respect students' lived realities.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

While the findings are insightful, the sample is limited to one institution and study program. Future studies could expand the participant pool to include diverse academic disciplines and universities to improve generalizability. Additionally, integrating quantitative tools like the MBI-SS or DASS-21 alongside qualitative interviews could strengthen the methodological triangulation.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the role of existential-humanistic counseling in addressing academic burnout among final-year students in the Guidance and Counseling Program at Universitas PGRI Argopuro Jember. The findings revealed three core themes: students' conscious awareness of burnout through emotional exhaustion and behavioral changes, the substantial negative impacts of burnout on mental health and daily functioning, and the diverse coping strategies—both internal (self-reflection, mindfulness, creative activities) and external (social interaction, support systems)—that students employed. The study highlights the urgent need for integrative, human-centered counseling approaches in higher education that move beyond behavior modification to address existential concerns such as meaning, agency, and personal growth. By applying existential-humanistic counseling in this context, the research contributes not only to expanding the theoretical application of this therapeutic model in Indonesian educational settings but also offers practical guidance for counselors and institutions to support students' emotional resilience. This study provides a novel, culturally relevant perspective that bridges counseling theory with the lived realities of

students, especially those balancing academic stress with personal obligations, thereby enriching the discourse on educational well-being and mental health support.

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