

# The Influence of Employment Pressure on Depressive Symptoms Among College Students: A Mediating Model of Self-Efficacy

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**Abstract:** *Aim:* To look at how college students' employment pressure influences their depression and to check what part self-efficacy plays in this relation. *Methods:* An online questionnaire was given to 365 college students. Structural equation modeling and the Bootstrap method were used to check the mediating effect. *Results:* Employment pressure can clearly raise the level of depression ( $\beta=0.36$ ). Self-efficacy has a certain mediating effect between the two factors (indirect effect=0.056, accounting for 13.4%). *Conclusion:* Employment pressure can make depression worse by lowering people's self-efficacy. Raising self-efficacy can reduce the bad mental influence brought by employment pressure.

**Keywords:** Employment pressure; Depressive symptoms; Self-efficacy

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## 1. Introduction

Employment pressure is a bad mental state. The state appears when students feel their ability cannot match job market needs during job hunting<sup>[1]</sup>. Employment pressure belongs to outside life stress. It has always been seen as a main factor. The factor affects college graduates' mental health<sup>[2]</sup>. The number of Chinese college graduates has been growing in recent years. The number of graduates in the 2026 group will hit 12.7 million. The depression detection rate of college students stays around 24%–26%<sup>[3]</sup>. Employment competition becomes fiercer now. Most college students face obvious employment pressure. The pressure brings bad effects on mental health. Such bad effects are getting more obvious<sup>[4]</sup>. This paper explores how employment pressure works on depressive emotions. The exploration carries real meaning and research meaning.

The authors look at this from a research theory angle. Most existing studies take employment pressure as an outcome variable or an intermediate variable<sup>[5]</sup>. Few studies use employment pressure as an antecedent variable. These studies directly check how it affects depression. Earlier studies have proved there is a

link between the two <sup>[6]</sup>. The research on their internal working ways is not deep enough. This study puts employment pressure into the antecedent variable system. It does this to expand the variable structure.

Self-efficacy is the confidence people have. People believe they can deal with specific life situations well. It is a valuable mental resource. The resource can help people adjust their stress reactions <sup>[7]</sup>. Past research finds that job-search self-efficacy has a mediating function. The function exists between personal factors and employment anxiety <sup>[8]</sup>. Self-efficacy may form a key path. The path connects employment pressure and depression. No systematic research has discussed this point yet. This study takes self-efficacy as a mediating variable for the first time. It shows how employment pressure makes depression worse. Employment pressure weakens people's self-efficacy in this process. It also offers a new angle for academic research.

The study looks at this from a practical angle. Employment pressure has become a common worry for college students <sup>[9]</sup>. The study needs to make clear how it affects depression. The study especially needs to find out the mediating role of self-efficacy. This can give ideas for college employment guidance workers. It can also help mental health professionals with intervention work <sup>[10]</sup>. The study can improve students' self-efficacy. This way can reduce the bad mental effects of employment pressure. It can also increase their confidence in job hunting <sup>[11]</sup>.

To sum up, this study builds a mediating model. The model is "employment pressure → self-efficacy → depression." The study tries to find out how employment pressure affects depression. It also checks the mediating role of self-efficacy. It wants to enrich related academic theories. It also provides practical evidence. The evidence is for college employment psychological counseling.

## 2. Literature review and research hypotheses

Employment pressure is a negative mental state. It happens when people feel they cannot meet job requirements. It also comes from the uncertainty of finding a job. People feel tense and anxious because of it. Depression is a common negative emotional problem among students. It makes people feel sad and lose interest in things. People under long-term employment pressure easily have wrong thoughts. They also feel tired emotionally. This makes them more likely to get depression. Researchers know employment pressure and depression are related. But researchers have not talked about how they connect in detail. Self-efficacy means people believe they can do things well. It is a kind of confidence in their own ability.

It is an important positive psychological resource. It helps people deal with stress. It adjusts stress reactions and keeps mental balance <sup>[14]</sup>. Past studies show self-efficacy is key. It connects stressful events and mental health. People with high self-efficacy often use positive ways to deal with stress. This reduces the bad mental effects of stress <sup>[15]</sup>. Based on this, the study puts forward the following hypotheses:

H1: College students' employment pressure significantly and positively predicts depression.

H2: Employment pressure has a significant negative predictive effect on college students' self-efficacy.

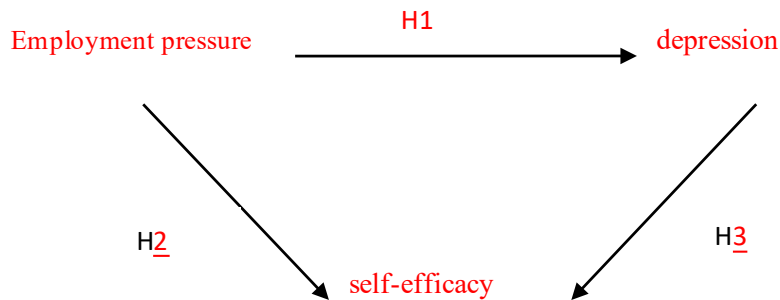
Self-efficacy is a key mental protection factor. It lessens the influence of negative events on mental health. College students with strong self-efficacy believe in their own ability. They can ease bad feelings, including anxiety and low mood <sup>[16]</sup>. Low self-efficacy makes the harmful effects of stress stronger. It raises the level of depressive tendency. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Employment pressure can affect depression directly. It can also affect depression indirectly. The way is by lowering self-efficacy. This is an inner mental process. That is, employment pressure → lower self-

efficacy → higher depression (**Figure 1**). Self-efficacy is like a bridge in this relationship. Based on this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: College students' self-efficacy significantly and negatively predicts depression.

H4: Self-efficacy plays a significant mediating role between college students' employment pressure and depression.



**Figure 1.** Research model diagram

### 3. Questionnaire design and variable measurement

#### 3.1. Participants

This study used the Wenjuanxing platform to send out online questionnaires. College students could fill in these questionnaires. Participants joined the study of their own will. The study set attention-check questions to screen participants. It also controlled the time spent on each questionnaire. Questionnaires with unreasonable time length were removed. These methods were used to guarantee data quality. The study tried to make the sample more diverse. A total of 380 questionnaires were gathered at first. Invalid questionnaires were sorted out later. 365 usable samples were kept in the end.

#### 3.2. Measurement

This study adopted the method of questionnaire survey. The questionnaire added screening questions at the beginning. Participants needed to state their stress from job hunting. They also needed to describe their personal self-efficacy. Only qualified participants were kept for research. The study aimed to lower common method bias. The questionnaire used only positive description questions. No reverse-scoring items were arranged in the content. Unreasonable answers were deleted in data processing. This step helped raise the reliability of research data.

The study set three core research variables. All variables can be seen in **Figure 1**. All scales come from mature existing tools. They were adjusted to fit college students' employment situation. General self-efficacy was measured with Schwarzer's scale. The scale contains 10 items in total. Employment stress was measured with a classic short academic scale. The scale has 16 items and covers 4 different dimensions. Depressive symptoms were measured with the Beck Depression Inventory. The BDI scale has 21 items and covers 7 different dimensions. All scales adopted a 5-point Likert scoring form. The three scales have Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients of 0.94, 0.95, and 0.93. The data shows all scales have good reliability. They fully meet the standard of psychological measurement.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Common method bias test

This study took orderly control steps when designing the questionnaire. It allowed participants to fill in the form anonymously. It also set reverse-scored questions inside the questionnaire. These steps reduce the possible influence of common method bias. This study used Harman's single-factor test to check common method variance. The test adopted exploratory factor analysis with no rotation. It picked out three factors with eigenvalues above 1. The largest explained variance of one single factor was 34.936%. The value was lower than 40%. No obvious common method bias existed in this study.

### 4.2. Construct reliability, validity, and discriminant validity test

This study ran confirmatory factor analysis. It calculated (CR) and (AVE) for every latent variable. It aimed to check the convergent validity of all scales. **Table 1** shows the CR values of three variables. Employment stress CR value is 0.945. Self-efficacy CR value is 0.938. Depression CR value is 0.929. All these CR values are higher than the standard value of 0.70. The AVE value of employment stress is 0.519. The AVE value of self-efficacy is 0.602. The AVE value of depression is 0.652. All these AVE values are higher than the standard value of 0.50. The scales have fine convergent validity. Every variable has its square root of AVE. The figures are (0.720, 0.776, 0.807). These figures are all higher than the correlation coefficients. The scales have sound discriminant validity.

**Table 1.** Construct reliability, validity, and discriminant validity test

Variable	Composite Reliability(CR)	Average Variance Extracted(AVE)	Square Root of AVE
Employment Stress (ES)	0.945	0.519	0.720
Self-efficacy (SE)	0.938	0.602	0.776
Depression (DE)	0.929	0.652	0.807

### 4.3. Correlation analysis

All correlation results are presented in **Table 2**. A clear correlation exists among self-efficacy, employment pressure, and depression. Self-efficacy has a positive link with employment pressure. The correlation value is ( $r = 0.306$ ). Self-efficacy also has a positive link with depression. The correlation value is ( $r = 0.265$ ). Employment pressure has a positive link with depression. The correlation value is ( $r = 0.385$ ). All correlation coefficients reach the 0.01 significance level. The test adopts a two-tailed standard. The three variables show a close connection with each other. The result supports the follow-up hypothesis testing.

**Table 2.** Pearson correlation analysis

	Self-Efficacy	Employment Stress	Depression
Self-Efficacy	1		
Employment Stress	.306**	1	
Depression	.265**	.385**	1

### 4.4. Structural model

The research sample includes 365 participants. The data shows the measurement model has good fitness.

The value of (CMIN/DF is 2.058). It is lower than the standard limit of 3. The model fitting degree stays within a reasonable range. The NFI value is 0.977. The RFI value is 0.969. The IFI value is 0.988. The TLI value is 0.984. The CFI value is 0.988. All these index values are above the standard of 0.90. The model reaches an excellent fitting level. The RMSEA value is 0.046. It is lower than the standard limit of 0.08. The measurement model has good structural validity. It can be applied to test variable relations in later analysis.

Structural path analysis gives clear results. Employment pressure has a positive effect on depressive symptoms. The standardized coefficient is ( $\beta = 0.36$ ). Employment pressure has a positive effect on self-efficacy. The standardized coefficient is ( $\beta = 0.33$ ). Self-efficacy has a positive effect on depressive symptoms. The standardized coefficient is ( $\beta = 0.17$ ).

The study draws a clear final conclusion. Employment pressure can influence depressive symptoms in a direct way. Employment pressure can also influence depressive symptoms indirectly. Self-efficacy acts as the medium in this influence process. The result proves the mediating role of self-efficacy. The result matches the preset research hypotheses. It also fits the logical connection among all variables.

#### 4.5. Mediation effect test

This study uses a mediation model for analysis. It also applies the Bootstrap method. It tests the mediation effect of the path employment pressure  $\rightarrow$  self-efficacy  $\rightarrow$  depression. The research data shows the 95% confidence intervals cover total effect, direct effect, and indirect effect. None of these intervals contains the number 0. Every path in the model reaches a significant level. The mediation effect of self-efficacy is confirmed.

All effect data are listed in **Table 3**. The indirect effect via self-efficacy is 0.056. Its 95% confidence interval ranges from 0.017 to 0.106. The direct effect of employment pressure on depression is 0.362. Its 95% confidence interval ranges from 0.248 to 0.470. The total effect of the whole path is 0.418. Its 95% confidence interval ranges from 0.316 to 0.510. The indirect effect takes up 13.4% of the total effect. Self-efficacy plays a partial mediating role. The role exists between employment pressure and depression.

**Table 3.** Mediation effect test

Path	Symbol	Meaning	Effect Size	Lower Limit	Upper Limit	Standard Deviation
Employment Pressure $\rightarrow$ Self-efficacy $\rightarrow$ Depression	a <sub>1</sub> b <sub>1</sub>	Indirect effect	0.056	0.017	0.106	0.023
Employment Pressure $\rightarrow$ Depression	c'	Direct effect	0.362	0.248	0.470	0.056
Employment Pressure $\rightarrow$ Depression	c	Total effect	0.418	0.316	0.510	0.049

### 5. Discussion

This study found a clear result. Employment pressure can positively predict depression. This result proves Hypothesis 1 (H1) is correct. It is consistent with previous research results. Self-efficacy has a mediating role. Employment pressure can directly make depression worse. It can also reduce people's confidence in their own abilities. This leads to the occurrence or worsening of depressive emotions. This path shows how employment pressure affects mental health. The partial mediation effect means other mediating variables may exist. For example, social support and coping strategies are possible. In practice, university career

counseling should focus on one thing. It should help improve students' self-efficacy. Ways include successful experiences, role models, and positive feedback. These methods can reduce the impact of employment pressure on mental health.

## 6. Conclusion

Employment pressure of university students has a significant positive impact on depression. Self-efficacy plays a partial mediating role between them. This study enriches the theoretical framework. The framework is about employment pressure as an antecedent variable. It also provides empirical evidence for university mental health interventions. Enhancing students' self-efficacy can effectively reduce depression risk. The risk is caused by employment pressure.

## 7. Limitations

The study uses a cross-sectional design. This design cannot infer causal relationships. The sample is only from online convenience sampling. This limits the representativeness of the sample. All variable measurements rely on self-reports. This may lead to social desirability bias. The study did not examine moderating variables. These variables include major, grade, and family background. Future research can use a longitudinal design. It can also collect multi-source data. More diverse samples can be used for verification.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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