

The Impact of Peer Relationships on the Mental Health of Students with Social Adaptation Disorders

Qiao Chen*, Gang Yang, Yujue Wang

Hunan Labor and Human Resources Vocational College, Changsha 410100, Hunan, China

*Corresponding author: Qiao Chen, chenqiao0731@163.com

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Abstract: With the continuous expansion of higher vocational education, students in vocational colleges face clear changes in learning methods, living environments, and interpersonal communication. Because of this, problems of social adaptation have become more obvious. Social Adaptation Disorders not only affect students' learning involvement and interpersonal development, but also have a long-term influence on their mental health. Among vocational college students, peer relationships are one of the most important sources of social support in daily life. They play an important role in reducing social adaptation pressure, adjusting emotional experience, and promoting mental health. Based on this background, this study takes vocational college students as the research group. After reviewing theories related to Social Adaptation Disorders, peer relationships, and mental health, this study builds a theoretical framework to explain how peer relationships affect the mental health of students with Social Adaptation Disorders. Empirical methods are used to test the research hypotheses. The results show that peer support and peer acceptance have a clear positive effect on the mental health of these students, while negative peer interactions may increase their psychological stress. These findings help people better understand the relationship between social adaptation and mental health among vocational college students. They also provide a theoretical basis for mental health education and intervention programs in vocational colleges that focus on peer relationships.

Keywords: Vocational college students; Social Adaptation Disorders; Peer relationships; Mental health; Theoretical framework

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1. Introduction

With the rapid development of higher vocational education in China, the number of students in vocational colleges has increased steadily. At the same time, problems related to students' psychological development and social adaptation have attracted growing attention from educators and researchers. Compared with undergraduate

students, vocational college students often face more complex situations in academic orientation, social expectations, and future career planning. Some students have clear difficulties in role identity, interpersonal communication, and adapting to new environments. If these Social Adaptation Disorders are not identified and addressed in time, they may lead to anxiety, depression, and low self-confidence. These problems can further affect students' learning performance, career development, and overall mental health. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the factors related to Social Adaptation Disorders and their impact on mental health among vocational college students. Interpersonal relationships play an important role in students' socialization and psychological development. Among them, peer relationships are the most direct and frequent form of social interaction for young people. Peer relationships influence students' emotional experience and self-evaluation, and they are also closely related to the development of social adaptation ability. Positive peer support and peer acceptance can provide emotional comfort and practical examples of social behavior. This helps students reduce adaptation pressure and strengthen their sense of belonging, which is beneficial to mental health. In contrast, distant, rejecting, or conflict-based peer relationships may increase feelings of loneliness and psychological stress, especially for students with Social Adaptation Disorders. Many previous studies have explored students' social adaptation and mental health from perspectives such as family background, individual personality, or school management. However, peer relationships have received less attention, and research focusing specifically on vocational college students remains limited. In particular, the way peer relationships influence mental health under conditions of Social Adaptation Disorders is still not clearly explained. Based on this gap, the present study focuses on vocational college students and examines Social Adaptation Disorders from the perspective of peer relationships. A theoretical framework is developed and tested through empirical analysis. This study aims to deepen the understanding of vocational college students' mental health and to provide practical references for peer-based mental health education and intervention.

2. Concept definition and theoretical background

2.1. Concepts of social adaptation disorders and mental health of vocational college students

Social Adaptation Disorders refer to long-term problems that individuals show in behavior, emotion, or thinking when they face changes in the environment or new social role demands. These difficulties usually appear because their coping ability is not strong enough. From a psychological perspective, Social Adaptation Disorders are not a single symptom. Instead, they reflect a mixed state of poor adaptation. Such difficulties are often shown in problems with building stable and effective interaction patterns in learning, daily life, and interpersonal communication. Among vocational college students, Social Adaptation Disorders are closely linked to educational background, academic pressure, and social expectations. After entering college, students must quickly adjust to practice-oriented teaching and career-focused learning environments. Without enough psychological preparation or support, some students may show low learning engagement, unclear goals, and weak self-efficacy, which lowers their overall adaptation level ^[1]. At the learning level, students with Social Adaptation Disorders often have low motivation, limited classroom participation, and weak recognition of their major. At the interpersonal level, they may avoid social interaction, lack communication skills, or be overly sensitive to peer evaluation. This makes it difficult for them to build stable and supportive peer relationships. At the emotional level, they may experience anxiety, depression, irritability, or strong mood changes. When facing academic and life pressure, they often

lack effective ways to manage emotions. These problems are closely connected and together increase the risk to students' mental health. Mental health is generally understood as a balanced and stable state of cognition, emotion, and behavior. It includes not only the absence of mental problems but also the presence of positive psychological functioning. In this study, mental health is defined through emotional state, self-identity, interpersonal adaptation, and psychological resilience. Considering these dimensions together helps provide a clearer understanding of the mental health of vocational college students with Social Adaptation Disorders and the mechanisms behind it^[2].

2.2. Theoretical foundations related to peer relationships

Peer relationships are an important part of the socialization process and play a basic role in psychological development and social adaptation during youth. Many theories suggest that peers are not only partners for emotional communication and social learning, but also key sources of social support and self-identity^[3]. Social support theory helps explain the psychological value of peer relationships. It points out that when individuals face pressure or challenges, emotional, informational, and practical support from others can reduce the negative impact of stress on mental health. For vocational college students, peer support is often more direct and frequent than family support. Positive peer relationships can increase feelings of safety and belonging and help reduce social adaptation pressure, which protects mental health. Developmental contextual theory further emphasizes that individual development always occurs within specific social environments. Peer groups are one of the closest and most influential environments for young students. According to this theory, behavior and psychological states are shaped through continuous interaction with peers rather than developing in isolation. In vocational colleges, where students study and live in relatively closed and highly interactive settings, peer relationships have a long-term influence on social adaptation and mental health through learning cooperation, emotional exchange, and shared values. For students with Social Adaptation Disorders, positive peer environments support learning social rules, improving communication skills, and gradually strengthening adaptation. In contrast, negative peer environments may increase avoidance behavior and negative self-perception^[4]. Interpersonal interaction theory focuses on the interaction process itself and highlights the dynamic and two-way nature of psychological development. Peer relationships are constantly adjusted through interaction. Feedback from peers directly affects students' self-evaluation, emotions, and behavior choices. Acceptance and positive feedback support healthy development, while frequent conflict or rejection can increase stress and weaken social adaptation. Together, these theories provide a clear basis for understanding how peer relationships influence the mental health of students with Social Adaptation Disorders^[5].

3. Theoretical framework and research hypotheses

3.1. Construction of the theoretical model on the impact of peer relationships on the mental health of students with Social Adaptation Disorders

Based on social support theory, developmental contextual theory, and interpersonal interaction theory, peer relationships can be understood as a key link between the social environment and individual psychological states. On this basis, this study builds a theoretical model to explain how peer relationships influence the mental health of students with Social Adaptation Disorders. In the model, peer relationship quality is treated as the main influencing factor, mental health is the outcome, and social adaptation status plays a mediating role. The model emphasizes that these factors are closely connected and interact with each other^[6]. For vocational college students with Social Adaptation Disorders, mental health problems do not come from a single cause. Instead, they develop

gradually through the combined effects of peer interaction, adaptation ability, and emotional regulation. Good peer relationships can influence mental health in two main ways. First, they have a direct effect through social support. Emotional care, understanding, and acceptance from peers can reduce stress in study and daily life and lower feelings of anxiety and loneliness. Second, peer relationships also have an indirect effect by improving social adaptation. Positive peer interactions help students learn social behaviors, build communication confidence, and adapt better to their environment. Over time, this supports healthier emotional management and learning participation. Peer relationships include different aspects, such as peer support, peer acceptance, and interaction quality. Supportive relationships help reduce negative emotions, while conflict and rejection may increase stress and harm mental health. This model offers a clear framework for later hypothesis testing and empirical analysis^[7].

3.2. Research hypotheses

Based on the theoretical analysis and model discussed above, different dimensions of peer relationships play different roles in the mental health of students with Social Adaptation Disorders. Peer support, peer acceptance, and peer conflict are key factors that reflect the overall quality of peer relationships. These factors influence students' emotional experience, self-identity, and social adaptation in both direct and indirect ways. From the perspective of social support theory, stable and positive peer support can provide emotional comfort and practical help. It helps students reduce stress and frustration in learning and daily life. As a result, students feel more emotionally stable and show better mental health. Therefore, this study suggests that higher levels of peer support are associated with better mental health among vocational college students with Social Adaptation Disorders. Peer acceptance refers to how much students feel recognized and accepted by their peer group. It strongly affects their sense of belonging and self-worth. For students with Social Adaptation Disorders, peer acceptance can reduce tension and avoidance in social situations^[8]. It can also increase their willingness to take part in group activities and improve their confidence in adapting to social environments. For this reason, peer acceptance is expected to have a positive relationship with mental health. In contrast, peer conflict reflects negative peer experiences such as rejection and frequent interpersonal friction. According to interpersonal interaction theory, repeated peer conflict can increase negative emotions and harmful self-evaluation. This weakens social adaptation ability and harms mental health. Overall, this study proposes that peer support and peer acceptance have positive effects on mental health, while peer conflict has a negative effect. These hypotheses guide the later empirical analysis and help test the theoretical model^[9].

4. Research design and methods

4.1. Research participants and sample selection

This study takes vocational college students who are currently enrolled as the research participants. Several representative vocational colleges were selected as the sample sources. Students from different majors and grade levels were included to make sure the sample structure is diverse, and the research results can be applied more broadly. The participants mainly came from several vocational colleges in the same region. Questionnaires were distributed using class-based cluster sampling. During the research process, voluntary participation and anonymous responses were strictly followed. After the questionnaires were collected, the data were checked and organized. Invalid or incomplete responses were removed, and valid data were kept for later analysis. In terms of sample size, this study tried to include as many participants as possible while still meeting the needs of statistical

analysis. This was done to improve the stability and reliability of the results. A pilot survey and a formal survey were carried out step by step to make sure the final sample size was large enough for correlation analysis and model testing. At the same time, attention was paid to the balance of gender, grade level, and major^[10]. This helps the sample better reflect the general characteristics of vocational college students. Students with Social Adaptation Disorders were identified mainly through standardized measurement tools. A social adaptation scale was used to assess all participants first. Based on the scale scores, clear criteria were set. Students whose social adaptation level was much lower than the norm or who fell into the low-score range were identified as students with Social Adaptation Disorders. This method helps keep the screening process objective and scientific. It also makes it possible to accurately identify students with Social Adaptation Disorders from the whole sample, which provides a solid database for later analysis of the impact of peer relationships on mental health.

4.2. Research instruments and data collection

To fully examine the impact of peer relationships on the mental health of vocational college students with Social Adaptation Disorders, this study used standardized psychological measurement tools to assess social adaptation, peer relationship quality, and mental health level. Social adaptation was measured using a well-established social adaptation scale. This scale evaluates students' adaptation in learning, interpersonal, and emotional dimensions. It has good reliability and validity and can accurately reflect students' adaptation status during college life. The results of this scale provide reliable support for identifying students with Social Adaptation Disorders and analyzing their adaptation characteristics. Peer relationships were measured using a peer relationship scale. This scale mainly includes peer support, peer acceptance, and peer conflict. It reflects students' overall experiences in peer interactions. The scale shows both positive aspects, such as emotional support and acceptance, and negative aspects, such as interpersonal conflict and rejection. This makes it possible to analyze how different dimensions of peer relationships influence mental health in different ways. Mental health was measured using a psychological health scale designed for college students. This scale assesses mental health from aspects such as emotional state, self-identity, and psychological adaptation. It can effectively show how students react psychologically when facing pressure from study and daily life. During data collection, questionnaires were distributed in a centralized way. Before filling out the questionnaire, participants were informed about the research purpose and instructions. Their informed consent and anonymity were clearly ensured. After the questionnaires were collected, the data were coded and organized in a unified manner. This provided reliable data for later statistical analysis and model testing.

5. Research results and analysis

5.1. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis results

After data cleaning and screening, descriptive statistical analysis was carried out on the main variables to understand the general situation of vocational college students with Social Adaptation Disorders. The results show that the average levels of peer support and peer acceptance are moderate. This suggests that many students can receive some emotional support and recognition from peers, but this support is not always stable or strong. At the same time, a part of the sample shows relatively high levels of peer conflict, which indicates that these students are more likely to experience disagreement and negative interaction in peer communication. Regarding mental health indicators, the results reflect noticeable emotional fluctuation and adaptation pressure, showing clear differences in mental health conditions among students with Social Adaptation Disorders. Based on the descriptive results,

correlation analysis was further used to examine the relationships between peer relationship dimensions and mental health. The analysis shows that peer support is positively related to mental health. Students who receive more peer support tend to have better emotional states and stronger psychological adaptation. Peer acceptance also shows a significant positive relationship with mental health, which means that feeling accepted by peers helps students maintain emotional stability and positive psychological experience. In contrast, peer conflict is negatively related to mental health. Frequent conflict and negative peer interactions are associated with higher psychological stress and lower mental health levels. Overall, these results provide initial empirical evidence that peer relationships are closely linked to the mental health of vocational college students with Social Adaptation Disorders. They also support the theoretical model and research assumptions of this study.

5.2. Analysis of the impact of peer relationships on mental health

Based on the correlation results, further empirical analysis was conducted to examine how different aspects of peer relationships affect the mental health of vocational college students with Social Adaptation Disorders. The results show clear differences in both direction and strength among these effects. This suggests that peer relationships influence mental health through multiple pathways rather than a single mechanism. Peer support shows a strong positive effect on mental health, which is consistent with the research hypothesis. Students who receive higher levels of peer support tend to show better emotional states, stronger self-identity, and improved psychological adaptation. This indicates that care, understanding, and practical help from peers in daily life can reduce psychological pressure. Peer support also provides important resources for emotional adjustment and stress coping, which helps protect mental health. Peer acceptance also has a significant positive influence on mental health. Students who feel more accepted by their peers generally report better mental health outcomes. Peer acceptance strengthens feelings of belonging and social identity, reduces negative self-evaluation and interpersonal anxiety, and encourages active social participation. For students with Social Adaptation Disorders, peer acceptance is not only a form of external support but also a key foundation for rebuilding confidence and improving social adaptation. In contrast, peer conflict has a clear negative effect on mental health. Frequent conflicts and negative peer interactions increase emotional distress and weaken students' ability to manage stress. Overall, the findings support the theoretical model of this study and highlight the important role of peer relationships in mental health development.

6. Discussion and implications

6.1. Theoretical interpretation of the research results

This study uses empirical analysis to explore how peer relationships influence the mental health of vocational college students with Social Adaptation Disorders. Overall, the findings support the proposed theoretical model and provide practical evidence for applying related theories to this group. From the perspective of social support theory, the positive effect of peer support shows that peers are one of the most direct and important sources of help in students' daily lives. Peer support can reduce the emotional and behavioral stress caused by Social Adaptation Disorders. For students with weaker adaptation ability, care, encouragement, and assistance from peers help lower psychological pressure, improve emotional stability, and increase feelings of safety, which supports better mental health. Developmental contextual theory also helps explain the results. Vocational college students live and study in relatively stable peer environments for long periods. These peer contexts continuously shape their

social adaptation and psychological states. Positive peer acceptance creates a supportive interaction environment, helping students learn social rules, improve communication skills, and build more positive self-understanding. In contrast, peer conflict may strengthen avoidance behavior and negative thinking, making adaptation problems more serious. The different effects of peer acceptance and peer conflict reflect the long-term influence of peer contexts. Interpersonal interaction theory further explains how feedback from peers affects emotions and self-evaluation. Positive feedback supports emotional stability, while rejection and conflict increase negative emotions. Together, these theories confirm the key role of peer relationships in shaping mental health among students with Social Adaptation Disorders.

6.2. Practical implications for mental health education in vocational colleges

Based on the empirical findings of this study, vocational colleges should place more emphasis on the positive role of peer relationships when carrying out mental health education, especially for students with Social Adaptation Disorders. Peer relationships should be included as an important part of the overall mental health education system. First, in terms of building peer support systems, vocational colleges can create stable peer support networks through organized methods, such as learning support groups, interest-based clubs, and class cooperation projects. These activities provide more chances for positive interaction among students. By strengthening emotional connections and practical support between peers, students with Social Adaptation Disorders can receive continuous psychological support in daily study and life, which helps reduce adaptation pressure. Second, at the level of peer counseling, vocational colleges can train student volunteers under the guidance of professional counselors or psychology teachers. These students should have basic psychological knowledge and communication skills, and can take part in peer counseling and support activities. Compared with traditional teacher-student counseling, peer counseling can more easily reduce psychological resistance among students with Social Adaptation Disorders. It can also increase trust and willingness to express feelings. Through equal communication and experience sharing among peers, students can better recognize and manage negative emotions, improve social adaptation ability, and enhance mental health. In addition, vocational colleges should pay attention to creating a positive class interpersonal atmosphere. Schools can encourage inclusive, supportive, and diversity-respecting class cultures through theme-based class meetings, team training, and cooperative learning activities. These activities help students develop empathy and cooperation awareness, and reduce peer conflict and exclusion. A healthy interpersonal atmosphere not only improves overall class cohesion but also provides a safe and stable psychological environment for students with Social Adaptation Disorders. In general, integrating peer support concepts into mental health education practices in vocational colleges can help form multi-level and sustainable intervention mechanisms. This approach is more effective in promoting the mental health development of students with Social Adaptation Disorders.

7. Conclusion

This study focuses on vocational college students with Social Adaptation Disorders and systematically explores the impact of peer relationships on their mental health. The results show that peer relationships play an important role in mental health development. Peer support and peer acceptance have clear positive effects on mental health, while peer conflict has a negative effect. Good peer relationships help reduce adaptation pressure, improve emotional stability, and strengthen a sense of social belonging, which leads to better overall mental health. Based

on these findings, this study suggests that mental health education in vocational colleges should fully recognize the positive function of peer relationships. By improving peer support systems and creating positive interpersonal environments, schools can better support the healthy development of students with Social Adaptation Disorders.

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