

# The Effects of Social Support on College Students' Employment Anxiety: The Mediating Role of Psychological Capital

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the employment anxiety experienced by college students, focusing on the influence of different sources of social support on the employment anxiety of college students and the mediating role of psychological capital. The primary objective was to delve deeply into the correlations between varying dimensions of social support and the employment anxiety felt by these students. and a mediating effect model was established to explore the mechanism of psychological capital. The study found that college students' social support positively predicted psychological capital ( $\beta = 0.56$ ), negatively predicted employment anxiety ( $\beta = -0.26$ ), and negatively predicted employment anxiety ( $\beta = -0.33$ ). Psychological capital played a partial mediating role in social support and employment anxiety. It shows that the current employment environment has a great impact on the anxiety of college students, and the social support from family and peers and their psychological capital can help college students relieve the anxiety of employment. It inspires the intervention plan for college students' employment anxiety.

**Keywords:** College students; Social support; Employment anxiety; Psychological capital; Intermediary effect

**Online publication:** July 9, 2024

## 1. Introduction

According to some China Central Television reports, the number of college graduates has been climbing year by year in recent years, from 8.74 million in 2020 to 11.58 million in 2023. Forecasts show that the number of fresh graduates will continue to rise to 11.79 million in 2024.

The phenomenon of employment anxiety among fresh graduates has become widespread. A study selected college students from teacher-training universities as a research sample and found that graduates of teacher-training universities generally have anxiety about employment <sup>[1]</sup>. When measuring the psychological pressure of college students, it was found that employment pressure accounted for the highest proportion <sup>[2]</sup>. In addition, Jiang Chunlei's research data show that as high as 49.4% of college graduates believe that the pressure brought by employment significantly exceeds the pressure of academics <sup>[3]</sup>. However, there are often numerous

influential factors hidden behind employment anxiety. Social support from others plays a significant role in alleviating employment anxiety<sup>[4]</sup>. This support may come from family, friends, colleagues, or other members of the social network, and the emotional support, information support, or substantial help they provide can reduce the psychological pressure of individuals facing employment to a certain extent. The individual's own social status and economic level will also have an impact on employment anxiety<sup>[5]</sup>. Higher social status and economic level often mean more employment opportunities and more stable economic security, which reduces the degree of employment anxiety. However, this does not mean that social status and economic level are the only determinants, as employment anxiety is also influenced by internal factors<sup>[6]</sup>. Some studies have further pointed out that an individual's psychological factors play an important mediating role in the influence of external factors on behavior. This means that even when faced with the same external environment and social support, different individuals may react very differently.

College students' employment anxiety is a kind of anxiety state. College students' employment anxiety is a subjective psychological experience, and negative emotions such as frustration tend to emerge when individuals are faced with job search difficulties and are unable to reach their originally set employment expectations<sup>[7]</sup>. This kind of anxiety is particularly significant when graduates have not yet secured a job and is expressed as a nervous psychological state triggered by a specific situation<sup>[8]</sup>. A researcher, on the other hand, defines it as the worry and anxiety of college students due to the possibility that they may not be able to achieve their employment goals<sup>[9]</sup>. Some researchers have also pointed out that career anxiety is a kind of anxious psychological state caused by college students' fear of not being able to find an ideal job<sup>[10]</sup>.

Social support mainly includes family support, peer support, and other types of support. Children can gain positive emotional connections in family interactions and environments to better cope with challenges<sup>[11]</sup>. Peers play an important role in obtaining social support for college students. The Internet provides people with a lot of information, and people gain social support from online information when they use the Internet<sup>[12]</sup>. Therefore, information support is regarded as one of the important dimensions of online social support for college students<sup>[13]</sup>. Luthans et al. used positive psychology and positive organizational behavior as the cornerstone of their theory<sup>[14]</sup>. Psychological capital is regarded as an optimistic state of mind. The main manifestations of this psychological state are confidence, with a high sense of self-efficacy when faced with some more difficult tasks; optimism when the effort put in is not properly rewarded; hopefulness, when positive attributions are made and the struggle for the goal is renewed; resilience, when one is in the midst of a difficult situation and will not give up easily.

A growing body of research suggests that social support affects individual development to some degree, including emotional well-being. Although many previous studies have focused on how social support affects college students' employment anxiety, no uniform conclusion has been reached due to the different ways of defining the classification of social support, and fewer studies have categorized the sources of social support (family support, peer support, information support, and other support) to study their relationship with employment anxiety. It can be seen that the relationship between social support and college students' employment anxiety is complex, and the discussion of its internal mechanism of action is not particularly clear. Therefore, this study makes the following hypotheses.

H1: There are significant differences in the demographic variables of employment anxiety among college students.

H2: Different sources of social support (family, peers, network) have different effects on employment anxiety.

H3: Social support can negatively predict employment anxiety.

H4: Psychological capital negatively predicts employment anxiety.

H5: Psychological capital mediates the relationship between social support and employment anxiety.

## 2. Objects and methods

### 2.1. Objects

This study mainly adopts the principle of random sampling, selecting undergraduate students in their junior and senior years, distributing and recovering 408 questionnaires, of which the valid questionnaires are 327, with an effective recovery rate of 80.1%. The study adopted the online distribution platform for the questionnaires. Before the beginning of the experiment, the subjects read the informed consent form, and then the subjects agreed to proceed to the next step of the study. The basic description of the demographic variables of the research subjects is shown in **Table 1**.

The subjects in this study consisted of 80 men, accounting for 24.5%, and 247 women, accounting for 75.5%. The analysis found that although the difference in the number of men and women is large, it was not significantly different. The study also explored demographic variables in the grade, profession, and future direction (**Table 1**).

**Table 1.** Demographic information of university students

Demographic variables	Category	Number of persons	Percentage of population
Sex	Male	80	24.5%
	Female	247	75.5%
Grade	Third-year university student	164	50.2%
	Fourth-year university student	163	49.8%
Major	Science	158	48.3%
	Liberal arts	169	51.7%
Future development direction	Pursue graduate school/ Going abroad	91	27.8%
	Study for graduate school	101	30.9%
	Employment	135	41.3%

### 2.2. Methods

#### 2.2.1. The Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS)

This scale was revised by Jiang Qianjin, and its main purpose is to provide in-depth validation of how individuals perceive the social support they receive. The scale has been carefully designed with 12 entries to assess the level of support an individual perceives from friends, family, and other sources. Through the measurement of these items, the scale can accurately reflect the overall level of social support perceived by the individual. In this experiment, the alpha coefficient of the social support questionnaire was 0.94, indicating that the questionnaire has good reliability.

#### 2.2.2. The psychological capital scale for college students

Revised by Song Hongfeng et al., the scale is more suitable for college students, with good reliability and validity. The scale consists of 16 items and the positive score is based on Likert's five-point scale, with 1 being "not at all conforming" and 5 being "conforming completely." The higher the mean value, the higher the level of psychological capital. In this experiment, the alpha coefficient of the psychological capital questionnaire is

0.92, which indicates that the questionnaire has high reliability and validity.

### 2.2.3. The online social support questionnaire

The questionnaire contains four dimensions of friendship support, emotional support, instrumental support, and information support, with a total of 23 questions and a five-point scale. Since this study needs to focus on the aspect of online information support, the information support dimension is used as an independent subscale to measure the level of online information support of college students. The alpha coefficient of this subscale is 0.92, which further proves that it has high reliability and validity. When conducting the measurement, the study will specifically select the relevant topics of the online information support dimension to be used as a single-dimension subscale.

### 2.2.4. The employment anxiety scale

Compiled by Zhang Yuju et al., there are 26 questions to measure the level of negative emotions such as employment anxiety among college students<sup>[15]</sup>. It is scored on a five-point Likert scale, with 1 being “not at all consistent” and 5 being “completely consistent.” The higher the total score, the higher the level of employment anxiety. The alpha coefficient of the employment anxiety questionnaire is 0.959, which indicates that the questionnaire has a high reliability and validity.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics

There is no significant difference in family support in terms of grade, profession, and future development direction, and there is no significant difference in peer support in terms of grade and profession, but the difference is significant in terms of future development direction ( $F = 4.578, P = 0.011 < 0.05$ ). Network information support did not differ significantly by major, but differed significantly by grade level and future direction ( $t = -2.84, P = 0.005 < 0.05; F = 3.898, P = 0.03 < 0.05$ ), and the level of network information support was higher among juniors than seniors, and those who were pursuing graduate school/studying abroad received higher levels of network information support than those who were in employment or studying for graduate school as shown in **Table 2**, **Table 3**, and **Table 4** below.

**Table 2.** Differences in social support among college students by grade level ( $n = 327$ )

Variables	Third-year university student	Fourth-year university student	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>	95% confidence interval of the difference	
	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i> ( <i>n</i> = 164)	<i>M</i> ± <i>SD</i> ( <i>n</i> = 163)				Lower limit	Upper bound
Family support	21.49 ± 4.77	21.01 ± 5.06	0.84	325	0.383	-0.595	1.546
Peer Support	21.34 ± 4.10	22.12 ± 4.23	-1.71	325	0.088	-1.694	0.119
Network support	14.40 ± 3.81	15.47 ± 2.95	-2.84	325	0.005	-1.811	-0.329
Social support	78.2 ± 13.04	80.13 ± 13.49	-1.32	325	0.187	-4.872	0.947

**Table 3.** Differences in college students' social support by major ( $n = 327$ )

Variables	Science	Liberal arts	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>	95% confidence interval of the difference	
	M ± SD ( <i>n</i> = 158)	M ± SD ( <i>n</i> = 169)				Lower limit	Upper bound
Family support	21.30 ± 4.68	21.21 ± 5.15	0.17	325	0.868	-0.982	1.162
Peer support	22.18 ± 3.88	21.30 ± 4.40	1.915	325	0.056	-0.024	1.788
Network support	14.92 ± 2.91	14.95 ± 3.88	-0.059	325	0.953	-0.773	0.728
Social support	80.09 ± 11.81	78.29 ± 14.51	1.229	325	0.220	-1.084	4.675

**Table 4.** Differences in social support among university students in terms of future orientation ( $n = 327$ )

Variables	Pursue graduate school / Going abroad	Study for graduate school	Employment	<i>F</i>	<i>P</i>
	M ± SD ( <i>n</i> = 91)	M ± SD ( <i>n</i> = 101)	M ± SD ( <i>n</i> = 135)		
Family support	22.26 ± 4.75	21.07 ± 5.30	20.70 ± 4.67	2.868	0.058
Peer support	22.27 ± 4.58	22.34 ± 3.39	20.90 ± 4.32	4.578	0.011
Network support	15.54 ± 3.31	15.21 ± 2.90	14.33 ± 3.81	3.898	0.030
Social support	82.24 ± 12.47	79.73 ± 12.43	76.66 ± 14.02	5.059	0.007

There were no significant differences in psychological capital in terms of grade, major, and future direction, indicating that the level of psychological capital of university students is less influenced by demographic variables, as shown in **Table 5** and **Table 6** below.

**Table 5.** Differences in psychological capital of university students in terms of grade and major ( $n = 327$ )

Factor	M ± SD	<i>n</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% confidence interval of the difference		
						Lower limit	Upper bound	
Grade	Third-year university student	58.70 ± 9.84	164	325	0.245	0.806	-1.822	2.341
	Fourth-year university student	58.44 ± 9.29	163					
Major	Science	58.37 ± 8.90	158	325	-0.352	0.725	-2.454	1.71
	Liberal arts	58.75 ± 10.15	169					

**Table 6.** Differences in psychological capital of university students on future development ( $n = 327$ )

Variables	Pursue graduate school / Going abroad	Study for graduate School	Employment	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	M ± SD ( <i>n</i> = 91)	M ± SD ( <i>n</i> = 101)	M ± SD ( <i>n</i> = 135)		
Psychological capital	59.01 ± 8.58	29.57 ± 8.01	57.51 ± 11.07	1.489	0.247

There is no significant difference in college students' employment anxiety in terms of grade level, and students in their junior year have the same high level of employment anxiety, and even their mean is slightly higher than that of students in their senior year. There is a significant difference in the future direction of college students' employment anxiety ( $F = 13.184$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), and the employment anxiety of the students pursuing graduate school/going abroad is much lower than that of those who are studying for graduate school and preparing for employment, as shown in **Table 7** and **Table 8**.

**Table 7.** Differences in college students' employment anxiety by grade and major ( $n = 327$ )

		M ± SD	n	df	t	p	95% confidence interval of the difference	
							lower limit	upper bound
Grade	Third-year university student	87.90 ± 20.82	164	325	0.743	0.458	-2.810	6.222
		Fourth-year university student	86.20 ± 20.70					
Major	Science	86.06 ± 17.62	158	325	-0.846	0.398	-6.402	2.551
		Liberal arts	87.98 ± 23.30					

**Table 8.** Differences in college students' employment anxiety in terms of future direction ( $n = 327$ )

Variable	Pursue graduate School / Going abroad	Study for graduate School	Employment	F	p
	M ± SD (n = 91)	M ± SD (n = 101)	M ± SD (n = 135)		
Employment anxiety	80.22 ± 19.50	84.54 ± 21.96	93.53 ± 18.78	13.184	0.000

### 3.2. Correlation analysis

There was a significant negative correlation between social support scores and employment anxiety scores ( $P < 0.001$ ). The total employment anxiety score of college students was also significantly negatively correlated with the total scores of family support and peer support in the social support dimension ( $P = 0.002$ ;  $P = 0.003$ ). The three dimensions of social support based on the social support questionnaire were significantly negatively related to employment anxiety, with family having the strongest influence. The Internet information support based on the online support questionnaire was not significantly related to employment anxiety.

The total score of social support and psychological capital of college students were significantly positively correlated ( $P < 0.001$ ), and the more social support college students received, the higher the level of psychological capital they had, with the total scores of family support and peer support also significantly correlated with the total score of psychological capital ( $P < 0.001$ ;  $P < 0.001$ ).

There is a significant negative correlation ( $P < 0.001$ ) between the total psychological capital score and the total employment anxiety score of college students, and the higher the level of psychological capital of college students, the lower the level of negative emotions in employment, as shown in **Table 9**.

**Table 9.** Correlation analysis between dimensions ( $n = 327$ )

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Family support	21.14	4.97	1					
2 Peer support	22.00	4.13	0.585**	1				
3 Network support	14.75	3.09	0.030	0.158**	1			
4 Social support	64.44	4.42	0.834**	0.840**	0.435**	1		
5 Psychological capital	57.55	9.24	0.573**	0.458**	0.104	0.565**	1	
6 Employment anxiety	83.98	19.93	-0.215**	-0.206**	-0.127	-0.258**	-0.325**	1

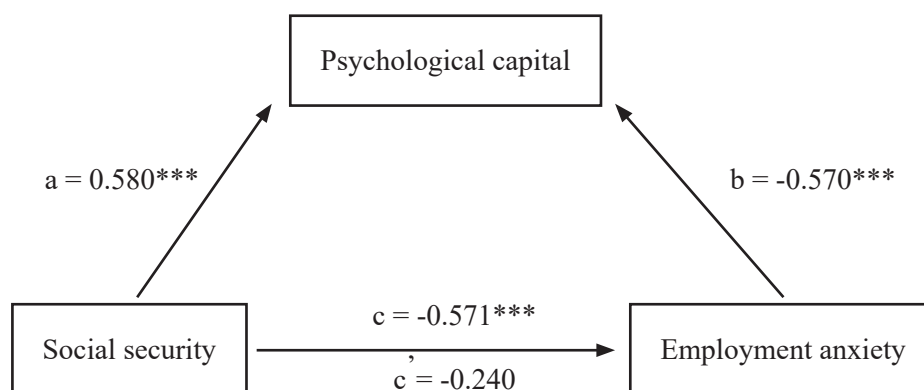
### 3.3. Analysis of mediating effects

The study by Zhonglin and Ye Baojuan suggested that testing the mediating effect requires analyzing and testing three models <sup>[16]</sup>. In this study, three models were established for testing, including Model 1, the presence of social support predicts employment anxiety model; Model 2, the presence of social support predicts psychological capital model; Model 3, social support and psychological capital together predict employment anxiety model, as shown in **Figure 1**.

The mediating effects were analyzed using PROCESS. As shown by **Table 10**, Model 1 has  $t = -3.733$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , so the total effect of social support on employment anxiety is significant. Model 2 has  $t = 9.567$ ,  $P < 0.001$ , so the effect of social support on psychological capital is significant. In Model 3, the effect of psychological capital on employment anxiety is also significant,  $P = 0.001$ . Combined with Model 2, it can be concluded that psychological capital plays a mediating role in social support and employment anxiety. However, in Model 3, under the combined effect of social support and psychological capital, the direct effect of social support on employment anxiety is not significant, while the effect of psychological capital on employment anxiety is very significant. Because the total effect is equal to the sum of the amount of direct effect and the amount of indirect effect ( $c = a * b + c'$ ). The indirect effect is  $a * b = 0.331$ , which has an indirect effect size of -0.331, and the value of  $c'$  is equal to -0.24 is the direct effect size. The share of the indirect effect size is 58% and the share of the direct effect size is 42%, so psychological capital acts as a partial mediator in social support and employment anxiety.

**Table 10.** Psychological capital mediation effect test ( $n = 327$ )

Predictor variables	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	$\beta$	$t$	$P$	$\beta$	$t$	$P$	$\beta$	$t$	$P$
Social support	-0.571	-3.733	<0.001	0.580	9.567	<0.001	-0.240	-1.328	0.186
Psychological capital							-0.570	-3.260	0.001
R <sup>2</sup>		0.066			0.316			0.114	
F		13.935			91.519			12.621	
95% CI		-0.872	-0.264		0.461	0.700		-0.596	0.116
								-0.914	-0.225



**Figure 1.** Model of social support, psychological capital, and employment anxiety

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Demographic differences in employment anxiety, social support, and psychological capital

There is no significant difference in employment anxiety on the demographic variables of grade and major. That is to say, junior students are also affected by the employment situation and develop employment anxiety no less than senior students. Despite the current employment issues in the arts and sciences that society is struggling with, employment anxiety exists for soon-to-be-employed juniors, regardless of the type of major. However, on the demographic variable of future direction, the employment anxiety scores of students going abroad and pursuing graduate school are lower than those of students studying for graduate school and employment; college students pursuing graduate school and going abroad have low employment pressure because they don't need to face employment directly. Students who want to be directly employed in the future have the highest anxiety scores, so schools and society need to give methods and suggestions to reduce anxiety to fresh graduates facing employment.

In family support, parents play a major role in providing emotional value and material basis for college students, and parental influence is one of the most important environmental variables for young people amid the transition from school to the workplace <sup>[17]</sup>. College students spend most of their time in school with their peers, and because they are at the same point in time, most of their peers face employment anxiety and provide support and assistance to each other.

Only the mean of the scores for online information support is lower than the theoretical mean, but the rest of the scores for support are higher than the theoretical mean, which suggests that college students do not receive as much online information support as they should. On the demographic variable of major, there was no significant difference in the sense of support received by arts and science students. However, on the direction of future development, the peer support, network support, and total social support received by the students who pursued graduate school/study abroad were significantly different from those who pursued graduate school and employment, and the mean scores were higher than those of the latter two directions of development. Among them, college students who chose the direction of employment received the least social support. College students received more peer support during their school years compared to both other types of support. There were no significant differences in the psychological capital levels of college students by grade, major, or future development direction. It can be predicted that despite the slogan of “laying low” and “sucking it up”, college students actually have a high level of self-esteem.

### 4.2. Mediation analysis

Family support and peer support can predict the employment anxiety of college students, and the predictability of family support for employment anxiety is higher compared to the other two supports. However, network support does not predict employment anxiety well, and in the correlation analysis, network support has no significant correlation with psychological capital and employment anxiety. In connection with the relationship between the influence of network support on demographic variables, it can be learned that in fact, the dimension of network support in social support has no significant influence on the subjects as well as the subjects' anxiety.

In the absence of the influence of psychological capital, the role of social support on employment anxiety is particularly significant. Social support can significantly affect the level of psychological capital of college students; specifically, the higher the level of social support, the higher the level of psychological capital of individuals. It has been suggested that parental involvement in children's development is closely related to the developmental outcomes of their abilities, personality, and adaptive behaviors. As a result, students who



receive social support, such as parental support, tend to demonstrate a greater sense of conviction in the face of challenges.

When considering the combined effect of psychological capital and social support, the direct effect of social support on employment anxiety diminished, while psychological capital became an important predictor of employment anxiety. This suggests that the elements of psychological capital, such as confidence, optimism, hope, and resilience, have a significant mitigating effect in coping with frustration and stress in life, and can also effectively intervene in psychological crises such as employment anxiety<sup>[18]</sup>. This finding is consistent with previous research on career choice anxiety, which is regarded as a kind of anxiety state, which is the subjective emotional reaction of individuals facing uncertainty in career choice situations<sup>[19–20]</sup>.

When individuals' attitudes contain more positive cognitive and behavioral components, their negative emotional components will naturally decrease. Therefore, when college students face social anxiety, positive psychological capital components help to alleviate their employment anxiety. Individuals with high psychological capital are more inclined to develop a competence growth perspective and achievement orientation towards learning goals and can cope positively with challenges and conflicts in the employment environment, thus reducing negative cognitions and lowering career choice anxiety<sup>[21]</sup>. As a whole, when psychological capital is involved in the model of the effect of social support on employment anxiety, part of the role of social support will act on employment anxiety through psychological capital, and social support, as an external factor, will act on the internal factor of psychological capital first, which is an important mediator of the role of the internal psychological factors in this process<sup>[22]</sup>.

Due to the small direct effect of social support on employment anxiety, the model was found to have a larger amount of indirect effect than the direct effect by the coefficient product test method. That is, when psychological capital and social support work together, social support is more likely to act on psychological capital first, and then have an effect on employment anxiety through psychological capital. Since parents, peers, and other social support will make college students adjust themselves positively and improve their psychological capital level, students with high social support are less anxious about employment. Therefore, psychological capital as a mediating variable can also be explained from the data, and hypothesis H5 is verified.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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