



How social support influences university students' academic achievement and emotional exhaustion: The mediating role of self-esteem



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ABSTRACT

Improving the quality of life for students has become a major concern for educational institutions. Using a sample of 262 university students (mean age 19.25 years) in China, this study investigates the mediating role of self-esteem in the relationships between social support and academic achievement and between social support and emotional exhaustion. Students in our sample completed questionnaires designed to assess their perceived social support, self-esteem, academic achievement, and emotional exhaustion. The results of path analysis suggest that self-esteem fully mediates the relationship between social support and academic achievement and the relationship between social support and emotional exhaustion. This study's implications and limitations are discussed.

1. Introduction

People have devoted substantial attention to quality of life in the process of pursuing well-being. Additionally, enhancing the well-being of citizens is an important governmental goal. Therefore, quality of life – an individual's overall evaluation of her/his life – is a subject of tremendous interest among researchers, policy makers, and the public (Lenderking, 2005). Although existing research has focused on different socioeconomic groups, there has been limited research on quality of life among university students, who are an important group in most societies (Vaez, Kristenson, & Laflamme, 2004). This is an important research gap because, in their young adulthood, university students experience critical transitions characterized by changes, confusion, and exploration, and the choices they make during this period may have enduring ramifications (Arnett, 2000). Moreover, due to their relatively limited social experiences, university students generally have lower self-consciousness and psychological endurance than individuals who are employed, thus they are more vulnerable to psychological problems (Bask & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Previous studies have found that university students' quality of life is a predictor of dropout or withdrawal (Timmons, 1978), and has a significant effect on their subjective well-being (Sirgy, Grzeskowiak, & Rahtz, 2007), as well as on their physical and mental health (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009). Therefore, university students' quality of life is of significant concern

(Benjamin & Hollings, 1995). In this article, we investigate university students' quality of life by focusing on academic achievement and emotional exhaustion.

Academic achievement, which is an important aspect of life for university students (Xiao, Tang, & Shim, 2009) and is typically regarded as the core criterion for determining a student's success at university, has been found to positively predict life satisfaction (Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2014). Therefore, we use academic achievement as the first indicator of university students' quality of life. In addition, university students often suffer pressures related to academic requirements, interpersonal relationships, and job searching (Ross, Niebling, & Heckert, 1999), making them prone to emotional exhaustion (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). Emotional exhaustion, the primary component of burnout, refers to an individual's feelings of being emotionally exhausted and depleted of emotional resources (Parker & Salmela-Aro, 2011; Salmela-Aro et al., 2009) and is considered as an erosion of life satisfaction (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012). Therefore, we use emotional exhaustion as the second indicator to assess university students' quality of life.

In the present study, we propose that social support is an important factor to promote university students' academic achievement and mitigate their emotional exhaustion. Social support refers to the social and psychological support an individual receives or perceives in her or his environment (Lin, 1986), such as respect, care, and help. Received

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social support is defined as the existence and reception of support, while perceived social support is defined as the perception and availability of support (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009; Helgeson, 1993). A large literature has demonstrated that perceived social support is more predictive and functional than received social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Helgeson, 1993). Therefore, this study focuses on perceived social support.

1.1. Social support and academic achievement

The ecological opinion posits that students are significantly influenced by their surrounding social contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). This opinion offers an approach to understanding the relationship between social support and students' learning outcomes (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Social support provides university students with a sense of security and competence, which, in turn, helps them to address intellectual challenges more efficiently (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990). According to social capital theory, embedded resources in social networks benefit individuals in achieving various goals (Brouwer, Jansen, Flache, & Hofman, 2016). Those with stronger social support are better embedded in a supportive network and are more socially integrated in their university academic environments, thus they are better positioned to improve their academic achievements (Rayle & Chung, 2007). Several studies have found that students with higher perceived social support reported better attendance (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Bowen, 1998) and university adjustments (Rueger, Malecki, & Demaray, 2008, 2010). A one-year longitudinal study conducted by DeBerard, Spielmans, and Julka (2004) has shown that social support is a significant factor to predict university students' academic achievement. Robbins et al. (2004) have confirmed the positive relationship between social support and university students' grade point average (GPA) by meta-analyzing 109 studies. Therefore, we suggest that social support is positively related to academic achievement.

1.2. Social support and emotional exhaustion

According to the general benefits (GB) model of social support proposed by Rueger, Malecki, Pyun, Aycok, and Coyle (2016), social support can improve individuals' positive psychological states, such as positive affect (Cohen & Wills, 1985) and sense of well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). Meanwhile, Rueger et al. (2016) have proposed the stress-buffering (SB) model of social support, which posits that social support acts as a buffer against stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). In addition, a cross-cultural study conducted by Taylor, Welch, Kim, and Sherman (2007) has reported that both Asians (including Asian Americans) and European Americans use social support to cope with stress in culturally appropriate ways. Social support can provide solutions for individuals facing stressful problems, reduce the perceived importance of problems, or facilitate positive psychological reactions and behavioral responses (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In other words, social support is regarded as a protective resource that enables people to cope with stress, distress, and depression (Chou, 2000; Zimet et al., 1988). Individuals might suffer more deleterious effects of stress if social support is deficient (Rueger et al., 2016). Furthermore, social support provides individuals with positive social contacts with others, which contributes to emotional balance and reduced burnout (Boren, 2013). Thus, students with supportive resources are less vulnerable to emotional exhaustion than their counterparts without such resources (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Uchida & Yamasaki, 2008). In conclusion, social support serves as an effective remedy to improve students' stress resilience, which may be particularly helpful in contending with emotional exhaustion (Jacobs & Dodd, 2003). Therefore, we suggest that social support is negatively related to students' emotional exhaustion.

1.3. Social support, self-esteem, academic achievement, and emotional exhaustion

We propose that social support enhances students' self-esteem, which, in turn, promotes their academic achievement and relieves their emotional exhaustion. Self-esteem is an overall appraisal of oneself, which reflects the attitudes one holds toward herself or himself (Leary & MacDonald, 2003). The relationship between social support and self-esteem has been well documented (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Hoffman, Ushpiz, & Levy-Shiff, 1988). For example, Harter (1993) argued that social support positively influences the development of self-esteem especially during adolescence. Moreover, a cross-cultural research conducted by Goodwin and Plaza (2000), with a sample of 72 British and 68 Spanish individuals, found that social support is positively related to self-esteem in both individualist and collectivist cultures. According to the GB model, social support increases individuals' perception of their own value and self-worth (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Rueger et al., 2016). Individuals with high levels of social support tend to possess higher self-esteem (Rueger et al., 2010). In contrast, lack of support from social relations makes individuals feel devalued and rejected (Leary, 1999), leading to negative self-evaluations and resulting in low self-esteem. Thus, we suggest that social support is positively related to self-esteem.

High self-esteem reflects individuals' positive evaluations of their self-worth and competence (Matthews, Deary, & Whiteman, 2003) and is beneficial for personal development. In a type of self-fulfilling prophecy, students will study harder if they believe they can achieve (Wong, Wiest, & Cusick, 2002). In other words, students' self-esteem can act as a motivator to achieve their academic goals (Fang, 2016). Moreover, students with higher levels of self-esteem might have higher aspirations and goals. They may have more confidence in tackling difficulties and be less likely to surrender to feelings of self-doubt (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Accordingly, they are more likely to get good grades (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Schmidt & Padilla, 2003). Hansford and Hattie (1982) conducted a meta-analysis of 128 studies consisting of > 200,000 participants and reported that self-esteem accounts for 4% ~ 7% of the variance in academic achievement. According to expectancy-value theory, self-evaluation of competence and capacity significantly predict students' education-related attainments and outcomes (Fang, 2016). Social support can promote students' appraisals of self-worth and appreciation of their own capacity (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which in turn help them perform better in academic contexts (Fang, 2016; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Schimel, 2004). Therefore, we expect that social support improves students' academic achievement by enhancing their self-esteem.

Self-esteem not only facilitates students' academic performance but also influences their emotional states (Baumeister et al., 2003). Several studies have revealed that self-esteem is negatively related to stress, loneliness, and depression (Dumont & Provost, 1999; Leary, 1999). Students with high self-esteem are less affected by stressors because they are confident in their ability to control their environment and to overcome challenges (Dumont & Provost, 1999). In contrast, those with low self-esteem suffer more stresses and experience poorer mental and physical health (Leary, 1999). In addition, some studies have also shown that self-esteem is negatively related to all three dimensions of burnout (Janssen, Schaufeli, & Houkes, 1999), because it keeps people away from high-risk circumstances that accompany the symptoms of burnout (Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998). Further, according to the GB model, social support promotes individuals' perception of their own value and self-worth (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Rueger et al., 2016), which, in turn, helps to ameliorate their emotional exhaustion (Luo, Wang, Zhang, Chen, & Quan, 2016). In contrast, lack of social support may lead to low self-esteem (Leary, 1999), which may make people doubt their capabilities, be afraid of failure, and be prone to encounter setbacks, leading them to eventually develop emotional exhaustion (Orth, Robins, Trzesniewski, Maes, & Schmitt, 2009). Therefore, we expect

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