



## The role of psychological resilience and career adaptability in the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety among college students

Hao Fang<sup>1</sup> and Xiaoyu Xu<sup>2,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Office of Asset Management, Zhejiang Agricultural Business College, Shaoxing, 312088, China

<sup>2</sup>College of Advanced Agriculture, Zhejiang Agricultural Business College, Shaoxing, 312088, China

\*Correspondence: Xiaoyu Xu, [xxy89892023@163.com](mailto:xxy89892023@163.com)

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**Abstract:** This study explored the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety among Chinese college students, as well as the mediating and moderating effects of psychological resilience and career adaptability on this relationship. A total of 1928 college students (females = 1371, mean age = 20.42, SD = 1.05) completed the Perceived Social Support Scale, Employment Anxiety Questionnaire, Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale and Career Adapt-Abilities Scale. Mediation analysis results showed that psychological resilience mediated the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety for lower employment anxiety. Career adaptability moderated the mediating effect of psychological resilience for lower employment anxiety than with either of the variables alone. The findings are consistent with cognitive diathesis-stress theory and career construction theory which propose that individuals' cognitive structures and psychological predispositions interact with environmental stressors to shape their career development and psychological well-being. Essentially, students who have a robust social support system, high career adaptability, and are psychologically resilient are less likely to experience employment anxiety.

**Keywords:** perceived social support; employment anxiety; psychological resilience; career adaptability; college students

### Introduction

The recurring and cyclical nature of employment opportunities can be anxiety causing to college students as emerging adults seeking to enter the job market. How college students perceive and circumvent job market challenges would define their career adaptability and development. Job market access can be anxiety provoking in sluggish emerging economies, such as those of developing countries. This could result in employment anxiety among college students (Chai et al., 2020) and in the absence of evidence, the support systems for mitigating the distress of these students. We aimed to consider personal and career adaptability influences on the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety among Chinese college students.

**Social support and employment anxiety.** Social support encompasses social networks, received support, and perceived social support (Panayiotou & Karekla, 2013). Perceived social support refers to an individual's emotional experiences and satisfaction with feeling respected, understood, and supported by others in one's social environment. Previous studies have shown that perceived social support affects employment anxiety among college students; however, the specific process through which it influences employment anxiety remains unclear. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the mediating mechanism of psychological resilience in the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety among college students.

Employment anxiety primarily refers to a state of intense and enduring negative emotions, including tension and stress, experienced by college students when faced with job search situations (Zhao, 2023). It can lead to physiological and behavioral changes, like decreased

sleep quality, increased heart rate, chest tightness, difficulty concentrating, slower and confused thinking, and loss of interest in studying, working, and life (Zhang & Chen, 2006). A prior study, showed that college students' employment anxiety stemmed from job competition pressure, a lack of employment support, insufficient self-confidence, and concerns regarding job prospects. It investigated employment anxiety among clinical graduates and found that 16.9% of the graduates experienced high levels of employment anxiety (Xu et al., 2020). Another study found that employment anxiety was not limited to students who had graduated but was also prevalent among students throughout their university careers (Gao et al., 2020). Consequently, the focus of employment anxiety research has gradually expanded from college graduates to college students in general.

**Psychological resilience mediation.** Psychological resilience is refers to an individual's ability to adapt and cope positively in the face of difficulties and adversity (Gutman et al., 2017; Perry & Bard, 2000). The cognitive diathesis-stress theory proposes that an individual's cognitive predispositions interact with environmental stressors. Psychological resilience through willpower stands out as a pivotal factor determining how people cope with these stressors (Wagner et al., 2007). Studies have shown that higher psychological resilience is associated with lower employment anxiety among college students (Du et al., 2012; Zhao et al., 2013). Therefore, this study hypothesized that psychological resilience mediates the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety among college students.

**Career adaptability moderation.** Career adaptability is a psychological and social construct that reflects an individual's ability to cope with current and future career



tasks, transitions, and events (Bright & Pryor, 2005; Super & Knasel, 1981). Career construction theory suggests that individuals enact their own professional identity through ongoing reflection and action, with career adaptability playing a crucial role in this process (Savickas, 2005). However, unpredictable career problems can occur due to career changes or contexts (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012), even with career adaptability and psychological well-being (Hirschi, 2009; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007). Enhancing career adaptability can reduce employment anxiety (Gadassi et al., 2013; Shu et al., 2021; Fiori et al., 2015; Zhang, 2020), by learning from both successes and failures. Hence, we hypothesized that career adaptability moderates the relationship between psychological resilience and employment anxiety.

**The Chinese employment setting.** According to statistics released by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the number of college graduates reached 11.58 million in 2023, which increased to 11.79 million in 2024, with a projected record high of 12.22 million in 2025, both in terms of scale and growth. As the number of college graduates increases rapidly, the employment situation of the country faces enormous challenges (Liu et al., 2022). The overall pressure on college graduates has increased in the recent times, with employment pressure ranking first among all sources of pressure (Li et al., 2020). Owing to the severity of employment conditions and intense job competition, the psychological state of many college graduates undergoes through a change, resulting in varying degrees of employment anxiety.

Investigating psychological resilience as a mediator in the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety among college students can help researchers explore the “process” through which they influence one another. However, the effect of perceived social support on employment anxiety may be moderated by other variables, and this moderating effect can better explain the “conditions” under which perceived social support influences employment anxiety among college students (Wen & Ye, 2014).

**Goals of the study.** This study aimed to construct and test a moderated mediation model to explore the mediating role of psychological resilience in the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety among college students, as well as the moderating effect of career adaptability on this mediation process. We tested the following hypotheses:

H1: Perceived social support significantly predicts employment anxiety.

H2: Psychological resilience significantly mediates the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety for lower employment anxiety.

H3: There is a significant the moderating effect of career adaptability on the mediating process of psychological resilience on employment anxiety for lower employment anxiety.

## Methods

### Participants and setting

The study sample comprised 1928 college students from three universities in China. Among them, 557 were male

and 1371 were female. The average age of the participants was  $20 \pm 2$  years old.

## Measures

### Perceived social support

Perceived Social Support (PSS, Zimet et al., 1987, revised by Jiang (2001) comprises 12 items. The scale comprises three dimensions: family support (4 items, e.g., “I can get emotional help and support from my family when I need it”), friend support (4 items, e.g., “I can discuss difficult problems with my friends”), and other support (4 items, e.g., “I can share happiness and sadness with some people”). Items are responded to using a 5-point scale, where 1 = not at all and 5 = very much. In the current study, Cronbach’s alpha for PSS scores was 0.97.

### Employment anxiety

The Employment Anxiety Questionnaire (EAQ, Zhang & Chen, 2006) comprises 26 items that are divided into four dimensions: employment prospect worry (5 items, e.g., “Worried that one’s career aspirations may not be realized”), lack of employment support (8 items, e.g., “Worried about having nowhere to consult and seek help when encountering problems in career selection”), lack of job search confidence (6 items, e.g., “Worried about their poor appearance affecting their employment prospects”), and employment competition pressure (7 items, e.g., “Feeling anxious upon hearing the news media’s promotion of the employment situation for college students”). Items are responded to using a 5-point scale, where 1 = not at all and 5 = very much. In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha for EAQ scores was 0.98.

### Psychological resilience

Connor–Davidson Resilience Scale (CD–RISC, Connor & Davidson, 2003; revised by Yu & Zhang, 2007) was measured using a 25-item scale revised by. It comprises three dimensions: resilience (13 items, e.g., “I will not be discouraged by failure”), strength (8 items, e.g., “Coping with stress makes me feel empowered”), and optimism (4 items, e.g., “I can see the humorous side of things”). Items are responded to using a 5-point scale, where 1 = not at all and 5 = very much. Sample items include “Past success gives me the confidence to face challenges” and “Under pressure, I can focus and think clearly.” The Cronbach’s alpha for CD–RISC scores was 0.96.

### Career adaptability

Career Adapt-Abilities Scale (CAAS, Hou et al., 2012) was measured using the 24-item scale. It comprises 24 items and four dimensions: career concern (6 items, e.g., “I am concerned about my career development”), career control (6 items, e.g., “I persist in my beliefs and ideas”), career curiosity (6 items, e.g., “I am full of curiosity and anticipation for new development opportunities”), and career confidence (6 items, e.g., “I can efficiently complete tasks”). Items are responded to using a 7-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. Sample items include “I’m full of curiosity and anticipation for

new development opportunities” and “I’m constantly looking for opportunities for personal growth.” In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha for CAAS scores was 0.97.

### Procedure

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of Zhejiang Agricultural Business College. The participants signed an electronic consent form and were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity.

### Data analysis

We used SPSS 26.0 to analyze all data, and the significance level was set at 0.05. We first conducted confirmatory factor analyses to evaluate the discriminant validity of the four variables (Carter, 2016), after which, we applied the PROCESS macro in SPSS to test the hypothesized relationships (Hayes, 2013).

**Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).** Before testing our hypotheses, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess the factor structure of the measures. Results showed that the four-factor structure was an acceptable fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 676.70$ ,  $df = 71$ ), comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.98, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.97, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.07, and standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) = 0.03. The four-factor model demonstrated a better fit compared to the three-factor model that combined perceived social support and psychological resilience into one factor ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 3646.38$ ,  $\Delta df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); the two-factor model that combined perceived social support, psychological resilience, and career adaptability into one factor ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 6119.2$ ,  $\Delta df = 5$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ); and the one-factor model that combined all variables into one factor ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 14,206.32$ ,  $\Delta df = 6$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The results supported the discriminant validity of the measures.

To evaluate the negative relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety, and the mediating role of psychological resilience, we used Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS with 5000 bootstrapped samples and included gender and grade as control variables.

## Results

### Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations of perceived social support, psychological resilience, career adaptability, and employment anxiety. The results showed that perceived social support significantly and positively correlated with psychological resilience ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), career adaptability ( $r = 0.67$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Additionally, the results showed that employment anxiety significantly and negatively correlated with perceived social support ( $r = -0.18$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), psychological resilience ( $r = -0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and career adaptability ( $r = -0.18$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

### Predicting employment anxiety from social support

Results found that perceived social support significantly and negatively predicted employment anxiety ( $b = -0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and positively predicted psychological

resilience ( $b = 0.66$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Psychological resilience significantly and negatively predicted employment anxiety ( $b = -0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hypothesis 1 was therefore supported.

**Psychological resilience mediation.** The mediating effect of psychological resilience was statistically significant ( $b = -0.21$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95%  $CI [-0.27, -0.15]$ ). The 95% confidence interval did not include zero, indicating that psychological resilience was a significant mediator between perceived social support and employment anxiety. The mediating effect accounted for 72.51% of the total effect (see Figure 1). Hypothesis 2 was therefore supported.

**Career adaptability moderation.** To test the moderating effect of career adaptability, we used Model 14 in Hayes’ PROCESS macro for SPSS. After including career adaptability as a moderator in the model, we found that the interaction effect of psychological resilience and career adaptability significantly predicted employment anxiety ( $b = -0.28$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Simple slope analysis revealed that psychological resilience negatively predicted employment anxiety in individuals with high career adaptability ( $+1SD$ ; simple slope<sub>high</sub> =  $-0.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and in those with low career adaptability ( $-1SD$ ; simple slope<sub>low</sub> =  $-0.13$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ); however, this effect was stronger in individuals with high career adaptability (see Figure 2).

Further, the results showed that career adaptability moderated the indirect effect of perceived social support on employment anxiety via psychological resilience ( $b = -0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ , 95%  $CI [-0.12, -0.06]$ ). Interestingly, when the career adaptability score was low, the mediating effect was significant, as indicated by the 95% confidence interval that did not contain zero ( $b = -0.48$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95%  $CI [-0.56, -0.40]$ ). When the career adaptability was high, the mediating effect was not significant, as indicated by the 95% confidence interval that contained zero ( $b = -0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , 95%  $CI = [-0.10, 0.09]$ ). There was a significant difference between the indirect effects at the high and low levels, and the difference was  $-0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ , 95%  $CI [-0.13, -0.07]$ . Hypothesis 3 was therefore supported.

## Discussion

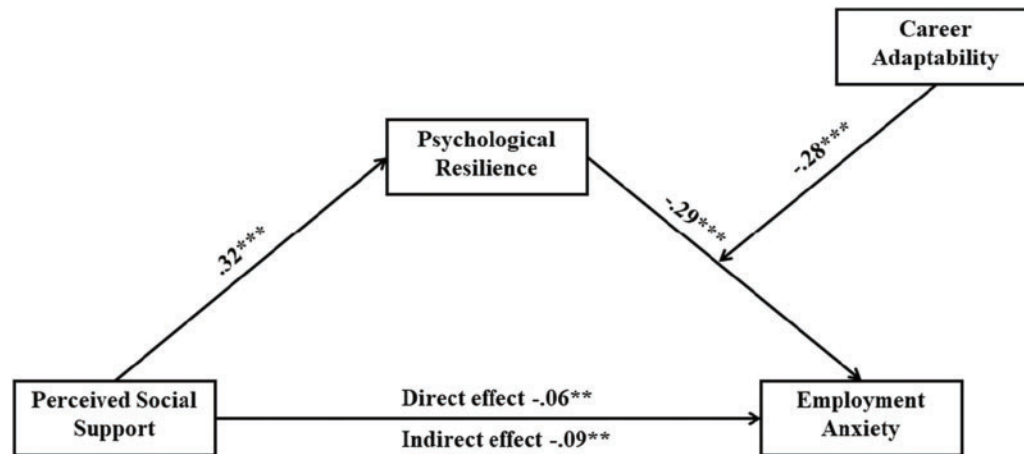
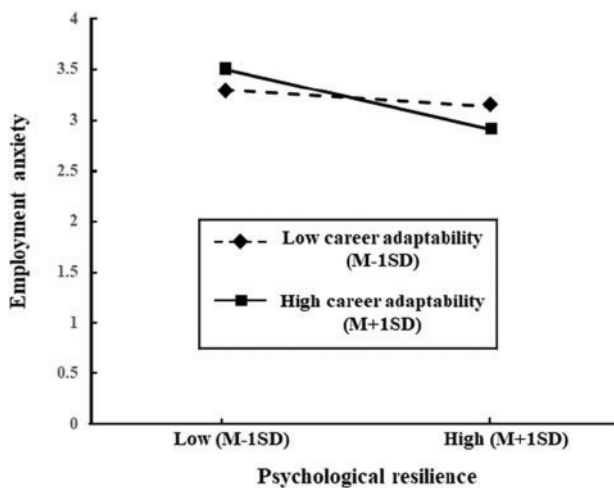
Consistent with a finding of a prior study, this study found that perceived social support negatively predicted employment anxiety among college students, indicating that higher levels of perceived social support were associated with lower levels of employment anxiety (Gao et al., 2020). Both the social support model and buffer theory suggest that experiencing sufficient social support helps alleviate the perception of stress and negative experiences (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). For college students, having a large social support network and supportive social relationships makes it increasingly possible for them to receive help from others when facing stressful events, facilitating their adaptation and coping (He & Zheng, 2010). Receiving support from family, friends, school, and society can contribute to their sense of security and belonging, effectively alleviating employment anxiety and adjusting their employment mindset.



**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Sex			1					
2. Grade			0.124**	1				
3. Psychological resilience	3.67	0.66	−0.052*	−0.083**	1			
4. Perceived social support	5.40	1.08	0.050*	−0.077**	0.521**	1		
5. Career adaptability	3.91	0.58	−0.039	−0.064**	0.640**	0.667**	1	
6. Employment anxiety	3.15	0.79	0.076**	0.072**	−0.282**	−0.180**	−0.180**	1

Note.  $N = 1928$ . Grade and sex are dummy variables; freshman = 1, sophomore = 2, junior = 3, senior = 4; male = 1, female = 2. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

**Figure 1.** A moderated mediation model of psychological resilience and career adaptability. Note. \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .**Figure 2.** Model of test for simple slopes

Furthermore, this study revealed that psychological resilience partially mediated the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety. Thus, perceived social support among college students directly influenced employment anxiety and indirectly influenced it via psychological resilience. Han and Zhang (2014) found that perceived social support positively predicted psychological resilience for college students, and psychological resilience indirectly affected their level of adaptation to unexpected events. A harmonious family atmosphere and positive peer relationships form the foundation for developing a positive level of perceived social

support, through which, college students can effectively enhance their psychological resilience (Liu, 2011). Mo et al. (2013) demonstrated that psychological resilience and social support predicted an individual's level of psychological adaptation to unexpected events. Individuals with high psychological resilience exhibited higher levels of psychological well-being when faced with similar stressors. A high level of psychological resilience enables individuals to skillfully utilize social support resources to enhance their ability to cope with stress, thereby reducing anxiety and distress. They often possess a stable, enriched, and robust social support system (Friborg et al., 2003).

Additionally, this study found that career adaptability moderated the mediating effect of psychological resilience in the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety among college students. Specifically, compared with individuals with low career adaptability, psychological resilience had a stronger indirect effect on employment anxiety through psychological resilience among individuals with high career adaptability (Feng et al., 2016). The self-constructive model of career adaptability posits that career adaptability is a psychological resource required for individuals to interact with their environment and adapt to career changes (Savickas, 2013; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). As a psychosocial resource, career adaptability facilitates the interaction between individuals and their environment, enabling them to adapt to career choices and behaviors (Yu & Zheng, 2013). Studies have found that career

adaptability reduces negative emotions and prevents negative behaviors (Hirschi, 2009; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007). It is significantly negatively correlated with career anxiety; and increasing career adaptability reduces anxiety (Gadassi et al., 2013; Shu et al., 2021; Fiori et al., 2015; Zhang, 2020).

### ***Implications for research and practice***

Theoretically, this study contributes to understanding the mechanisms and pathways through which perceived social support influences employment anxiety among college students, thus providing a basis for intervention research to alleviate employment anxiety. Under the current situation of employment, it is important for college students to receive social support from family, parents, teachers, and peers; therefore, interventions that enhance their perceived social support or utilize their social networks for support would be beneficial. Additionally, interventions should involve helping them develop their psychological potential, establish a positive self-protective mechanism, and strengthen their psychological resilience. Universities can enhance college students' career adaptability through courses on career planning, career counseling lectures, and innovative entrepreneurship programs, which can facilitate the positive influence of psychological resilience on employment anxiety and alleviate employment anxiety during the pandemic, thereby promoting their mental and physical well-being.

Employment anxiety, an important factor influencing college students' mental health, was significantly negatively correlated with psychological resilience. It was found that college students with higher levels of psychological resilience tended to experience lower levels of anxiety (Geng et al., 2013). If college graduates perceive support from their family, friends, and school and possess a high level of psychological resilience, their employment anxiety can effectively be alleviated.

Individuals with low psychological resilience often experience a significant sense of frustration and negative emotions when facing setbacks and negative experiences, making it difficult for them to recover from adversity. Contrastingly, individuals with high psychological resilience can more quickly regulate the subjective emotional experiences awakened by negative events (Hildebrandt et al., 2016). If college students possess high psychological resilience and career adaptability simultaneously, they can approach problems positively, learn from failures, and reduce employment anxiety. During the critical stage of transitioning from college to the job market, college students' perceived social support, mediated by psychological resilience, influences their employment anxiety. The moderating role of career adaptability effectively promotes college students' ability to face the job market correctly, facilitates their interactions with society, helps them adjust their job search mentality to achieve satisfactory job search results, and alleviates employment anxiety (Guan et al., 2013; Guan et al., 2014).

### ***Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research***

This study opens up new avenues for research on the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety among college students. However, it has some limitations. The study was cross-sectional, and the scales used in this study were self-reported measures. Future research could employ more objective measures of the constructs and adopt longitudinal designs to determine the temporal relationships among the variables. In terms of the study sample, only college students from three universities were selected, which may introduce potential selection bias. Future research could thus employ large-scale stratified random sampling. In addition to the variables examined in this study, other variables may influence employment anxiety among college students. Thus, further exploration and discussion of factors that contribute to employment anxiety among college students are warranted.

### ***Conclusion***

The results of the study accentuate that perceived social support has a significant effect on employment anxiety among college students. This study demonstrates the importance of perceived social support, psychological resilience, and career adaptability in alleviating students' employment anxiety. In addition, the study suggests that understanding how perceived social support is significantly correlated with employment anxiety through psychological resilience, and alleviates students' employment anxiety by enhancing their career adaptability.

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**Availability of Data and Materials:** The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

**Ethics Approval:** Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Zhejiang Agricultural Business College. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki. The ethics review approval number was IRB-ZABC-2023012.

**Informed Consent:** This study has obtained informed consent from all participants.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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