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The Relationship between Career Social Support and Employability among University Students in Shandong Province, China

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Abstract

The study examines the relationships between career social support and employability perceived by final-year undergraduate students. In line with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, career social support predicted employability during the transition from higher education to employment. This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional correlational research design. A total of 734 final-year undergraduate students from Shandong Province in China, attending both public and private higher education institutions, completed a structured online questionnaire via Wen Juan Xing. The two variables of career social support and employability were measured by means of a five-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation as well as linear regression. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between Career Social Support and Employability ($r = .631$, $p < .001$). Regression analysis confirmed that Career Social Support significantly predicted Employability ($\beta = .631$, $t = 22.006$, $p < .001$), explaining 39.8% of the variance in perceived Employability. This study provided evidence for the empirical application of Social Cognitive Theory within China higher education regarding the influence of the learning environment upon students' career-related self-perceptions. Practical implications for higher education and the findings of the current study were discussed. Furthermore, future directions of research on graduate employability were suggested, including the exploration of other psychological and educational factors that impact upon graduate employability in different regions of the world.

Keywords: Career Social Support, Perceived Employability, University Students, Social Cognitive Theory, Higher Education

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive labor market, graduates from China higher education institutions are facing new challenges when transitioning from university to employment. Measuring employability in higher education means not only looking at academic qualifications but also at students' ability to apply what they have learned in real-life settings as well as their confidence in their career choices, ability to adapt to new situations, and psychological preparedness for entering the workforce (Chang et al., 2026; Ming, 2026). Such external support can come in the form of career social support provided by family, peers and

university staff. Hence, the present study focuses on measuring levels of Career Social Support among final-year undergraduate students at higher education institutions in Shandong Province, and uses their perceptions of their employability to gauge their readiness for entering the workforce.

While many studies concerning social support have explored the relationships between support and employability with self-efficacy, psychological capital, and career adaptability as the mediating variables (Xia et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2026; Yang et al., 2026), there are also many other studies, focusing on employment anxiety, career satisfaction, and career search in relation to employability (Li et al., 2025; Song et al., 2024). In the reviewed literature, there is a lack of evidence concerning the independent contribution of Career Social Support to Employability of final-year undergraduate students in Shandong Province.

The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between career social support and employability among final-year undergraduate students in Shandong Province, China. This study was grounded by Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). In this study, career social support was conceptualized as an external contextual variable which would aid in students' perception of their employment readiness as well as their career prospects. The study addresses the following research objective:
RO1: To examine the significant predictive relationship between Career Social Support and Employability among university students in Shandong Province, China.
Research Question (RQ1): Does Career Social Support significantly and positively predict Employability among university students in Shandong Province, China?
Research Hypothesis (H1): Career Social Support significantly and positively predicts Employability among university students in Shandong Province, China.

Literature Review

This section reviews studies that have examined the relationship between career social support and employability of university students. A number of empirical studies as well as theories including Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory have been reviewed. Key research questions and gaps in relation to career social support and employability have been highlighted. The review will form a good basis for the current study that investigates whether career social support predicts employability of university students.

Social support is an increasingly recognized contextual factor influencing the career development, psychological readiness for work and employability of university students. In higher education, career social support refers to support from family, friends, teachers, mentors and from within and around educational institutions, including emotional, guidance, information and practical help. A number of studies have examined the relationship between career social support and career exploration, career adaptability, employment anxiety and perceived employability of China university students.

Xia et al. (2020) studied the relationship between career social support and employability of students by employing a moderated mediation model. The study provided empirical evidence from a contextual viewpoint on how Career Social Support, as a resource, influenced students perceived capacity to secure employment. More recently, Wang et al. (2026) investigated the relationship between career social support and employability of China university students

from low-income families. The mediating roles of career decision-making self-efficacy and career goals were examined in the study. Therefore, career social support could be a direct predictor of employability as well as a resource that is associated with a number of career-related psychological processes of students.

Jia and Wang (2024) explored the mediator roles of self-efficacy and life satisfaction in the relationship between perceived social support and career exploration. The study indicated that social support can affect individuals in terms of enhancing their psychological confidence and well-being to respond to supportive environments. In addition, Liu and Liang (2025) explored the relationship between social support and career adaptability, using proactive personality and career decision-making self-efficacy as mediators. The findings indicated that social support is related to students' psychological resources that can help them prepare for employment.

Additionally, career adaptability is considered as a medium linking external support with career-related outcomes. In their study on the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety, and the roles of psychological resilience and career adaptability, Fang and Xu (2025) explored the supportive environment helping students to face uncertainty in their transition to employment. Xu et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between perceived social support and career adaptability of China vocational students. The findings of this study may be different from those of university students; however, they provide insights into how social support is related to career in terms of career preparation for different educational populations of students. In the context of China postgraduate students, mentoring for postgraduate employment has been a major focus for many colleges (Jiang & Wang, 2025). Support for university employment offered by a university has been found to enhance the career adaptability of university students (Yang & Kim, 2026). A measure of university employment support perceived by undergraduate students was developed and validated by Ye et al. (2025). The resources offered by a university for career development are an area that is increasingly gaining attention from researchers.

In terms of the role of teachers and mentors, there are a number of studies conducted from an interpersonal or psychological perspective. Zhang et al. (2025) explored career-related teacher support from an attachment theory perspective and found that supportive educational relationships at university can be of relevance to students' future career orientation. Song et al. (2024) also investigated the relationship between perceived social support and career satisfaction among Chinese college graduates in the early stages of their career. Thus, social support that is provided during university education has implications for the early stages of professional life. Studies also explored the psychological underpinnings of employability. For instance, Tan et al. (2025) employed a multiple mediation model to investigate the relationship between general self-efficacy and undergraduate employability. In addition, Chang et al. (2026) analyzed the psychological mechanism that university students employed to enhance their employability, and Ming (2026) examined the relationship between occupational future time perspective and perceptions of decent work. Furthermore, the work values, perceived employability, and rural employment intentions of recent graduates were examined by Wen and Ye (2024). These studies found that employability is associated with a number of psychological resources, future goals and career-related evaluations.

Wang and Wang (2026) studied the relationship between students perceived social support and their employability from a signaling perspective. Yang et al. (2026) and Zhou et al. (2026), investigated the relationship between social support and students' employability with the former being mediated by psychological capital and career adaptability, and the latter focusing on the role of psychological capital in the relationship between social support and graduates' perceived employability. These studies therefore support the notion that social support is an important correlate of students' employability. In addition to studying various negative employment-related psychological states of university students, a number of studies have investigated support provided by various individuals in helping students deal with problems relating to their studies and/or employment. Li et al. (2025) studied the relationship between social support and employment anxiety of preschool teacher trainees in China, whereas Linge and Kosnin (2026) investigated the relationship between career decision-making self-efficacy and employment-related stress as well as anxiety about seeking a job. Wang (2025) examined the relationship between students perceived social support and their intention to change to a different major. Even though these studies did not investigate the relationship between career social support and employability, they generally support the assumption of a positive relationship between the two variables, however, the way in which social support was conceptualized and the analyzed variables as well as the analyzed samples of students and the applied methods of analysis differed from the present study. In the present study, therefore, the direct predictive value of career social support for the variable of Employability of final-year undergraduate students from Shandong Province was investigated.

This study primarily relies on the Social Cognitive Theory developed by Bandura (1986). Social Cognitive Theory defines human behavior through interactions between the individual's personal characteristics and behaviors and environmental factors.

An important concept within Social Cognitive Theory is the notion of self-efficacy. This pertains to how individuals perceive their own capabilities in order to carry out certain actions to attain their desired ends. A student's perceptions of their capabilities in regard to employment opportunities will influence students planning, job searching and application behaviors. Also, how a student deals with the uncertainty of the labor market is influenced by self-efficacy beliefs. Another important principle of the present theoretical framework is the interplay between environmental resources and human cognition. Bandura (1986) has noted that the social environment in which live, learn and work, includes a vast array of experiences, information, encouragement, opportunities etc. which can impact on how people think and behave. In the present study, Career Social Support from family, peers, teachers and other social contacts, is viewed as an environmental resource comprising of emotional, guidance, information and practical help in relation to their career. The relevancy of this theoretical perspective is illustrated in recent studies. Jia and Wang (2024) explored the psychological processes that are facilitated by supportive environments. The relationship between social support and career adaptability by means of career decision-making self-efficacy was examined by Liu and Liang (2025). These studies are congruent with the social cognitive perspective that environmental resources and individual's beliefs are correlated in career development processes.

This study attempts to explain the relationship between Career Social Support and Perceived Employability of students in regional higher education in China within the framework of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986). By measuring support from family, friends, teachers and other social contacts, the study extends the application of Social Cognitive Theory to the study of students' perceptions about their career within a particular set of sociocultural and higher education environment. The findings are meaningful within given environmental and socio-psychological context and consistent with key propositions of Social Cognitive Theory concerning the role of environmental factors and human perception. However, the cross-sectional design of the study does not capture the hypothetical causal processes that the theory hypothesizes.

Other researchers have also investigated the relationship of supportive environments and career preparation in higher education. Jiang and Wang (2025) in terms of its effects on employment outcomes. Support provided by universities in terms of employment was studied in relation to career adaptability by Yang and Kim (2026). Also, career-related teacher support was investigated by Zhang et al. (2025) and its relationship with career adaptability and future work orientation of students was explored. Even though Social Cognitive Theory can be used to describe relations between environment and personality, the present study will specifically focus on the relation between Career Social Support and perceived Employability. Career Social Support is used as the independent variable, and Employability as the dependent variable. Therefore, it is assumed that the stronger the Career Social Support the higher the Employability.

More studies are needed to explore various aspects of the relationship between social support and graduate employability. Although a number of studies have been conducted to explore the complex mediating and moderating processes through which social support affects various aspects of graduate employability, there are still a number of issues that can be explored through independent predictive power of Career Social Support. In a study of the relationship between Career Social Support and graduate employability, Xia et al. (2020) adopted a moderated mediation model. In another study, Wang et al. (2026) examined the relationship between career decision-making self-efficacy and career goals and graduate employability. Furthermore, in a recent study, Yang et al. (2026) explored the mediating roles of psychological capital and career adaptability in the relationship between social support and graduate employability.

The prior studies have adopted different definitions of social support, including general perceived social support (Jia & Wang, 2024; Fang & Xu, 2025), teacher support (Jiang & Wang, 2025; Ye et al., 2025), university employment support (Zhang et al., 2025), and school-based social support (Linge & Kosnin, 2026). These support types are related to Career Social Support but are distinct from it, since Career Social Support refers to the support resources that students perceive as helpful for their career preparation and for making employment decisions. Examining the direct predictive relationship between such specific support type and Employability would thus constitute a unique contribution to the current body of research. Other studies were conducted on different populations and different career-related outcomes, for example, university students from low-income families (Wang et al., 2026), preschool teacher trainees (Li et al., 2025), and students in vocational schools (Xu et al., 2024). There were also studies that explored students' employment anxiety (Song et al., 2024),

career satisfaction (Linge & Kosnin, 2026), and career adaptability (Xia et al., 2026). The direct predictive relationship studied in this research has not been fully investigated among final-year undergraduate students in Shandong Province.

Previous studies on Career Social Support and Perceived Employability have been conducted within others countries contexts and have used mediation and moderation models to explain the relationships between variables and the underlying psychological processes and contextual factors. There is a lack of studies that explore the direct relationship between Career Social Support and Perceived Employability within specific regional higher education contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the direct predictive relationship between Career Social Support and Perceived Employability among a sample of final-year undergraduate students from public and private higher education institutions in Shandong Province, China. In doing so, this study provides a regional perspective that can complement the existing body of knowledge on mediation and moderation models of Career Social Support and Perceived Employability. Importantly, differences in the institutional resources, labor market and career support networks within and across regions are known to affect how students perceive their employability.

From a theoretical perspective, the positive relationship between Career Social Support and Employability can be explained by Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory. Resources in the students' environment might influence their career-related beliefs, their self-efficacy, their level of preparation for their future career. Recent studies on self-efficacy, psychological capital and career adaptability, conducted by for example Tan et al. (2025), Liu & Liang (2025) and Yang et al. (2026), support this hypothesis. Therefore, it is expected that Career Social Support has a significant positive predictive value to students' perceptions of their Employability. Based on the theoretical background as well as on previous empirical research the following hypothesis have been proposed. H1: Career Social Support significantly and positively predicts Employability among university students in Shandong Province, China.

Methodology

This study employed quantitative research approach within cross-sectional correlational research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study explores the relationship of career social support and employability among university students. Participants consisted of 734 final-year undergraduate students studying in public and private universities across the Shandong Province. An online questionnaire developed by the researcher using Wen Juan Xing survey software was completed by participants. In order to measure two variables in the study, career social support and perceived employability, both were measured by five-point Likert-type scales. Following data cleaning process, 734 useable data sets were analyzed using descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the major characteristics of the participants as well as the characteristics of the two major variables in the study. In addition, in order to check the reliability and validity of the measurement instruments of the two variables, Pearson correlation coefficient as well as simple linear regression analysis were used. In simple linear regression analysis, Career Social Support was used as independent variable for predictor variable and Employability was used as dependent variable for outcome variable. In addition to the coefficient of determination R^2 and the adjusted R^2, analysis of variance ANOVA, the unstandardized regression coefficient and its associated standard error as well as the t-value and the 95% confidence interval of the unstandardized regression coefficient

were used to assess the regression model. In addition, p-value of .05 was used to determine whether or not to support the hypothesis of the study.

Finding

This section describes the findings of the simple linear regression analysis of the relationship between career social support and employability of university students in Shandong Province, China. The findings of this section are intended to answer Research Objective (RO1) and test Hypothesis 1 (H1). The major results from the analysis, including the model summary, ANOVA, regression coefficients, and test of hypotheses, are presented and described in order to indicate whether Career Social Support has significant influence on Employability and the nature of that influence as well as its predictive power.

Table 1

Model Summary for the Effect of Career Social Support on Employability

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.631	0.398	0.397	0.262

Table 1 presents that the regression model has an R value of 0.631, consistent with the correlation result reported earlier. More importantly, the model explains 39.8% of the variance in Employability (R Square = 0.398; Adjusted R Square = 0.397). The career social support factor is not a background factor of minimal importance, but an antecedent variable of considerable explanatory power. The perception of the degree of career-related support of the student is an important factor in their evaluation of their own employability. The difference between R Square and Adjusted R Square is minimal, thus the model is stable and does not suffer from parameter inflation. The value of the Std. Error of the Estimate = 0.262 indicates that the prediction errors are within an adequate range of values.

Table 2

ANOVA for the Effect of Career Social Support on Employability

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	33.273	1	33.273	484.272	0.000
Residual	50.319	732	0.069		
Total	83.592	733			

Table 2 shows that the regression model is highly significant, $F(1, 732) = 484.272$, $p < .001$. The model including the predictor career social support for the criterion employability is significantly better than the model without a predictor. The p-value alone does not convey sufficient information about the finding. It must be considered in conjunction with the associated R Square value. In this case, the effect of career social support on employability is not trivial.

Table 3
Coefficients for the Effect of Career Social Support on Employability

Model	Predictor	Unstandardized B	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	t	Sig.	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
1	(Constant)	2.048	0.072		28.506	0.000	1.907	2.189
1	Career Social Support	0.451	0.020	0.631	22.006	0.000	0.411	0.491

Table 3 provides the key evidence for H1.

The unstandardized coefficient (B) for the variable career social support is 0.451 with a corresponding increase of Employability with 0.451 units on the 1–5 scale. Since both variables are measured on the same 1–5 scale, this is a clear positive effect. The corresponding standardized beta of 0.631 even indicates a strong effect of career social support on Employability in terms of standard deviation. That means a one standard deviation increase in Career social support leads to an increase of 0.631 standard deviations in employability. The effect is highly significant ($t = 22.006$, $p < .001$), and the 95% confidence interval [0.411, 0.491] lies entirely above zero. Therefore, both the point estimate and the interval estimate confirm a robust positive direct effect.

Table 4
Hypothesis Testing Summary for H1

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	t	Sig.	Decision
H1	Career Social Support → Employability	0.631	22.006	0.000	Supported

Table 4 clearly shows that H1 is supported. In other words, Career Social Support significantly and positively predicts Employability, so $H1_o$ is rejected and $H1_1$ is accepted. In accordance with the study's conceptual framework, students who receive higher levels of encouragement, guidance and support from family, friends, as well as teachers, also perceive that they are more employable. Thus, external career-related support does not only have a limited emotional effect; instead, it also has a direct effect on students' perception of their career readiness, their adaptability, and their labor market preparedness. However, the above-mentioned findings need to be interpreted with caution, as the present analysis was conducted using simple regression. The observed direct effect therefore only represents the predictive effect of Career Social Support. Other variables, such as learning inputs and self-efficacy, have not yet been taken into account. Even though 39.8% of the variance of employability can be explained by the variable of Career Social Support, the remaining variance is large. Thus, it can be concluded that employability is not determined by the variable of career social support alone. In the following sections, the predictive effect of learning inputs and of self-Efficacy, as well as the interrelation among the three variables, will be tested. In summary, the findings support the following three statements: There is a significant positive direct relationship between career social support and employability; the regression model is significant; and a large part of the variance of Employability can be explained by the model. The standardized coefficient furthermore is of high magnitude, and the unstandardized coefficient even shows a strong increase in Employability with higher levels of Career Social Support.

Discussion

The findings were consistent with previous studies, including those by Xia et al. (2020), who examined the relationship between career social support and employability using a moderated mediation model in a sample of college students, and by Wang et al. (2026), who examined the relationship between career social support and the employability of Chinese university students from low-income families, with career decision making self-efficacy and career goals investigated as mediator variables. Importantly, the current study found a significant positive predictive relationship between career social support and employability in a sample of final-year undergraduate students studying at universities across Shandong Province. Studies by Wang and Wang (2026) and by Yang et al. (2026) investigated Perceived Social Support and Employability respectively from a signaling theory perspective and by means of measures of Psychological Capital and Career Adaptability. Although these studies adopt very different theoretical perspectives and employ different methodologies, together they provide strong support for the role of social support in accounting for students' employability.

The findings from the previous studies indicated that there is a relationship between supportive environments and certain psychological resources for career development. Previous studies such as Jia and Wang (2024) explored the relationship between perceived social support and career exploration by examining the role of self-efficacy and life satisfaction. Liu and Liang (2025) investigated the relationship between social support and career adaptability by incorporating proactive personality and career decision-making self-efficacy into the study. Fang and Xu (2025) explored the relationship between perceived social support and employment anxiety by examining the relationship between psychological resilience and career adaptability. Students with higher levels of Career Social Support reported higher levels of perceived Employability. This may be because such students received more emotional encouragement, career guidance and information in their career development.

The findings also are consistent with Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory. As outlined in this theory, environmental factors and personal factors are recursively related to behavior. Thus, within the career search model, career social support is an environmental variable which influences students' beliefs about their careers, their confidence and expectations about their careers, and the resources available to them to gain employment. The support students receive from family, peers, lecturers, and mentors can encourage students, provide them with career information, and help them gain employment-related competencies. Thus, support from others can reinforce students' perceptions of their ability to secure employment and deal with the work-related expectations of potential employers. The positive coefficient from the regression equation above is consistent with the theory's assertion that supportive social environments are related to more favorable career-search-related self-evaluations. However, because self-efficacy and the other variables within the model were not included in the above regression equation, the mediating roles of these variables are provided as theory only and have not been empirically verified. Previous research has investigated institutional and interpersonal career support, mentoring in higher education in China (Jiang & Wang, 2025). Yang and Kim (2026) states university employment support and career adaptability and career-related teacher support in relation to career adaptability and future work self-salience. The findings of the present study suggest that universities in Shandong

Province could benefit from strengthening career guidance, lecturer support, employment information and from creating more opportunities for students to establish contacts with potential employers in order to foster more positive views of their employability. An important contribution of this research is the effect of career social support. Therefore, in addition to the studied variables, other factors include self-efficacy, career adaptability, learning experiences, psychological capital, and career expectations can influence employability (Tan et al., 2025; Chang et al., 2026; Ming, 2026). In sum, findings from this study demonstrated that career social support would positively predict employability among university students from Shandong Province, China. The findings from the study supported prior empirical studies as well as Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory regarding the supportive environments of social support for the career development of university students.

Conclusion

In this study found that career social support significantly and positively predicts perceived employability among university students in Shandong Province, China. The findings were consistent with Social Cognitive Theory and prior research that identified social support as a critical factor in career development. Furthermore, our study introduced the concept of environmental support, career social support, in relation to students' career confidence, their employment readiness, and their perceived employability. To facilitate students' transition from higher education to the workplace, universities should strengthen their career counseling, mentoring, employment guidance, and professional networking functions. However, several limitations inherent to the current study design and data source must be acknowledged. These limitations include the cross-sectional nature of the current study design, the use of self-report measures, and the geographic limitations to the current study, which were conducted with a sample of students attending universities in Shandong Province, China. Other variables that may predict employability were not included in the current study's regression model. Future research should employ longitudinal and mixed-methods research designs, and study students from various geographic locations. Variables such as self-efficacy, learning inputs, and career adaptability, for instance, may also be included as predictors of Employability. Overall, the study highlighted the significance of career social support as an important environmental resource in relation to graduate employability and offers implications for enhancing career development functions in China higher education settings.

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