

Social Support, Academic Burnout, and Life Satisfaction of International Students

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the internal relationship between academic burnout, social support, and the life satisfaction of Chinese overseas students, adopted survey based on 167 international students. by using the College Student's Learning Burnout Scale, the Social Support Scale, and the Life Satisfaction Scale to survey. It is indicated by the results that the overall academic burnout of international students is at the upper-middle level, the level of objective support, subjective support, and overall social support of female international students is greater than that of male international students, but there is no significant difference in the utilization of support between female and male international students. Social support has a significant and positive predictive effect on life satisfaction, while the relationship between social support and life satisfaction is negatively moderated by academic burnout. It is suggested that parents, universities, and society should pay more attention to international students' emotional support based on material support, and schools should establish an emotional comfort and care system with a focus on peer care, tutor care and psychological comfort. The life satisfaction of Chinese students abroad will greatly improve if they receive more emotional and material care and support from their schools, peers, families, and local social groups.

Keywords: social support, learning burnout, life satisfaction, overseas students

1. Introduction

Life satisfaction (LS), an important component of psychological well-being, is an overall cognitive assessment of an individual's quality of life based on a self-selected standard (Shin & Johnson, 1978). The happiness and mental health of contemporary Chinese students affects their life satisfaction. International students are a special group of people, who leave their familiar learning life circle and go abroad to study alone. In doing so, they face cultural differences, racial issues, academic pressure, difficulty in communicating in a foreign language, and other problems; hence, their life satisfaction is generally lower than that of domestic Chinese students. As there have frequently been suicides among international students in prestigious universities in recent years, it is important to understand the factors that influence overseas students' life satisfaction via investigation and research in order to take preventive measures and provide them with support.

Hirata (2022) proposed that overseas students who leave their hometown alone to study abroad often experience physical and mental changes due to the different living environment and increased academic pressure. Ikeda (2022) also determined that international students receive less social-material support than domestic students, and that social-emotional support is also reduced due to cultural differences and common social problems, which further indirectly cause their life satisfaction to fluctuate (You et al., 2018).

According to research, international students' academic burnout can be alleviated by social support, such as medical support, personal care, psychological support, and religious support (Heaney & Israel, 2016). Social support is also an important external factor that can affect their life satisfaction, and those with high social support are generally happier and more satisfied with life (Onalet al., 2022).

In addition to the low life satisfaction of international students in prestigious universities, the problem of academic burnout is also prominent, and the phenomenon of dropping out and being tired of studying is also increasing

(Bertrand-Cloudt et al., 2017). Besides, life satisfaction is also significantly reduced by stress and anxiety from academic injury. The phenomenon of academic burnout is extremely common among international students. This is a persistent negative mental state related to learning that occurs in students and is manifest by physical and mental exhaustion, a negative attitude toward learning, and low academic achievement (Salanova et al., 2010). Both external environmental factors (such as social support, etc.) and individual factors (such as self-efficacy, coping style, etc.) can cause students' academic burnout (Cappe et al., 2021).

There are many mature studies of the impact of social support on college students' life satisfaction (Jia et al, 2021; Wang & Lu, 2021; Zhou et al., 2020); There are also relevant studies of the relationship between social support and academic burnout (Wang, et al., 2021; Pan, 2021). Yet, the relationship between social support, life satisfaction and academic burnout remains to be explored and demonstrated. Therefore, this study begins with environmental factors, such as social support, to examine their impact on academic burnout and an increase of life satisfaction. A questionnaire survey completed by 167 Chinese students studying abroad is used to examine the relationship between social support, life satisfaction, and academic burnout.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction is an overall cognitive assessment of an individual's quality of life based on a self-selected standard (Shin & Johnson, 1978). There are two types of life satisfaction, one of which is general life satisfaction, which is the overall evaluation of an individual's quality of life. The other is special life satisfaction, which is a specific evaluation of different areas of an individual's life, such as family satisfaction, school satisfaction, community satisfaction, etc. General life satisfaction is more special than special life satisfaction, which is more abstract and stable (Tian & Jin, 2003). Although both domestic and foreign scholars have studied life satisfaction by undertaking a great deal of hard and meticulous work, the results have been different due to diverse research objects, research regions and research time. Besides, most of them were focused on consumer satisfaction, elderly pensioner satisfaction and other fields; therefore, they need to be supplemented with the study of overseas students' life satisfaction. (Van Damme-Ostapowicz et al., 2021)

2.2 Social Support

Social support refers to the perception that individuals are cared for or can obtain help from others. The sources of this support, which is one of the external factors that affect individuals' life satisfaction, can be financial, medical, personal care, religious, psychological, etc. (Heaney & Israel, 2016). As an environmental factor that greatly affects individuals' life satisfaction and happiness, social support can be divided into two categories. Objective and practical support includes material assistance and direct services, while subjective or emotional support, also known as perceived social support, refers to an individual's emotional experience and satisfaction due to being respected, supported and understood in society (Schmiedl et al., 2022). Both objective social support (scholarships, medical insurance, English courses/ preschool language classes) and perceptive social support (companionship of roommates, care by tutors, help from passers-by) affect overseas students' life satisfaction (Nicolaou et al., 2015). Social support can relieve pressure on individuals and eliminate psychological barriers, which are important factors in alleviating academic burnout.

2.3 Learning Burnout

The word "burnout" was originally used to describe the negative symptoms of individuals at work, such as long-term emotional exhaustion, physical fatigue, reduced job involvement, inhumane attitude toward clients, and reduced job accomplishment (Clercx et al., 2023). By extending the research of job burnout to students, it is found that there is a high-incidence of burnout in this group in terms of academic activities, (Ma et al., 2023). Students who suffer from academic burnout may have a negative emotional experience of academic activities, an incorrect attitude toward school work and a lack of belief in coping with academic-related issues. It refers to the exhaustion of emotion, attitude, and behavior of students in the learning process accompanied by long-term high-pressure experiences (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Brunsting et al., 2022).

It was found by combing through previous domestic research on academic burnout that most of the research objects selected were middle-school and college students, and less attention was paid to international students. However, in fact, international students feel more pressure than national students from parents and others in academic, social and interpersonal settings (Yvette, 2018). For instance, learning problems are far more common, they do not pay much attention to their studies, they are more tired of studying, and the phenomenon of dropout is also more common (Wang et al., 2015; Wong, 2010). Therefore, it is worth studying the phenomenon of academic burnout in such

special groups as international students.

2.4 Social Support and Life Satisfaction

Social support is closely related to life satisfaction. Comprehensive and effective social support can assist individuals to deal with negative emotions and overcome difficulties to maintain a high level of life satisfaction. Headey et al. (2010) found that family and social support have a significant impact on individuals' life satisfaction according to the 20-year tracking data of the German Socio-economic Survey Group. Individuals who receive more social support tend to show a higher life satisfaction level. In Germany, which is a high-level welfare state, students are given various kinds of social supports (Teichler & Ulrich, 2016), including material support (such as free tuition, high scholarships, start-up funds, insurance, etc.), as well as emotional support (such as free psychological counseling in the community, pre-exam comfort, and peer empathy sharing sessions). This high level of social support reduces the psychological and material pressure on students during the learning process, thereby maintaining a high level of life satisfaction overall (Gu, 2022). Social support has a positive impact on individual mental health (Qi et al., 2021). Students face various difficulties and academic pressure, and social support can provide emotional support and comfort, reduce the psychological burden of individuals (Akbar & Aisyawat, 2021). One study showed that students who received social support after a traumatic event recovered more easily from psychological trauma and had higher levels of mental health (Duren & Yalçın, 2021). This shows that social support can promote individual psychological adaptability and improve life satisfaction. On this basis, hypothesis 1 is proposed, as follows:

H1: Social support is a significant positive predictor of life satisfaction.

2.5 Moderating Effect of Academic Burnout on The Relationship Between Social Support And Life Satisfaction

Despite the increasing social support for international students in many foreign universities, the life satisfaction of international students is still lower than that of local students (Headey et al., 2010), which implies that other factors also play an inhibiting role.

As a cognitive component of individuals subjective well-being, life satisfaction refers to their overall evaluation of their quality of life quality based on the criteria they choose to evaluate (Pavot & Diener, 2008). Academic pressure and other negative emotions are closely related to a low level of life satisfaction (Koivumaa-Honkanen et al., 2014; Sun & Shek, 2012). Academic burnout is a negative behavior, which leads to a bad attitude toward life satisfaction. The fast-paced development of modern society and increasingly fierce competition exacerbate the pressure of life and work, causing individuals to become easily tired. This particular applies to international students, who study in a second language overseas based on a learning mode that is different from the one at home. The heavy pressure of homework, frequent class discussions, lectures, seminars, and demanding coursework make international students tire of their studies. In addition, they need to overcome cultural differences and even cultural conflicts they encounter in group discussions and communicating with peers in their spare time. It is no wonder, then, that international students often demonstrate psychological tension and exhaustion, a lack of motivation and interest in their studies, boredom and the inability to adapt, as well as a low level of efficiency in their academic output. In the long run, they will lose interest and enthusiasm for study and life-related activities, be reluctant to socialize, and their life satisfaction will be greatly reduced.

In addition, life satisfaction reflects an individual's life status or environment to a certain extent, and it will change with changes in the external environment (Cyniak-Cieciura et al., 2023). Based on the ecosystem theory, the interaction between students and their new environment abroad will jointly affect their development. The difference in the new environment and the language barrier will also lead to greater academic burnout (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Yu et al., 2013). In this context, there is an intrinsic relationship between life satisfaction, social support, and academic burnout. Therefore, hypothesis 2 of this study is as follows;

H2: Academic burnout negatively moderates the relationship between social support and life satisfaction.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Objects

Chinese students from 7 universities completed an online questionnaire, which took about 20 minutes. 250 questionnaires were sent out, and 167 valid questionnaires were collected. There were 77 males (46.1%) and 90 females (53.6%) aged 26 years on average.

3.2 Research Tools

3.2.1 Job Burnout Scale

This 20-item questionnaire was based on the "College student Burnout Scale" developed by Professor Lian Rong, which has three dimensions: low mood, improper behavior, and a low sense of achievement. 8 of the questions concerned depression, 6 were related to improper behavior, and 6 to a low sense of accomplishment. The scale was a 5-point Likert, with 1 representing "completely inconsistent" and 5 representing "completely consistent". The higher the score for depression, improper behavior, and a low sense of achievement, the more serious was the degree of academic burnout. The internal consistency coefficient in this study was 0.890, and the cumulative total explanatory quantity was 68.479%, indicating that the scale had good reliability and validity.

3.2.2 Social Support Rating Scale

The Social Support Rating Scale compiled by Chinese scholar, Xiao Shuiyuan, was used in this study. This scale consists of 10 items related to three factors: objective support, subjective support, and support utilization. It is a 5-point Likert scale, and the higher the total score, the better is the status of social support. The internal consistency coefficient in this study was 0.919, and the cumulative total explanatory quantity was 71.279%, indicating that this scale has good reliability and validity.

3.2.3 Life Satisfaction Scale

The "Satisfaction With Life Scale" (SWLS) was also adopted in this study. This scale was compiled by Diener et al., University of Illinois, USA. It is a 7-point Likert scale consisting of five questions, namely: (1) The degree to which the individual's life is close to the ideal state; (2) Specific life status; (3) Individual satisfaction with life; (4) Individuals get what they think is the most important thing in life; (5) The individual would not change a thing if he could live it over again. The higher the average score, the higher is the level of life satisfaction. Domestic researchers widely use this scale. The internal consistency coefficient of this scale in this study was 0.897, and the cumulative total explanatory volume was 67.380%, indicating that this scale has good reliability and validity.

4. Results

IBM's SPSS program was used to analyze the collected data based on descriptive statistics, correlation, and a regression analysis, and the results are shown below.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

As shown in Table 1, the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of each variable were as follows: Social support (M=2.052, SD=1.581), academic burnout (M=3.053, SD=0.951), and life satisfaction (M=11.012, SD=10.28). This indicated that the social support of international students is below the medium level, there is a moderate overall level of academic burnout, and their life satisfaction is close to the medium level. Social support was also positively correlated with life satisfaction ($r=0.393$, $p<.01$), while academic burnout was negatively correlated with this factor ($r=-0.367$, $p<.01$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistical Results and Correlation of Main Variables

Variables	M	SD	Social support	Learning burnout	Life satisfaction
Social support	2.052	1.581	1		
Learning burnout	3.053	.951	-.472**	1	
Life satisfaction	11.012	10.280	.393**	-.367**	1

Note: * $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$

4.2 Analysis of Differences

According to the range of scores (1-5 points), there is no significant difference between male and female students in terms of academic burnout and its dimensions. At the same time, there is no significant difference between overseas students of different genders in terms of life satisfaction. However, as shown in Table 2, gender differences are significant in terms of social support. Females required more objective support ($t= 6.381$, $p=0.003$) and subjective support ($t=6.696$, $p=0.001$) than males, but there was no significant difference between males and females in the utilization of support.

Table 2. Analysis of differences in academic burnout, social support, and life satisfaction among international students of different genders

Dimensions	Female		Male		t	p	Post-hoc
	M	SD	M	SD			
Feeling down	2.401	1.492	3.792	1.333	-6.372	.032	-
misconduct	2.192	1.433	3.601	1.412	-6.403	.643	-
Low sense of achievement	2.270	1.476	3.735	1.421	-6.501	.515	-
Objective support	2.932	1.012	1.998	.901	6.381	.003	Female>Male
Subjective support	1.479	.561	.940	.452	6.696	.001	Female>Male
Support availability	4.212	1.237	1.962	1.114	6.891	.051	-
Life satisfaction	25.830	9.162	16.890	9.392	6.207	.636	-

4.3 Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was used in this study to explore the effects of social support and academic burnout on international students' life satisfaction. According to Table 3, the F and β values of Model 1 were 560.821 ($p < .001$) and 0.941 ($p < .001$), respectively, with an interpretive variance of 87.2%. This indicates that social support is a significant positive predictor of international students' life satisfaction. Therefore, H1 is supported.

4.4 Moderating Effect of Academic Burnout on Social Support and Life Satisfaction

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed in order to determine the moderating effect of academic burnout on the relationship between social support and life satisfaction, controlling for the participants' gender. International student burnout and social support were standardized to prevent collinearity. As shown in Table 3, the variational inflation factor VIF of all the variables was less than 10, indicating that there was no collinearity between them. Model 3 had an F-value of 306.750 ($p < .001$). The interaction between social support and academic burnout was significant ($\beta = -0.071$, $p < .05$), indicating that academic burnout negatively moderates the relationship between social support and life satisfaction. Therefore, H2 is supported.

Table 3. Moderating effect of academic burnout on the relationship between social support and international students' life satisfaction: Hierarchical regression analysis

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	VIF
Gender	.0144	.0051	.0063	3.304
Social support	.941***	.500***	.649***	5.674
Learning burnout		-.446***	-.253***	4.281
Social support*Learning burnout			-.071*	3.059
R ²	.872	.883	.883	
ΔR^2	--	.880	.880	
F	560.821***	404.955***	306.750***	

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Academic burnout constrains the relationship between life satisfaction and social support. Specifically, the impact of social support on the life satisfaction of participants with greater academic burnout is weaker than on the life satisfaction of participants with lower academic burnout. When international students' degree of academic burnout increases, the positive impact of social support on their life satisfaction is weakened; on the contrary, when the degree of academic burnout is reduced, the influence of social support on international students' life satisfaction increases.

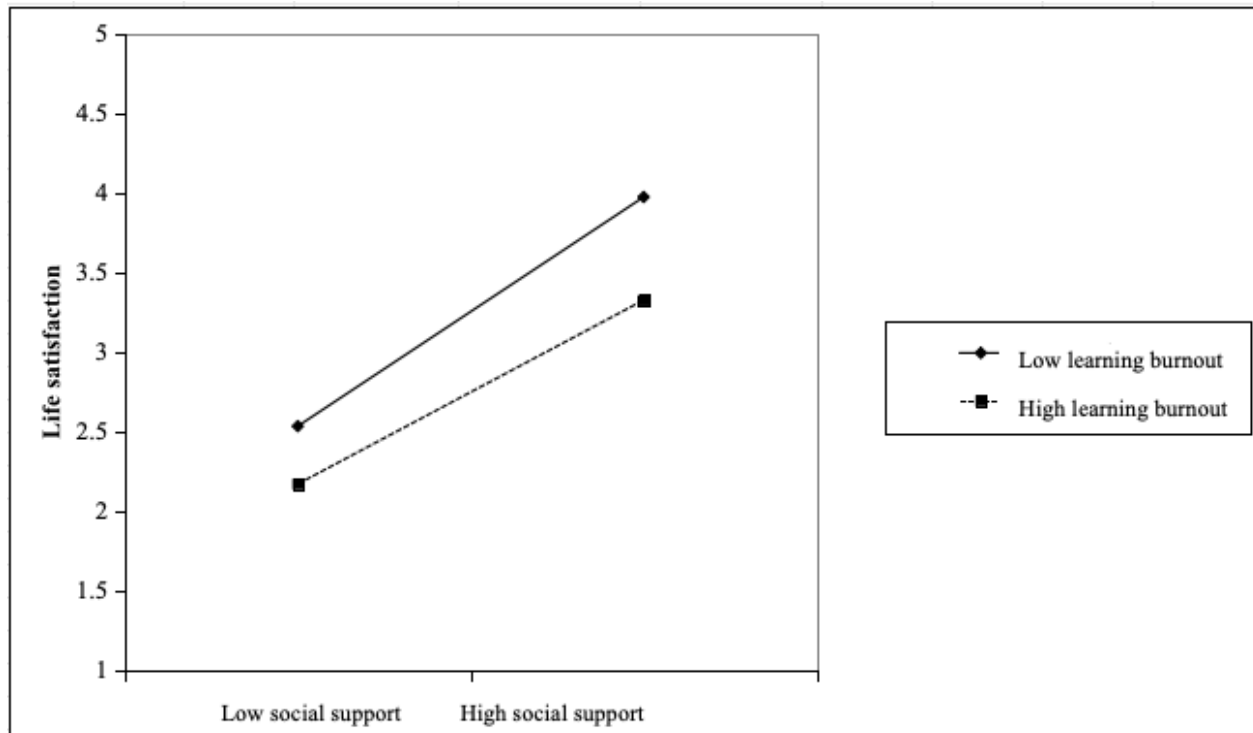


Figure 1. Moderating Effect

5. Discussion

5.1 Overall Status of International Students' Academic Burnout, Social Support and Life Satisfaction

According to the above data, it is obvious that the overall level of Chinese overseas students' academic burnout is moderate, especially in the two dimensions of low mood and low sense of achievement. The anxiety of many overseas students who are faced with a language barrier and the pressure of schoolwork is obvious, and their sense of achievement is low. Furthermore, the overall level of social support is not high, but at a medium level, which is consistent with the results of the research of You et al, (2018). In addition, a new factor was found in this study, which is that international students are given a lower level of subjective support than objective support.

5.2 Gender Differences in International Students' Job Burnout, Social Support and Life Satisfaction

Another finding of this study is that gender differences exist between male and female international students in terms of social support, as reflected in two aspects: objective support and subjective support. Female students not only receive better social support overall than male students, but they also receive greater social objective support and subjective support; on the other hand, there is no significant difference between the way male and female students utilize that support. This indicates that male students receive less social support from others or other sources when they are living abroad (Mutz et al., 2021).

5.3 Influence of Social Support and Academic Burnout on Overseas Students' Life Satisfaction

It was found from an analysis of the relationship between international students' social support, academic burnout and life satisfaction that life satisfaction and social support have a significant positive impact, which is consistent with previous research results (Deuri & Jahan, 2010). However, academic burnout negatively moderates the relationship between social support and life satisfaction. Heavy academic pressure not only easily causes international students to have academic burnout, but also reduces their time for entertainment and socializing. This results in ineffective communication and support between international students and friends and family, thereby reducing their life satisfaction (Chen et al., 2021).

6. Conclusions and Limitations

6.1 Focus on Emotional, Social Support for International Students

In terms of life satisfaction, most international students are from families that have fairly high consumption power, and they usually study in developed countries with good welfare facilities (Teichl & Ulrich, 2016), good-quality accommodation and food, and a high objective material support index. However, due to the distance from home, language, cultural and social barriers, Chinese overseas students are likely to make few foreign friends and spend more time alone due to a lack of communication with their neighbors. Therefore, the results show that the level of subjective support of overseas students is lower than the level of objective support (Olivia, 2021). Hence, the overall level of social support is not high, but at a medium level. On this basis, it is suggested that parents, universities, and society should pay more attention to international students' emotional support based on material support, and schools should establish an emotional comfort and care system with a focus on peer care, tutor care and psychological comfort. The life satisfaction of Chinese students abroad will greatly improve if they receive more emotional and material care and support from their schools, peers, families, and local social groups.

6.2 Increase Social Support for Male Students Studying Abroad

There are gender differences between male and female students in terms of social support. Although female students receive more social support than male students, there is no significant difference in their utilization of support. This is mainly reflected by the fact that men receive less objective support from others or other channels in life abroad. At the same time, because most men's personalities are not as delicate as women's, their subjective sensitivity to support from others is also lower than women's. Therefore, it is suggested that schools strengthen the subjective social support for male international students, and the university system should also pay more attention to male international students' mental health. (Huang & Zhang, 2022)

6.3 Pay Attention to The Problem of International Students' Academic Burnout

International students' life satisfaction is often low, even in foreign universities with high welfare and social support. This is because, although universities increase social support for international students, they ignore those students' academic burnout, which weakens the positive impact of social support on life satisfaction. Some international students face language barriers and academic pressure. Their anxiety is more obvious, and they have a low sense of achievement, which leads to dissatisfaction with the study abroad life, despite the existence of many scholarships and emotional support from their classmates.

Instead of simply strengthening material support for overseas students, education departments and parents should pay attention to the inhibiting and regulating effect of academic burnout. Giving overseas students too much material support, such as money, will sometimes not only improve their life satisfaction, but also tempt them to ignore their studies and, instead, spend money on gaming devices, indulge in playing games, or take drugs without supervision, which causes huge problems. In the final analysis, universities should improve the life satisfaction of international students by respecting their cultural differences, understanding their adaptation problems, and reforming the curriculum to reduce academic pressure and alleviate academic burnout (Jiang et al., 2022).

This study also has certain limitations. 250 questionnaires were distributed with 41 questionnaire items, and only 167 valid questionnaires were recovered, which is a small sample size. Besides, most of the respondents were studying in the UK, and the sample region is obvious. The sample size was expanded to verify the conclusions of this paper. It is also essential to further develop and enrich the study of the construction of international students' social support system and the early warning mechanism of academic burnout.

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