

The Impact of Perceived Social Support on Career Management Competencies among Applied University Students in China

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Abstract

As the pace of industrial upgrading accelerates and youth employment pressures intensify, enhancing career management competence among students in higher vocational education institutions (HVEIs) has become critical for their career adaptability and sustainable development. While existing research has predominantly focused on external supply factors, such as educational resources and policy support, the intrinsic psychological drivers and extrinsic social environmental factors influencing career management competence remain underexplored. Bridging this gap, this study investigates the extent to which self-efficacy and perceived social support (from family, school, and peers) predict and shape HVEI's career management competence. Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory and Social Support Theory, data were collected from 609 HVEI students across multiple provinces in China via questionnaire surveys. They were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). Results indicate that perceived social support exerts a significant positive effect on career management competence among students at higher vocational education institutions. The findings provide practical insights for designing psychologically empowering and socially supportive interventions that aim to cultivate robust vocational planning capabilities within the context of higher vocational education.

Keywords: perceived social support; career management competencies; self-efficacy; higher vocational education institutions

Introduction

Career management competency, defined as an individual's capacity to plan, adjust, and optimize career development trajectories, plays a crucial role in helping college students clarify their professional goals, enhance their employability, and foster holistic development (Hirschi et al., 2018). However, with China's gross higher education enrollment rate exceeding 60% (Ministry of Education, 2023), college students at higher vocational education institutions now constitute 16.7 million individuals, accounting for 41.2% of the total tertiary student population (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024). As the primary source of technically skilled personnel, this cohort faces systemic constraints in career management competence development, including inadequate information acquisition, ambiguous occupational awareness, insufficient practical experience, and diminished self-efficacy, thereby constraining their advancement in career management competence (Wang & Li, 2024).

To date, although there is some research on high-quality university students' career management competencies or corresponding courses in the existing literature (Bragg et al., 2021; Hirschi & Koen, 2021) There are few studies on career management competencies for higher vocational education institutions that systematically and exclusively examine this topic. As is well-known, higher vocational education institutions aim to cultivate skilled talents and serve the local economy. (Li, 2024). In this study, the term higher vocational education institutions refers broadly to institutions in China that focus on cultivating industry-aligned technical competencies. With 674 higher vocational education institutions constituting 53.07% of China's undergraduate institutions (Xinhua Daily, 2022) improving career management programs and employment curricula in these areas is critical to advancing industry-academia collaboration, modernizing innovation-driven education, and aligning graduate competencies with labor market needs.

This study examined the mechanisms linking perceived social support, self-efficacy, and career management competencies among Chinese higher vocational education institutions. A cluster sampling method was employed to recruit 609 participants (gender-balanced, spanning multiple academic years) from applied universities. The research tested the theoretical pathway of “perceived social support → self-efficacy → career management competencies,” with a focus on examining the significance of the mediating effect.

Research Objective

1. To examine the relationship between perceived social support (PSS) and career management competencies (CMC).
2. To examine the relationship between perceived social support (PSS) and self-efficacy (SEE).
3. To examine the relationship between self-efficacy (SEE) and career management competencies (CMC).

Literature Review

Social support is a fundamental concept in social psychology that explains how individuals receive assistance from others to cope with stress and foster development. According to the classification proposed by Wethington and Kessler (1986) and later expanded by Furukawa et al. (1999), social support can be divided into two types: objective support (Received Social Support) and subjective support (Perceived Social Support). Perceived social support refers to an individual's emotional experience and sense of satisfaction derived from feeling respected, understood, and supported by others. It is closely tied to one's subjective psychological state (Wu et al., 2021). Many scholars argue that perceived social support is more significant than received support in influencing behavior and development, as the perception of support—rather than the objective amount—constitutes the psychological reality that shapes individual outcomes (Wu et al., 2021).

Perceived social support has been extensively applied in fields such as education, mental health, and career development. Within the context of career development, it is often conceptualized as an environmental factor that helps individuals navigate their career paths by offering emotional and social resources. For instance, Hongyu (2024) found that social support significantly enhances college students' career management competencies. However, the study did not specify the relative contributions of each dimension of social support.

To address measurement challenges, Wu et al. (2025) recently developed a short version of the Perceived Social Support Scale (PSSS-M6), which offers a more concise and psychometrically sound tool for assessing perceived support in empirical research.

The concept of Career Management Competencies (CMC) emerged in the United States in the late 1980s, aiming to empower individuals to take control of their career development and advancement. Bridgstock (2009) defined college students' career management competencies as their ability to proactively and purposefully construct their own career paths to secure appropriate

educational or employment opportunities. This framework emphasizes individual agency, planning, and adaptability.

Hirschi et al. (2018) further elaborated on the concept by developing a multidimensional scale that categorizes career management competencies into eight distinct areas, including goal setting, self-assessment, planning, and resource utilization. This model offers a comprehensive framework for assessing how individuals manage and develop their careers, particularly within dynamic labor markets.

Self-efficacy, first introduced by Bandura (1989a, 1989b), refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviors necessary to achieve specific goals. In the context of career development, self-efficacy functions as a crucial psychological mechanism that shapes decision-making, persistence, and adaptability.

Lent and Brown (2013), building on Bandura's theory, proposed that both environmental support and self-efficacy significantly influence self-directed career behaviors. They suggested that perceived environmental support can enhance self-efficacy, which in turn promotes more effective career self-management. Similarly, Betz and Hackett (1981) adapted Bandura's social learning theory to career counseling, leading to the development of Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), which highlights self-efficacy as a predictor of career interest, goals, and performance.

Furthermore, Xu and Tracey (2015) demonstrated that individuals with high levels of career decision-making self-efficacy also tend to exhibit greater career maturity, characterized by more thoughtful career choices and goal alignment. This evidence underscores the critical role of self-efficacy as a mediator between external support and internal career capabilities.

Based on the literature, the conceptual framework is generally formed (See Figure 1). There are three hypotheses in this study, which are as follows:

H1: Perceived social support positively influences career management competencies.

H2a: Perceived social support (PSS) positively influences self-efficacy (SEE).

H2b: Self-efficacy (SEE) positively influences career management competencies (CMC).

Theoretical Framework.

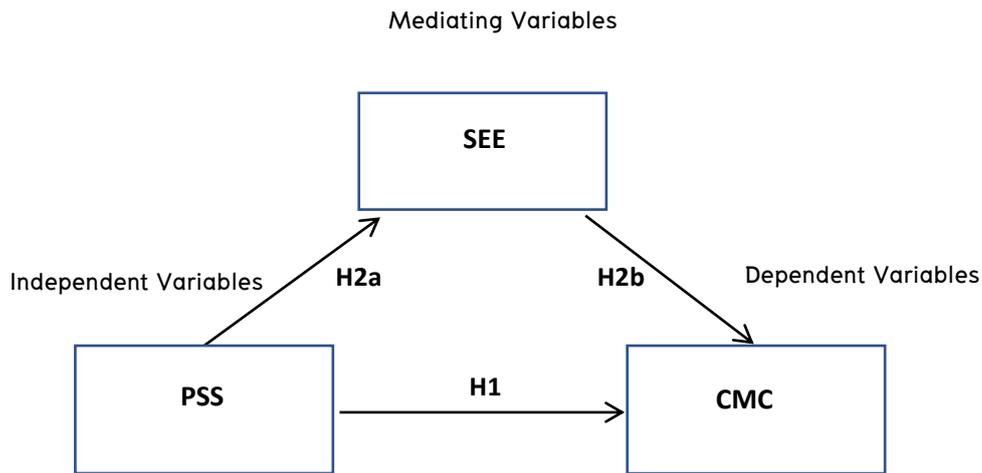


Figure 1 Research Model

Research Methodology

The data for this research were collected across several provinces in China, including Yunnan and Shanxi, utilizing both online and offline survey methods to enhance representativeness and ensure a diverse pool of responses. A total of 609 valid responses were obtained through a multistage convenience sampling approach, exceeding the recommended minimum sample size required for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS–SEM), which stipulates a minimum of 10 cases per indicator (Hair et al., 2021). This robust sample size strengthens the reliability of the model estimation and significantly improves statistical power.

Surveys were administered in major vocational colleges, youth development centers, and community hubs using a carefully structured questionnaire designed to measure perceived social support, career management competencies, and self–efficacy. Offline data collection was conducted with the assistance of trained research assistants who ensured accurate administration and explanation of questionnaire items. Simultaneously, online surveys were distributed through academic mailing lists, social media platforms (such as WeChat and QQ), and university career counseling portals to reach students who might not be accessible through physical channels.

Participants were screened based on specific inclusion criteria. All respondents were students from higher vocational education colleges aged 18 years or older, who were either actively engaged in career planning or had participated in career–related development activities. The use of both online and offline modes reduced sampling bias and broadened the demographic spectrum, thereby enhancing the external validity of the study.

Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, with informed consent obtained before survey initiation, in accordance with the ethical guidelines for psychological and educational research. The final sample comprised a heterogeneous group in terms of gender, academic major, and year of study, as illustrated in Table 1, providing a solid empirical foundation for examining how perceived social support and self-efficacy influence students' career management competencies in the contemporary Chinese educational context.

Based on the 10:1 ratio recommended by Nunnally and Bernstein (1978) for structural equation modeling, and with 49 measurement items, the minimum required sample size was 490. To enhance data representativeness, 1,000 questionnaires were distributed using cluster sampling across approximately 10 higher vocational education institutions nationwide. A total of 668 responses were received, of which 59 were excluded due to invalid or duplicate entries, resulting in 609 valid responses for analysis.

Research Results

The descriptive statistics indicated that the sample aimed to encompass multiple academic disciplines while maintaining a relatively balanced gender composition. However, 52.73% of respondents were from STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) majors, and 44.54% from liberal arts disciplines (see Figure 2)—female participants (56.93%) slightly outnumbered males (43.07%). The distribution across academic years was as follows: 24.55% of first-year students, 37.04% of second-year students, 30.59% of third-year students, and 5.62% of fourth-year students, with an additional 2.19% enrolled in Top-up Degree Programs.

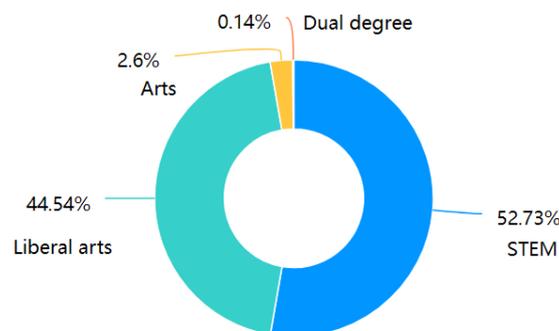


Figure 2 Academic majors of participants

To assess the internal consistency of the measurements, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated using SPSS 25.0, and the results are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 (or, for brevity, in Figure 3). As can be seen, the scale's reliability was acceptable, with all Cronbach's α coefficients exceeding 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1978).

Table 1 Reliability Analysis of each dimension of the dependent variable

Variable	Items	CITC	Cronbach's α after item deletion	Cronbach's α
SC	SC1	.855	.932	.945
	SC2	.797	.942	
	SC3	.886	.926	
	SC4	.868	.930	
	SC5	.849	.933	
IS	IS1	.821	.925	.937
	IS2	.843	.922	
	IS3	.747	.934	
	IS4	.847	.921	
	IS5	.812	.926	
	IS6	.813	.926	
TM	TM1	.785	.920	.931
	TM2	.743	.925	
	TM3	.837	.913	
	TM4	.799	.918	
	TM5	.834	.914	
	TM6	.790	.920	
PA	PA1	.864	.956	.962
	PA2	.889	.954	
	PA3	.887	.954	
	PA4	.890	.953	
	PA5	.878	.955	
	PA6	.864	.956	
DM	DM1	.760	.917	.927
	DM2	.741	.919	
	DM3	.821	.909	
	DM4	.796	.912	
	DM5	.792	.913	
	DM6	.815	.910	

Variable	Items	CITC	Cronbach's α after item deletion	Cronbach's α
KE	KE1	.572	.901	.897
	KE2	.742	.876	
	KE3	.799	.868	
	KE4	.795	.868	
	KE5	.764	.873	
	KE6	.680	.887	
FD	FD1	.812	.872	.907
	FD2	.753	.893	
	FD3	.840	.862	
	FD4	.758	.891	

Table 2 Reliability Analysis of the independent variable

Variable	Items	CITC	Cronbach's α after item deletion	Cronbach's α
PSS	PS1	.624	.866	0.878
	PS2	.606	.869	
	PS3	.780	.841	
	PS4	.710	.852	
	PS5	.763	.842	
	PS6	.641	.867	

Table 3 Reliability Analysis of mediating variable

Variable	Items	CITC	Cronbach's α after item deletion	Cronbach's α
SEE	SE1	.694	.949	.950
	SE2	.699	.949	
	SE3	.744	.947	
	SE4	.831	.943	
	SE5	.815	.944	
	SE6	.739	.947	
	SE7	.838	.943	
	SE8	.863	.942	
	SE9	.839	.943	
	SE10	.824	.943	

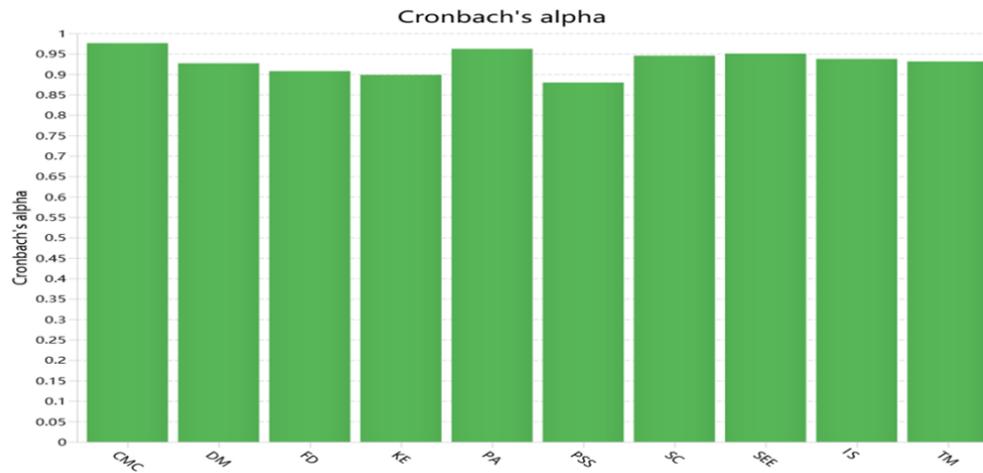


Figure 3 Cronbach's alpha

Since the large-sample data utilized a validated questionnaire, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was implemented with AMOS 22.0.0 software. Figure 4 displays the standardized path diagram generated through CFA procedures.

This research employed the combination of root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) as primary decision criteria for model fit evaluation. Meanwhile, goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) are generally considered supplementary indicators (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Notably, Yuan et al. (2013) explicitly abandoned GFI as a reliability metric in their analytical framework. Recent methodological developments suggest that GFI and AGFI thresholds exceeding 0.7 may indicate an acceptable model fit under specific analytical conditions (Sahoo, 2019).

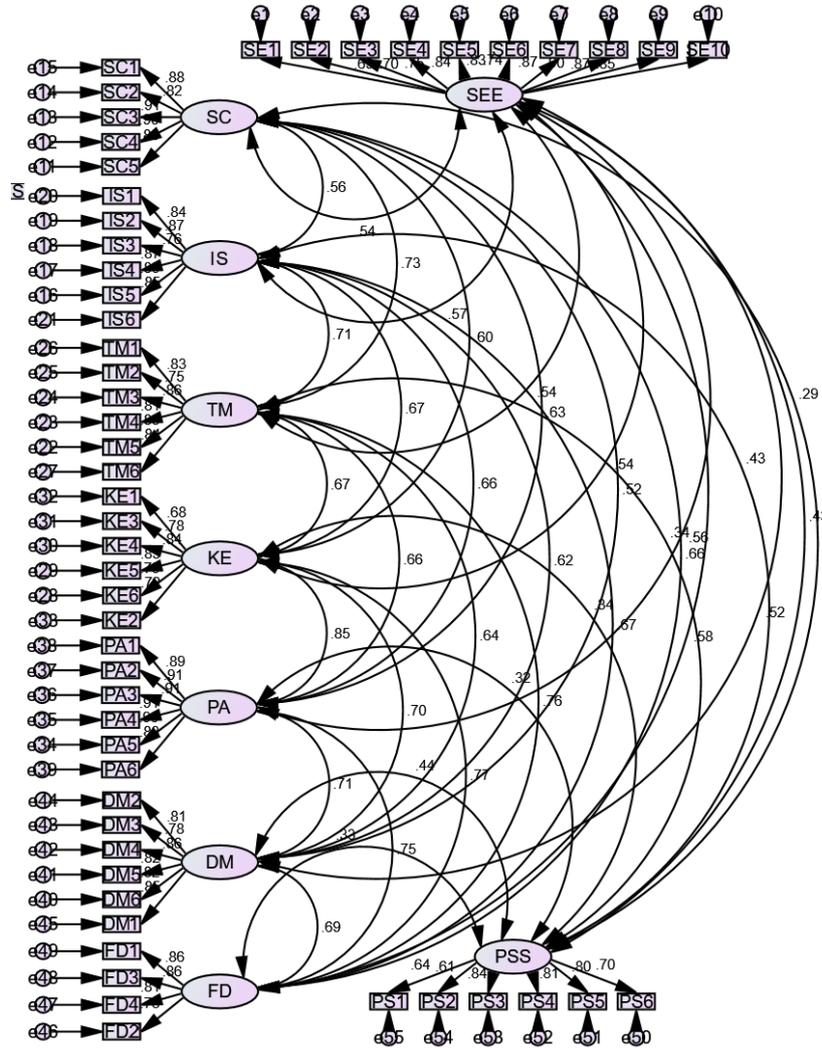


Figure 4 Confirmatory factor model

The confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated satisfactory model fit with $\chi^2/df = 2.911$ (acceptable range 1–3), RMSEA = 0.058 (<0.08 threshold), CFI = 0.908 and TLI = 0.903 (both >0.90 standard), along with GFI = 0.779 and AGFI = 0.757 (exceeding 0.7 minimum and approaching 0.8), collectively indicating that all indices met established psychometric criteria and supported the model's robust measurement properties.

Table 4 Model fitting index

Indicator	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	IFI	RMR	GFI	AGFI
Value	2.911	0.058	0.908	0.903	0.909	0.050	0.779	0.757
Ref value	<5	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.08	>0.7	>0.7
C.Met	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. C. Met = Criteria Met status; Yes, fulfillment of a specific standard

Table 5 Construct reliability and validity

Variable	Cronbach's α	(rho_a)	CR (rho_c)	AVE
CMC	0.976	0.977	0.977	0.526
DM	0.927	0.929	0.942	0.732
FD	0.907	0.908	0.935	0.783
KE	0.898	0.905	0.923	0.667
PA	0.962	0.962	0.969	0.841
PSS	0.880	0.890	0.909	0.625
SC	0.945	0.946	0.958	0.821
SEE	0.950	0.953	0.958	0.694
IS	0.937	0.938	0.950	0.762
TM	0.931	0.933	0.946	0.744

The construct validity of the scale was established through SmartPLS analysis, with Figures 4 and 5 demonstrating convergent validity criteria ($\text{rho}_c > 0.9$ and $\text{rho}_a > 0.9$) that meet psychometric thresholds, confirming the strong internal consistency of the measurement model. As depicted in Figure 6, while the second-order construct career management competencies (CMC) yielded an average variance extracted (AVE) of 0.526, all other latent variables exhibited AVE values ≥ 0.625 (maximum 0.841), surpassing the recommended ≥ 0.5 benchmark, thereby indicating that latent variables accounted for at least 52.6% of observed variance and supporting effective theoretical representation through measurement items, collectively affirming robust composite validity.

Discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) via SmartPLS analysis, which quantifies the correlation ratio between distinct constructs, with all HTMT values adhering to the stringent threshold of < 0.85 (rigorous criterion). As presented in Table 6, the HTMT values among latent variables uniformly complied with this criterion, confirming adequate discriminant validity.

Table 6 Discriminant validity

	CMC	DM	FD	KE	PA	PSS	SC	SEE
PSS	0.423	0.448	0.331	0.324	0.316			
SC						0.313		
SEE	0.648	0.498	0.570	0.543	0.562	0.455	0.554	
IS						0.428		0.584
TM						0.345		0.546

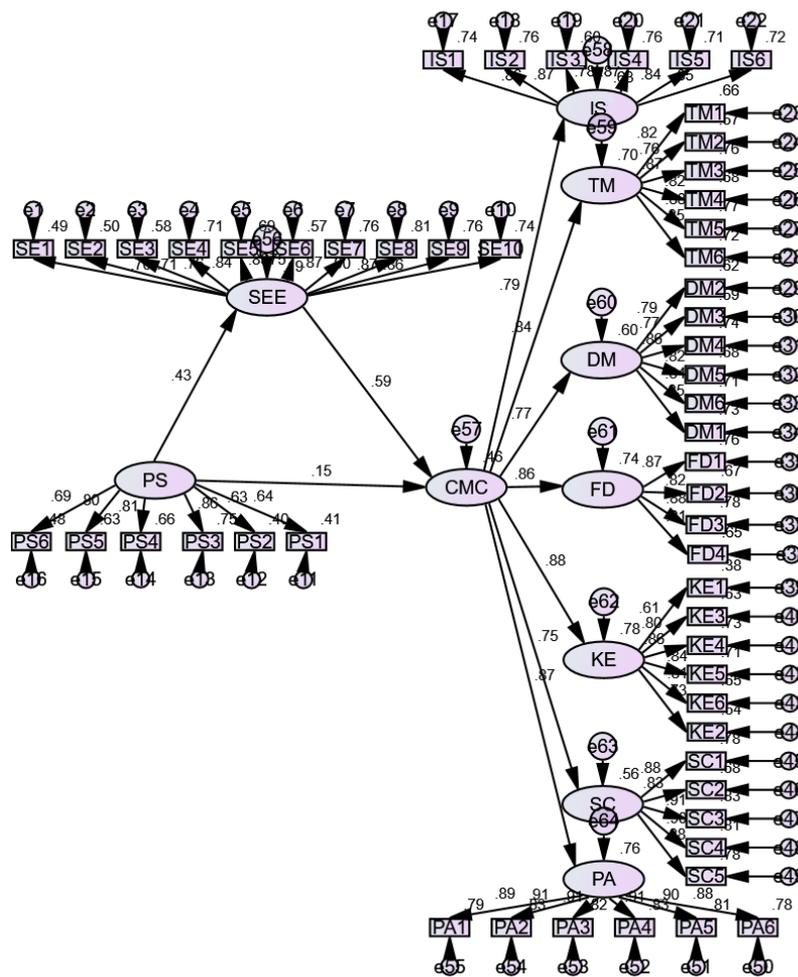


Figure 5 Standardized Path Coefficient Estimation in SEM

The validity of the structural equation modeling (SEM) was established through fit index assessments, with all primary fit indices meeting established thresholds and supplementary indices demonstrating acceptable ranges (see Table 7), collectively indicating good model fit. As shown in Figure 5, the model achieved acceptable alignment with academic standards, thereby justifying subsequent path analysis of the established relationships.

Table 7 Model fitting index

Indicator	χ^2/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	IFI	RMR	GFI	AGFI
Value	3.102	0.059	0.906	0.901	0.906	0.052	0.776	0.757
Ref value	<3	<0.08	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.08	>0.7	>0.7
C.Met	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note. C. Met = Criteria Met status; Yes= fulfillment of [specific standard]

As shown in Table 8, the direct effect of perceived social support on career management competencies (PSS • CMC) demonstrated a standardized path coefficient of 0.153 ($\beta = 0.153$, $t = 3.823$, $p < .001$), with the t-value exceeding the stringent critical threshold ($|t| \geq 2.58$). This confirms a highly significant positive relationship between perceived social support and college students' career management competencies, indicating that higher levels of perceived social support are associated with stronger career management abilities. Thus, Hypothesis H1 was supported.

Table 8 Path coefficients between variables

Path	Standardized Estimate (β)	S.E.	C.R.	P
SEE ← PSS	0.432	0.048	8.806	***
CMC ← SEE	0.594	0.052	11.664	***
CMC ← PSS	0.153	0.040	3.823	***

Regarding indirect effects, the standardized path coefficients from perceived social support to self-efficacy (PSS→SEE) and from self-efficacy to career management competencies (SEE→CMC) were 0.432 ($t = 8.806$, $p < .001$) and 0.594 ($t = 11.664$, $p < .001$), respectively, both exceeding the stringent critical threshold ($|t| \geq 2.58$). These results confirm a highly significant positive influence of perceived social support on self-efficacy and of self-efficacy on career management competencies. (Wang & Jiao, 2023).

Following the methodological framework proposed by Wen and Ye (2014), the indirect effect and its proportion were calculated using the formulas:

$$IE = a \times b$$

$$PME = \frac{a \times b}{c}$$

Formula 2 & 3 IE and PME calculation formulas

Note. PME Proportion of mediating effect, IE = Indirect Effect, a path coefficient from PSS to SEE, b path coefficient from SEE to CMC, c the total effect.

Source: Wen and Ye (2014)

The indirect effect of perceived social support (PSS) on career management competencies (CMC) through self-efficacy (SEE) was calculated as $0.432 \times 0.594 = 0.257$, indicating that self-efficacy mediated the relationship between perceived social support and career management competencies with an indirect effect of 0.257. The total effect was derived from the sum of the direct and indirect effects ($0.153 + 0.257$, resulting in 0.41). Based on Formula 3, the indirect effect accounted for 62.7% of the total effect: the direct (PSS→CMC) and indirect (PSS→SEE→CMC) effects constituted 37.3% and 62.7%, respectively. These results demonstrate that self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between perceived social support and career management competencies, thereby supporting hypotheses H2a and H2b.

Discussion

Structural equation modeling revealed that perceived social support (PSS) positively influenced career management competencies (CMC) through self-efficacy (SEE), with significant paths from PSS to SEE ($\beta_1 = 0.432$, $p < .001$) and from SEE to CMC ($\beta_2 = 0.594$, $p < .001$). The indirect effect of this mediation pathway was 0.257 (95% CI), accounting for 62.7% of the total effect. To enhance visual clarity, a schematic diagram was generated using SmartPLS 4.

Building on prior findings, perceived social support (PSS) remains a critical determinant of psychological well-being. The WDQ model further demonstrates that PSS exerts both significant direct effects on career management competencies (CMC) and indirect effects via enhanced self-efficacy (SEE) among applied university students. Therefore, within applied higher education contexts, educators and administrators can strategically foster students' CMC by strengthening PSS through mentorship, resource provision, and psychosocial empowerment. Institutions should

prioritize sustained support networks that integrate career development programs and initiatives to enhance students' psychological and competency-based outcomes.

Self-efficacy (SEE), a core dimension of psychological capital (Bandura, 1989b), reflects an individual's confidence in mobilizing context-specific competencies. As demonstrated earlier, SEE amplifies the benefits of perceived social support (PSS) and exerts a significant positive effect on career management competencies (CMC) among applied university students.

Given the domain-specific nature of SEE, interventions should prioritize experiential learning, observational modeling, and constructive feedback to enhance learning outcomes. Applied universities may deepen industry-academia collaboration to integrate cutting-edge practices into curricula, offering immersive internships where students solve real-world problems and build confidence through repeated successes. Concurrently, discipline-specific reforms—such as aligning curricula with regional development needs, updating instructional materials, and creating simulated learning environments—can enhance students' engagement and hands-on competencies. These strategies directly strengthen SEE while fostering career readiness through the iterative mastery of skills.

Conclusion

Results confirmed all hypotheses (H1, H2a, H2b). The fit model demonstrated that perceived social support exerted a strongly significant positive effect on career management competency, with self-efficacy acting as a partial mediator. These findings underscore the critical role of psychosocial resources in career development interventions. These findings demonstrate that psychosocial resources critically enhance career management competence in career interventions for students in higher vocational education institutions, supporting resource-based higher educational reforms.

Suggestions

To foster the generation of new knowledge and competencies, institutions should adopt an integrated curriculum design that dissolves the traditional boundaries between academic disciplines and career development. This can be achieved by implementing an “all-faculty-as-mentors” model, where career readiness becomes a shared responsibility across departments. Strengthening industry-academia collaboration—through recruiting dual-qualified faculty and aligning curricula with labor market needs—ensures that students acquire relevant, up-to-date

skills. Additionally, incorporating experiential learning methods such as internships, simulations, and project-based learning can provide students with mastery experiences that enhance their self-efficacy and career preparedness.

New Knowledge

The research reveals that self-efficacy mediates 62.7% of the total effect of perceived social support on career management competence, highlighting the dominant psychological pathway in the development of career competency. Additionally, the study introduces a revised, context-specific measurement model. It provides actionable insights for educational policy and curriculum reform tailored to vocational-track higher education, thereby enriching theoretical understanding and practical approaches in employability research.

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