



A Study of Competitive Attitudes, Anxiety Levels and Social Support among University Students

Yaxuan Liu ¹, Jiayuan Sun ², Zhao Zhang ³, Yan Li ⁴

(Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Beijing University of Technology, Beijing, China)

Email: ¹kuaillesophy@163.com, ²sunjiayuan1220@163.com,

³zhangzhao_clair@163.com, ⁴ly225857@126.com

Abstract. Since the Reform and Opening-up, as the education quality in China has risen dramatically, the expansion of universities and the focus of society on higher education has led to an increasing number of university students and growing competitive pressures, resulting in higher levels of social anxiety and mental health problems. For university students, excessive competition attitudes may cause anxiety and even mental illness, and social support can play a moderating role in helping them to regulate their attitudes to competition and alleviate their anxiety. Therefore, the article uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to understand the competitive attitudes, anxiety levels and social support of university students. On this basis, the article explores the interaction mechanisms between the three concepts. The results of this study are as follows: (1) Although the quantitative analysis showed that the impact of competitive attitudes on anxiety levels is weak, it was found that university students with positive competitive attitudes still felt a certain amount of anxiety in the qualitative results. (2) Excessive competitive attitudes lead to high-level of anxiety. (3) Families, peer groups and other specific individuals are various types of social support, which make different effects on students. (4) The scarce or low utilization of social support is the main reason why university students have chronically high levels of anxiety and tend to exhibit overly competitive attitudes.

Keywords: University Students' Competitive Attitudes; Anxiety Levels; Social Support; Involution

1 Introduction

In recent years, the rising social density and the relative shortage of resources have made "involutional competition" a common mode of competition among university students, which has a negative impact on their physical and mental health. The term "involution" is generally used to describe excessive competition in a certain field or a certain system, which leads people to enter into a state of mutual collusion and internal conflict, similar to vicious competition. Many university students use it to refer to irrational internal competition or "voluntold" competition. In order to further understand the influence of university students' competitive attitudes, psychological state and so-

cial support, the study explores the relationship between the competitive attitudes, anxiety levels and social support among university students, and proposes corresponding suggestions to guide the students to form a benign competitive environment and reduce conflicts. Understanding the possession and utilization of social support of university students and strengthening the friendly connection between university students and society can promote the friendly development of individuals and other social relationships, and promote the positive development of social psychology and the formation of a good competition culture.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Competitive attitudes

Competitive attitudes, as the intrinsic motivation that governs competitive behavior, exhibit dual character. On the one hand, it manifests itself as negativity, and as early as 1937, Horney introduced the concept of hyper-competitiveness, which she considered as the behavior of individuals who go to any lengths to win in order to enhance their self-worth[1], which has negative effects on individual and social development.

Other scholars, such as Ryckman, have suggested that not only are positive competitive attitudes not detrimental to others, but they also enhance individual focus and contribute to their self-development and improvement[2][3][4]. Chen Guopeng found that the study of competitive attitudes has an interculturality with his practice, so he compiled a mature and culturally appropriate version of the Competitive Attitudes Scale[5]. In this study, this scale will be used to further examine the competitive attitudes of university students.

2.2 Social support

There is no consensus in existing researches on the definition of the "social support", some scholars consider that social support is "an individual's perception of the external support he or she wants or can receive[6]", or a supportive behavior that allows individuals to improve their adjustment to society and reduce the harm caused by unfavorable circumstances by obtaining material or moral help from the outside[7][8].

Depending on the content, social support can be divided into objective social support and subjective social support. Objective social support is independent of the individual's psychological feelings and includes direct material help, actual participation in social networks or group relations, and the amount and degree of access to social contacts. Subjective social support is more closely related to an individual's subjective feelings and refers to the emotional experience and satisfaction of being respected, supported and understood in society. It has been argued that the scope covered by personal social support includes the utilization of social support[9], so this study also includes the utilization of social support.

In this study, the Social Support Rating Scale[10], which was designed by Shuiyuan Xiao, was selected to measure different dimensions of social support, namely, three categories of objective support, subjective support, and utilization of support.

2.3 Competitive attitudes, social support, and anxiety

Anxiety refers to the negative emotions that individuals experience when faced with potentially threatening as well as dangerous situations[11]. Several studies have shown that the presence of excessive competitive attitude may be accompanied by “extreme individual”[12]. Some scholars have focused on the effects of competitive attitudes on mental health, such as the relations between competitive attitudes and occupational burnout or test anxiety: one study showed a significant positive correlation between students' excessive competitive attitude and test anxiety [13].

Social support has a moderating effect on individual anxiety levels. It has been suggested that certain social support can reduce the hurtfulness of stressful situations and the severity evaluating of stressful events by increasing self-defense ability. In addition, social support can reduce stress by providing problem-solving strategies, which can reduce the importance of the problem[14].

3 Research Content

3.1 Research hypothesis

This study focuses on the three variables of competitive attitude, anxiety levels and social support among university students and establishes the following research framework.

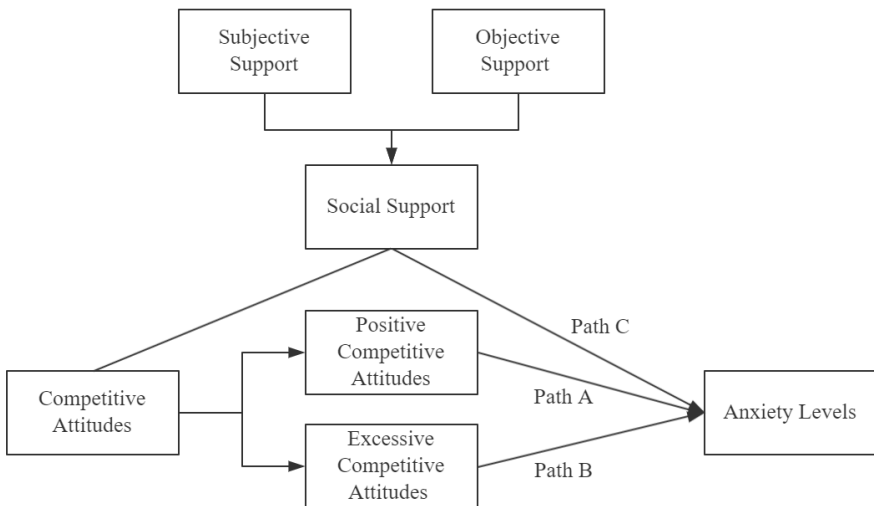


Fig. 1. Influence Paths of Competitive Attitudes, Anxiety Levels and Social Support

As shown in Figure 1, the study divided university students' competitive attitudes into two analytical dimensions: positive competitive attitudes and excessive competitive attitudes.

According to previous studies, it is known that there is a certain causal relationship between competitive attitudes and anxiety levels, i.e., Path A and Path B. To address this, taking university students as the research object, the article proposes Hypothesis 1: There is a correlation between competitive attitudes and anxiety levels among university students.

Hypothesis 1a: Positive competitive attitudes have a significant positive effect on the anxiety level of university students.

Hypothesis 1b: Excessive competitive attitudes have a significant positive effect on the anxiety level of university students.

Path C is the path of influence between social support and anxiety level of university students. Based on previous research and experience, the article proposes hypothesis 2: social support as well as support utilization has a significant negative effect on anxiety.

Hypothesis 2a: Objective social support plays a significant negative influence on anxiety psychology.

Hypothesis 2b: Subjective social support plays a significant negative influence on anxiety psychology.

Hypothesis 2c: Support utilization has a significant negative effect on anxiety.

In addition, based on experience and social support theory, this paper intends to investigate the effect of social support on the relationship between competitive attitudes and anxiety levels of university students, which leads to hypothesis 3: With the increase of social support and the utilization of support, the effect of excessive competitive attitudes on students' anxiety levels is dissipated, and the higher the social support and the utilization of support, the lower the anxiety levels of students under excessive competition.

3.2 Hypothesis testing method

This study further analyzed the causality and correlation between anxiety levels, competitive attitude and social support among university students based on descriptive analysis to test the hypothesis.

In addition, the study interpreted the quantitative results through semi-structured interview method. Twenty-four current undergraduate students from University B in different grades and majors were selected as respondents through a convenience sampling method, and interviews were conducted around the three elements of competitive attitudes, anxiety levels, and utilization of support.

From October 29, 2021 to May 28, 2022, researchers conducted 45-90 minutes of interviews with the respondents according to a pre-designed interview outline. Twenty-four interviewees were interviewed, spanning a wide range of majors, including liberal arts, science, and engineering. During the data compilation process, the interviewees were further classified into four categories: positive attitude and low anxiety level, positive attitude and high anxiety level, excessive attitude and low anxiety level, and excessive attitude and high anxiety level.

4 Variable Measurement

The main variables in this study are competitive attitudes, anxiety levels and social support among university students, and the specific variables were measured as follows.

4.1 Competitive attitudes

Based on the Chinese version of the Competitive Attitude Scale, this paper divides competitive attitudes into two independent dimensions: positive competitive attitudes and excessive competitive attitudes, both measured on a Likert 5 scale, and divided into seven levels according to the total score. With plus or minus one standard deviation to divide university students into low, medium and high-competitive attitude score groups, students with high excessive competitive attitude scores accounted for 14.3% and students with low excessive competitive attitude scores accounted for 13.0%, which shows that benign competitive attitudes are dominant in competitive attitudes, but students' excessive competitive attitude levels are still at a high level.

4.2 Anxiety levels

The anxiety levels of university students are divided into four categories: normal anxiety level, mild anxiety level, moderate anxiety level, and severe anxiety level. In this study, we measured the anxiety factors on the Likert 5 scale of the Symptom Checklist 90 (SCL-90) and used the summed score as the index of anxiety level assessment. According to statistics, the mean anxiety level of university students was 22.38, which was at a low level overall.

4.3 Social support

Social support is divided into two categories: subjective and objective. In this study, based on the Social Support Rate Scale compiled by Xiao Shuiyuan, some questions were selected and modified according to the characteristics of the university students. The results showed that the total social support score of university students was 31.627 ± 6.963 , and the students were divided into low, medium and high social support groups by plus or minus one standard deviation, with high score group accounting for 14.9% of total and low score group accounting for 13.7% of total, which shows that the social support of secondary school students is at the upper level.

After conducting the computational analysis and processing, the study obtained the results shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of variable expressiveness analysis

Variables (Assignment case)	Standard deviation	Unit: %
		Related statistics
Anxiety level (10-50 points)	9.15	Mean value

Explained variables			22.38
Explanatory variables 1: Competitive attitude of university students			Percentage
	Grade 1 (>65 points)		3.1
	Grade 2 (56-64 points)		14.9
	Grade 3 (47-55 points)		36.0
Positive Competitive Attitudes	Grade 4 (38-46 points)	10.622	29.2
	Grade 5 (29-37 points)		11.2
	Grade 6 (20-28 points)		4.3
	Grade 7 (<20 points)		1.2
	Grade 1 (>50 points)		6.2
	Grade 2 (44-49 points)		13.7
	Grade 3 (36-43 points)		49.7
Excessive Competitive Attitude	Grade 4 (29-35 points)	7.533	20.5
	Grade 5 (21-28 points)		8.1
	Grade 6 (14-20 points)		0.6
	Grade 7 (<14 points)		1.2
Explanatory variables 2: Social Support			Mean value
	Total social support (11-55 points)	6.963	31.62
Level of social support	Subjective support score (7-28 points)	4.057	17.24
	Objective support score (1-16 points)	3.172	7.47
	Level of utilization of support (3-12 points)	1.876	6.93

5 Analysis of Study Results

5.1 Analysis of the relationship between anxiety levels and competitive attitudes of university students

Table 2. Different dimensions of anxiety levels and competitive attitudes among university students

Variables	Model A	Model B	Model C
Competitive Attitudes			
Positive Competitive Attitudes	-0.048 (-0.068)		-0.319 (0.083**)

Excessive Competi- tive Attitudes		0.230 (0.094**)	0.431 (0.117***)
R ²	0.004	0.047	0.103

* $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$

After multiple linearity tests, the coefficient of variance inflation of the independent variables within each of the four models is less than 2, so the independent variables of each Model Can be included in the regression model into the analysis.

In Table 2, Model A and Model B are linear regression models of the effects of positive competitive attitudes and excessive competitive attitudes on university students' anxiety, and Model C incorporates both core independent variables to examine the differences in the magnitude of their effects on university students' anxiety.

Model A shows that the effect of positive competitive attitudes on individuals' anxiety level is not significant, and Hypothesis 1a is not valid. From Model B, it can be seen that excessive competitive attitudes have a significant positive effect on individuals' anxiety ($p < 0.01$), and Hypothesis 1b holds. The negative effect of positive competitive attitudes become significant ($p \leq 0.01$) after including both excessive competitive attitudes and positive competitive attitudes in Model C, but this is largely influenced by the variable of excessive competitive attitudes.

Positive competitive attitudes may also bring high anxiety levels, first of all, confusion about the future can lead university students into anxiety and self-doubt. "What I think about in high school is purely about exams, and when I have to think about employment and the future in university, it makes me feel anxious" (Guo). The disconnection between their education and their future work can bring anxiety to university students. Secondly, university students are easily influenced by the external environment of "involution". The "involutional" competition is an extremely common social phenomenon, which is a kind of modern anxiety[15]. In this over-competitive environment, even in a small group with a good competitive atmosphere, university students still feel anxious because of the contradiction between the general atmosphere and the small one. "Putting it into the overall perspective, the base of examinations is getting bigger and bigger, and the pressure of social competition is increasing" (Xia). Lastly, for some university students, they often feel anxious due to their unique personality traits. "My highest demand now is my study, but (this) satisfies my demand at the moment" (Yung). High anxiety levels are often closely related to the anxiety-prone personality traits of some university students.

It can be seen that there is a certain association between positive competitive attitudes and anxiety levels among university students, but positive competitive attitudes do not correspond to lower anxiety levels. Confusion about future development, fear of an overly competitive general atmosphere, and personal personality traits could all have an impact on university students' anxiety levels.

5.2 Analysis of the relationship between anxiety level and social support among university students

Table 3. Regression analysis of anxiety level on each dimension of social support

Variables	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
Social Support				
Objective Support	-0.245 (-0.222**)			-0.097 (0.249)
Subjective Support		-0.244 (0.174**)		-0.151 (0.063)
Utilization of Support			-0.300 (0.369***)	-0.214 (0.012***)
R ²	0.054	0.053	0.084	0.108

Note: Standard errors in the brackets, significance levels are marked as *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

After the multicollinearity test, the coefficient of variance inflation of the independent variables within each of the four models was less than 2, so the independent variables of each Model Could be included in the regression model for analysis. As could be seen from Table 4, Model A, Model B, and Model C were linear regression models for the effects of objective support, subjective support, and utilization of support on university students' anxiety levels, respectively, and Model D included all three core independent variables into the Model At the same time to examine the differences in the magnitude of their effects on anxiety levels.

From Model A, it can be seen that objective support has a significant negative effect on university students' anxiety levels ($p < 0.01$), and Hypothesis 2a holds. From Model B it can be seen that subjective support has a significant negative effect on individual anxiety levels ($p < 0.01$), ($p < 0.01$), and Hypothesis 2c holds. From Model C it can be seen that the utilization of support has a significant negative effect on individual anxiety levels ($P < 0.001$), and Hypothesis 2c holds. From Model D, it can be seen that after including subjective support, objective support and utilization of support simultaneously in the model, the coefficient significance of subjective support and objective support decreases, while the coefficient significance of utilization of support ($P < 0.001$) remains almost unchanged, indicating that the effects of objective support and subjective support are dissipated by utilization of support.

Based on the interviews, it is clear that the role of social support varies from one source to another. Core family members are very important sources of social support for university students. As a place divided from school, family can give university students rich material resources and spiritual nourishment, making it an ideal place for university students to get away from competition, release anxiety and seek identity. The material support provided by family capital and the spiritual support brought by family members can reduce university students' anxiety level and increase their subjective motivation, and play a key role in the formation of their benign competitive attitude. "Every time I go home, I feel alive again" (Kang); "My father also studies similar majors, sometimes talking about my professional knowledge with him can help me relieve some stress, my father can be considered my spiritual pillar" (Yang). It can be seen that

the intimacy of blood relations makes students willing to express their real sources of anxiety and can get the most direct and effective guidance.

Second, peer group support, such as classmates and friends, is also critical for university students. Students are able to properly manage competitive relationships with peer groups and develop them as an important source of social support. "Talking to friends can really relieve anxiety ... high school friends are the main source of support in my life because of good relationships, no competitive conflicts and not being in the same school, so there is a lot to talk about" (Han). Similar age, equal relationships and free friendship, choices make university students more inclined to communicate with peer groups. On the one hand, peers in different fields, such as high school friends, are the most important part of social support for university students because they are not in competition with each other. On the other hand, peer groups with positive role models in the same field can also indirectly contribute to the regulation of one's mentality and the improvement of one's ability. "My homework grouping was with the first in my grade, she actually kept pushing me along, and I really learned a lot from her" (Ma).

Third, external professional support such as counseling is also increasingly becoming an important way for people to get support and release their emotions. "I had some psychological problems during my second semester of freshman year, and my mom took me to see my psychiatrist, and after that everything solved. It just felt like if it was really something I couldn't handle at all, and no one around to help me, I would definitely go talk to a therapist" (Yan). Professional counseling channels are an effective source of social support when you are unable to relieve anxiety on your own. Seeking timely help from a professional agency can alleviate the level of one's anxiety and restore a healthy state of mind.

5.3 Analysis of the effect of social support on the relationship between competitive attitudes and anxiety levels

Table 4. OLS analysis of factors influencing anxiety levels of university students

Variables	Model A	Model B
Competitive Attitudes		
Positive Competitive Attitudes	-0.319 (-3.312***)	-0.170 (-1.731*)
Excessive Competitive Attitudes	0.431 (4.474***)	0.379 (4.084***)
Social Support		
Objective Support		-0.66 (-0.803)
Subjective Support		-0.175 (-2.165**)
Utilization of Support		-0.201 (-2.472**)
R ²	0.103	0.189

Note: Standard errors in the brackets, significance levels are marked as *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

The coefficient of variance inflation of the independent variables within each of the four models was less than 2 after multiple covariance testing, so the independent variables of each Model Could be included in the regression model. After adding social support variables, the combined explanatory power of the models increased from 10.3% to 18.9%, and the effect of overcompetitive attitudes on anxiety levels significantly weakened, indicating that the positive effect of overcompetitive attitudes on university students' anxiety levels tended to weaken as social support and utilization of support increased, so Hypothesis 3 held.

On this basis, this research conducted in-depth interviews with high-anxiety university students under excessive competitive attitudes around social support and utilization. The results of the interview show that this type of university students can divided into two categories: lack of sufficient social support and hard to use social support. Specifically, these two categories are divided into four types (Figure 2):

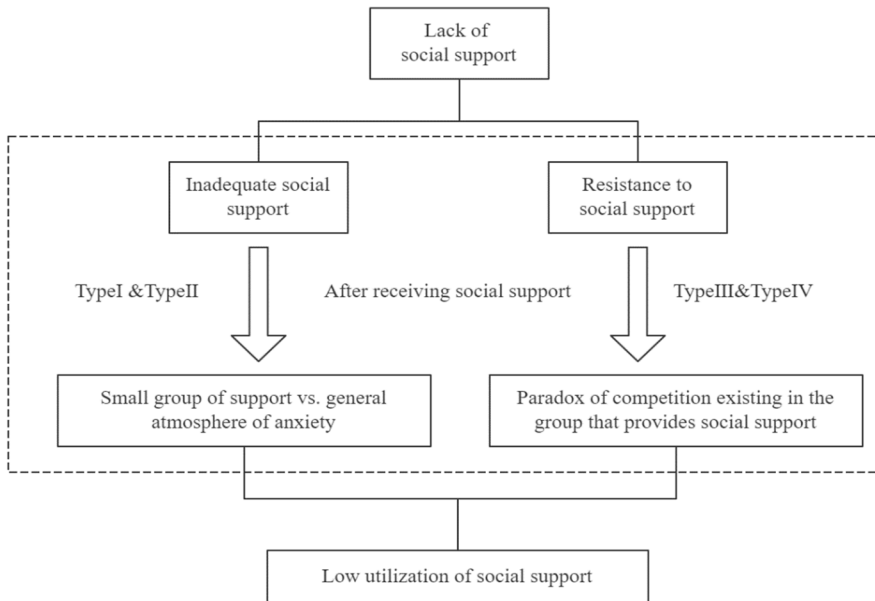


Fig. 2. The logic of social support influence

Type I, little or no social support was felt. For some of the interviewees, personality traits and other influences make them feel chronically insecure. When facing with limited resources and clear competitors, over-competition become a form of self-regulation. "If he doesn't have a conflict of interest with me, I can adapt to the thing. But if he's in competition with me, then I either have to overtake him or keep up with him to secure my own interests which makes me feel more anxious, so I'll do everything I can to make sure I will not be pulled down" (Xuan).

For some competitors who are insecure, excessive competition can partially relieve anxiety. However, at the same time, the aversion to competition can further aggravate the anxiety situation. Thus, excessive competition can temporarily compensate for the lack of social support and alleviate anxiety, yet it cannot alleviate the anxiety caused

by being in an overly competitive environment because of the lack of social support for long periods of time.

Type II, refusal to using social support. Another group of people who have less social support is more subjectively rejecting all kinds of social support that may exist. When confronting with family support, they consider it childish and inappropriate. And they believe that they should not continue to seek help from their families in adulthood. When confronting with peer support, they place more value on themselves than on the group. "To be honest, I think my classmates are too immature. I don't want to converse with them, and I can't have a chat with them" (Jiang).

Type III, the paradox that competition exists in the group that provides social support leads to the decrease of support utilization of university students. Peer groups are one of the main sources of social support for university students and their main competitors. As a result, the conflict between different roles of the same group puts university students in a paradoxical dilemma. "Our classmates are particularly close ... but there is also competition between us, and it is difficult to completely detach from the competitive relationship to support others unconditionally" (Ma). Social support from peer groups is dissipated by mutual competition, and once there is a stronger competitive relationship, the role of social support will be significantly reduced, and even the transmission of anxiety will occur.

Type IV, social support within a small group cannot resolve the high anxiety level triggered by vicious competition in a general atmosphere. Faced with the state of involution in the whole occupation, some interviewees began to worry whether they could still have enough competitiveness in the general atmosphere. "I've been studying digital media for four years and I still can't find any competitiveness of my own" (Xia). "Now it's not just about my surrounding classmates, the industries that are related to design are too involved, I really think I can't do it, and I don't have the courage to stick in this industry" (Wu). Pressure from the larger external environment can still drive some students with social support into a state of excessive competition or high anxiety. Although they have already gotten a lot of social support, their confusion and negative attitudes about the larger environment can still keep them from gaining enough strength from the support they already have.

For the first group of students, excessive competition can relieve anxiety temporarily, but can also lead to further anxiety. Lack of social support and security is likely to persist for a long time, and even with adequate social support, students in the fourth category may still have difficulty resisting the stress and anxiety from the larger group and social environment.

For the third group of students, they will tend to treat the group around them as competitors and thus fall into a high anxiety condition which is hard to get rid of. As they begin to receive some social support from their peers, they are more likely to become Type III students due to their competitive habits. Therefore, they usually have to look for support in other fields, but competitive relationship is difficult to avoid in the peer group.

6 Conclusion

There is a link between university students' competitive attitudes and anxiety levels, and social support has an impact on university students' anxiety levels. The results of the data show that, firstly, the positive competitive attitudes of university students have less influence on their anxiety levels, but further interview results show that holding positive competitive attitudes sometimes still leads to anxiety. The confusion about the future, the worsening social competition and the personal character traits are all important influencing factors that make university students anxious. Second, excessive competitive attitudes are closely related to high anxiety level. Thus, it can be seen that there is a complex connection between the competitive attitudes and anxiety levels of university students, and this connection ultimately points to the need of university students for their own future development.

At the aspect of social support, first, different sources of social support can have different effects, and external support such as family members, peer groups and psychologists are effective sources of anxiety reduction for university students. Second, over-competitive university students with high anxiety level have difficulties in seeking and using social support. They face four situations: little or difficult to feel social support, refusal to use social support, support resources and competition rivals are come from the same group, and the pressure of large group on small group. Thus, it is clear that the absence or deficiency of social support has a complex and obvious impact on the mental health status of university students.

- Based on this, all sectors of society should pay attention to the competitive attitudes, anxiety levels and social support of university students and care about the development of their mental health. This paper makes the following recommendations based on the findings of the study.

Suggestion 1: At the level of competition, excessive competitive attitudes bring high anxiety level, so the government and enterprises need to create diversified channels of further education and employment for university students to alleviate their competitive pressure.

- Suggestion 2: At the dimension of support, different types of social support have different impacts, so parents, universities and society should provide a comprehensive support system for university students to provide them with a strong social support. In addition, university students also need to improve their utilization of support and convert it into motivation to resolve anxiety and make continuous progress.

For high-anxiety students who are excessively competitive and face problems such as lack of social support and have difficulties in using social support, they need to be proactive in seeking help, paying attention to their psychological situation, and actively cooperating to build social support.

- Suggestion 3: At the anxiety dimension, students need to be well supported with appropriate counseling, proper guidance and positive companionship in a joint home-school approach, basing on student regulation.

As the society is expanding its investment in education, the social influence brought by "involutional competition" has become a problem which cannot be ignored. Families, universities and governments should pay more attention to the mental health of university students.

This paper is based on three aspects of competition, social support and anxiety, and the conclusions obtained are able to provide support and guidance for college students to a certain extent, effectively enhance the healthy growth environment of young groups, and promote the reserve and development of professional strength in China.

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