



# Adaptability and Life Satisfaction: The Moderating Role of Social Support

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the moderating role of social support in the relationship between adaptability and life satisfaction. Data were collected from 99 undergraduate freshmen in a Chinese university using a lagged design with a 1-month interval. Results demonstrated that social support moderated the relation between adaptability and life satisfaction, such that the positive relation between adaptability and life satisfaction was stronger for individuals with higher levels of social support than for individuals with lower levels of social support. The theoretical and practical implications of this result are discussed.

**Keywords:** individual adaptability, life satisfaction, social support

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## INTRODUCTION

The ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment facilitates positive outcomes (Wilkins et al., 2014). Specifically, adaptability refers to “an individual’s ability, skill, disposition, willingness, and/or motivation to change or fit different task, social, or environmental features” (Ployhart and Bliese, 2006). Adaptability is considered to be a key source of mental resources. Individuals with a high level of adaptability can reserve more psychological resources than individuals with a low level of adaptability (Ployhart and Bliese, 2006). Psychological resources are especially important for newcomers who are encountering a totally new environment. The increasingly changing nature of modern life requires individuals to constantly improve their ability to adapt (Ployhart and Bliese, 2006). To adapt to changing circumstances, individuals have to exhibit adaptability both in cognition and behavior (Ployhart and Bliese, 2006).

According to the model of conservation of resources, resources, including both personal and conditional resources, are important factors that can protect individuals from stress in both work and non-work contexts (Hobfoll, 2001). As such, resources would be expected to improve the quality of life. If people attempt to create and maintain personal and conditional resources, they can enhance and avoid losing these resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Accordingly, this is a useful strategy to create pleasure and success.

In the present study, adaptability is considered to be a kind of personal resource that helps individuals to accommodate changing conditions. The environment is often a threat to or can deplete personal resources, but social support can help protect personal resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, in the present study, social support is considered to be a conditional resource. Thus, based on the construct of conservation of resources, we hypothesize that there is an interaction effect between adaptability and social support on some positive outcomes, such as life satisfaction.

Adaptability and social support are both positive factors in the psychological health domain, and they should jointly promote life satisfaction. However, research to date has failed to examine

the interaction effects of these constructs and to investigate the extent to which social support, as a situational factor, strengthens or inhibits the relation between adaptability and life satisfaction. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to determine if social support moderates the relation between adaptability and life satisfaction.

## Adaptability and Life Satisfaction

Adaptability can be considered a type of self-regulation resource, which is perceived to be a kind of strength that allows control over self (Muraven and Baumeister, 2000, p. 247), and is important in helping individuals adjust to a new environment. Thus, adaptability can promote positive outcomes. For example, there is a positive correlation between adaptability and well-being (Maggiori et al., 2013) and, in university freshmen, adaptation was negatively related to depressive symptoms and level of stress (Dyson and Renk, 2006).

Life satisfaction is an individual's self-evaluation of their quality of life determined using their own rules (Shin and Johnson, 1978). Life satisfaction is the cognitive component of subjective well-being (Pavot and Diener, 1993). Life satisfaction is an important variable and reflects the state of an individual's life as well as their mental state (Pavot and Diener, 1993).

A number of studies have explored the antecedents of life satisfaction (Moksnes and Espnes, 2013; Bastian et al., 2014; Luhmann et al., 2014; Malinauskas et al., 2014; Bourassa et al., 2015; Cheung and Lucas, 2015). From a resource perspective, adaptability can be considered an antecedent of life satisfaction (Wang et al., 2011; Mackey et al., 2013; Stoltz et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2015). A longitudinal study showed that the growth of career adaptability over time was a predictor of the growth of life satisfaction over time (Hirschi, 2009). Santilli et al. (2014) observed a group of adult workers with mild mental disability and found that career adaptability indirectly predicted life satisfaction. Zacher and Griffin (2015) reported that the age of old workers moderated the association between career ability and job satisfaction. Using longitudinal data from high school adolescents, Martin et al. (2013) found that adaptability was positively related to both academic outcomes (i.e., class participation, school enjoyment, and positive academic intentions) and non-academic outcomes (self-esteem, life satisfaction, and sense of meaning and purpose). As such, we hypothesized that, in university freshmen, adaptability would be positively related to life satisfaction.

## The Moderating Role of Social Support

Social support refers to information from others expressing concern, love, respect, or value (Kim et al., 2008). Social support has buffering effects that could relieve the pressure felt by individuals (Eaton, 1978). Individuals that received higher levels of social support reported higher levels of well-being (Shakespeare-Finch and Obst, 2011), indicating that social support can result in or promote positive psychological outcomes.

An increasing number of studies are focusing on the effect of social support on life satisfaction (Selda et al., 2013). For example, perceived social support positively affected life satisfaction

(Shahyad et al., 2011), school-related social support from parents, peers, and teachers predicted the global life satisfaction of adolescents (Siddall et al., 2013), support from spouses was positively related to life satisfaction (Park and Fritz, 2015), and support predicted life satisfaction, via academic satisfaction (Garriott et al., 2015).

As mentioned above, adaptability and social support are both positive factors in the psychological health domain, and they should jointly promote life satisfaction. However, although research shows that the growth of personal resources (i.e., occupational adaptation) over time can predict the growth of life satisfaction (Hirschi, 2009), limited research has focused on the interactive effects of personal resources (i.e., adaptability) and social resources (i.e., social support) on life satisfaction. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to examine the interaction effects of these constructs to investigate the extent to which social support, as a situational factor, strengthened or inhibited the relation between adaptability and life satisfaction.

Logically, adaptable individuals already have strong ability to adapt to a new environment. If adaptable individuals also receive a high level of social support from the environment, they will have high levels of both internal personal resources and external resources (i.e., social capital). As such, it would be expected that they would be able to adapt well to the environment, and thus have a high level of life satisfaction. By contrast, low levels of social support will weaken the ability of an individual to integrate personal and conditional resources, and thus decrease the level of life satisfaction. In sum, we hypothesize that social support will moderate the relation between adaptability and life satisfaction, such that the positive relation between adaptability and life satisfaction will be stronger for individuals with higher levels of social support.

## METHODS

### Participants and Procedure

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the first author's university. Carefully following the approved protocol, we collected data from 99 undergraduate freshmen in a university in China using a lagged design with a 1-month interval. Freshmen students enrolled in a course were asked to participate in a survey aimed at investigating how they adapted to university life. Participation was voluntary, but the 99 freshmen who participated received extra credit. The survey was confidential.

First-wave data were collected approximately 1 month after university enrollment (time 1) and second-wave data were collected 1 month after the time 1 survey (time 2). Data were collected from 110 individuals at time 1 and 113 individuals at time 2. Ninety-nine individuals completed both surveys; thus the sample size for the analysis was 99. The average age of the 99 participants was 18.25 years ( $SD = 0.85$  years, ranging from 15 to 21 years) and 48% were female.

To test the possible bias caused by attrition, we tested whether there were any significant differences in demographic or outcome variables between participants who completed the surveys at both time 1 and time 2 ( $n = 99$ ) and participants who completed

the surveys at only time 1 ( $n = 11$ ). There were no significant differences in any variables.

## Measures

Given that all the measures used in the current study were originally published in English, we followed the conventional procedure of translation–back translation (Brislin, 1980) to translate them into Chinese. First, a graduate student fluent in both English and Chinese translated the English scales into Chinese. Then, another graduate student who was also fluent in both English and Chinese re-translated the Chinese versions back into English. Finally, the two English versions of all of the scales were compared with each other to review any inconsistencies. Minor discrepancies between the original and back-translated versions were resolved through discussion between the translators and a professor of psychology.

## Adaptability

Adaptability was evaluated at time 1 using a 55-item scale developed by Ployhart and Bliese (2006). This scale has been widely used to measure individual differences in adaptability and has been demonstrated to have good reliability and validity in various cultural contexts (e.g., Ployhart and Bliese, 2006; Wessel et al., 2008; Hamtiaux et al., 2013), including China (e.g., Wang et al., 2011). Although, this scale reflects eight facets of adaptability (e.g., learning adaptability, interpersonal adaptability, and adaptability to uncertainty, see Ployhart and Bliese, 2006 for more detail), we treated it as a uni-dimensional measure because the current research focused on how participants' overall adaptability is linked to their life satisfaction. Responses were scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to seven (*strongly agree*). Sample items include: "When facing uncertainty, I am able to make effective decisions without all relevant information" and "I believe it is important to be flexible in dealing with new people." Cronbach's alpha was 0.87.

## Social Support

Social support was evaluated at time 1 using a four-item scale developed by Huang and Lin (2011). This scale is brief and has been shown to have good reliability and validity in Chinese context (Huang and Lin, 2011). Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they had received social support in the past month on a seven-point scale ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to seven (*strongly agree*). Items include "My friends and I understand each other," "My friends and I are concerned about each other," "My friends and I often agree with each other's points of view," and "My friends and I share emotion with each other." Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

## Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was evaluated at time 2 using a five-item scale developed by Pavot and Diener (1993). This scale is one of the most commonly used measures of life satisfaction component of subjective well-being, which has been demonstrated to have good reliability and validity in various cultural contexts including China (Pavot and Diener, 1993, 2008). Responses were scored on

a seven-point Likert scale ranging from one (*strongly disagree*) to seven (*strongly agree*). Items include "In most ways my life is close to my ideal," "The conditions of my life are excellent," "I am satisfied with my life," "So far I have gotten the important things I want in life," and "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing." Cronbach's alpha was 0.88.

*Control variable* (rated at time 1): Previous research demonstrated that age and gender are related to life satisfaction (Daig et al., 2009). Therefore, age and gender were included as control variables in our analyses.

## RESULTS

The mean, standard deviation, and reliability of and correlations between variables are presented in **Table 1**. Adaptability and social support (measured at time 1) were both positively related to life satisfaction (measured at time 2).

Before conducting ordinary least squares regression analyses to test our hypothesis, a number of assumptions must be fulfilled (Keppel and Zedek, 1989). The relationships between predictors and outcome variable should be linear and the variables normally distributed with equal variances. From visual inspection of the scatterplots, it was concluded that the assumption of linearity was adequately met. Tests for normality demonstrated no violations of assumptions underlying the regressions. We also ran multi-collinearity diagnostics, which indicated that all individual variance inflation factor (VIF) values were below 2 (mean VIF = 1.16), suggesting that multicollinearity did not affect our results.

As such, it is appropriate to use ordinary linear regression to test our hypothesis. Specifically, we used a two-step hierarchical multiple regression analyses. In the first step, control variables (i.e., age and gender), adaptability, and social support were entered into the regression analysis. In the second step, the multiplicative interaction term between adaptability and social support was entered to directly test the current hypothesis about the moderating effect. All predictor variables were centered by subtracting their means. **Table 2** shows the results of regression analysis. Adaptability ( $b = 0.74$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ,  $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $p = 0.00$ ) and social support ( $b = 0.29$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) were both positively related to the subsequent measure of life satisfaction. Moreover, the interaction effect between adaptability and social support on life satisfaction was significantly positive ( $b = 0.28$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ), indicating that the effect of adaptability on life satisfaction depends on social support. The addition of the interaction effects between adaptability and social support explained additional 4% variance in life satisfaction. *F*-test demonstrated that the addition of this interaction effect was significant ( $F = 4.39$ ,  $p = 0.04$ ).

We used the online calculator developed by Preacher et al. (2006) to estimate simple slopes, which describe the relations between adaptability and life satisfaction at multiple levels of social support. High, average, and low social support was designated as 1 SD above the mean, mean, and 1 SD below the mean, respectively. A simple slope test demonstrated that the relation between adaptability and life satisfaction was significantly positive when social support was high ( $b = 1.08$ ,

**TABLE 1 | Means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables (N = 99).**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender	1.48	0.50					
2. Age	18.25	0.85	−0.05				
3. Adaptability	4.72	0.68	−0.23*	−0.15	(0.87)		
4. Social support	5.50	1.21	−0.25*	−0.07	0.30**	(0.88)	
5. Life satisfaction	4.37	1.54	−0.03	−0.14	0.39**	0.30**	(0.88)

Adaptability and social support were evaluated at time 1. Life satisfaction was evaluated at time 2. Gender was coded as male = 1, female = 2. Alpha reliabilities are provided in parentheses on the diagonal. \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01.

**TABLE 2 | Results of multiple regression (N = 99).**

Variable (Time 1)	Life satisfaction (Time 2)									
	Step 1					Step 2				
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	4.40	0.48		9.13	0.00	4.35	0.48		9.17	0.00
Gender	−0.02	0.31	−0.01	−0.07	0.95	−0.03	0.31	−0.01	−0.10	0.92
Age	−0.15	0.17	−0.08	−0.86	0.39	−0.11	0.17	−0.06	−0.65	0.52
Adaptability	0.72	0.24	0.32	3.05	0.00	0.74	0.23	0.33	3.17	0.00
Social support	0.26	0.13	0.20	1.96	0.05	0.29	0.13	0.23	2.20	0.03
Adaptability × Social support						0.28	0.13	0.19	2.10	0.04
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			0.20					0.24		
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>			0.16					0.19		
$\Delta R^2$			0.20					0.04		
F for $\Delta R^2$			5.80					4.39		
<i>p</i> for F-test			0.00					0.04		

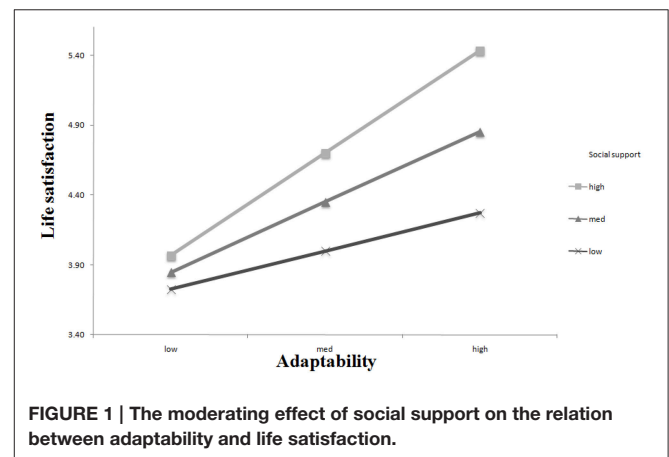
Gender was coded as male = 1, female = 2. *b*, unstandardized estimates. *SE*, standard errors;  $\beta$ , standardized estimates.

$\beta = 0.47, t = 3.75, p = 0.00$ ) and average ( $b = 0.74, \beta = 0.33, t = 3.08, p = 0.00$ ), but was not statistically significant when social support was low ( $b = 0.40, \beta = 0.18, t = 1.44, p = 0.15$ ). These results demonstrate that social support strengthened the relationship between adaptability and life satisfaction (see **Figure 1**), supporting our hypothesis.

## DISCUSSION

In the current study, we explored the interaction effect between adaptability and social support on life satisfaction. Consistent with the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we found a positive relation between adaptability and life satisfaction. Moreover, we found that social support played a moderating role in the relation between adaptability and life satisfaction. Specifically, the positive relation between adaptability and life satisfaction was stronger for participants who reported higher levels of social support than for participants who reported lower levels of social support.

University freshmen are newcomers in the educational setting, and face a new and challenging environment, especially in the first year after enrollment (Park et al., 2012). As such, the adaptation of university freshmen has received a large amount of attention (Park et al., 2012). Adaptability is a



type of self-regulation resource and is considered important in helping freshmen to adjust to university life in the first year (Park et al., 2012). Adaptability may influence whether or not an individual can adapt to the new university environment, which is quite different from the high school environment. In university freshmen, adaptation was negatively related to depressive symptoms and level of stress (Dyson and Renk, 2006).

Generally speaking, individuals will take the initiative to adjust their adaptability when facing a new environment or a changing situation. However, in addition to self-adjustment, receiving external support and external resources can also aid quick adaptation to the environment. Social support reflects the level of social resources received from the external environment (Shallcross et al., 2014), and thus can aid quick adaptation to the environment.

The findings of the present study have important implications for positive psychology. Prior studies indicate that adaptability can predict a number of positive outcomes. For instance, Overdale and Gardner (2012) showed that coping adaptability was positively related to performance. Individuals who have stronger adaptability can adjust their own psychological resources to make themselves suitable for the new environment and changing conditions. One previous study showed a direct relationship between adaptability and life satisfaction (Martin et al., 2013), and the present study extends these findings by showing that social support strengthened this relation. Our results suggest that individuals with high levels of both adaptability and social support will be better able to adapt to new and changing social environments, and will thus experience higher levels of life satisfaction.

The results of this study suggest that individuals not only need to improve their adaptability to fit in to a new environment, but also need to strive for social support from others when encountering a new environment or changing situation. Social support will enable them to adapt to the environment better, and a combination of adaptability and social support will have a more positive impact on life satisfaction. Adaptability from within and social support from others are both important to happiness. Modern society has a rapid rhythm and changes quickly. If individuals want to feel satisfied in this modern society, they must adapt to changing situations as soon as possible and receive social support from others. These two kinds of psychology embody the positive attitude that is required to respond to modern society, and will maximize the positive impact of modern society.

## LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, Our research sample was a group of university students that did not include working people. More heterogeneous samples are needed to test the generalizability of our findings. Second, our data were collected from the same source, which might result in common method variance. However, we collected the data using a lagged design. Specifically, the antecedent and outcome variables were measured separately with a 1-month interval in between

measurements, and the order of measurements was consistent with the temporal order of variables in our model. This lagged design might mitigate the common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Moreover, common method variance is unlikely to result in statistical interactions (see Siemsen et al., 2010; Lin et al., 2013), which are the main focus of this study. Thus, we believe that our findings cannot be an artifact of common method variance. Third, the research design of our study would make it difficult to interpret causal inference. Although, we measured the antecedent and outcome variables separately with a 1-month time lag, we cannot directly test the causal direction between our studied variables because we did not measure all variables repeatedly, which is the basic requirement for longitudinal research (Ployhart and Vandenberg, 2010). Thus, future research should use a longitudinal design to provide a stronger inference of the causal relation between adaptability and life satisfaction.

Future research on adaptability could focus on the effects and characteristics of different sub-dimensions of adaptability, examining different factors that influence each sub-dimension. Future research could also examine the developmental trajectory of adaptability. Adaptability may change with the changing environment. It might be interesting to see how individual adaptability develops, as well as how such development affects adaptation outcomes. In addition, future research could further examine the impact of adaptability on other aspects of individual well-being, such as life purpose (Damon et al., 2003; Han, 2015). Life purpose refers to “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 121). Similar to general life satisfaction that we examined in the current study, the development of life purpose is also closely associated with adaptability and social support (Bundick, 2011; Bundick and Tirri, 2014; Han, 2015). It is possible that adaptability and social support would interactively impacts life purpose. As such, future research could test the generalizability of the interaction effect between adaptability and social support using other well-being outcomes.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MZ is the first author, who presented the idea and wrote the main part of the manuscript; WL is the corresponding author, who built the structure of the article and is in charge of the whole project.

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

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