

# The Influence of College Students' Social-emotional Competence on Social Exclusion: A Chain Mediator of Ego-depletion and Moral Disengagement

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## Abstract

To explore the influence of social-emotional competence on social exclusion and to examine the mediating role of ego-depletion and moral disengagement, a questionnaire was used to investigate the social-emotional competence, ego-depletion, moral disengagement, and social exclusion of 1610 Chinese university students. The results found that: social-emotional competence significantly and negatively predicted social rejection; ego-depletion and moral disengagement mediated the relationship between social-emotional competence and social rejection individually; and ego-depletion and moral disengagement mediated the relationship between social-emotional competence and social rejection in a chain. Schools and families can pay attention to developing students' social-emotional competence to reduce and prevent social exclusion.

## Keywords

College students; Social-emotional competence; Social exclusion; Ego-depletion; Moral disengagement.

## 1. Introduction

Social exclusion is a phenomenon in which individuals are excluded or ignored by others or groups (Zeng & Zhu, 2022). As a negative life event, social exclusion can easily cause harm to an individual's physical and mental health (Katherine et al., 2004). It has been shown that excluded adolescents report more internalizing problem behaviors, such as anxiety, depression (Xu et al., 2021; Cacioppo et al., 2006), self-harm (Zhang et al., 2017), and aggressive behavior (Mark et al., 2003), transgression, and delinquency than adolescents who report good relationships with others. ), transgressions, and delinquency (Kupersmidt & Patterson, 1997). Adolescents are in a "turbulent period" of socialization and personality development, when exclusion may cause more intense internal and external conflict (Wang & Zhang, 2020). Although we now know the impact of social exclusion on individual development, we still know little about the antecedents associated with individuals' experiences of social exclusion, particularly which emotion-related skills and abilities make individuals more vulnerable to exclusion. Therefore, studying the relationship between social-emotional competencies and social exclusion is of great importance to prevent social exclusion in advance and to maintain the physical and mental health of students.

Social-emotional competencies are defined as effectiveness in pro-social interpersonal interactions and relationships (Olga et al., 2017). These competencies include applying knowledge, skills, and attitudes to understand and manage one's own emotions and influence the emotions of others in a pro-social manner, as well as having empathy, being able to initiate and maintain good interpersonal relationships, and making responsible decisions (Huang et al.,

2021). Current research clearly indicates that emotional competence (e.g., understanding emotions, expressing appropriate emotions) plays an important role in the social competence of children and adolescents, especially with peers (Denham et al., 1990; Eisenberg et al., 1993; Tedra et al., 1999). Students with good social-emotional competence tend to use appropriate interpersonal skills when dealing with peers, build positive peer relationships, and will experience less peer rejection (Durlak et al., 2011; Goleman, 1995). Also, high social-emotional competence represents better emotional control, while students who have difficulty controlling their emotional expressions may make them less desirable partners for social interactions (Garner & Power, 1996). Therefore, this study proposes hypothesis 1: Social-emotional competence significantly and negatively predicts social exclusion.

An individual's self-control is a limited resource, and when it consumes the limited resource, it produces a loss of self-control energy, i.e., ego depletion. Self-depletion theory suggests that people exercise self-control every day to make their words and actions conform to social standards or norms, and that the weakening or absence of such regulation increases the likelihood of various negative psychological and problematic behaviors (Tan et al., 2012). On the one hand, social-emotional competence represents the regulation of emotions, awareness and management of self, social awareness, and responsible decision-making, and to some extent belongs to self-control tasks, which can be depleted when individuals perform self-control tasks and produce ego-depletion effects (Baumeister et al., 1998). Studies have shown that short-term emotion management exacerbates the ego-depletion effect (Peter, 2007). On the other hand, cognitive, emotional, and affective abilities have a buffering effect on ego attrition (Mark, 2003; Dianne et al., 2006). Social-emotional competence in the present study focuses more on the latter, as a self-management and regulation ability rather than a process. Research has shown that improving social-emotional competence can prevent and reduce risky behaviors such as aggression, delinquency, substance use, and academic failure (Moffitt et al., 2011), which facilitates the mitigation and reduction of individual ego-depletion effects. Based on this, the present study initially hypothesized that social-emotional competence is negatively related to ego-depletion. Second, after individuals enter into ego depletion, they may develop ego depletion aftereffects and a series of maladaptive adaptations and reactions, such as decreased attention, reduced positive emotions, and increased negative emotions, which may easily cause problems and deviant behaviors (Wang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2015). Studies have shown that people experience cognitive biases after self attrition, negatively assessing their control resulting in depression, substance abuse, aggressive behavior, deceptive behavior, and unethical behavior (Ye et al., 2019; Inzlicht et al., 2006; Xiong et al., 2021; Liu & Zhao, 2015), and these behaviors are all antecedents of poor peer relationships, peer rejection, and peer rejection. The Symptoms-driven Model suggests that depressive symptoms affect an individual's development of social skills and can lead to difficulties in interpersonal relationships and increased rejection by peers (Zeiss & Lewinsohn, 1998). In addition, research has found that problematic behaviors such as aggression and deception in children and adolescents also increase the risk of peer rejection (Wang et al., 2018). Therefore, this study proposes hypothesis 2: Self-depletion mediates the relationship between social-emotional competence and social rejection.

Moral deference refers to the cognitive tendency of individuals to self-justify their unethical behavior, in which there are eight interrelated cognitive mechanisms that enable us to avoid internalized moral standards and act unethically without distress (Bandura et al., 1996). Research has shown that negative emotions produce moral disengagement behavior (Fida et al., 2015); there is a significant positive correlation between irresponsible, unethical decision making and individual levels of moral disengagement (Detert et al., 2008), while individuals with high social-emotional competence are able to maintain positive connections with others, manage to regulate their emotions, and make responsible decisions. Therefore, this paper infers

that social-emotional competence can have an impact on moral disengagement. Meanwhile, Bandura pointed out that peer relationships are closely related to individual moral development, and the cognitive mechanism of moral disengagement in adolescents is gradually developed and matured through continuous interaction with others, and the two influence each other (Zhou et al., 2015). Moral disengagement has a higher correlation with peer rejection, and when individuals show higher moral disengagement within the group, they may be rejected at a higher level. In addition, individuals' tendency to moral disengagement is associated with many negative behaviors, including aggression, bullying, and immoral behavior (Gini et al., 2014). As mentioned above, these behaviors increase the risk of peer rejection. Therefore, this paper proposes hypothesis 3: Moral disengagement mediates the relationship between social-emotional competence and social rejection.

Individuals with high social-emotional competence may buffer individuals from the effect of ego-depletion due to daily control tasks, which can lead to a decrease in ethical behavior and an increase in unethical behavior resulting in social rejection (Marie-Louise, 2013; Dewall, 2008). Specifically, individuals with low social-emotional competence have high ego depletion, and when self-control resources are reduced, their limited psychological resources are insufficient to whitewash their desire to behave more ethically, and thus moral disengagement behaviors occur. Individuals with high moral disengagement are mostly not accepted and liked by their peers and are also prone to problematic behaviors, and research has shown that moral disengagement is significantly associated with students' self-reported bullying and bullying behaviors (Yang et al., 2010). Therefore, this study proposes hypothesis 4: Self-depletion and moral disengagement play a chain mediating role between social-emotional competence and social exclusion.

## 2. Methods and Measurements

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

In this study, online questionnaires were collected using the whole-group sampling method by using the Questionnaire Star APP, and the subjects were mainly from college students in six universities in Jingzhou, Wuhan and Guangzhou. A total of 1854 questionnaires were received in this survey, of which 1610 were valid, with an effective rate of 86.84%. Among them, 661 (41.1%) were male students and 949 (59.9%) were female students; 987 (61.3%) were freshmen, 563 (35.0%) were sophomores, and 60 (3.8%) were juniors and above.

### 2.2. Measurements

#### 2.2.1. Social-emotional competence

Social-Emotional competence was measured by Delaware social-emotional Competence Scale (DSECS), which revised by Zhu and Xie (2014). This scale contains 12 items, which are divided into 4 dimensions, namely responsible decision-making, peer relationship, social awareness, and self-management. The Likert 4-point scoring method is adopted, from "1= not at all like me" to "4= very like me". The higher the score, the higher the social-emotional ability. In the present study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.88.

#### 2.2.2. Ego-depletion

The Ego-depletion Scale compiled by Lin and Johnson (2015) was used. This scale consists of five questions (e.g., "I have been feeling low energy lately") and is scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "1 = not at all" to "5 = completely". The higher the score, the higher the ego-depletion, and the scale is widely used in China. In the present study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.91.

#### 2.2.3. Moral disengagement

Sports moral disengagement was measured by The Sports Morality Disengagement Scale compiled by Bandura(2002). There are 32 items in the scale, including 8 dimensions, namely,

moral justification, euphemism labeling, favorable comparison, responsibility transfer, responsibility dispersion, distorted results, responsibility attribution, and dehumanization. The Likert 5-point scoring method is adopted, from "1= completely disagree" to "5= completely agree". The higher the score, the higher the level of moral disavowment. In the present study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.92.

#### 2.2.4. Social Exclusion

The Chinese version of the Social Exclusion Scale for Adolescents (OES-A) compiled by Rich et al (2013) and revised by Zhang et al (2018) was used. This scale consists of 11 items, including two dimensions of social neglect and social rejection (e.g., "In general, my classmates seem to ignore me.") The scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale from "1=strongly disagree" to "5=strongly agree", with higher scores indicating higher levels of social exclusion. In the present study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.90.

### 2.3. Statistical Analysis

Firstly, EXCEL 2021 is used to import and organize online data. Secondly, for the validity of the data, SPSS 26.0 was used for common method deviation test, descriptive analysis of demographic information was conducted, and Spearman correlation analysis was conducted for main research variables. Finally, conditional process models were completed through the multiple linear regression,  $P < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant. In addition, demographic variables were controlled for in the main analysis.

## 3. Result

### 3.1. Common method bias

In this study, anonymous completion and reverse scoring were used to control for common method bias. Exploratory factor analysis was performed on all question items of this study. The results revealed that there were 11 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and the variance explained by the first factor was 20.70% (less than 40%), indicating that there was no serious common method bias in this study.

### 3.2. Preliminary Correlation Analyses

The results of the correlation analysis are shown in Table 1: social-emotional competence was significantly negatively correlated with ego-loss, moral disengagement, and social rejection ( $p < 0.001$ ); ego-depletion was significantly positively correlated with moral disengagement and social rejection ( $p < 0.001$ ); and moral disengagement was significantly positively correlated with social rejection ( $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, there were correlations between gender and grade level on the main variables of this study, so gender and grade level were used as control variables in the subsequent chain mediation analysis.

**Table 1.** Expression statistics and correlation analysis of each variable (N =1610)

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.Gender	1.59	0.49	1					
2.Grade	1.47	0.73	-0.10***	1				
3.Social-emotional competence	3.31	0.44	0.05*	-0.09***	1			
4.Ego-depletion	2.51	0.99	0.09***	0.06*	-0.22***	1		
5.Moral disengagement	1.94	0.53	-0.23***	0.10***	-0.21***	0.24***	1	
6.Social exclusion	2.35	0.66	-0.04	0.03	-0.38***	0.32***	0.21***	1

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; Gender is a dummy variable: 1=male, 2=female

### 3.3. Analysis of the chain mediating effect of social-emotional competence and social exclusion

The PROCESS macro was used to run Model 6 for chain mediation model analysis and the model was tested using the nonparametric bootstrap method with a bootstrap sample size of 5000 and a confidence interval of 95%. The results showed (Table 2 and Figure 1) that gender was significantly associated with ego-depletion and moral disengagement, showing that female students were more likely to fall into ego-depletion and male students were more likely to engage in moral disengagement. College students' social-emotional competence significantly and negatively predicted social rejection ( $\beta = -0.31, p < 0.001$ ); social-emotional competence significantly and negatively predicted ego-depletion ( $\beta = -0.22, p < 0.001$ ); ego-depletion significantly and positively predicted social rejection ( $\beta = 0.23, p < 0.001$ ); social-emotional competence significantly and negatively predicted moral disengagement ( $\beta = -0.15, p < 0.001$ ); moral disengagement significantly and positively predicted social exclusion ( $\beta = 0.08, p < 0.001$ ); also, ego depletion significantly and positively predicted moral disengagement ( $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$ ).

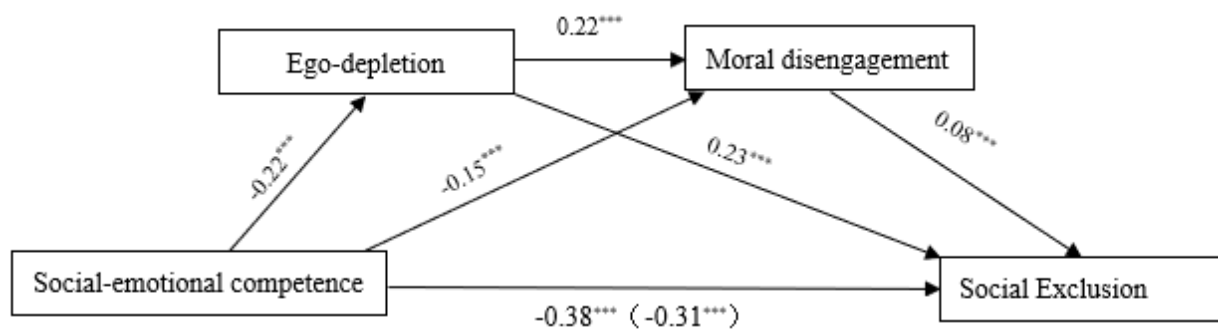
The results of Bootstrap path analysis of the mediating effect (Table 3) showed that the mediating effect of self-depletion and moral disengagement between social-emotional competence and social exclusion was significant and consisted of three paths of action. The indirect effect of path 1 "social-emotional competence  $\rightarrow$  ego-depletion  $\rightarrow$  social exclusion" was -0.052 with 95% confidence interval [-0.071,-0.035]; the indirect effect of path 2 "social-emotional competence  $\rightarrow$  moral disengagement  $\rightarrow$  social exclusion" was -0.013. The indirect effect of path 2 "social-emotional competence  $\rightarrow$  moral exculpation  $\rightarrow$  social exclusion" was -0.013 with 95% confidence interval [-0.023,-0.004]; the indirect effect of path 3 "social-emotional competence  $\rightarrow$  ego-depletion  $\rightarrow$  moral exculpation  $\rightarrow$  social exclusion" was -0.004 with 95% confidence interval [-0.007,-0.002], the indirect effects of the three paths The confidence intervals of the indirect effects of all three paths do not contain 0, indicating that all three paths are significant.

**Table 2.** Regression analysis of the relationship between variables in the chain mediation model

Regression equation (n=1610)		Fitting index			Coefficient Significance	
Dependent variable	Independent variable(s)	R	R2	F	$\beta$	t
Ego-depletion	Gender	0.25	0.06	34.88***	0.21	4.30***
	Grade				0.07	1.93
	Social-emotional competence				-0.22	-9.15***
Moral disengagement		0.38	0.15	68.59***		
	Gender				-0.49	-10.24***
	Grade				0.08	2.36*
	Social-emotional competence				-0.15	-6.21***
Social exclusion	Ego-depletion	0.46	0.21	86.82***	0.22	9.41***
	Gender				-0.06	-1.38
	Grade				-0.03	-0.85
	social-emotional competence				-0.31	-13.61***
	Ego-depletion				0.23	9.86***
	Moral disengagement				0.08	3.54***

**Table 3.** Mediating effects of ego-depletion and moral disengagement

Pathways	Effect	SE	95%CI		Proportion
			LLCI	ULCI	
Total effect	-0.383	0.023	-0.428	-0.337	
Direct effect	-0.314	0.023	-0.359	-0.269	82.174%
Indirect effect	-0.068	0.011	-0.091	-0.048	17.826%
Social-emotional competence → Self-depletion → Social exclusion	-0.052	0.009	-0.071	-0.035	13.461%
social-emotional competence → moral disengagement → social exclusion	-0.013	0.005	-0.023	-0.004	3.267%
Social-emotional competence → Self-depletion → moral disengagement → Social exclusion	-0.004	0.001	-0.007	-0.002	1.098%



**Figure 1.** Chain Mediation Model Diagram

## 4. Discussion

This study investigates the impact of social-emotional competence on social exclusion and its internal mechanisms of action. The results show that social-emotional competence has an impact on individuals' experiences of social exclusion, and can also have an impact on social exclusion through the independent mediation of self-depletion and moral disengagement and the chain mediation of self-depletion and moral disengagement. The results of the study contribute to a deeper understanding of the internal mechanisms by which personal emotional competence can weaken the risk of social exclusion, and have theoretical and practical implications for the promotion of positive interpersonal relationships and healthy physical and psychological development of college students.

### 4.1. The relationship between social-emotional competence and social exclusion

This study found that college students' social-emotional competence significantly and negatively predicted social exclusion, validating hypothesis 1 and indicating that higher social-emotional competence is associated with a lower risk of experiencing social exclusion, which is consistent with previous research findings. Specifically, those individuals who demonstrated greater emotional knowledge and were able to regulate their emotions had lower social exclusion scores. Social-emotional competence is an other-oriented emotional competence, specifically involving the ability to discriminate important social cues related to understanding the behavior and feelings of others (Tedra et al., 1999). Furthermore, social-emotional competence in such situations can serve as a guide for an individual's own behavior in that situation (e.g., responding to the emotional reactions of others in that situation). Thus, these

social-emotional skills can enhance or promote positive social relationships and encounter less social rejection in individuals.

#### **4.2. The mediating role of ego-depletion**

This study found that ego-depletion mediates between social-emotional competence and social-emotional ability, verifying hypothesis 2. Social-emotional competence inversely predicts ego-depletion, indicating that individuals with high social-emotional competence are more likely to enter into ego-depletion. Individuals with high social-emotional competence will have higher cognitive level, be able to have clear self-awareness and self-management ability, and also perform better in terms of emotions, which are important influencing factors of ego-depletion. At the same time, ego depletion significantly and positively predicts social rejection. The reason for this is that after temporary depletion of an individual's cognitive and psychological resources, it becomes more difficult for the individual to exercise self-control, which has an important role in interpersonal relationships (Roy, 2002). High self-control predicts good social functioning and popularity, it gives individuals the ability to remain calm and rational in unpleasant situations, and it facilitates mutual communication and prevents rejection. Studies have found that individuals at ego loss experience a range of responses such as increased negative emotions, decreased information processing, and decreased pro-social behavior, which may even lead to a range of adaptive problems and aggressive behavior (Ma & Mo., 2022), which are risk factors for social exclusion.

#### **4.3. The mediating role of moral disengagement**

The present study found that moral disengagement mediates between social-emotional competence and social rejection, which validates hypothesis 3. Social emotions significantly and negatively predict moral disengagement, indicating that individuals with higher social-emotional competence engage in less moral disengagement behavior. During socialization, individuals act in accordance with the moral standards and values of a certain society, and if moral standards are violated, moral disengagement mechanisms may be activated to reduce cognitive dissonance. In this process, social-emotional competence can facilitate individuals' timely self-evaluation and self-reflection, and the interaction of cognitive reasoning and emotional responses to reduce moral deference (Ersilia et al., 2008). Moral deferral significantly and positively predicts social exclusion, which is consistent with previous research. High moral deferral can have a significant negative effect on pro-social behavior and is more likely to engage in unethical behavior (Runions & Bak, 2015). Because group peers are similar and can influence each other, individuals with low levels of moral deference are less likely to use favorable comparisons and blame attributions to disregard others, will have higher peer acceptance, and experience less peer rejection.

#### **4.4. The chain mediating role of self-depletion and moral disengagement**

This study also found that ego-depletion and moral disengagement act as a chain mediator between social-emotional competence and social rejection, which verifies hypothesis 4. Specifically, individuals with high social-emotional competence effectively buffer the individual's ego-depletion effect through better self-awareness, emotional control, and social cognition, and consume fewer self-control resources in daily tasks. With sufficient self-control resources, individuals reconstruct their cognition in order to reduce self-critical guilt, change moral standards in different contexts, and thus accept fewer self-inflicted moral violations, and are less likely to excuse their immoral behavior, which makes them more likely to be accepted by their peers and less likely to experience rejection behaviors. In addition, individuals with low levels of ego depletion and moral disengagement also engage in less antisocial behavior (Wang et al., 2016), aggression (Barchia & Bussey, 2011), etc., which is also an important factor in reducing social rejection.

#### 4.5. Inspiration and Limitation

This study explores the relationship and internal mechanisms between social-emotional competence and social exclusion of college students by constructing a chain mediation model, which has important practical implications for social exclusion in college students' social relationships. First, the results of the study enrich the mechanisms of social-emotional competence on social rejection, the theory of ego depletion, and the theory of social cognition. It helps individuals to avoid social exclusion from the perspectives of social-emotional competence, ego depletion, and moral disengagement. Second, the findings point to the benefits of social-emotional competence in preventing social exclusion, improving individuals' resilience, and promoting healthy development of individuals, and provide theoretical support for schools to integrate social-emotional competence development in their curricula.

There are also some shortcomings in this study, such as the fact that this study used a cross-sectional study, which lacks further causal arguments, and future studies can use experiments and follow-up studies to further explore the relationship between social-emotional competence and social exclusion; secondly, other moderating variables that may have an impact on the study results were not taken into consideration, and subsequent studies need to pay attention to them. Finally, the results of this study show that the direct effect of social-emotional competence on social exclusion is more pronounced than the mediating effects of ego-depletion and moral disengagement, and future studies can focus on the effects of the direct path to be explored in depth.

#### 5. Conclusion

(1) Social-emotional competence can significantly reverse predict social exclusion; (2) Ego - depletion plays a mediating role between social-emotional competence and social exclusion; (3) Moral disengagement plays a mediating role between social-emotional competence and social exclusion; (4) socialemotional competence can also have an impact on social exclusion through the chain mediating effect of ego-depletion and moral disengagement

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