

# Perceived Discrimination and Social Anxiety among College Students: The Chain Mediating Effects of Self-Esteem and Psychological Resilience

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**Abstract:** This study examined the current status of social anxiety among college students and its underlying mechanisms, with a focus on the direct and indirect effects of perceived discrimination, self-esteem, and psychological resilience. A sample of 215 college students was assessed using the Everyday Discrimination Scale, Social Anxiety Scale, Self-Esteem Scale, and Psychological Resilience Scale. The findings revealed that: (1) College students exhibited a relatively high level of perceived discrimination, moderately high levels of self-esteem and psychological resilience, and a moderate level of social anxiety. (2) Perceived discrimination was significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem and psychological resilience but positively correlated with social anxiety. Self-esteem showed a significant positive correlation with psychological resilience and a significant negative correlation with social anxiety. Similarly, psychological resilience was negatively correlated with social anxiety. (3) Perceived discrimination did not directly predict social anxiety; instead, its impact was mediated through the independent and sequential chain mediating roles of self-esteem and psychological resilience. This study highlights the mediating mechanisms of self-esteem and psychological resilience, suggesting that enhancing these psychological resources may serve as a key intervention strategy to mitigate social anxiety among college students. The results provide valuable insights for designing mental health promotion programs in higher education settings.

**Keywords:** perceived discrimination; self-esteem; psychological resilience; social anxiety; college students

## 1. INTRODUCTION

College students face rapid internal and external changes while managing multiple challenges, including academic pressures, interpersonal relationships, self-identity development, and future planning. These stressors make them particularly susceptible to negative emotional states, such as social anxiety, shame, depression, and emotional suppression. The intense tension, fear, and avoidance behaviors that individuals exhibit toward social situations are referred to as social anxiety (Guo, 2000). According to Li Bo et al. (2003), when individuals are aware of the need to receive evaluation and attention from others but worry about the appropriateness of their behavior, they will experience significant anxiety. The level of social anxiety among our residents has been increasing in recent years, and young people are more susceptible to social anxiety (Jefferies & Ungar, 2020). The phenomenon of social anxiety among college students is on the rise year by year, and it has become one of the major problems affecting the mental health of college students (Luo Liufen, 2019). Severe social anxiety even leads to more serious mental health problems such as depression, self-injury, and even suicide (Hou Juan et al., 2021).

Therefore, investigating social anxiety and its underlying mechanisms among college students holds significant importance. Previous research on social anxiety has predominantly focused on social minority groups, such as individuals with autism spectrum disorder, physical disabilities, migrant children, and ethnic minorities (Chen & Xiong, 2023; Peng et al., 2020; Ma & An, 2019). Other studies have identified relative deprivation, rumination, and fear of negative evaluation as contributing factors to social anxiety in college students. While existing evidence suggests that perceived discrimination, self-esteem, and psychological resilience may influence social anxiety, the chain mediation mechanism involving these factors remains unexplored. Thus, this study specifically examines the roles of

perceived discrimination, psychological resilience, and self-esteem, constructing a chain mediation model to elucidate their interplay. This approach not only aids in alleviating context-specific anxiety but also fosters holistic development in college students across key domains—professional communication, psychological adaptation, academic performance, and social interaction. Ultimately, the findings may provide sustainable developmental impetus for their socialization process.

### **1.1. Perceived Discrimination and Social Anxiety in College Students**

College students demonstrate a strong desire to establish high-quality social connections while exhibiting heightened sensitivity to evaluative feedback within their social networks. For instance, they closely monitor others' perceptions of their academic performance and worry about identity-related markers (e.g., clothing style, consumption patterns) under social scrutiny. Besides, social media amplifies these concerns, leading students to over interpret others' judgments of their behavior across both online and offline interactions—a cognitive bias resembling "imagined audience scrutiny." When perceived social feedback deviates from self-expectations, students may attribute this discrepancy to identity-based discrimination or group exclusion. When individuals perceive that others have negatively evaluated their identity and behavior, they may feel that they have been treated unequally by others, resulting in the feeling of being discriminated against (Xie Luqi, 2024), which is a subjective experience as opposed to objective discrimination, or perceived discrimination (Major et al., 2002). Perceived discrimination can lead to social anxiety by thwarting an individual's interpersonal interactions. According to rejection identification theory, perceived discrimination erodes group identification, reinforcing a sense of marginalization that compromises mental health (Branscombe et al., 1999). Foster (2000) found that college students who perceive higher discrimination tend to adopt avoidant interpersonal strategies, report weaker group identification, and exhibit elevated depression and anxiety. Thus, we hypothesize (H1): Perceived discrimination positively correlates with and significantly predicts social anxiety.

### **1.2. Self-Esteem and Social Anxiety**

Self-esteem is a fundamental part of our self-concept and encompasses an individual's overall attitudes, evaluations, and beliefs about themselves and their self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965). According to Leary (2000), self-esteem is shaped by how individuals believe they are perceived by others during social interactions. Cognitive appraisal theory suggests that students who perceive discrimination will develop self-doubt and low self-esteem. Adolescents who perceive discrimination by others over time will internalize the prejudicial attitudes of others and lower their self-esteem (Xie Qili et al., 2023). In collectivist cultures like China, where self-concept is tightly linked to in-group acceptance (Han et al., 2020), perceived discrimination disproportionately impacts self-esteem. The metacognitive model of social anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995) posits that individuals with low self-esteem may receive more negative evaluations in their lives and they are more sensitive to negative evaluations, so they may presuppose negative evaluations from others and believe that they will perform poorly, which in turn increases social anxiety. A meta-analysis of 130 papers showed a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and social anxiety (Yin, 2022). In conclusion, self-esteem may be an important pathway through which perceived discrimination affect social anxiety. Therefore, this study proposes the hypothesis H2: Self-esteem mediates the effect of perceived discrimination on social anxiety.

### **1.3. Psychological Resilience and Social Anxiety**

Psychological resilience is a dynamic process in which individuals fully mobilize their resources to adapt in the face of negative events (Luthar, 2000). Not only does psychological resilience serve as a relatively stable personality trait and positive resource within an individual, but it is also an important mediator of the influence of external environmental variables on an individual's internal psychological outcome variables, which can mitigate the adverse effects of negative life events (Han Li & Long Yan, 2020). Self-esteem, as an important protective factor of psychological resilience (Liu Qiaolan et al., 2013), has a positive predictive effect on psychological resilience, suggesting that a high level of self-esteem is conducive to buffering individuals from the negative impacts of stressful events and demonstrating a good level of resilience (Ma Wenyan et al., 2022). The higher the level of psychological resilience possessed by college students, the less pronounced the symptoms of anxiety produced in social situations (Benetti & Kambouropoulos, 2006). Psychological resilience is a protective factor that

can act as a shield against social anxiety for individuals in interpersonal interactions, and in general individuals with low psychological resilience also have relatively high levels of social anxiety (Zeng Jiahong et al., 2017). Research by many scholars, such as Lee, has found that when an individual is under stress or adversity, individuals with high psychological resilience inspire more self-esteem and can rationally utilize their resources to obtain more social support and harmonious interpersonal relationships, thus alleviating the individual's perception of stress and emotional experience and attenuating the individual's level of social anxiety (Lee et al., 2013). It can be seen that psychological resilience can affect both the social anxiety of college students and their perceptions and self-esteem at the same time. Therefore, this study proposes Hypothesis H3: Psychological resilience mediates the effect of perceived discrimination on social anxiety; Hypothesis H4: Psychological resilience mediates the effect of self-esteem on social anxiety. Based on this, combined with Hypothesis H2, Hypothesis H5: Self-esteem and psychological resilience play a chain mediating role in the effect of perceived discrimination on social anxiety.

## 2. PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

### 2.1. Participants

Data were collected through online surveys administered between April and May 2025. Participants were recruited from Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou, Dongguan, etc. A total of 244 questionnaires were collected, and after excluding invalid questionnaires, 215 valid questionnaires were finally obtained, with a validity rate of 88.11%. Among them, the demographic variables of the subjects are shown in Table 1. The age of the subjects was 18-26 years old, with a mean age of (20.91±1.76) years old. Detailed demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	68	31.63%
	Female	147	68.37%
Academic Year	Freshman	30	13.95%
	Sophomore	45	20.93%
	Junior	52	24.19%
	Senior	36	16.74%
	1 <sup>st</sup> -yr Grad	20	9.30%
	2 <sup>nd</sup> -yr Grad	16	7.44%
	3 <sup>rd</sup> -yr Grad	16	7.44%
Major	Humanities	87	40.47%
	Natural Sciences	51	23.72%
	Engineering	58	26.98%
	Other	19	8.84%
Hometown	Urban	119	55.35%
	Rural	96	44.65%

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Perceived Discrimination

Perceived discrimination was measured using the Everyday Discrimination Scale (EDS; Williams et al., 1997), which consists of 9 items. The scale lists potential discriminatory situations in daily life and requires participants to rate the frequency of their occurrence. A 5-point Likert scale was used, with "0" representing "never" and "5" representing "almost always." Higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived discrimination. In this study, the scale demonstrated a *Cronbach's α* of 0.902.

#### 2.2.2. Self-Esteem

Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), a 10-item unidimensional scale. Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 4 indicating "strongly agree." Originally, five items were reverse-scored, but due to cultural differences between China and the West, one item ("I wish I could have more respect for myself") was modified to be positively scored to align with Chinese linguistic understanding. Higher total scores reflect higher self-esteem levels. The *Cronbach's α* for this scale was 0.915 in the current study.

*2.2.3. Psychological Resilience*

The Chinese version of the Resilience Scale, developed by Yu Xiaonan and Zhang Jianxin in 2007, was used to measure psychological resilience. This 25-item scale comprises three dimensions: tenacity, optimism, and strength. Tenacity refers to an individual's endurance, courage, and perseverance when facing physical or mental stress. Optimism reflects confidence in positive outcomes and the ability to view situations from a constructive perspective. Strength describes the self-confidence, motivation, and vitality individuals exhibit when overcoming adversity. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 represents "never" and 5 represents "always." Higher scores indicate greater psychological resilience. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this study is 0.941, which is a good internal consistency coefficient.

*2.2.4. Social Anxiety*

Social anxiety was evaluated using the Social Anxiety Scale developed by Leary (1983). This 15-item scale measures anxiety experiences in social situations (e.g., "I feel nervous when talking to unfamiliar same-gender peers"). Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, with 0 representing "never" and 5 representing "very frequently." Three items were reverse-scored, and after conversion, total scores were calculated. Higher scores indicate more severe social anxiety. The scale's Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.930 in this study.

**2.3. Data Processing and Analysis**

SPSS 27.0 was used for reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, and correlation analysis. Based on the research hypotheses, chain mediation effects were tested using the SPSS PROCESS macro.

**3. RESULTS**

**3.1. Common Method Bias Analysis**

Common method bias was assessed using Harman's single-factor test (Zhou & Long, 2004). An unrotated principal component analysis of all variables yielded nine factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. The first factor accounted for 37.975% of the variance, which is below the 40% threshold, indicating no significant common method bias in this study.

**3.2. Descriptive and Correlation Analyses**

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1. The mean scores were as follows: perceived discrimination (4.19/5), self-esteem (3.08/4), psychological resilience (3.65/5), and social anxiety (2.88/5). Correlation analysis results (Table 2) revealed significant relationships among all four variables: Perceived discrimination was negatively correlated with self-esteem. Self-esteem was positively correlated with psychological resilience. Psychological resilience was negatively correlated with social anxiety. Perceived discrimination was positively correlated with social anxiety.

**Table 2.** *Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Variables*

Variable	M±SD	r					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Gender	1.68±0.47	1					
2 Age	20.91±1.76	-0.09	1				
3 Perceived discrimination	2.04±0.74	0.04	-0.27***	1			
4 Self-esteem	3.08±0.60	-0.07	0.32***	-0.79***	1		
5 Psychological resilience	3.65±0.63	-0.04	0.30***	-0.76***	0.85***	1	
6 Social anxiety	2.88±0.87	0.26***	-0.30***	0.50***	-0.61***	-0.62***	1

**Note:** \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . The same applies to subsequent tables.

**3.3. Chain Mediation Test of Self-Esteem and Psychological Resilience in the Relationship between Perceived Discrimination and Social Anxiety**

Using the PROCESS macro in SPSS, we employed the nonparametric percentile Bootstrap method for mediation effect testing with 5,000 resamples. Gender and age were included as control variables to examine the mediating effects of self-esteem and psychological resilience in the relationship between perceived discrimination and social anxiety. Regression analysis revealed that before introducing the mediators, the direct effect of perceived discrimination on college students' social anxiety was

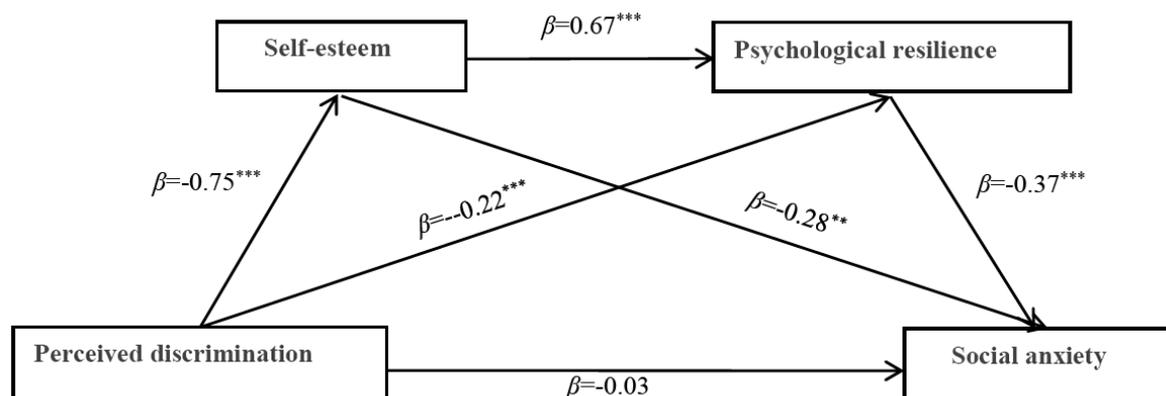
significant. After incorporating self-esteem and psychological resilience into the regression equation: Perceived discrimination showed significant negative effects on both self-esteem and psychological resilience, and its direct effect on social anxiety became nonsignificant. Self-esteem demonstrated significant positive effects on psychological resilience and significant negative effects on social anxiety. Psychological resilience showed significant negative effects on social anxiety (see Table 3). We conducted mediation effect tests and confidence interval estimations for three pathways. Results indicated that none of the 95% confidence intervals for these three pathways included zero, confirming that all indirect effects reached statistical significance (model shown in Figure 1). The total standardized mediation effect value was 0.565, accounting for 106.75% of the total effect. The proportions of indirect effects for the three mediation pathways were 47.03%, 18.20%, and 41.52% respectively (see Table 4).

**Table 3.** Chain Mediation Analysis of Everyday Discrimination and Social Anxiety

Variable	Self-esteem		Psychological resilience		Social anxiety	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Gender	-0.03	-0.64	0.01	0.37	0.22	4.30***
Age	0.04	2.63**	0.03	0.69	-0.08	-1.50
Perceived discrimination	-0.75	-17.37***	-0.22	-3.93***	-0.03	-0.36
Self-esteem			0.67	11.70***	-0.28	-2.63**
Psychological resilience					-0.37	-3.70***
R	0.80		0.86		0.68	
R2	0.63		0.75		0.47	
F	120.86		154.38		36.77	

**Table 4.** Mediation Effects and Confidence Intervals

Mediator	Effect Size	Proportion of Total Effect	95%CI	
			Lower	Upper
Perceived discrimination→Self-esteem→Social anxiety	0.249	47.03%	0.071	0.440
Perceived discrimination→Psychological resilience→Social anxiety	0.096	18.20%	0.002	0.276
Perceived discrimination→Self-esteem→Psychological resilience→Social anxiety	0.220	41.52%	0.099	0.357
Total indirect effect	0.565	106.75%	0.376	0.845



**Figure 1.** Chain Mediation Model Diagram

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

##### 4.1. The Impact of Perceived Discrimination on Social Anxiety

This study confirmed a significant positive correlation between perceived discrimination and social anxiety among college students, consistent with previous research. However, mediation analysis revealed that the direct predictive effect of perceived discrimination on social anxiety did not reach statistical significance. College students, undergoing social transition, exhibit heightened sensitivity in interpersonal interactions. Compared to traditional vulnerable groups (e.g., migrant children or ethnic minorities), they may rely more on internal psychological resources (e.g., self-esteem and resilience) to

mitigate the negative effects of perceived discrimination rather than manifesting overt social anxiety. Aligning with the metacognitive model of social anxiety (Clark & Wells, 1995), perceived discrimination may activate anticipatory cognitive biases about negative evaluations, indirectly intensifying self-monitoring and over-reflection in social situations, thereby exacerbating social anxiety.

Notably, the average perceived discrimination score in this study was 4.19 (out of 5), indicating a relatively high level. This may reflect contemporary social dynamics, such as the "labeling" effect of digital socialization and campus competition, which amplify social comparison and sensitize students to signals of differential treatment. Gender differences were significant, with female students more affected by perceived discrimination, potentially due to sociocultural reinforcement of interpersonal sensitivity. This suggests that university mental health programs could employ group cognitive-behavioral training to help students distinguish objective situations from subjective threats, adjust catastrophic thinking, and anchor self-worth while strengthening core identity.

#### **4.2. The Mediating Role of Self-Esteem**

The study validated self-esteem's significant mediating role between perceived discrimination and social anxiety (Hypothesis 2). Symbolic interactionism posits that others' feedback shapes self-esteem development; prolonged exposure to discrimination may internalize prejudiced attitudes, lowering self-evaluation (Xie et al., 2023). The cognitive model of social anxiety suggests that socially anxious individuals develop negative beliefs as a result of early unpleasant experiences and use information within themselves to infer others' perceptions of themselves, thus producing social anxiety manifestations (Zhang et al., 2019). Self-esteem acts as a natural buffer, with its self-regulatory mechanisms providing resilience against social anxiety (Ding et al., 2018).

#### **4.3. The Mediating Role of Psychological Resilience**

The present study verified the independent mediating role of psychological resilience between perceived discrimination and college students' social anxiety, supporting Hypothesis H3. The results showed that perceived discrimination had a significant negative predictive effect on psychological resilience, and the inhibitory effect of psychological resilience on social anxiety, which is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Lee et al., 2013). According to the psychological resilience model, when individuals perceive themselves to be in unfavorable situations, such as perceived discrimination, individuals with high levels of psychological resilience, as a positive psychological resource, have more positive cognitive schemas and can recognize and regulate their emotions to cope with the situation (Zeng et al., 2024).

#### **4.4. Chain Mediation of Self-Esteem and Resilience**

Self-esteem and psychological resilience chain mediated 41.52% of the total indirect effect between perceived discrimination and social anxiety among college students, and hypothesis H5 was valid. Dynamic models of resilience indicate reciprocal relationships between self-esteem and resilience: external resources and environments fulfill internal needs, fostering resilience development when self-esteem is satisfied (Kuck et al., 2021). Self-esteem serves as a protective factor, and individuals with low self-esteem lack confidence in processing external information such as perceiving others' evaluations and discrimination, and more often adopt negative emotions to view them negatively, leading to failure or withdrawal. The level of self-esteem determines the coping attitudes that individuals make in stressful situations (Liu and Liang, Rui-Qiong, 2019). That is, perceived discrimination serves as a chronic stressor that first erodes self-esteem, the core resource of an individual's self-worth system, and then weakens the buffering capacity of psychological resilience against social anxiety.

In our study, college students exhibited moderately high levels of self-esteem and psychological resilience, along with a moderate level of social anxiety. This suggests that most current college students maintain a relatively positive perception of self-worth and possess a certain degree of adaptability when facing stress. At the same time, their social anxiety reflects general social distress. As the college student population is in the process of "establishing self-identity" while simultaneously undergoing a phase of values reconstruction, their self-identity remains unstable, making them prone to self-worth fluctuations when encountering discrimination. These findings highlight the importance of incorporating self-

affirmation exercises into mental health education curricula in colleges to help students strengthen their sense of value and self-esteem. Additionally, students should be encouraged to proactively engage in stress-relieving activities such as physical exercise and group counseling to cultivate resilience and perseverance, thereby enhancing self-efficacy and preparing for future socialized life. Furthermore, to address the prevalent issue of social anxiety among college students, colleges could implement social scenario-based training programs. For instance, stepwise stress exposure training (e.g., mock interviews, group presentations) tailored to common college social situations could be designed to enhance adaptive coping strategies through progressive challenges. Establishing in-group support networks through classes or student organizations such as peer support programs can also help students activate resilience resources within a sense of belonging, thereby alleviating feelings of isolation.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

- College students reported relatively high perceived discrimination, moderately high self-esteem and resilience, and moderate social anxiety.
- Significant gender differences emerged in social anxiety (higher in females); age negatively predicted social anxiety.
- Perceived discrimination negatively correlated with self-esteem and resilience but positively with social anxiety. Self-esteem positively correlated with resilience and negatively with social anxiety; resilience negatively correlated with social anxiety.
- Perceived discrimination indirectly influenced social anxiety through self-esteem and resilience's separate and chain mediation.

Overall, this study is the first to elucidate the psychological mechanism by which perceived discrimination affects college students' social anxiety through the chain mediation pathway of self-esteem to psychological resilience. Focusing on the general college student population, it reveals their heightened perception of discrimination in the digital social era and high-pressure competitive environments, along with the underlying psychological mechanisms, providing valuable theoretical and practical insights for alleviating social anxiety among college students. However, this study has the following limitations: First, as a cross-sectional study, it cannot determine the dynamic changes and causal relationships among variables. Second, the sample size was relatively small and geographically concentrated, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs and expand the sample size for a more comprehensive investigation.

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