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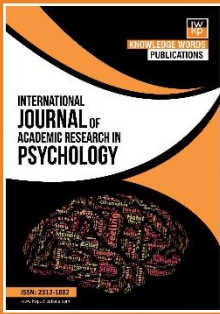
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## Relationship between Social Support, Loneliness and Academic Adjustment among University Students

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### Abstract

Transition from high school to university often causes much stress for most students. In the new university environment, students often face various interpersonal, social, and academic demands, each of which could potentially create stressful situations for most of them. Such changes can lead to specific problems in adjustment. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate the relationship between social support and loneliness, in one hand, and academic adjustment, in the other hand, among university students. The statistical population includes all students studying at the University of Kashan in 2014-2015 academic year. According to Krejcie and Morgan Table, 320 students were randomly selected via stratified multistage cluster sampling based on gender and faculty. The participants filled out Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), the UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-LS), and the Academic Adjustment subscale of Baker and Siryk's Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). Stepwise Regression Analysis and Pearson Correlation were run in SPSS-22 to analyze the data. The results showed that academic adjustment has a significant positive relationship with the dimensions of social support and a significant negative relationship with loneliness. Moreover, loneliness and social support from family can significantly predict academic adjustment among university students.

**Keywords:** Social Support, Loneliness, Academic Adjustment, Students.

### Introduction

Transition from high school to university is regarded as a major change in the lives of many adolescents (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007) and a key developmental challenge in late adolescence, which is due to the fact that individuals achieve greater independence and adopt more responsibilities in this period (Hickman, Bartholomae, & Mckenry, 2000). Studying at university provides students with opportunities for psychosocial development (Friedlander et al., 2007) but can

cause much stress (Leong, Bonz, & Zachar, 1997) and acute pressure (Friedlander et al., 2007) for them. Without proper academic adjustment, students might either face serious problems or drop out of university. In the US, around 30-40% of students drop out of university without obtaining their degree, and some never return for completing their education (Enochs and Ronald, 2006). Social support offered by families and peers is one of the main factors predicting academic adjustment among students (Grant-Vallone et al., 2004). Researchers believe that students who receive more support and consultation from their families are better capable of adapting with university. On the other hand, entering university might cause the former adjustment to be disrupted, thus individuals should be able to make an adjustment to the new environment and its particular features. Although some students achieve academic adjustment more quickly, others have difficulty detaching themselves from their previous relationships and/or adjust to their new academic and social life at university (Woosly, 2003). The extent to which and how social support can influence academic adjustment has been discussed in two main models. According to the first model, known as the generic model of social support (Lazarus, 1966), social support in itself directly influences an individual's health, and shortage or lack of it can cause more stress for the person. Therefore, social support could be helpful in many ways. Moreover, it can increase an individual's resistance to mental disorders in different ways by, for example, improving his/her self-esteem. The other model, called the buffering model of social support (Lazarus, 1966), states that only upon undergoing stressful experiences, social support can contribute to adjustment. Therefore, social support as a buffering factor can be helpful in preventing adjustment problems (Faghirpoor, 1995).

Moreover, one of major crises of the adolescence period and even other life periods is loneliness (Chary, 2003). Psychologists have defined loneliness in different ways. Elhageen (2004) defines it as an unpleasant experience in which the person perceives himself/herself distinct from others, following by serious behavioral problems such as sadness, anger, and depression. This might be indicative of unfulfillment of desires and expectations in social relationships and is characterized by such behaviors as avoiding contact with others (Elhageen, 2004). Peplau et al. (1982) define loneliness as the difference between the desired and current levels of social relationships in terms of their quantitative and qualitative aspects. In fact, loneliness is based on the gap between an individual's ideals and present achievements in his/her interpersonal close relationships. The wider this gap is, the stronger the loneliness will be (Peplau, 1982). On the other hand, some individuals might develop loneliness because they hold negative expectations in their interactions and lack necessary social skills for establishing and maintaining intimate relationships. Moreover, they have extreme anxiety in their social relationships (Solano & Koester, 1989), are sensitive to rejection (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980), have difficulty establishing friendly relationships, performing social activities, participating in group activities, enjoying parties, and controlling the environment (Horowitz & de Sales French, 1979), consider themselves negative, worthless, and socially incompetent (Jones, Freemon, & Goswick, 1981; Jones & Moor, 1987; Jones, Sanson & Helm, 1983), and have low self-esteem (Heinrich & Gullone, 2006). Shahini, Asayesh, Ghobadi, and Sadeghi (2013) pointed out field of study and place of residence are two important factors influencing the amount of loneliness and social support students may receive. Considering the aforementioned studies; the present study, therefore, aims to examine the relationship between social support and loneliness, in one hand, and academic adjustment, in the other hand, among university students.

## **Research Method**

The present study is descriptive with a correlational design. The statistical population includes all BA and MA students studying at the University of Kashan in 2014-2015 academic year. Based on Krejcie & Morgan Table (1970), 350 was determined as the required sample size. Multistage cluster sampling method was used to randomly select three faculties, namely, Faculty of Humanities, Faculty of Engineering, and Faculty of Arts, out of each of which five classes were selected. Twelve students were chosen from each class. After explaining the objectives of the study to the participants, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), the UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-LS), and the Academic Adjustment subscale of Baker and Siryk's Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) were distributed among the participants, out of which 320 ones were completed and collected. Pearson Correlation and Stepwise Regression Analysis were run in SPSS-22 to analyze the data.

## **Instruments**

### **Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)**

The MSPSS (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) is a 12-item self-report questionnaire scored on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree). There are three subscales for different areas of support, namely, family, friends, and significant others. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal reliability was 0.88. Zimet et al. (1988) report test-retest reliability of .85 over a 2-3 month period, along with moderate construct validity. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as 0.82 in the present study.

### **The UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA-LS)**

**UCLA-LS** (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980) was used to assess the subjective feelings of loneliness or social isolation. There are 20 items seeking respondents' opinions about the extent to which they agreed with each description. The responses ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (often), with a total possible aggregate score range of 20–80. In this scale, the higher the score, the more loneliness the person experience. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of internal reliability of this instrument is .94 (Russell, Peplau & Cutrona, 1980).

### **Academic Adjustment**

The Academic Adjustment subscale of Baker and Siryk's Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) was used to measure academic adjustment. This instrument consists of 67 nine-point Likert-scale items ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 9 (totally agree). It has 4 sub-scales of academic adjustment (24 items), social adjustment (20 items), personal-emotional adjustment (15 items), and attachment to the institution or university (Baker & Siryk, 1986). In the present study, only the academic adjustment subscale was used. Higher scores in this scale indicated higher academic adjustment, motivation, academic achievement, and satisfaction. Baker & Siryk (1989) indicated the scores of this scale have a negative relationship with university turnover and a positive relationship with participation in social activities. In the present, Cronbach's alpha as an internal consistency for academic adjustment subscale was .86.

## Results

Descriptive statistics (M and SD), internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's alpha), and bivariate inter-correlation coefficients (Pearson's *r*) for all measures are reported in Table 1.

*Table 1. Descriptive indices and intercorrelations between primary variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	Std. Deviation
1) Loneliness	1					38.88	8.83
2) Perceived social support	-.46**	1				60.28	8.36
3) Social support (family)	-.31**	.63**	1			20.84	2.99
4) Social support (friends)	-.34**	.78**	.210**	1		19.90	4.36
5) Social support (important other)	-.36**	.79**	.35**	.39**	1	19.53	3.85
6) adaptation with university	-.36**	-.22**	-.20**	-.12*	-.17**	126.85	19.64

According to Table 1, all perceived social support components including social support from family, social support from friends, and social support from important others, and adaptation with university have inverse significant relationship with students' loneliness. On the other hand, the components of perceived social support including social support from family, friends and important others have direct significant correlation coefficient with adaptation with university among students.

Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis was used to predict adaptation with university and determine the distinctive role of each component of perceived social support and loneliness in explaining adaptation with university variance and detecting the best predictors.

The results of regression analysis based on cognitive emotion regulation and mindfulness showed that loneliness ( $\Delta R^2 = .107$ ,  $F(1,318) = 38.124$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and social support from family ( $\Delta R^2 = .012$ ,  $F(1,317) = 4.392$ ,  $P = .001$ ) could predict 12% of adaptation with university variance in two steps, respectively. Other components of perceived social support including friends and important others did not enter the equation at the third step of the analysis since they could not predict adaptation with university significantly. Table 2 demonstrates standardized and unstandardized regression coefficients in the second step.

*Table 2. standardized and unstandardized coefficients of stepwise regression of adaptation with university based on Perceived social support components and loneliness*

Model	R	R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
				R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1 . Loneliness	.32	.107	18.59	.107	38.124	1	318	.000
2 . Social support (family)	.34	.119	18.49	.012	4.392	1	317	.037

According to Table 2, adaptation with university could be predicted indirectly by loneliness in the first step, and directly by perceived social support from family in the second step.

## Discussion

Perceived social support has an important role in reduction of mental disorders prevalence (Halvae & Nosratabadi, 2014), improvement of people's loneliness, life quality, and mental health (Kang, Park, & Wallace, 2016; Zhao, Kong, & Wang, 2012) and students' self-esteem and life satisfaction (Zhao, Wang, & Kong, 2014). Hence, students with strong social, supportive networks like family and friends enjoy more life satisfaction. In fact, as their life satisfaction and social support increases, they suffer less loneliness. The results of the present study are in agreement with those of Zhao, Kong, and Wang (2013); Wang et al. (2011); Tajalli and Ganbaripanah (2010). As Dyck & Holtzman (2013) maintain, improvement in the quality of interpersonal relationships and availability of social support leads to better psychological well-being and fewer depression symptoms. Also, access to social and supportive networks is known as one of the most important resources in protection of individuals against psychological sufferings (Tajalli & Ganbaripanah, 2010); Wang et al. (2011); Duru (2008) studied the relationship between loneliness and social support, and they found a negative relationship between family function and social support, in one hand, and loneliness, in the other hand. Moreover, Dong, Beck & Simon (2009) have indicated that social support has an important role in reduction of loneliness among the adolescents, youth, and elderly.

The findings of the present study showed that there is a statistically significant relationship between social support and academic adjustment, which was also reported by Sallvina et al. (2003), White and Hostings (2004); Sila and Begrio (2007). In addition, Adams et al. (2000) found that family is an influencing factor in the academic adjustment, and the family environment has a complementary role to academic experience quality. A student's academic experience contributes to his/her personal and social development. Moreover, Tav et al. (2000) maintained that social support leads to an increase in academic adjustment. Robert and Goblit (1997) found that individuals receiving more social support enjoy a higher degree of physical, mental, and social health and make a better adjustment to life challenges. Therefore, considering all the findings of the previous research and the present study, it can be concluded that there is a significant positive relationship between social support and academic adjustment. Furthermore, the higher the degree of social support an individual perceives, the higher the degree of adjustment he/she can make to life's challenges and tensions.

Moreover, the results of the present study showed that there is a significant relationship between loneliness and academic adjustment. The results of the present study are consistent with those of Len and Grun's (1992) study. They found out that lonely individuals make less academic adjustment, have less social competency, and are less likely to be chosen as a friend, show fewer honest behaviors, and act passively. Also, there is a significant relationship between loneliness and psychosocial disorders such as alcoholism, suicide, depression, anxiety, addiction, low self-confidence, negative attributions, delinquencies, and academic failures (Len and Grun, 1992). Katrina (2007) found that those with chronic loneliness had significantly weaker social skills than those without it and had a much less degree of academic adjustment. To justify the findings of the present study, since students are away from their families due to their educational circumstances and life at the campus, they might fail in establishing good social relationships with others because of loss of connection with their old friends and family, thus feeling lonelier and making less academic adjustment. Therefore, it is highly important that families and friends support students to establish intimate relationships with their new friends at campus and provide suitable conditions for them to avoid loneliness.

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