

The Effect of Perceived Family Environment Functioning Previous Social Experiences, and Values on Social Competence of College Students

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Abstract

This study investigated how family environment, social experiences, and social values influence college students' social competence. A sample of vocational students from Guizhou Industry Polytechnic was randomly selected, and data were collected using self-developed assessment tools. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and multivariate regression were employed to examine the relationships among the variables. The findings revealed that all three factors positively affected social competence, with social values being the most influential, followed by family environment and social experiences. These results align with Expectancy–Value Theory, which posits that individuals' motivation and competence are shaped by both the value they attach to a task and their expectations of success. The study clarified operational definitions and measurement dimensions, contributing to the literature by addressing an existing research gap and offering practical implications for social education in higher institutions, school–family collaboration, and student self-development. Nonetheless, the study is constrained by its sample size and cross-sectional design, highlighting the need for future research with larger samples and more refined frameworks.

Keywords: college students, social competence, family environment, social values, expectancy–value theory

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Introduction

Social competence is widely recognized as a core developmental outcome for young adults, particularly college students who are in a critical period of transition toward autonomy and social integration (Erikson, 1950). Despite its importance, recent surveys highlight substantial challenges: the China University Media Alliance reports that 64.82% of university students possess limited social networks, while in Guizhou Province, 40% of vocational college students report low confidence in cross-cultural interactions. At Guizhou Polytechnic Institute, approximately 10% of freshmen present severe psychological difficulties annually, many of which stem from problems of social adaptation. These figures underscore the urgent need to investigate the mechanisms shaping social competence among vocational college students.

The present study focuses on four interrelated constructs—social competence, family environment function, social experience, and social values. Social competence is defined as the comprehensive ability of an individual to communicate effectively, establish relationships, and manage social interactions, encompassing five dimensions: language expression, nonverbal communication, emotional understanding, social skills, and interpersonal relationship management. Family environment function refers to the background conditions that influence personal growth—including emotional climate, communication patterns, parenting approaches, and economic resources—which provide the foundation for social values and behavioral tendencies. Social experience captures the knowledge, skills, and emotions accumulated through participation in activities such as student clubs, volunteer service, and internships. Finally, social values represent the evaluative standards that individuals hold toward social activities, which guide their interpersonal behaviors and are shaped by family, education, and cultural contexts.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in Expectancy–Value Theory (EVT) (Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). EVT posits that individuals' motivation and performance are determined by two key factors: (a) their expectancies for success—the belief in their own ability to succeed in a given task, and (b) the subjective task value—the perceived importance, utility, or intrinsic interest of the task. When applied to social development, EVT suggests that college students' social competence depends not only on their confidence in managing interpersonal interactions (expectancy) but also on the value they place on social relationships and group belonging (value). Family environments contribute by shaping early expectations and emotional security; social experiences provide opportunities to test and reinforce self-efficacy; and social values guide the perceived significance of social participation. Thus, EVT offers a coherent framework to understand how these three factors converge to influence students' social abilities.

A growing body of literature has examined these constructs and their associations with social competence. Research on social competence demonstrates that it is linked to psychological resources and motivational mechanisms. D. Zhang (2008) reported a significant positive correlation between college students' general self-efficacy and interpersonal communication. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory highlights the role of observational learning in developing social abilities, while Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs theory identifies social belonging as a prerequisite for self-esteem and self-actualization. More recently, Kong Hua et al. (2022) showed that disengaged parenting styles predict poorer interpersonal adaptability, with irrational beliefs mediating this effect.

In terms of the family environment, maternal nurturing that encourages autonomy fosters resilience, which in turn promotes social competence (Yin, 2020). Xu (2021), using structural equation modeling, confirmed that parenting styles influence adolescents' communication abilities indirectly through self-esteem. Similarly, S. Zhang (2022) revealed that evaluative fear mediates the relationship between parenting styles and college students' social anxiety. Studies on social experience emphasize its developmental value. Sang (2020) found that club participation improves teamwork and conflict resolution skills, while Xie (2021) demonstrated that internships enhance real-world communication abilities. Beyond human studies, Li et al. (2024) showed that adolescent social experiences can shape neural development in the prefrontal cortex, with long-term consequences for social behavior.

Regarding social values, Xu (2022) reported that positive digital media content promotes proactive values among students. L. Wang (2021) emphasized the role of empathetic values in building trust, whereas negative orientations often result in social barriers. Liu (2022), through qualitative interviews, demonstrated that family cultural climate plays a crucial role in internalizing social values.

Although these studies provide a multidimensional foundation, important limitations remain. First, the conceptual definitions of variables across studies are inconsistent. Second, many investigations adopt a single-factor perspective rather than examining interactive mechanisms. Finally, the internal pathways by which family environment, social experience, and social values jointly shape social competence have yet to be fully clarified. These gaps provide the rationale for the present study.

Accordingly, this research seeks to examine how different dimensions of the family environment shape social skills and the extent to which family functioning influences behavioral patterns. It also aims to analyze how campus social activities and accumulated experiences contribute to the enhancement of interpersonal competence. In addition, the study investigates how social values guide attitudes and behaviors and ultimately influence the quality of social relationships.

The objectives of this study are: (a) to analyze the mechanisms by which the family environment fosters emotional support and communication skills; (b) to examine the role of frequency and quality of social participation in enhancing social confidence; and (c) to reveal the guiding effects of social values on interactional styles and relationship quality. By anchoring these questions in Expectancy–Value Theory, the study seeks to clarify the mechanisms through which family, experience, and values interact to shape vocational college students' social competence, thereby contributing to theoretical refinement and offering practical implications for social education, school–family collaboration, and student development.

Research Hypotheses

Drawing upon Expectancy–Value Theory and prior empirical findings, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1 (H1): Family environmental function has a significant positive relationship with college students' social competence.
- Hypothesis 2 (H2): Social experience has a significant positive relationship with college students' social competence.

- Hypothesis 3 (H3): Social values have a significant positive relationship with college students' social competence.

Method

Participants

This study targeted vocational college students enrolled at Guizhou Industrial Vocational and Technical College. Participants were selected through random sampling to ensure representativeness. A total of 370 questionnaires were distributed, of which 310 valid responses were obtained, yielding an effective return rate of 84%.

The participants were between 17 and 24 years of age and represented a wide range of academic disciplines and grade levels. They also came from diverse family backgrounds, including both nuclear and single-parent households. Such diversity in age, academic specialization, and family structure enhances the representativeness of the sample and reflects the broader characteristics of the vocational college student population.

Instrumentation

Four self-developed scales were employed in this study, each optimized through a pre-survey ($n = 100$) and confirmed to meet established reliability and validity standards. The instruments included: Social Competence Scale (19 items; Cronbach's Alpha = .95), Family Environment Functioning Scale (9 items; Cronbach's Alpha = .74), Social Experience Scale (9 items; Cronbach's Alpha = .80), Social Values Scale (14 items; Cronbach's Alpha = .93). All instruments were administered using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Content validity was assessed using the item-objective congruence (IOC) index, with all items exceeding the threshold of .50.

Results

To provide an overview of the relationships among the study variables, correlation analyses were conducted. Table 1 presents the correlations among social competence, social experience, family functioning, and social value. The results indicate that all study variables were significantly and positively correlated. Specifically, social competence was positively associated with social experience ($r = .60, p < .01$), family functioning ($r = .54, p < .01$), and social value ($r = .61, p < .01$). Social experience was also positively related to family functioning ($r = .49, p < .01$) and social value ($r = .56, p < .01$). Finally, family functioning showed a positive correlation with social value ($r = .38, p < .01$).

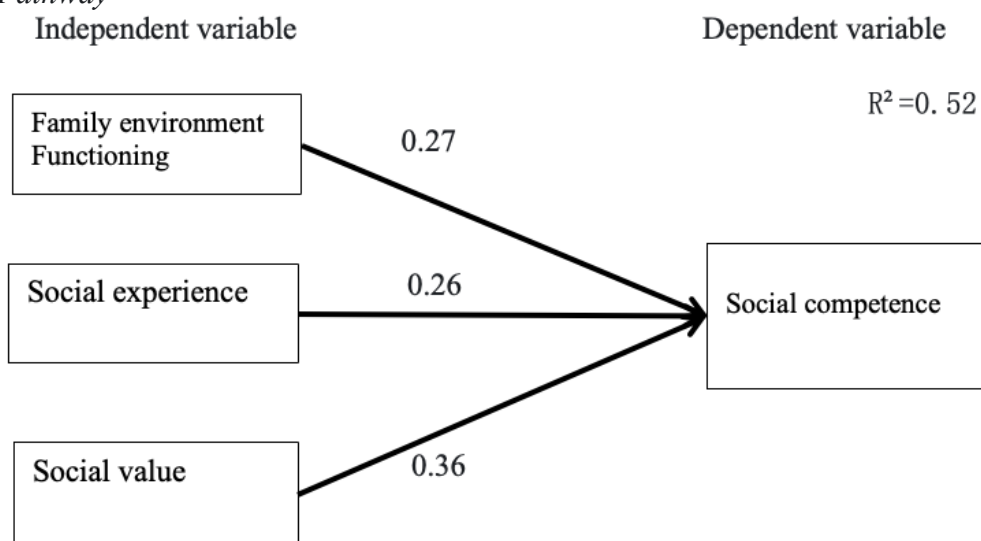
These findings suggest that stronger family functioning, richer social experiences, and more positive social values are all linked with higher levels of social competence among vocational college students.

Table 1
Correlation Matrix of Study Variables (N = 310)

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-------|---|
| 1. Social Competence | 1 | | | |
| 2. Social Experience | .60** | 1 | | |
| 3. Family Functioning | .54** | .49** | 1 | |
| 4. Social Value | .61** | .56** | .38** | 1 |

The multiple regression analysis indicated a significant overall model fit ($R^2 = .52$, $F(3, 306) = 52.37$, $p < .001$), supporting all three hypotheses. Family environment function had a significant positive effect on social competence ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$). Students from families characterized by emotional support and open communication demonstrated greater social confidence and skills. Social experience also exerted a significant positive effect on social competence ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$). Engagement in social participation, volunteer service, and related activities enhanced students’ communication and collaboration abilities. Social values emerged as the strongest predictor of social competence ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$). Students who emphasized emotional connection and reciprocity exhibited more positive and adaptive social behaviors. Together, these results suggest that family functioning provides the foundation, social experience reinforces skill development, and social values guide positive social orientations. This pathway is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Pathway



Discussion and Conclusion

The present study examined how family environment, social experiences, and social values influence college students’ social competence. Consistent with Expectancy–Value Theory (Eccles et al., 1983; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), all three variables significantly and positively predicted social competence, with social values emerging as the strongest predictor. These findings underscore the joint influence of external contexts and internalized value orientations on students’ social development.

The Foundational Role of Family Environment

The results confirmed that family functioning significantly contributes to social competence, supporting Hypothesis 1. This is consistent with prior research indicating that supportive parenting styles and positive family climates foster resilience and interpersonal confidence (Yin, 2020; Xu, 2021). Democratic families foster secure attachments through emotional support, where parents demonstrate positive social behaviors—such as listening and empathy—that help students perceive social interaction as a source of security rather than anxiety. In contrast, authoritarian or neglectful family environments are more likely to produce social skill deficiencies, which aligns with Yin’s (2020) findings. Within the framework of Expectancy–Value Theory, family environments shape students’ early expectancies for social success by providing or withholding the emotional and behavioral foundations for effective interaction.

The Practical Value of Social Experience

Hypothesis 2 was also supported, showing that social experiences significantly enhance students’ social competence. Campus associations, volunteer services, and internships provide “trial-and-error feedback” platforms where students test and refine their interpersonal skills. Group cooperation can strengthen conflict resolution abilities, while workplace internships help students adapt to organizational norms and rules of interaction. These findings confirm Sang’s (2020) view that “practical accumulation promotes ability improvement.” From an EVT perspective, such experiences reinforce students’ perceptions of competence by providing tangible evidence of success in real-world settings, thereby encouraging continued participation in social activities.

The Core Driving Force of Social Values

The strongest effect was observed for social values, supporting Hypothesis 3. Positive values, such as prioritizing emotional connection and empathy, motivate students to initiate communication and accept differences, fostering higher-quality relationships. Conversely, utilitarian values may lead to the instrumentalization of social interactions, ultimately reducing relational quality. This is consistent with Xu’s (2022) findings on the role of digital content in shaping proactive versus instrumental value orientations. Within the EVT framework, social values represent the motivational “value” component, guiding the degree of effort students are willing to invest in social relationships. Thus, values serve as the driving force that directs students’ social behaviors toward either constructive or superficial outcomes.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study extends Expectancy–Value Theory by demonstrating its applicability in the domain of social competence. The findings suggest a developmental pathway whereby family functioning lays the foundation for secure expectancies, social experiences reinforce competence through practice, and social values guide behavior through internalized standards. Practically, the results highlight the importance of a multi-level approach. Families should adopt supportive and communicative parenting practices, universities should strengthen extracurricular and service-learning opportunities, and educators should promote positive social values through curriculum design, counseling, and media literacy programs.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. First, the reliance on self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias; future research could include peer or teacher assessments. Second, the cross-sectional design restricts causal inference; longitudinal designs would clarify developmental trajectories. Third, the sample was drawn from a single vocational college in Guizhou Province, which may limit generalizability. Expanding to other institutional and cultural contexts would improve external validity.

Future studies should also explore mediating and moderating mechanisms. For instance, self-esteem or irrational beliefs may mediate the link between family functioning and social competence (Kong et al., 2022; Xu, 2021). Cultural orientation, digital media exposure, or socioeconomic status may moderate the influence of social values. Examining these pathways will provide a more nuanced understanding of how contextual and psychological factors jointly shape students' social development.

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