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**Adaptability, Personality, and Social Support: Examining Links with Psychological Wellbeing Among Chinese High School Students**

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# **Adaptability, Personality, and Social Support: Examining Links with Psychological Wellbeing Among Chinese High School Students**

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## **Abstract**

The first year of boarding senior high school marks a period of great change for students. The extent to which students are able to adjust to successfully navigate this change (adaptability) likely has an impact on their psychological wellbeing. It has also been theorized that students' personality traits and perceived social support may impact upon their adaptability and, directly and/or indirectly through adaptability, influence their psychological wellbeing. However, the literature examining independent and mediating effects of adaptability on psychological wellbeing is sparse particularly among students from non-Western cultures. In the present study, 102 grade-one high school students in China, were surveyed for their personality, perceived social support, adaptability, and psychological wellbeing (life satisfaction, mental well-being, and psychological distress). Findings showed that adaptability (along with neuroticism, extraversion, and social support) made a significant independent contribution to students' psychological wellbeing. Further, adaptability was found to fully mediate the relationships between personality (conscientiousness and neuroticism) and psychological wellbeing, and to partially mediate the relationships between extraversion and psychological wellbeing, and social support and psychological wellbeing. These findings have important theoretical and practical implications for researchers and educators who are seeking to support students' adjustment to boarding senior high school.

**Keywords:** adaptability; personality; social support; psychological wellbeing; boarding senior high school.

# **Adaptabilidad, Personalidad y Apoyo Social: Análisis de su Vínculo con el Bienestar Psicológico entre Alumnos de Instituto Chinos**

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## **Resumen**

El primer año de internado de secundaria marca un período de grandes cambios para los estudiantes. La medida en la que los estudiantes son capaces de ajustarse a este cambio (adaptabilidad) tiene un impacto en su bienestar psicológico. También se ha teorizado que los rasgos de personalidad de los estudiantes y el apoyo social percibido pueden influir en su adaptabilidad y, directa y/o indirectamente, influir en su bienestar psicológico. Sin embargo, la literatura que examina los efectos independientes y mediadores de la adaptabilidad en el bienestar psicológico es escasa, especialmente entre los estudiantes de culturas no occidentales. En el presente estudio, se encuestó a 102 estudiantes de primer curso de secundaria de China para conocer su personalidad, el apoyo social percibido, la adaptabilidad y el bienestar psicológico (satisfacción vital, bienestar mental y malestar psicológico). Los resultados mostraron que la adaptabilidad (junto con el neuroticismo, la extraversión y el apoyo social) contribuyó de forma significativa e independiente al bienestar psicológico de los estudiantes. Además, se encontró que la adaptabilidad medió totalmente en las relaciones entre la personalidad (concienciación y neuroticismo) y el bienestar psicológico, y que medió parcialmente en las relaciones entre la extraversión y el bienestar psicológico, y el apoyo social y el bienestar psicológico. Estos resultados tienen importantes implicaciones teóricas y prácticas para los investigadores y educadores que buscan apoyar la adaptación de los estudiantes al internado de secundaria.

**Palabras clave:** adaptabilidad, personalidad, apoyo social, bienestar psicológico, internado de secundaria.

Across the lifespan, an individual will regularly be confronted with changing environments, unexpected challenges, uncertain situations, or novel circumstances, which they must endeavor to adjust and accommodate themselves to (Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2009). This is particularly the case for individuals in the adolescent period, where there is tremendous change (Holliman et al., 2020) at a time where they may be less proficient in dealing with change (Martin et al., 2013). The commencement of high school is widely recognized as an important (and challenging) transition milestone (Estell et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2013). This may be exacerbated for boarding senior high school students in China, where there are heightened pressures compared with their Western counterparts due to the lack of tertiary education resources and the fierce competition in college entrance examination (Liu & Lu, 2011; Zhang et al., 2018). Moreover, this is often their first experience of moving out of home and living on their own in a school dormitory, which will inevitably disrupt routines and create new challenges. It is proposed that students' adaptability—defined here as students' cognitive, behavioral, and/or affective adjustment in the face of uncertainty and novelty (Martin et al., 2012)—may play an important role in assisting the positive psychological functioning among students who are transitioning to boarding senior high school in China.

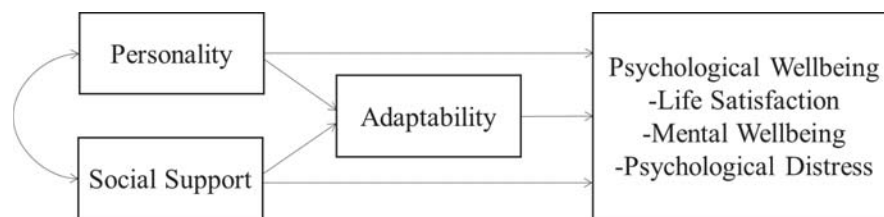
Although a considerable body of work has shown that students' adaptability is associated with a range of psychological outcomes, such as life satisfaction and self-esteem (e.g., Martin et al., 2013), few studies have been carried out using non-Western student samples (Zhang et al., 2018): this is problematic given the need to enhance the heterogeneity and generalizability of recent findings (Zhou & Lin, 2016). Further, research is warranted to help elucidate the role of adaptability in psychological functioning among students; for example, it has been theorized that adaptability may be influenced by other factors, such as personality traits (e.g., Martin et al., 2013) and perceived social support (e.g., Sahin & Kirdok, 2018), and that these factors may be predictive—either directly and/or indirectly through adaptability—of psychological wellbeing. It is important to measure all of these variables in a single study, so that independent and mediation effects can be determined (e.g., Burns et al., 2018): such research would be highly original and of theoretical and practical importance.

In the current study, therefore, we sought to examine the relationship between personality, perceived social support, adaptability, and psychological

wellbeing (life satisfaction, mental well-being, and psychological distress) among grade-one boarding senior high school students in China. More precisely, we examined whether adaptability (along with personality and social support) could make a significant independent contribution to students' psychological wellbeing, and whether adaptability could mediate any observed relationships between personality/social support and psychological wellbeing. This hypothesized model is shown in Figure 1. The findings have the potential to advance knowledge of how students manage the transition to boarding senior high school and may provide information relevant to interventions that may promote positive psychological functioning among students.

**Figure 1**

*The hypothesized model under examination.*



### **Adaptability: A Conceptual Overview**

Although adaptation has long been considered as one of the most important capacities among human beings, the concept of adaptability is a recently developed construct. According to the tripartite framework (Martin et al., 2012, 2013), adaptability refers to individual's ability to manage, adjust, and modify their thoughts (cognitions), actions (behaviors), and emotions (affect) in response to changing, novel, and uncertain circumstances, conditions, and situations. This approach derives from a number of theoretical domains (briefly considered below) and forms the basis for further investigation of its role in predicting students' psychological wellbeing.

The conceptualization of adaptability is partly grounded in the lifespan theory of control, according to which individuals adaptively adjust their behaviors (primary control) and cognitions (secondary control) in order to

attain positive outcomes during their goal-pursuit processes (Heckhausen et al., 2010). The process of compensatory primary control which involves alternative courses of action and compensatory secondary control, which involves reappraising goals and altering expectations, are considered of relevance to adaptability. The tripartite approach extends the lifespan theory by adding an ‘affective’ dimension to the process of adaptive adjustments.

Adaptability is also embedded within self-regulation theories. This is a self-directive process during which learners constantly monitor, direct, and control their actions to achieve their goals (Zimmerman, 2002). According to Winne and Hadwin (2008), during the fourth phase of self-regulation (the adaptation phase), learners evaluate their present performances and figure out which modifications and improvements are warranted for a better outcome next time. The construct of adaptability complements this self-regulation model with an added affective dimension. Furthermore, it shifts attention from tackling common learning tasks and demands to dealing specifically with changing, novel, and uncertain situations. Taken together, these different theoretical approaches (see Martin et al., 2012, for a more comprehensive overview) provide a conceptual basis for the construct of adaptability and provide reason to anticipate connections with psychological functioning.

### **Adaptability and Psychological Wellbeing**

Based on the conceptual relevance of adaptability, it is unsurprising that the regulatory nature of adaptability has been found to be associated with effective functioning (Diener et al., 2006) and adaptive outcomes in the face of novelty and uncertainty (Martin et al., 2013). For example, adaptability has been found to positively predict life satisfaction (Martin et al., 2013; Zhou & Lin, 2016), self-esteem (Ghasemi-Nejad, 2014; Martin et al., 2013), an enhanced sense of meaning and purpose (Ghasemi-Nejad, 2014; Martin et al., 2013), and to negatively predict psychological distress (Wrosch & Scheier, 2003). This is not a novel finding; however, there are at least two ‘gaps’ in the literature where further research is warranted: 1) there is currently a need to assess the replicability of recent findings using non-Western student samples, and 2) recent literature has suggested that adaptability may be influenced by other factors, such as personality traits and perceived social support, and that these factors may be predictive of psychological wellbeing either directly or indirectly via adaptability (e.g., Martin et al., 2013). These predicted patterns of association will now be considered in turn.

### **Personality, Adaptability, and Psychological Wellbeing**

According to the adaptation theory of well-being (Diener et al., 2006), individuals may adopt different strategies to adapt and exhibit distinct ways of expressing their adaptability. This may be due, in part, to individual differences in some dispositional factors, such as personality. Indeed, some research has shown that components of the five-factor model of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1985, 1996)—comprising extraversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism—may exert influence on individual's adaptability.

Lepine et al. (2000) argued that, to be adaptable, it requires flexibility in the face of changing or novel circumstances (agreeable), the capacity to thrive on external stimuli in order to better adapt to them (extravert), and the ability to embrace new experiences (openness). The perspective that personality characteristics may hold particular relevance to adaptability was supported by De Raad and Schouwenberg (1996) who found that extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness, significantly predicted an individual's adaptive adjustment of their personal resources. Moreover, McCrae and Löckenhoff (2010) concluded from their systematic review that conscientiousness (positively) and neuroticism (negatively) are related to effortful control, which may set children up for success during times of transition (Duckworth & Allred, 2012). Similarly, Hoyle (2010) noticed logical connections between key aspects of personality and regulatory processes and suggested that conscientiousness might play an essential role in self-regulation (a process that is closely related to adaptation). Finally, in one recent study, Martin et al. (2012) examined the relations between the big five factors and adaptability and found that extraversion, openness, neuroticism (negatively), conscientiousness, and agreeableness, all significantly correlated with adaptability. The literature briefly considered here, which draws upon conceptual and empirical work, suggests therefore that personality may function as a predictor of adaptability.

However, in a separate literature, direct links have been found between personality traits and positive psychological functioning, such as life satisfaction (Kuppens et al., 2008; Ho et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2018; Jovanovic, 2019) and psychological well-being (Fogle et al., 2002; Garcia, 2011; Larsen & Eid, 2008); therefore, given that adaptability has been found to be associated with personality and psychological wellbeing, it would seem



necessary to help elucidate the role of adaptability in relation to these dispositional and outcome variables. For example, it is plausible that one's personality may predispose them to adopt different coping mechanisms to deal with change, novelty, and uncertainty, and that these differences in managing this process (adaptation) may impact upon psychological outcomes. In one pertinent study in this area, [Martin et al. \(2013\)](#) found that adaptability significantly mediated the relationships between three personality predictors (conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism) and psychological wellbeing outcomes among high school students. Further empirical evidence is required to corroborate this novel finding.

### **Social Support, Adaptability, and Psychological Wellbeing**

Apart from personality factors, (perceived) social support (that is, the overall availability of social support, which could be emotional, instrumental, financial, or informational from his/her social network, that a person is aware of, [Demaray & Malecki, 2002](#)), is regarded as another important environmental factor which may exert influence on an individual's adaptability (e.g., [Burns et al., 2018](#)) particularly under conditions of change, uncertainty, and stress ([Cohen & Wills, 1985](#); [Guan et al., 2015](#)). For example, in the conservation of resource theory ([Hobfoll, 1989; 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018](#)), it has been theorized that social support may guard personal resources, such as adaptability, to help individuals strive and overcome stressful situations ([Hobfoll, 2001](#)). Thus, adaptability and social support may interact to influence psychological wellbeing: this has received some empirical support (see [Holliman et al., 2021](#); [Zhou & Lin, 2016](#)), but more research is necessary to corroborate this novel finding.

Numerous studies have shown that social support benefits psychological outcomes among adolescents. For example, it has been shown that adolescents who perceive a higher level of support from their parents, peers, and teachers have higher school engagement ([Rosenfeld et al., 2000](#); [Jelas et al., 2016](#)), higher academic achievement ([Danielsen et al. 2009](#); [Rosenfeld et al., 2000](#)), increased self-efficacy ([Danielsen et al., 2009](#)), and a higher level of life satisfaction ([Danielsen et al., 2009](#); [Koydemir et al., 2013](#)) as well as psychological wellbeing ([Poudel et al., 2020](#)). Therefore, given that adaptability is likely associated with social support, and that both adaptability and social support have been found to influence psychological wellbeing, it

would again seem necessary to help elucidate the role of adaptability in relation to these variables.

It is plausible, for example, that the effect of perceived social support on students' psychological outcomes is partially mediated by adaptability (Sahin & Kirdok, 2018). That is, students who perceive a higher level of social support might be able to better adapt to changing or novel environment and thus experience more positive psychological outcomes. This path has partly been supported by Tomás et al. (2020) who found evidence of a mediating role of school adjustment (though, not adaptability, per se) in the relationship between social support and wellbeing. It remains something of an empirical question, as to whether perceived social support influences adolescents' psychological wellbeing via adaptability.

### **Summary, Rationale, and Research Questions**

In sum, the transition to a boarding senior high school in China, is a time of great change, and the extent to which individuals are able to adjust to successfully navigate this change (adaptability) may impact upon their psychological wellbeing. Current theorizing (and some empirical evidence) has shown that students' personality traits and perceived social support may be associated with their adaptability and psychological wellbeing (potentially via their association with adaptability). However, the literature examining independent and mediating effects of adaptability on psychological wellbeing is sparse particularly among students from non-Western cultures. Consequently, we hypothesize a model (see Figure 1) in which personality and perceived social support predict adaptability; personality, perceived social support, and adaptability predicts psychological wellbeing; and adaptability mediates (to some degree) the relationships between personality/social support and psychological wellbeing.

Taken together, the present research addressed three major questions:

1. What is the bivariate relationship between adaptability, personality, perceived social support, and psychological wellbeing (mental health, life satisfaction, and psychological distress)?
2. Can adaptability, personality, and perceived social support make a significant independent contribution to psychological wellbeing?

3. Does adaptability have a mediating effect between personality and psychological wellbeing, and between perceived social support and psychological wellbeing?

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedure**

All participants in this study ( $N = 102$ , representing approximately one-half of the total number of students eligible for this study) were opportunity sampled from a single mainstream boarding high school in Qingdao, China.

Approximately two-thirds (65%) of the sample were female ( $n = 66$ ). Students were in Grade 1, aged between 15 and 16 years ( $M = 15.79$ ,  $SD = .60$ ), and most (72%,  $n = 73$ ) were living at a student dormitory from Monday to Friday during that academic year, with 80% of them ( $n = 58$ ) reporting this to be their first experience of living away from home.

The selection criteria were not limited to any particular demographic or ability group; all students who were in Grade 1 were invited to participate in this research. The class tutor administered a paper questionnaire to students during class to ascertain demographic details and to measure the core constructs in this study (i.e., adaptability, personality, social support, life satisfaction, mental wellbeing, and psychological distress), as detailed in the next section. All participating students along with their parents/guardians and the school's head teacher were provided with a participant information sheet and gave informed consent prior to completing the survey. A debrief and results summary was also made available via the participating school.

### **Measures**

All measures in this study were selected on the bases of their acceptable reliability, validity, and age-appropriateness. Validated Chinese versions of the scales were used where available but for some scales English versions were translated carefully by two postgraduate students who spoke fluently in both English and Chinese.

**Adaptability.** Adaptability was measured using a translated version of the Adaptability Scale (Martin et al., 2013). The scale comprised 9 items reflecting three aspects of adaptability (cognitive, behavioural, and emotional adaptability) based on the 'tripartite' framework (Zimmerman, 2002). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

agree) with a higher index score representing higher levels of adaptability. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) in this study was .89.

**Personality.** Personality was measured using a short version of the Big Five Inventory-10 (Rammstedt & John, 2007), which has been validated in Chinese-speaking countries (Carciofo et al., 2016). The scale comprised 10 items, 2 for each of extraversion, openness to experiences, neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with a higher averaged index score across the two items representing higher levels of that component of personality.

**Social Support.** Perceived social support was measured using translated version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet et al., 1988), which has been validated in Chinese-speaking countries (Chou et al., 2000). The scale comprised 12 items of 3 domains of social support: family, friends, and significant others. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with a higher index score representing higher levels of perceived social support. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) in this study was .93.

**Psychological Wellbeing.** Three outcomes related to psychological wellbeing—life satisfaction, mental wellbeing, and psychological distress—were measured using scales which has been validated in Chinese-speaking countries (Yin & He, 2012; Xiong & Xu, 2009; Zhou et al., 2008).

**Life Satisfaction.** Life satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). The scale comprised 5 items: these were rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) with a higher index score representing higher levels of life satisfaction. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) in this study was .80.

**Mental Wellbeing.** Mental well-being was measured using Mental Health Continuum Short Form (Keyes, 2002). The scale comprised 14 items which describe one's feelings during the past month. Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 6 (everyday) with a higher index score representing a healthier mental health status. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) in this study was .69.

**Psychological Distress.** Psychological distress was measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler & Mroczek, 1994). The scale comprised 10 items which describe one's feelings during the past month. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time) with a higher index score representing higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms. The internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) in this study was .93.

### **Data Analysis**

For preliminary analyses, reliability coefficients, means, standard deviations, were computed using SPSS Version 26. This software was also used to compute bivariate correlation (Pearson) and multiple regression analyses to see whether adaptability, personality, and perceived social support can make a significant independent contribution to psychological wellbeing (mental health, life satisfaction, and psychological distress). For mediation analyses, the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) was used to see whether adaptability can mediate the link between personality and psychological wellbeing, and between perceived social support and psychological wellbeing. The indirect effects of personality and perceived social support on outcomes via adaptability were tested with bootstrapping methods (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and zero order correlations for all core measures in this study.

**Table 1**  
*Means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables (N = 102)*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1.Age											
<i>Personality</i>											
2.Extraversion	.12										
3.Agreeableness	.01	-.01									
4.Conscientiousness	.05	.04	-.03								
5.Neuroticism	-.32	-.18	.11	-.17							
6.Openness	.07	.12	-.10	.09	-.06						
7.Perceived Social Support	.12	.34**	-.05	-.26**	-.17	.11					
8.Adaptability	.04	.29**	-.15	.23*	-.41**	.12	.59**				
<i>Psychological Wellbeing</i>											
10. Life satisfaction	.06	.42**	-.04	.22*	-.29**	.10	.70**	.54**			
11. Mental wellbeing	.10	.37**	-.11	.19	-.23*	.13	.48**	.45**	.50**		
12. Psychological distress	-.03	-.30**	-.01	-.23*	.38**	-.05	-.53**	-.44**	-.50**	-.51**	
Mean	15.79	3.57	3.47	2.87	3.16	4.09	5.40	4.96	4.42	4.58	2.11
SD	.60	1.18	.77	.86	.83	.85	1.31	1.13	1.30	1.10	.84

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

For brevity, adaptability and social support were significantly positively correlated with life satisfaction and mental wellbeing, and negatively associated with psychological distress. The three personality traits—extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism—were significantly correlated with adaptability.

### **Predictors of Psychological Wellbeing**

To examine whether predictor variables (adaptability, personality [extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism], or perceived social support) can independently predict psychological wellbeing (life satisfaction, mental wellbeing, and psychological distress), a multiple regression analyses was conducted. To produce a single estimate of psychological wellbeing that represented a range of components relevant to psychological wellbeing, a composite measure of psychological wellbeing was created by converting life satisfaction, mental wellbeing, and psychological distress to *Z* scores and then adding them together. Note, given the weak correlations concerning two personality components—agreeableness and openness—these variables were not entered into the regression analyses as predictors. All parametric assumptions were checked and were met.

The regression model accounted for 65.4 per cent of the variance in psychological wellbeing, was highly significant ( $F(5, 96) = 39.1, p < .001$ ), and had a large effect size ( $f^2 = 1.85$ ). Adaptability ( $\beta = .17, p = .034$ ), neuroticism ( $\beta = -.17, p = .010$ ), extraversion ( $\beta = .14, p = .025$ ), and social support ( $\beta = .56, p < .001$ ) all made a significant independent contribution to students' psychological wellbeing, with perceived social support being the strongest predictor. However, conscientiousness was not a significant predictor in the model ( $\beta = .06, p = .290$ ).

### **The Mediating Effect of Adaptability**

Finally, to examine whether adaptability has a mediating effect between personality and psychological wellbeing, and between social support and psychological wellbeing, a PROCESS Macro based on a simple mediator model was used to run a series of mediation models (see Table 2 and Figure 2). The indirect effect via adaptability was assessed by bootstrapped confidence intervals, with the recommended 5000 resamples adopted (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Specifically, if the confidence intervals do not contain 0, then this is considered a significant effect.

**Table 2**

*Mediation effects of adaptability on the relationships between extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and social support, and psychological wellbeing (N = 102)*

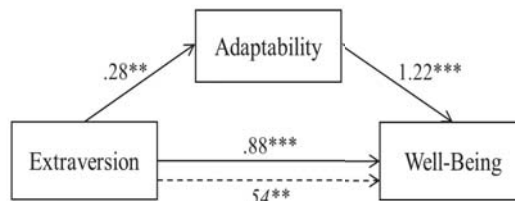
Effects	<i>b</i>	95% CI	
		Lower	Upper
Total (Extraversion on Wellbeing)	.88	.50	1.26
Direct (Extraversion on Wellbeing)	.57	.22	.87
Indirect (mediation)	.33	.13	.57
Total (Conscientiousness on Wellbeing)	.82	.26	1.37
Direct (Conscientiousness on Wellbeing)	.42	-.03	.88
Indirect (mediation)	.39	.03	.77
Total (Neuroticism on Wellbeing)	-1.12	-1.68	-.57
Direct (Neuroticism on Wellbeing)	-.43	-.93	.08
Indirect (mediation)	-.70	-1.05	-.40
Total (Social Support on Wellbeing)	1.45	1.20	1.70
Direct (Social Support on Wellbeing)	1.13	.85	1.43
Indirect (mediation)	.31	.10	.54



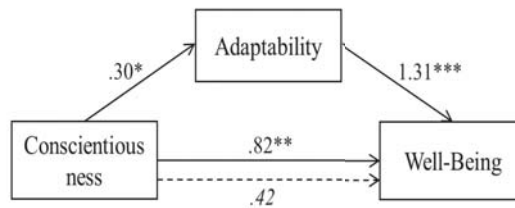
**Figure 2**

*The results of the four models examining the mediating effect of adaptability: Standardized coefficients are displayed.*

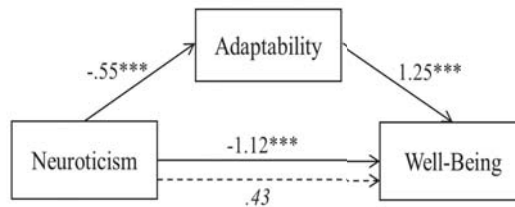
**A) Model 1**



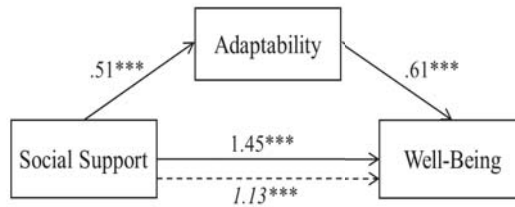
**B) Model 2**



**C) Model 3**



**D) Model 4**



As seen in Table 2, adaptability fully mediated the relationships between personality (conscientiousness and neuroticism) and psychological wellbeing. Furthermore, adaptability partially mediated the relationships between extraversion and psychological wellbeing, and social support and psychological wellbeing, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

### **Discussion**

In line with our expectations, adaptability was significantly positively correlated with life satisfaction and mental wellbeing, and significantly negatively correlated with psychological distress. These findings were consistent with prior research in this area (e.g., [Ghasemi-Nejad, 2014](#); [Martin et al., 2013](#); [Wrosch & Scheier, 2013](#); [Zhou & Lin, 2016](#)). Moreover, extraversion, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (negatively) were also significantly correlated with adaptability and all three aspects of psychological wellbeing. This finding was largely in line with prior work (i.e., [Ghasemi-Nejad, 2014](#); [Martin et al., 2013](#)); although, the non-significant findings in relation to openness and agreeableness contradict [Martin et al. \(2013\)](#). By including personality in our hypothesized model, we provided evidence for the view that some individuals are dispositionally better placed for adaptability than others ([Martin et al., 2013](#)) and that certain types of individuals are more likely to experience distress due to their pre-existing personality traits ([Lischetzke & Eid, 2006](#)). In response, as suggested by [Ghasemi-Nejad \(2014\)](#), it is sensible for teachers and educators to target those individuals who might be less adaptive due to their pre-existing personality traits and gradually modify their habitual pattern which tends to leave them stuck. Finally, significant correlations were found between perceived social support and adaptability as well as all three aspects of psychological wellbeing (negatively with psychological distress), and this was in line with prior research in this area (e.g., [Poudel et al., 2020](#), [Sahin & Kirdok, 2018](#)). This suggests that perceived support may act as a useful mental tool to help adolescents better navigate change, novelty, and uncertainty, and maintain a higher level of psychological wellbeing in their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: For additional regression model statistics these will be made available upon reasonable request.

### **The Mediating Role of Adaptability**

Consistent with prior work (e.g., [Martin et al., 2013](#); [Sahin & Kirdok, 2018](#)), adaptability was found to significantly (and fully) mediate the relationships between personality (conscientiousness and neuroticism) and psychological wellbeing, and to significantly (partially) mediate the relationships between extraversion and psychological wellbeing, and social support and psychological wellbeing. The indirect effects via adaptability have important theoretical and practical implications. Firstly, it sheds new light into research which aims to investigate the nature of the influence of personality and social support on psychological outcomes such as life satisfaction and mental wellbeing. For example, it is logical to conclude from our research that one's personality traits could be either adaptively expressed (in terms of extraversion and conscientiousness) when faced with changing stimuli, circumstances, or situations and thereby lead to positive outcomes, or maladaptively expressed (in terms of neuroticism) to bring about negative outcomes. Secondly, it highlights the value of targeting adaptability during the intervention for students who may experience psychological difficulties during times of transition due to their pre-existing nature (e.g., introversion or neuroticism). It is less likely for students to alter their personality, but it is possible to promote adaptability to bring about the desired outcomes including improved life satisfaction, enhanced mental health, and increased emotional stability.

### **Practice Implications**

The findings of the present study bear important implications for researchers and educators who wish to improve students' psychological wellbeing. It highlights the value of placing greater emphasis on high school students' adaptability, particularly during their first year's adjustment. Intervention work might be designed to improve levels of adaptability and enable students to respond more constructively to novel or unfamiliar study environments. For example, this could be achieved by offering students sufficient opportunities and detailed dialogue which guide them to adopt appropriate cognitive, behavioural, and emotional strategies to meet new challenges (see [Martin et al., 2015](#), for greater coverage of adaptability interventions).

Moreover, the predictive effect of personality and social support on adaptability enables practitioners to identify the types of students who might face greater difficulties fitting into a new environment (e.g., low in

extraversion and conscientiousness or high in neuroticism) when they direct interventions at school. Practitioners, then, could assist those students by increasing the amount of social support that students perceive from their peers, teachers, and family, to help them derive a sense of connectedness. For example, one way to provide strong social support is to organize a variety of activities, clubs, or student events by which students could establish stable friend circles at school (Zhang et al., 2018). Another way is to encourage parents to become more supportive and more involved in their children's education through regular parent-teacher-school communication (Tomás et al., 2020). Interventions of this kind would ultimately lead to better psychological outcomes, especially for Chinese adolescents who are navigating their first year in high school.

#### **Limitations and Future Directions**

The present findings should be interpreted with a degree of caution due to some limitations to the study, which, at the same time, provides directions for future research. First, this research utilized quantitative methodology only; therefore, future research might incorporate qualitative approaches to gain a richer, deeper understanding of how and when adaptability, personality, and social support may operate, for example, in a boarding secondary high school context. Secondly, all variables in this study were measured via self-report; therefore, as this is open to bias, future work might consider alternative approaches including other data sources, such as teacher/parent report or systematic observations in the context of a novel situation. Another limitation lies in the cross-sectional nature of the present study. As a result, we cannot infer causality. The hypothesized model here is only one of the possible models to offer an interpretation of the relationships between the studied variables. For example, instead of regarding perceived social support as a predictor of adaptability, some researchers (e.g., Zhou & Lin, 2016) used perceived social support as a moderator between adaptability and one of our non-academic outcomes—life satisfaction. Future research which adopts a longitudinal design to establish causal inferences is still warranted. Finally, the focus of the present study was restricted to individual-level characteristics/perceptions; therefore, other personal variables not captured here and macro factors at the teaching and institution level (Green et al. 2015; Vossensteyn et al. 2015) were not considered.

### **Conclusion**

The present study was designed to investigate the complex relationships between personality, perceived social support, adaptability, and students' psychological wellbeing. Findings showed that adaptability, neuroticism, extraversion, and social support, each made a significant independent contribution to students' psychological wellbeing. Adaptability was also found to fully mediate the relationships between personality (conscientiousness and neuroticism) and psychological wellbeing, and to partially mediate the relationships between extraversion and psychological wellbeing, and social support and psychological wellbeing. These findings, which partially support existing literature in a non-Western (Chinese) context, have important theoretical and practical implications for researchers and educators who are seeking to promote positive psychological functioning by supporting their transition to boarding senior high school.

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