# Festival Participation as the Mediator Role towards Emotional Solidarity on Destination Loyalty Among College Students

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA) 2025, Vol. 17 (1) pp 36-49 © The Author(s) 2025 Reprints and permission: UITM Press Submit date: 10<sup>th</sup> March 2025 Accept date: 20<sup>th</sup> April 2025 Publish date: 30<sup>th</sup> April 2025

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# **Proposed citation:**

Mengyuan, L., Ariffin, H. F., & Ngelambong, A. (2025). Festival Participation as the Mediator Role towards Emotional Solidarity on Destination Loyalty Among College Students. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 17(1), 36-49.

# Abstract

This research aims to test festival participation as the mediator role towards relationship between emotional solidarity and destination loyalty among Chinese college students. 400 college students from Guilin, China participated in the survey by answering online questionnaires. Convenience sampling ensures that data from a specific population sample is collected more accurately. The results suggest that these festival participation have a mediating effect between the emotional solidarity of Chinese college students and the loyalty of their learning place. These findings were validated by model 4 mediation analysis, which belonged to Hayes Process Macro. The findings are expected to enrich our understanding of Chinese college students' study destination loyalty behaviors. Provide new insights for tourism managers, practitioners, and marketers.

# Keywords:

Festival participation status, Emotional solidarity, Destination loyalty

## 1 Introduction

Participating in festivals at study locations is an integral part of the daily life of sojourning students. Sun et al. (2019) research shows that festival engagement is an integral driver of customer loyalty, as social distancing and positive attitudes shift due to contact interactions. Their word-of-mouth recommendations and repurchases are more likely to convince their relatives and friends and attract other tourists than other tourists and local residents (Beerli et al., 2007). Long-term living abroad enables students to develop a deeper emotional connection with the place of study and the residents, forcing them to participate in and integrate into local festivals. However, few researchers have considered expatriate college students as an independent market segment to link emotional solidarity, festival participation, and destination loyalty.

Intergroup contact theory refers to the contact and interaction between members of different groups (Allport, 1954). According to Prentice (2020), when contact occurs under conditions of sufficient informatization, contact between groups leads to positive changes in attitudes towards members of "other" groups. Therefore, in the context of festival participation, college students ' active and equal interactions with other festival participants are conducive to the integration of emotional solidarity and loyalty behavior. Previous studies have investigated the relationship with residents' affective solidarity and visitor loyalty (Ribeiro et al., 2017; Prayag et al., 2016). However, festival participation status was not taken into account, especially the festival participation of expatriate college students in the place of study, as a mediating factor.

This research aims to test festival participation as the mediator role towards relationship between emotional solidarity and destination loyalty among Chinese college students. We selected college students who only live in China as our sample, and they were required to have participated in festivals in the study location in the past six months. College students have the special dual identities of tourists and residents, but their identity as temporary residents is ignored. The researchers have collected data at a college in Guilin, Guangxi in December 2024. Convenience sampling was used to ensure that data from specific population samples were collected more accurately. The results are expected to enrich our understanding of Chinese college students' loyalty behavior to study destinations. They provide insights for tourism managers, practitioners, and marketers. By creating a healthy and good festival environment and types and cultivating emotional solidarity between student tourists, Chinese college students can be effectively motivated to be loyal to their study destinations.

# 2 Literature Review

## 2.1 Intergroup contact theory

Pettigrew's (1998) theory of contact suggested that when contact occurs under favorable conditions, intergroup contact leads to positive changes in attitudes toward members of "other" groups, such as equality of status, shared goals, intergroup cooperation, and supportive contact. The concepts of emotional energy and social

markets help explain how residents' perceptions and behaviors change in response to tourists and tourism (Joo, Cho, et al., 2020). Prentice (2020) explored how to enhance the travel experience by managing the service contact between tourism service representatives and travelers. The results showed that service encounters were diagnosed as emotionally motivated by discussion of tourism products, emotional labor performance, and tourist attribution. A good emotional retreat will exhibit service-creating behaviors, which will be beneficial to enhance the travel experience. Chen et al. (2023) conducted an on-site questionnaire survey of 402 tourists visiting the Wuyi Mountain Scenic Area in China. The results extend the application of affective event theory to the interaction between hosts and tourists, and emphasize the key role of sincere social interaction in generating tourist joy.

#### 2.2 Emotional solidarity

Patwardhan et al. (2020) argued that tourists' perception of emotional solidarity has a profound impact on subsequent behavior. The researchers examined visitors' loyalty to a destination through their emotional bond with the place, their emotional solidarity with the residents, and their perceived level of safety. To a certain extent, emotional solidarity mediates the influence of place attachment on destination loyalty. Joo et al. (2020) collected survey data from Korean tourists on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in South Korea and found that all dimensions of affective solidarity showed a significant correlation in triggering travel satisfaction or destination loyalty. Jiang et al. (2022) validated the emotional solidarity of residents and its impact on volunteer tourists in the field of volunteer tourism. The study proposes a theoretical model that combines emotional solidarity (including three dimensions: feeling welcome, emotional closeness, and sympathetic understanding) with memorable travel experiences and destination loyalty. The results showed that volunteer visitors' perception of emotional closeness and sympathetic understanding of residents directly affected tourists' loyalty to the destination.

As a group of sojourners, college students will also develop emotional solidarity with the study destinations and residents where they live for a long time. Zhang et al. (2005) studied the impact of the quality and frequency of contact between American college students and their most frequent Chinese international students on their cognitive attitudes towards Chinese international students from the perspective of intergroup contact. The results showed that both the quality and frequency of contact positively predicted emotional solidarity with Chinese international students. Philips et al. (2017) conducted a questionnaire survey on international students in China, and the results showed that the experience of studying abroad had a significant positive impact on the destination loyalty of international students. Among them, the mediating role of emotional solidarity in the context of higher education tourism is very significant. Wang et al. (2021) found that college students have a strong emotional attachment to the place of study because they live and live in the study destination for a long time, and this attachment may also directly affect their willingness to spread word of mouth.

#### 2.3 Destination loyalty

Loyalty refers to a consumer's intention or behavior to purchase a product or service again, resulting in repeat purchases of the same brand or product (Tasci, 2017). Tourism researchers often explore the concept of destination loyalty as a way to create the best possible way to bring more visitors to a particular destination (Woosnam et al., 2021). In the tourism literature, destination loyalty is defined as the degree to which tourists are willing to recommend a destination or the extent to which tourists repeat visits (Yoon et al., 2001). Chen et al. (2023) claim that the combination of attitudinal and behavioral loyalty reflects a more powerful representation of loyalty. Destination loyalty may not require individuals to repeatedly visit the same destination, however, revisit intentions and recommendations from others are the most commonly used indicators of tourist loyalty (Oppermann, 2000; Woosnam et al., 2021).

Kim (2008) analyzed an empirical model that includes push motivation, pull motivation, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, satisfaction, and student loyalty to the destination. The results showed that emotional engagement was a good predictor of satisfaction, and satisfaction was significantly associated with destination loyalty. McDowall (2010) compared the satisfaction and destination loyalty of 254 international visitors who visited Bangkok for the first time and repeat visits, among international students and international tourists. The results show that despite the different perceptions of safety and security among international students and international tourists, both groups are willing to revisit and recommend Bangkok to others because of the hospitality and beautiful smiles of the residents, as well as the quality of goods or services. Stylidis et al. (2020) surveyed 401 Serbian tourists who had previously visited Greece and found that international travelers' overall familiarity with the destination shaped the cognitive and emotional destination image, and that each image component uniquely explained destination loyalty.

#### 2.4 Festival participation status

Levang (2023) stated that festivals create a relaxed and engaging environment for like-minded people who build intimate connections through festivals. Sun et al. (2019) argued that openness, tolerance, and emotional perception of being able to talk to anyone can help deepen tourists' engagement with destination tourism activities and help them integrate effectively into the place. Zhao and Mantero (2018) explored the mediating role of emotional solidarity and destination image in the context of higher education tourism. Researchers conducted a questionnaire survey among international students in China, and the results showed that those who felt welcomed, sympathetic, understanding, and emotionally close were more likely to interact with locals and build a positive image of a study destination. Patwardhan et al. (2020) investigated tourists' place attachment to places, their emotional solidarity with residents, and their perceived level of safety during Indian festivals to examine destination loyalty. The study found that holding religious festivals with rich ethnic and cultural colors allows tourists to understand how emotional solidarity and faith are established, which helps to cultivate their destination loyalty.

# 3 Methodology

## 3.1 Sample size

The data were collected through an online questionnaire, named Wenjuxing. We arranged the items of the questionnaire in both Chinese and English so that the respondents could understand the directions and inquiries more clearly. Two masters in English supervised the translation process. Thereafter, data were collected from universities in Guilin, Guangxi from December 12 to December 17, 2024. We distributed the electronic questionnaire link to the class WeChat groups of different majors and grades in this university. Convenience sampling ensured that the data of a specific population sample was collected more accurately. In addition, screening questions were set to filter out respondents who had no experience of local festival tourism in the past six months.

The minimum sample size was determined using G\*Power software (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). Since the model contained 2 predictors, the effect size was set to medium (0.15), the required power was 0.80, and the alpha level was 0.05. According to the calculation results, 68 respondents should be included. Therefore, the sample size of 400 Chinese college students from China was sufficient for data analysis. We finally used 367 valid questionnaires, and the other data were deleted due to missing, similar or other reasons.

## 3.2 Measuring instruments

The instruments used in this study were taken from the questionnaires of the original studies (Woosnam and Aleshinloye, 2013; Li & Shi, 2022; Chen and Rahman, 2018). For demographic data, a self-created survey was used. There were a total of 15 questions in these two parts: the demographic component and items related to the independent and dependent variables. Four questions covered the demographic part, and the remaining 11 questions involved the variables.

The variables include the independent variable emotional solidarity, the mediating variable festival participation, and the dependent variable destination loyalty. The measurement of emotional solidarity uses 5 items from the scale of Woosnam and Aleshinloye (2013), expressed as EMS. Festival participation uses 4 items from Li and Shi (2022), expressed as FPS. Destination loyalty uses 6 items from Chen and Rahman (2018), expressed as DNL. The demographic part includes the number of times the respondents participated in the festivals at the learning location, the number of companions, the type of festivals, and self-role perception.

All scales are presented in a 5-point Likert scale format, where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree. Hundleby & Nunnally (1968) believed that the Cronbach's alpha value should be at least 0.7 or higher to justify keeping the items within the appropriate range. The reliability of all scales in this study was above 0.8, so all items should be retained.

## 3.3 Statistical analysis

To explore the internal mechanism of the significant positive impact of emotional solidarity on destination loyalty, the study further introduced festival participation status as a mediating variable and brought it into the structural model. The researchers used SPSS (IBM version 28) to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics summarize the basic demographic characteristics of the data. In addition to statistics on the basic information of the respondents such as gender, age, and profession, this study also cross-compared the relationship between the number of festivals participated and the number of companions, the type of festivals participated in, and the role positioning of tourists.

The statistical technique used for data analysis is mediation analysis using Hayes Process Macro (Model 4). The mediation effect was tested by using model 4 in SPSS macro program Process. The mediation effect of the mediating variable between the independent variable and the dependent variable was tested according to the bootstrap method provided by Hesterberg (2011). If the mediation effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable and the mediating variable does not include 0 above and below the bootstrap 95% confidence interval, it indicates that the independent variable not only has a direct effect on the dependent variable, but also has a mediating effect on the dependent variable through the mediating variable.

# 4 Results

## 4.1 Demographics

The researchers implemented descriptive statistics to determine the data of college students, and 367 valid questionnaires were collected. Among them, most of the respondents were female, 211 people, accounting for 57.49%; the rest were male, 156 people, accounting for 42.51%. In terms of the age of the respondents, the number of respondents under 19 and over 24 was the smallest, both 23 people, accounting for 12.54%. There were 187 respondents aged 20-21, accounting for 50.95%. There were 134 respondents aged 22-23, accounting for 36.51%. According to the profession of the respondents, there were 107 respondents in the tourism field, accounting for 29.16%. There were 125 respondents in the hotel field, accounting for 34.06%. There were 135 respondents in the exhibition field, accounting for 36.78%.

The researchers implemented descriptive statistics to determine the data of college student tourists. According to the data in Table 1, in terms of the number of festival visits by college students in the study place, 27 students (7.36%) participated in local festivals less than once, 107 (29.16%) participated in 1-2 times, 103 (28.07%) participated 3-4 times, 71 (19.35%) participated in 5-6 times, and 59 (16.08%) participated more than 6 times. It can be seen that the proportion of respondents is evenly distributed.

From the data in Table 1, the status of college students' festival companions can also be obtained. The proportion of college students interviewed who attended the festival at their study location alone was 7.90%, the smallest number. The number of 1-2 festival companions was the largest, with 134 people, accounting for 36.51%. Subsequently, the number of companions with 3-4 trips, 5-6 trips, and more than 6 trips gradually decreased, accounting for 26.16%, 17.71% and 11.72%.

| Number of engagements |        |            | The number of festival companions |        |            |  |
|-----------------------|--------|------------|-----------------------------------|--------|------------|--|
| Туре                  | Number | Percentage | type                              | Number | Percentage |  |
| Less than 1 time      | 27     | 7.36%      | Alone                             | 29     | 7.90%      |  |
| 1-2 times             | 107    | 29.16%     | 1-2 people                        | 134    | 36.51%     |  |
| 3-4 times             | 103    | 28.07%     | 3-4 people                        | 96     | 26.16%     |  |
| 5-6 times             | 71     | 19.35%     | 5-6 people                        | 65     | 17.71%     |  |
| More than 6 times     | 59     | 16.08%     | More than 6 people                | 43     | 11.72%     |  |

Table 1: Number of festival participants and the companions

Table 2 shows the types of local festivals that student tourists participate in and their role perceptions during their study in the place of study. As shown in the table, festivals with more local cultural characteristics are more popular among students. The number of participants is 137, accounting for 37.33% of the total number of respondents. The number of people who have participated in sacrificial festivals accounts for 21.8% (80 people), ranking second. The number of people who have participated in entertainment festivals accounts for 19.89% (73 people), ranking third. Student tourists will also position their festival roles, among which the largest number of people consider themselves leisurers, accounting for 37.33% (137 people). The number of people who consider themselves tourists is 94, accounting for 25.61%, ranking second. The number of people who see themselves as festival advocates is sharply reduced compared with the first two, accounting for 19.62% (72 people), ranking third.

| Number of engagements |        |            | The number of festival companions |        |            |  |
|-----------------------|--------|------------|-----------------------------------|--------|------------|--|
| Туре                  | Number | Percentage | type                              | Number | Percentage |  |
| Culture               | 137    | 37.33%     | visitor                           | 94     | 25.61%     |  |
| Sacrifice             | 80     | 21.80%     | Leisure                           | 137    | 37.33%     |  |
| Faith                 | 25     | 6.81%      | Advocates                         | 72     | 19.62%     |  |
| Entertainment         | 73     | 19.89%     | Locals                            | 41     | 11.17%     |  |
| Derivatives           | 52     | 14.17%     | Difficult to define               | 23     | 6.27%      |  |

Table 2: Types of festivals and role status

#### 4.2 Cross-over Statistic

This study compared the relationship between the number of festivals attended and the role positioning of tourists, as shown in Figure 1. The results show that the self-role positioning of college students and their number of festivals attended show a certain trend. The role of leisure is more evenly distributed under different festival attendance states. And it increases with the increase in the number of participation. In addition, more college students define themselves as tourists when they participate in local festivals 1-2 times. This role cognition status drops sharply as the number of their participation increases. As advocates, the number of people distributed in the number of festivals they participate in increases significantly when they participate in 1-2 times and 3-4 times, and peaks when they participate 3-4 times. The role of being a local shows a positive distribution trend with the number of festivals attended.



Figure 1: Number of festival participants and role status

This study also compared the relationship between the type of festival participated and the number of companions, as shown in Figure 2. The results show that the number of companions varies depending on the type of festival. Regardless of the type of festival, the number of people who participate alone is very small. Cultural festival products are most popular among college students, and the number of companions is generally 1-2. There are two trends in the number of companions of sacrificial festivals, 1-2 people or 5-6 people. The number of companions of entertainment festivals is generally 1-4 people, and the possibility of 5-6 people participating at the same time is the lowest. The number of companions of religious festivals is generally small and relatively average. The number of companions of derivative festivals is generally between 1-2 people.



Figure 2: Types of festivals and the companions

#### 4.3 Mediation effect

The results of the mediating effect test showed that festival participation indirectly mediated the emotional solidarity and destination loyalty of college students. As shown in 3.2 Measuring Instruments, EMS is an acronym for Emotional Solidarity, FPS refers to students' participation status in local festivals, and DNL refers to their loyalty to the destination where they are studying.

| В     | IF(B)  | t  | р  | LLCI  | ULCI  | Percentag  |
|-------|--|--|--|---|---|--|
|       |  |  | ·  |   |   | e  |
| 0.500 | 0.411  | 12.153   | 0.000  | 0.419   | 0.580   |  |
| 0.280 | 0.529  | 5.302  | 0.000  | 0.176   | 0.384   |  |
| 0.399 | 0.430  | 9.277  | 0.000  | 0.314   | 0.484   |  |
| 0.259 | 0.492  | 5.268  | 0.000  | 0.162   | 0.356   | 64.94%   |
| 0.140 | 0.340  |  |  | 0.734   | 0.210   | 35.06%   |
|       |  |  |  |   |   |  |
|       | B<br>0.500<br>0.280<br>0.399<br>0.259<br>0.140 | B  IF(B)    0.500  0.411    0.280  0.529    0.399  0.430    0.259  0.492    0.140  0.340 | B  IF(B)  t    0.500  0.411  12.153    0.280  0.529  5.302    0.399  0.430  9.277    0.259  0.492  5.268    0.140  0.340 | B  IF(B)  t  p    0.500  0.411  12.153  0.000    0.280  0.529  5.302  0.000    0.399  0.430  9.277  0.000    0.259  0.492  5.268  0.000    0.140  0.340 | B  IF(B)  t  p  LLCI    0.500  0.411  12.153  0.000  0.419    0.280  0.529  5.302  0.000  0.176    0.399  0.430  9.277  0.000  0.314    0.259  0.492  5.268  0.000  0.162    0.140  0.340  0.734  0.734 | B  IF(B)  t  p  LLCI  ULCI    0.500  0.411  12.153  0.000  0.419  0.580    0.280  0.529  5.302  0.000  0.176  0.384    0.399  0.430  9.277  0.000  0.314  0.484    0.259  0.492  5.268  0.000  0.162  0.356    0.140  0.340   0.734  0.210 |

Table 3: Mediation Analysis

Note: \*\*\*p<0.001

The direct effects between the variables are shown in Table 3. The mediating effect of affective solidarity on destination loyalty and participation status is excluded from 0 in Bootstrap's 95% confidence intervals. These results suggest that affective solidarity not only plays a direct role in destination loyalty, but also can play a mediating effect on destination loyalty through participation status variables. Specifically, the effect of affective solidarity on participation status was 0.500. The LLCI value was 0.419, the ULCI

value was 0.580, and the significant level p<0.001 was 0.001. Therefore, the direct effect of affective solidarity on participation status is significant. The effect of student tourists' festival participation on destination loyalty was 0.280. The LLCI value was 0.176, the ULCI value was 0.384, and the significant level was p<0.001. Therefore, the direct effect of festival participation on destination loyalty is significant. Figure 3 of the path coefficient of the conceptual model of this study is drawn according to Table 3.

According to Table 3, the effect of affective solidarity on destination loyalty is 0.259. The LLCI value was 0.162, the ULCI value was 0.356, and the significant level p<0.001 was significant. Therefore, the direct effect of emotional solidarity on destination loyalty is also very significant. The total effect of affective solidarity on destination loyalty was 0.399, and the mediating effect was 0.140. Therefore, the indirect mediating effect of festival participation on the emotional solidarity and destination loyalty of college students exists. The mediating effect accounted for 35.06% of the total effect.



Figure 3: Diagram of the path of each variable

### 5 Conclusion

#### 5.1 Discussions

The results of this study support the mediating role of festival participation in the relationship between emotional solidarity and destination loyalty. This means that Chinese college students who have emotional solidarity with residents are more likely to establish connections with their study locations by participating in local festivals. As Wiley and Collins (1976) stated, interaction helps members to develop a sense of mutual identification and establish emotional bonds. Destination loyalty is directly affected by emotional solidarity and festival participation, and festival participation indirectly mediates emotional solidarity and destination loyalty. Wang et al. (2021) pointed out that this may be because college students have developed a place attachment to the destination due to long-term destination life experience. They are willing to participate in local festivals, which in turn generates destination loyalty to the place of study. The stronger the festival participation, the easier it is to form destination loyalty to a place.

The results also show that the self-role positioning of college students is related to the number of festivals they participate in. College students are more likely to perceive their role in the place of study as leisure rather than just short-term tourists. This may be because the long-term travel experience has enabled college students to develop emotional solidarity or place attachment to the place of study. As Hammarström (2005) said, under the trend of emotional solidarity, they are willing to try to participate in local social practices. Therefore, the number of festivals participated in is positively correlated with the role cognition of being a local. At the same time, the number of college students who only see themselves as tourists also decreases sharply with the increase in the number of festivals they participate in. In addition, there is an interesting manifestation that the number of college students who are considered advocates is the highest in the medium participation background, while it shows a decreasing trend in the low or high participation background. This may be because college students are new-age travelers, and high-intensity festival participation may not increase their interest in festival planning.

The results also show that no matter what type of festival, the number of people who attend alone is very small. As Oldenburg (1997) said, festivals build an inclusive and diverse platform that participants can join regardless of race, religion, and regional economic differences. Therefore, marketers should try to increase the possibility of college students participating in festivals with others. Use the Internet to create tourism-specific organizations to promote information exchange and experience sharing between student tourists and other tourists. Offline, expand the efforts to organize participatory activities, such as cultural performances and festivals, to encourage college students to collaborate and share with family, friends, and even other strangers. In addition, when setting up tourism reception facilities and planning festival products, the type of festival should be matched with the number of companions. Because the number of companions also varies depending on the type of festival. We cannot pursue the maximum number of festival participants while ignoring the type of festival. For example, the number of companions in sacrificial activities peaks at 1-2 people, which is not applicable to medium-sized tourism planning and reception. In addition, cultural festival products are most popular among college students. This may be due to the identity of college students, who prefer festivals with more local cultural characteristics. Therefore, when planning, more emphasis should be placed on reflecting local cultural elements, such as inserting cultural labels and adding cultural symbols.

### 5.2 Conclusion

This study enriches our understanding of Chinese college students' loyalty to their learning destinations, which has not been fully demonstrated in previous studies. The results of data showed that emotional solidarity had predictive power. In particular, the participation of college students in festivals indirectly mediates their emotional solidarity and destination loyalty. The proposed integrated framework allows for the determination of (1) emotional solidarity and loyalty among college student visitors; (2) emotional solidarity and their participation in the festival of the place of study; (3)

festival participation and loyalty; and (4) the mediating effect of satisfaction between emotional solidarity and loyalty. The results of the study confirm that the emotional solidarity between college students and residents is an important indicator of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes through the status of festival participation (i.e., mediator) in the place of study.

The results of this study have important implications for theoretical and future research. Since there were no studies investigating the relationship between affective solidarity and loyalty among tourists and residents, our main contribution was to determine the role of college students' participation in the festival in the relationship between affective solidarity and loyalty. We determined that emotional solidarity had a positive impact on their festival participation, and that festival participation had a positive impact on loyalty. In addition, festival participation plays a mediating role on the relationship between emotional solidarity and loyalty. In addition to advancing existing loyalty-building research, our research provides insights for student administrators, practitioners, and marketers. In fact, college students who live at their study sites generate word-of-mouth and re-buying behaviors that convince their friends and relatives and attract other tourists more than other tourists and residents. It seems logical for practitioners to focus on maximizing contact opportunities to effectively increase their loyalty, which will have a significant impact on the economic growth and competitiveness of the destination.

#### 5.3 Limitations and future research

Like other studies, this study is not without limitations. The results of this study should be interpreted with caution for several reasons. This is the first study to use festival participation as a mediator of emotional solidarity and loyalty. In addition, this direction of investigation in schools was continued and broadened, as most research on destination loyalty was limited to a tourist's perspective. The results do not allow the model to be universal outside the context of Chinese higher education. Future studies should replicate this model in other target contexts, which may help cross-validate current findings.

The data of the model presented in this study are transversal and correlated, and no causal relationships within the model are inferred. At the same time, all predictors and outcome variables were obtained from the same population, and explanations were provided provisionally. Further research might go beyond the use of cross-sectional and self-report data and address these limitations by using longitudinal analyses to capture and control for differences and causal directions among variables. For example, interview or triangulation methods (as well as self-report measures) and real-time methods might be considered to obtain more reliable and valid information.

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