

How Can Cross-Strait Residential College Exchanges Enhance University Students' Trust? — The Mediating Role Of Cultural Identity

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Abstract

This study investigates how cross-strait residential college exchange influences university students' trust, highlighting the mediating role of cultural identity. Grounded in social identity theory and cross-cultural adaptation theory, we surveyed 214 students (116 from Mainland China, 108 from Taiwan) who participated in residential college forums between 2014 and 2024. Data were analyzed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), structural equation modeling (SEM), and Bootstrap estimation. The results show that residential college exchange significantly enhances cultural identity, which in turn promotes trust among students. Cultural identity partially mediates the relationship, accounting for approximately 24% of the total effect. This dual-path mechanism clarifies how institutional engagement fosters both direct and identity-based trust. The findings contribute to educational sociology by distinguishing cultural identity from belonging and integrating competence- and affective-based trust into the study of cross-regional higher education collaboration. Practical implications include strengthening institutional platforms and culturally immersive programs to support mutual trust and youth integration across the Taiwan Strait.

Keywords: *Cross-Strait Higher Education; Residential College Exchange; Cultural Identity; Student Trust; Social Identity Theory*

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I. Introduction

Amid the ongoing transformation of global higher education and the deepening of regional cooperation, cross-strait universities have been entrusted with the mission of fostering mutual understanding, collaboration, and shared development among young people. Although students from Mainland China and Taiwan share common cultural roots and a Chinese heritage, longstanding differences in institutional systems, educational contexts, and socialization experiences may generate psychological distance and barriers to interpersonal trust.

As a contemporary reinvention of traditional Chinese academies, residential colleges integrate academic collaboration, communal living, ritual practices, and participatory governance into a holistic learning ecology that enables high-frequency interaction. This structure is conducive to constructing and internalizing shared meanings within a culturally rooted framework (Kuh, 2008; Hong et al., 2000). Recent empirical studies in Chinese-speaking contexts provide direct evidence: among students in Macao, engagement in residential college activities positively correlates with both sense of belonging and academic learning (Luo & Zhou, 2024); similarly, for Hong Kong students enrolled in cross-border programs, their university-based identity and sense of belonging evolve through a process of negotiation and gradual strengthening (Gao, 2024; Chou & Ching, 2020). A recent systematic review on sense of belonging (SoB) in higher education indicates strong associations between belonging, academic performance, and well-being, yet also highlights inconsistencies between concept and measurement, suggesting the need for clearer differentiation and integration between belonging and cultural identity (Dias-Broens et al., 2024).

From a psychosocial perspective, newer studies also show that belonging and emotional support significantly influence student happiness and mental health (Romeo et al., 2024), providing fresh empirical and

theoretical grounding for understanding how learning communities contribute to identity construction and the development of trust. These findings underscore the significance of the present study: in a cross-strait context characterized by shared cultural origins yet divergent institutional frameworks, structured residential college exchanges may enhance the salience and accessibility of shared cultural schemas through ongoing collaboration and daily cohabitation. This, in turn, can reinforce cultural identity and lay a psychosocial foundation for trust (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Rotter, 1967; McAllister, 1995; Phinney, 1990; Kim, 2001).

Despite the growing body of research, several key gaps remain. First, existing work on the “exchange–trust” linkage is often descriptive, lacking rigorous mediation models that test the exchange → identity → trust mechanism. In particular, in the cross-strait context—marked by quasi-cross-cultural adaptation stress—the formation of trust is influenced by both identity cues and the quality of institutional interactions, warranting an integrated framework that combines insights from social psychology and educational organization theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Kim, 2001). Second, regarding cultural identity, recent systematic reviews highlight misalignments between conceptual definitions and empirical measurement (Dias-Broens et al., 2024), calling for a multidimensional operationalization that distinguishes cognitive consistency, emotional attachment, and behavioral intention (Phinney, 1990), while differentiating these from sense of belonging in higher education instruments. Third, although new evidence shows that participation in residential colleges enhances belonging and learning (Luo & Zhou, 2024), and that identity negotiation occurs in cross-border settings (Gao, 2024), the chain mechanism from belonging to cultural identity to trust has yet to be tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) in cross-strait exchange samples.

Meanwhile, recent evidence supports the positive role of cultural identity in student well-being: Zhou et al. (2023) found cultural identity to be significantly associated with subjective well-being, and Zhou et al. (2025) further identified a chain mediation via social support and resilience leading to a stronger sense of life meaning. Integrating these findings into the paradigm of High-Impact Practices (HIPs) enables a re-interpretation of residential college features—task collaboration, communal living, ritual engagement—as institutionalized time–space contexts for activating and internalizing shared cultural schemas (Kuh, 2008; Hong et al., 2000). Nonetheless, quantitative verification remains limited in the cross-strait setting.

To address these gaps, this study proposes and tests a mediation model of Residential College Exchange → Cultural Identity → University Student Trust. It contributes to theory and empirical research in the following three ways:

First, in terms of conceptual framework, this study constructs a systematic mediation model positioning cross-strait residential college exchange as a structured, task-oriented, and enduring form of cross-campus collaboration and communal living. It enriches the theoretical scope of the residential college system in regional education cooperation by incorporating dimensions of interaction depth, resource sharing, emotional resonance, and relational continuity.

Second, regarding concept measurement, cultural identity is operationalized through three dimensions—cognitive, emotional, and behavioral—allowing clear distinction from sense of belonging while identifying their interconnections (Phinney, 1990; Dias-Broens et al., 2024). This provides a coherent scale and analytical path for future research.

Third, at the empirical level, the study integrates classical models of competence-based trust and affective-based trust (Rotter, 1967; McAllister, 1995; Lewicki & Bunker, 1996), mapping university students’ psychological and behavioral inclinations toward trust in academic cooperation and interpersonal interactions. This enriches the empirical foundation of the cultural identity–trust pathway in educational exchange contexts.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review and hypotheses; Section 3 details the research design; Section 4 reports data processing and statistical analyses; Section 5 discusses the findings and practical implications; and Section 6 concludes with suggestions for future research.

II. Literature Review And Hypothesis Development

Cross-Strait Residential College Exchange and Cultural Identity

Residential college (RC) exchanges between universities in Mainland China and Taiwan represent an educational interaction based on shared cultural roots but implemented across differentiated institutional systems and campus governance contexts. In recent years, such exchanges have become increasingly institutionalized and normalized, expanding from short-term visits to broader cross-campus collaborations centered on residential colleges, including joint courses, cooperative projects, and community-based learning networks. Mechanism-wise, the consecutive “Modern Residential College Education Forums for Higher Education Institutions across the Taiwan Strait and Hong Kong–Macao Regions” in 2023 and 2024—featuring themes such as “Digital Empowerment for Collegiate Education” and “Residential College Community Building”—have gathered the latest practices from across regions, suggesting that cross-regional RC–RC

collaboration platforms have established a standardized mechanism for dialogue and sharing (Fudan University Academic Affairs Office, 2023, 2024).

At the institutional level, many Mainland universities have recently issued official reports on residential college reforms, emphasizing immersive academic–life–cultural communities and sustained faculty–student interactions. Examples include Tsinghua University’s identity-building RC model and Westlake University’s “universal residential college system” for undergraduate education, both of which stress identity belonging and community participation (Tsinghua University, 2023; Westlake University, 2024). The University of Macau has formed a dense learning–living ecology through its ten residential colleges, fostering interdisciplinary, cross-grade, and cross-linguistic student integration and community collaboration (University of Macau, 2023). Together, these institutional and contextual developments indicate a shift in RC exchanges from “event-based” to “mechanism-based” platforms, offering a stable environment for the construction and internalization of shared cultural meanings.

From the perspective of cultural psychology and identity studies, the impact of RC exchange on cultural identity lies in its ability to repeatedly activate and consolidate shared cultural schemas through everyday community life. Dynamic constructivist theory suggests that cultural schemas are continuously triggered and internalized through frequent cue exposure and social interaction, eventually forming stable self–group connections (Hong et al., 2000). Recent studies within the Chinese context further demonstrate a robust link between cultural identity and positive psychosocial outcomes (e.g., subjective well-being, meaning in life), often mediated by social support and resilience (Zhou et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2025). In the context of cross-strait RC exchanges, the combination of high-density cultural cues and shared tasks—such as classical text reading, ritual participation, intangible cultural heritage workshops, joint exhibitions, and inter-campus projects—offers a continuum of cognitive consensus, emotional resonance, and behavioral engagement, enabling students to co-construct identity under a shared cultural framework of “who we are.” In higher education literature, residential colleges are often regarded as a form of High-Impact Practice (HIP) characterized by high engagement, sustained collaboration, and strong peer networks (Kuh, 2008). A 2024 systematic review of sense of belonging (SoB) in higher education affirms its close relationship with student well-being and academic achievement, but also calls for more consistency in operationalizing the concept. This offers methodological guidance for distinguishing and linking SoB with cultural identity in RC-based research (Dias-Broens et al., 2024).

Empirical studies from 2023–2024 also validate the positive chain between RC participation, belonging/identity, and learning: quantitative data from Macao indicates that RC involvement enhances students’ belonging and academic development, while cross-border students from Hong Kong attending Mainland institutions exhibit increasingly negotiated and strengthened university-based identity and belonging (Luo & Zhou, 2024; Gao, 2024). These findings align with the organizational logic of cross-strait RC exchange: when students collaborate on shared goals and engage in high-frequency interactions, belonging and identity are more likely to evolve from fleeting emotional experiences into meaning frameworks sustained through everyday practices, thereby reinforcing cultural identity. Mapping this RC exchange–identity mechanism across three dimensions further clarifies how cultural identity is formed and deepened:

- (1) Cognitive dimension: Through classical text reading, historical discussions, and field visits to cultural sites, students construct a shared “knowledge skeleton” of cultural heritage (Phinney, 1990), transforming “knowing” into “believing” via task collaboration.
- (2) Emotional dimension: Communal living, peer support, and ritual participation foster a sense of safety and group warmth, reducing psychological distance caused by institutional differences. Recent findings confirm the emotional support–belonging pathway as key to student well-being and social connection (Romeo et al., 2024).
- (3) Behavioral dimension: In joint projects, service learning, and rotating leadership roles, students “learn by doing” and “identify by doing,” externalizing cultural values into stable practices and intentions.

These dimensions echo the conclusions of recent SoB measurement reviews, which describe belonging as comprising connection with peers, faculty, and institutions, feeling valued and accepted, and gaining a sense of safety and participation in diversity—all of which are embedded in the organizational everyday life of residential colleges (Dias-Broens et al., 2024; Kuh, 2008). Finally, revisiting RC exchange through the lens of “shared culture, cross-institutional systems” in the cross-strait context: On one hand, the residential college system offers stable organizational boundaries, shared norms, and institutional support across campuses and regions, providing students with visible and dependable in-group identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979); On the other hand, the ongoing regional RC forums and institutional reforms create the necessary conditions for repeated exposure, social support, and meaning integration, transforming cultural schemas from passive activation to active participation and embodiment (Fudan University Academic Affairs Office, 2023, 2024; Tsinghua University, 2023; Westlake University, 2024; University of Macau, 2023).

Based on this theoretical and empirical foundation, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Cross-strait residential college exchange has a significant positive effect on students' cultural identity.

Cultural Identity and University Student Trust

In social and educational psychology, trust is commonly defined as an individual's psychological tendency and cooperative behavior to accept a certain level of risk based on their expectations of another person's (or institution's) competence, integrity, and benevolence (Rotter, 1967; McAllister, 1995). In contrast, cultural identity refers to an internalized connection with the symbols, values, and practices of one's cultural group. It provides not only a cognitive frame for answering “who we are” but also emotional belonging and behavioral norms for action. According to social identity theory, when the identity of “we” as an ingroup becomes more salient, normative expectations and reciprocity scripts are more easily activated, thereby enhancing trust and cooperation among ingroup members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This general proposition has been reaffirmed in recent empirical studies. For example, Luo and Zhou (2024) found that strong identity fusion enhances not only commitment to the ingroup but also openness to trust and exploration with outgroup members. This suggests that a solid group identity can serve as a psychological safe base, lowering uncertainty and defensiveness in social interactions and raising the threshold for trust behaviors. At a broader level, Hancock et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis shows that interpersonal trust is significantly shaped by relational closeness and shared situational cues—both of which are key resources derived from cultural identity via the reinforcement of shared norms and meanings (e.g., shared values, role expectations, and predictability). These findings support the theoretical pathway linking cultural identity to trust.

Within the higher education context, the chain linking cultural identity with sense of belonging, psychological safety, and trust/cooperation is especially salient. A recent systematic review in educational sciences emphasizes that while definitions and measurements of sense of belonging (SoB) have long lacked consistency, there is widespread agreement that SoB is closely tied to student performance and well-being, and that it interacts with identity variables such as ethnicity and first-generation status (Dias-Broens et al., 2024). Quantitative studies on university students also indicate that SoB interacts with social support, quality of interaction, and emotional connection, forming a psychological climate of “being seen, being accepted, and being trusted” (Romeo et al., 2024). Specifically, in residential college communities, research based on samples from the University of Macau shows that participation in RC activities enhances students' sense of belonging both to the RC and the university, which in turn promotes academic engagement. In cross-regional contexts, Hong Kong undergraduates studying in Mainland universities also negotiate their sense of belonging, positioning, and identity, which influences trust and cooperation with peers, faculty, and institutional structures (Luo & Zhou, 2024; Gao, 2024). These findings collectively suggest that when students live and learn in a cultural community with stable norms and shared narratives, they are more likely to transform “shared cultural schemas” into predictable expectations and positive intentions toward others and institutions—i.e., trust. More specifically relevant to this study, recent research using Chinese samples has shown that cultural identity can promote positive psychological outcomes such as well-being and meaning in life through relational and affective mechanisms like social support and resilience, thereby revealing the psychological foundation through which identity fosters trust and cooperation (Zhou et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2025).

Mechanistically, the positive effect of cultural identity on university student trust can operate through at least three complementary pathways:

- (1) **Cognitive–Normative Pathway:** Shared cultural meanings and behavior scripts make interactions more predictable and controllable, thus lowering the perceived risks in the trust–betrayal dilemma (Hancock et al., 2023).
- (2) **Affective–Safety Pathway:** Cultural identity enhances emotional warmth and psychological safety through experiences of belonging and acceptance, improving prior expectations of others' benevolence and integrity (Romeo et al., 2024).
- (3) **Behavioral–Reciprocity Pathway:** Through repeated interactions in a shared community, cultural identity fosters adherence to reciprocity norms and role obligations, producing observable and memorable “trustworthy records” that generate a virtuous cycle of trust → cooperation → reinforced trust (McAllister, 1995).

Correspondingly, a 2024 longitudinal study conducted in China found that positive intergroup contact (through shared activities, friendship, and support) significantly enhanced future trust toward outgroups, partially mediated by reduced loneliness—an emotional mechanism (Yuan et al., 2024). In high-density social and cooperative environments such as university residential colleges, cultural identity provides the normative and semantic foundation for “high-quality contact,” enabling the above three mechanisms to be frequently activated, strengthened, and externalized into more stable trust dispositions.

Based on this theoretical framework and recent empirical evidence, the second hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Cultural identity has a significant positive effect on university students' trust.

The Mediating Role of Cultural Identity Between Cross-Strait Residential College Exchange and University Students' Trust

Amid deepening globalization and advancing regional integration, residential college (RC) exchanges between universities in Mainland China and Taiwan have increasingly become vital platforms for enhancing mutual understanding and collaboration among young students. RCs not only serve as spaces for academic learning but also play a crucial role in cultural immersion and the development of social identity. Recent scholarship has paid growing attention to the mediating role of cultural identity in fostering trust within higher education and cross-cultural exchange contexts (Chen, 2024). According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals construct self-concepts by developing a sense of group belonging and value alignment during intergroup interactions, which subsequently shapes their attitudes toward “the other” and influences levels of interpersonal and institutional trust. Cross-strait RC exchanges, through mechanisms such as joint curriculum building, immersive cultural learning, and lived experiences, offer concrete scenarios where identity can be reconstructed around shared goals and cultural narratives.

Recent empirical studies conducted between 2023 and 2025 provide solid support for this logic. For instance, Quan et al. (2025) found that high-quality intergroup contact enhances not only intergroup attitudes but also significantly boosts students' sense of Chinese national identity. Further analysis showed that cultural identity plays a key mediating role in explaining young people's political trust and willingness for social cooperation. Similarly, Yuan et al. (2024), in a longitudinal study, showed that early intergroup contact effectively predicted subsequent levels of intergroup trust, primarily through pathways involving cultural or group identity. Zhou et al. (2025), drawing on a cross-cultural survey of youth, also emphasized that cultural identity reinforcement tends to accompany increased trust and sense of belonging. These findings indicate that in educational and socialization processes, cultural identity is no longer merely a psychological construct but has emerged as a core mediator in building intergroup trust and cooperation. In the context of cross-strait RC exchanges, the value of exchange lies not only in academic knowledge transmission but also in cultural embedding—namely, reinforcing students' experiences and recognition of shared cultural roots.

Practical cases provide further support. Fudan University's “Star Plan” (Fudan University, 2023) and Tianjin University's “Straits Tongwen College” (Tianjin University, 2024) both demonstrate how students from both sides of the Strait, through joint participation in courses and shared living experiences, tend to develop shared identity perceptions, which in turn promote trust and willingness to collaborate across regions. These empirical findings align well with the theoretical assumption that the positive impact of RC exchange on trust is not direct, but mediated by cultural identity. This exchange → identity → trust mechanism can be further unpacked into three distinct layers:

- (1) Recategorization – the essential precondition for the mediation pathway. According to the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1993), when previously separate groups are recategorized under a superordinate identity, intergroup prejudice diminishes and willingness for cooperation and trust increases. Vezzali et al. (2025) validated this by showing that shared identity promotes cooperation and indirectly enhances trust in both institutions and individuals. In cross-strait RC settings, their communal organizational structure and immersive atmosphere offer an institutionalized platform for cultivating a “sense of we-ness.”
- (2) Value Alignment – the core logic through which cultural identity fosters trust. Trust relies on perceived behavioral predictability and adherence to shared norms (Möllering, 2006). Cultural identity facilitates this by internalizing shared values and behavioral expectations, thereby reducing uncertainty in social interaction. Sun et al. (2024a) found that cultural and moral identity significantly mediated the relationship between college students' online trust and prosocial behavior. Klein et al. (2025) further showed that identity fusion enhances intergroup trust and reconciliation. Thus, cultural identity functions not only as emotional belonging but also as a value-based foundation for trust.
- (3) Emotional Connection and Social Support – amplifying the mediating role of cultural identity. Longitudinal data indicate that intergroup contact improves students' attitudes toward outgroups and enhances intergroup trust through emotional mechanisms such as reduced loneliness and increased belonging (Yuan et al., 2024). In educational settings, Dost and Mazzoli Smith (2023) also demonstrated that students' campus belonging significantly predicts their trust in peers and institutions—belonging being a concrete manifestation of cultural identity. Consequently, the strong sense of belonging and perceived support cultivated through shared academic and residential experiences in cross-strait RCs can be transformed into enhanced student trust.

In summary, existing literature has established a preliminary logical chain of exchange → identity → trust: residential college exchange promotes the development of cultural identity through diverse forms, and this

cultural identity in turn significantly enhances student trust. Between 2023 and 2025, multiple empirical studies across Mainland China and East Asia have repeatedly verified the validity of this mediation model, offering a robust theoretical foundation for cross-strait RC exchange research.

Based on this synthesis, we propose the third hypothesis:

H3: Cultural identity mediates the relationship between cross-strait residential college exchange and university students' trust.

III. Research Design

Grounded in social identity theory and cross-cultural adaptation theory, this study constructs and tests a mediation model of Cross-Strait Residential College Exchange → Cultural Identity → University Student Trust. The aim is to examine both the direct effect of RC exchange on student trust and the mediating mechanism of cultural identity. The research design is outlined below:

Participants and Methodology

Target Population: The study targets students who participated in the Cross-Strait Residential College Alliance Forum between 2014 and 2024. This group was selected for two main reasons:

- (i) They had direct experience in residential college education, engaging deeply with cross-strait collegiate culture;
- (ii) They possess practical experience in cross-cultural communication, allowing for authentic responses relevant to the research focus.

Sampling Method: A snowball sampling strategy was adopted, in which existing participants recommended new respondents. The sample spans a critical decade in cross-strait relations (2014–2024), covering both periods of active engagement and contraction, ensuring temporal representativeness.

Sample Characteristics: A total of 214 valid responses were collected in June 2024 (Mainland China: 116; Taiwan: 108), maintaining a balanced 1:1 ratio. According to Kline (2016), the sample size meets the basic requirements for structural equation modeling (at least 10 cases per parameter).

Statistical Tools and Procedures:

Data were analyzed using SPSS 24.0 and AMOS 24.0, incorporating: (a) Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), (b) Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), and (c) Bootstrap Confidence Interval Estimation.

Measurement of Constructs

Based on the literature and hypotheses H1–H4, the following measurement model was constructed: Cross-Strait Residential College Exchange (A) → Cultural Identity (B; mediator) → Undergraduate Trust (C). All items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree). Subscale scores were averaged, with higher scores indicating stronger latent constructs. Two pilot tests (each N = 50) were conducted to assess item clarity and reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$), with revisions made accordingly.

(a) Cross-Strait Residential College Exchange (A, 4 items)

Operational Definition: Based on intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) and interpersonal trust theory (Rotter, 1967), this construct reflects the quality rather than the frequency of exchange, covering task collaboration, resource sharing, emotional resonance, and continuity. Sample items include:

Interaction Depth: "I collaborated with cross-strait faculty or peers on joint projects such as academic workshops or intangible heritage studios."

Resource Sharing: "Our colleges engaged in reciprocal resource sharing, such as co-editing textbooks and sharing databases."

Emotional Resonance: "Through shared classical reading (e.g., Zhuzi Family Instructions) or Confucian rituals, I developed a sense of cultural belonging with peers from across the Strait."

Continuity: "I maintain long-term connections with cross-strait peers (e.g., regular online discussions or mutual visits)."

(b) Cultural Identity (B, 4 items; Mediator)

Operational Definition: Following the cognitive–affective–behavioral framework (Chen & Zhang, 2009), this construct emphasizes the shared cultural roots of Mainland China and Taiwan. Items include:

Cognitive: "Through cross-strait RC activities, I have come to recognize Chinese classics (e.g., The Analects) as our common cultural foundation."

Affective: "I developed emotional bonds with cross-strait peers during intangible heritage collaboration (e.g., lacquer thread carving)."

Behavioral Intention: “I am willing to actively learn traditional cultural skills from the other side (e.g., calligraphy, tea ceremony).”

Communication Willingness: “I would share the cultural content of our RC exchange (e.g., joint exhibitions) with others.”

(c) Undergraduate Trust (C, 4 items)

Operational Definition: Based on interpersonal trust theory (Rotter, 1967), this scale measures both competence-based trust, affective trust, and behavioral intentions. Items include:

Competence Trust: “I believe that students from the other side can deliver high-quality work in joint academic or cultural projects.”

Affective Trust: “I sensed sincere care from cross-strait faculty and peers (e.g., gift exchanges, ongoing online contact).”

Cooperation Willingness: “I am willing to team up with cross-strait students for competitions or community service.”

Commitment Credibility: “Cross-strait peers reliably fulfill commitments during collaboration (e.g., submitting outputs on time).”

(d) Instrument Development and Quality Control

Semantic Equivalence: All items were reviewed independently by scholars from both Mainland and Taiwan (e.g., teachers from Fujian and Taiwan universities) to ensure semantic neutrality and eliminate politically sensitive ambiguities.

Validity and Reliability:

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion (i.e., the square root of AVE for each construct must exceed inter-construct correlations).

Model fit was evaluated through SEM analysis, with the thresholds: $CFI \geq 0.95$, $RMSEA \leq 0.08$, referencing the cultural orientation moderator in intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954).

Mediation Testing: The SEM model was further analyzed using Bias-Corrected Bootstrap resampling (2,000 iterations) to compute 95% Confidence Intervals (CIs) for indirect effects. A mediation effect was considered significant if the CI did not include zero (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

The full conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 1.

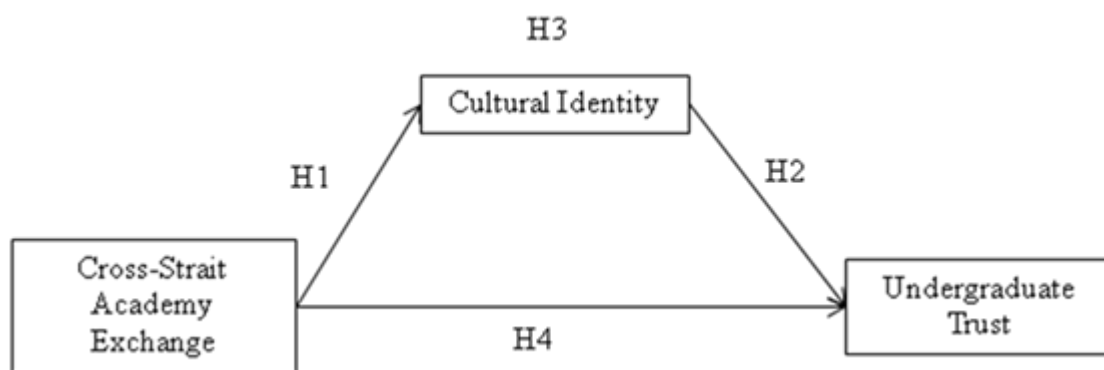


Figure 1. Research Framework Diagram

IV. Data Processing And Statistical Analysis

Sample Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, a total of 214 valid responses were collected for this study. Using SPSS version 24, frequency and percentage analyses were conducted to summarize the demographic distribution of the participants in terms of academic background, number of forum participations, and gender. The results indicate that the majority of respondents came from STEM (science and engineering) disciplines (56.7%), while non-STEM participants accounted for 43.3%. Regarding the number of forum participations, most participants had attended only once (76.0%), followed by those who had participated twice (23.6%). The gender distribution was nearly balanced, with males comprising 50.2% and females 49.8% of the sample. Overall, the sample structure demonstrated strong representativeness, providing a solid foundation for subsequent analyses.

Preliminary Analysis of Variable Properties

To determine whether the collected sample data conformed to the assumption of a normal distribution, the study examined all observed variables for skewness and kurtosis. Furthermore, Mardia's coefficient was employed to assess the assumption of multivariate normality. Before conducting structural equation modeling (SEM), the 214 valid responses were imported into AMOS version 24, and descriptive statistical analyses were performed on the 12 observed variables to understand the fundamental distributional characteristics of the data. Particular attention was given to skewness and kurtosis values to test for univariate normality. As shown in Table 1, the absolute values of skewness for all variables were below 3, and the absolute values of kurtosis were below 10, indicating that the distributions of all items were reasonably close to normal. Therefore, no additional data transformation was necessary. These results meet Kline's (2016) criteria for univariate normality.

Table 1. Tests of Univariate and Multivariate Normality

Variable	skew	c.r.	kurtosis	c.r.
UT4	-.131	-.783	-.862	-2.573
UT3	-.046	-.275	-.729	-2.178
UT2	-.082	-.489	-.760	-2.268
UT1	-.129	-.773	-.883	-2.638
CI4	-.044	-.263	-.847	-2.528
CI3	-.001	-.007	-.689	-2.058
CI2	-.129	-.770	-.684	-2.043
CI1	-.009	-.053	-.781	-2.333
CS4	.009	.055	-.677	-2.022
CS3	.051	.302	-.760	-2.268
CS2	-.044	-.264	-.646	-1.929
CS1	.002	.013	-.730	-2.179
Multivariate			10.628	4.241

After confirming univariate normality, this study further examined the suitability of multivariate normality, as both the subsequent confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) adopted the maximum likelihood (ML) method for parameter estimation, which requires the assumption of multivariate normality. According to Mardia's (1970) test for multivariate normality, both skewness and kurtosis components must be evaluated. In this study, the number of observed variables was $p = 12$, resulting in a theoretical cutoff value of $p(p + 2) = 12 \times 14 = 168$. The actual Mardia kurtosis coefficient was 4.241 (unstandardized), and its critical ratio (c.r.) was calculated as $4.241/\sqrt{(168/214)} \approx 4.786$, which exceeds the conventional threshold of 1.96, indicating a significant deviation from normality. Furthermore, based on the empirical rule suggested by West et al. (1995), skewness greater than 2 or kurtosis greater than 7 is considered to reflect "severe" non-normality. From a multivariate perspective, a commonly cited guideline in AMOS considers multivariate kurtosis with $c.r. > 5$ as "severely" non-normal. Although the result of 4.786 falls below this threshold, it is still statistically significant. In other words, the data are statistically confirmed to be non-normal, though the extent is "moderate" rather than extreme. The multivariate kurtosis result is significant ($p < .05$), indicating a meaningful violation of multivariate normality assumptions. Consequently, it was necessary to apply correction methods such as bootstrapping or robust estimation.

Given this significant departure from multivariate normality, the Bollen–Stine bootstrap method was employed (with 2,000 bootstrap samples) to adjust the chi-square goodness-of-fit test. The p-value for the Bollen–Stine bootstrap test was 0.133, suggesting that the model could not be rejected under conditions of non-normality.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Reliability-Validity Tests

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) constitutes a critical component of Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). Prior to examining the structural model, it is essential to validate the measurement model to ensure that latent constructs are accurately reflected by their observed indicators.

This study focuses on three latent constructs: Cross-Strait University College Exchanges, Cultural Identity, and Student Trust. The CFA was conducted in AMOS using the Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation method, with model robustness further verified through 2,000 Bootstrap samples. The results demonstrated strong psychometric properties: All standardized factor loadings exceeded 0.70, Indicator reliability reached 0.83, Model fit indices (CFI = 0.984, RMSEA = 0.041) satisfied the thresholds proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999), indicating excellent model fit (see Figure 2)..

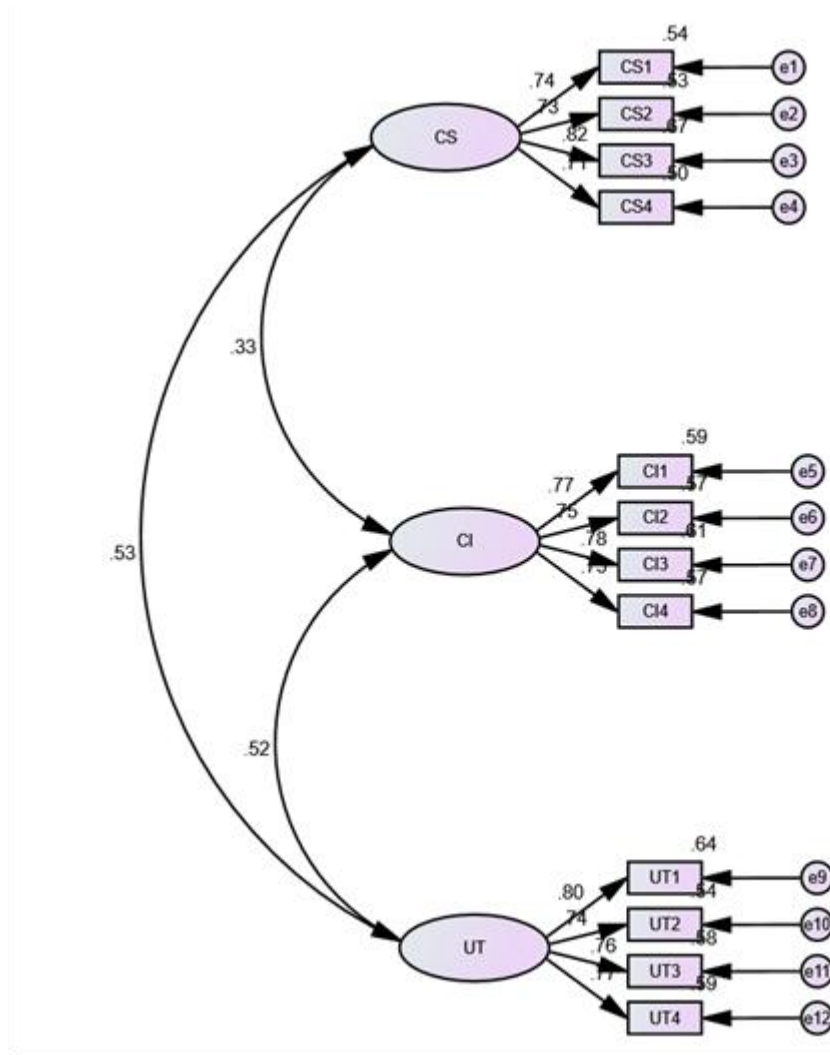


Figure 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model

V. Discriminant Validity Assessment

This study employed two complementary methods to examine discriminant validity.

First, following the Fornell-Larcker criterion, we compared the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each latent construct with their inter-construct correlations. Results indicated that the AVE square roots for the three latent constructs (0.748, 0.764, and 0.768) exceeded all pairwise correlation coefficients, providing initial evidence of discriminant validity.

Second, we conducted correlation significance tests, examining 95% confidence intervals (CIs) and p-values for inter-construct correlations. A latent construct pair was deemed distinct if its CI did not encompass 1 and exhibited statistical significance ($p < .05$). As presented in Table 2, none of the CIs for the three construct pairs included 1, and all correlations were significant ($p < .05$), statistically rejecting the possibility of construct

redundancy. Notably, even the upper bounds of the highest correlation pairs remained substantially below 1, reinforcing the theoretical and empirical independence of the constructs.

Convergent validity was further supported by: (1) Standardized factor loadings all exceeding 0.70, (2) AVE values surpassing 0.50, and (3) Composite Reliability (CR) scores above 0.70. The combined evidence from Figure 2 (structural model) and Table 2 (fit indices) confirms that the measurement scale satisfies both convergent and discriminant validity criteria across all four latent constructs, thereby demonstrating robust construct validity.

Table 2. Confidence Intervals of Correlation Coefficients and Discriminant Validity

Parameter			Estimate	Lower	Upper	P
CS	<-->	CI	.330	.178	.476	.001
CS	<-->	UT	.530	.385	.653	.001
CI	<-->	UT	.519	.393	.646	.000

VI. Structural Equation Modeling And Hypothesis Testing

Using AMOS, this study specified a mediation model of “Cross-strait Residential College Exchange → Cultural Identity → College Student Trust”, clarifying both the direct and indirect pathways through which exchange influences cultural identity. After confirmatory factor analysis was conducted, the structural model was tested. Employing 5,000 Bootstrap resamples, the analysis confirmed that the 95% BCa confidence intervals of all path coefficients and loadings were stable and did not include zero. The parameter estimates and model fit indices demonstrated strong robustness, and the results are presented in Figure 3. As shown, the chi-square value was 68.83 with 51 degrees of freedom, yielding a chi-square/df ratio of 1.35, with $p = 0.049$. The fit indices were RMSEA = 0.041, GFI = 0.95, AGFI = 0.924, NFI = 0.942, CFI = 0.984, and IFI = 0.984. All indices fell within the recommended thresholds for SEM standards (Grapentine, 2000). Therefore, the structural model in this study demonstrated a good overall model fit.

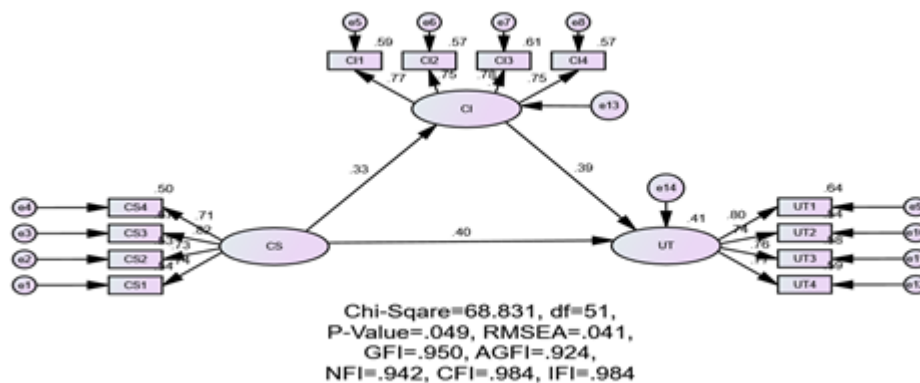


Figure 3. Standardized Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

In testing the proposed hypotheses, this study employed the Bootstrap resampling method for estimation. The results indicated that all standardized path coefficients (β) reached a statistically significant level. As shown in Table 3, Cross-strait Residential College Exchange (CS) exerted a significant positive effect on Cultural Identity (CI) ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of college exchange are associated with stronger cultural identity among students, thus supporting H1. Similarly, Cultural Identity (CI) had a significant positive impact on University Student Trust (UT) ($\beta = 0.386$, $p < .001$), indicating that for every one standard deviation increase in cultural identity, student trust improved by approximately 38.6%, thereby supporting H2. Further analysis also revealed a significant direct effect of Cross-strait Residential College Exchange (CS) on University Student Trust (UT) ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < .001$). After controlling for the mediating variable, the findings demonstrated that exchange not only influences trust through the indirect pathway of cultural identity, but also exerts a direct positive effect, providing empirical support for H4.

Table 3. Standardized regression coefficients and significance of direct relationships

Parameter			Estimate	Lower	Upper	P
CI	<---	CS	.330	.178	.476	.001
UT	<---	CI	.386	.256	.525	.001
UT	<---	CS	.403	.236	.537	.001

To examine the presence of mediation effects, this study employed the Bootstrap resampling procedure with 5,000 iterations to generate the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect. As shown in Table 4, Cultural Identity (CI) functioned as a positive mediator, as evidenced by the significant indirect pathway from Cross-strait Residential College Exchange (CS) to University Student Trust (UT) through CI. The estimated indirect effect was 0.127, with $Z = 3.53$ and a 95% bias-corrected confidence interval [0.067, 0.213], which did not include zero. These results provide empirical support for H3.

Table 4. Mediation effect analysis of the model

	Point Estimates	Product of Coefficients		Bias-Corrected CI		Percentile CI	
		SE	Z	Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
Total effect							
CS→UT	0.530	0.069	7.68	0.385	0.653	0.382	0.651
Indirect effect							
CS→UT	0.127	0.036	3.53	0.067	0.213	0.060	0.199
Direct effect							
CS→UT	0.403	0.075	5.37	0.236	0.537	0.243	0.539

VII. Discussion And Practical Implications

Summary of Key Findings

This study validated the mediation model of “Cross-strait Residential College Exchange → Cultural Identity → University Student Trust” using SEM and Bootstrap analysis. The model demonstrated good fit ($\chi^2 = 68.831$, $df = 51$, $\chi^2/df = 1.35$, $RMSEA = 0.041$, $GFI = 0.95$, $CFI = 0.984$). Path coefficients were stable, with 95% BCa intervals excluding zero. Results confirmed: CS positively affected CI ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .001$, H1); CI positively affected UT ($\beta = 0.39$, $p < .001$, H2); CI served as a significant mediator (indirect effect = 0.127, $Z = 3.53$, H3); and CS retained a significant direct effect on UT ($\beta = 0.403$, $p < .001$, H4). Decomposition showed 23.96% of the total effect (0.53) was mediated by cultural identity, confirming a dual-path mechanism.

Theoretical Contributions

Theoretically, the study advances three dimensions. First, it empirically substantiates the mediation model linking exchange, identity, and trust, extending prior descriptive claims with robust evidence. Second, it conceptually distinguishes sense of belonging (relational connection within campus) from cultural identity (cognitive, affective, behavioral dimensions), demonstrating that the latter provides a higher-order mechanism for cross-institutional trust. Third, it integrates the “competence–affective trust” framework into the cross-strait educational context, highlighting the trust structures underpinning academic collaboration and social interaction, thus expanding trust theory within higher education.

Mechanisms of Transformation

Findings suggest three complementary pathways through which exchange transforms into trust. (1) Direct contact: Institutionalized exchange provides equal status and repeated interaction, enabling accumulation of positive experiences that foster interpersonal and intergroup trust. (2) Socio-emotional: Exchange reduces loneliness and anxiety, strengthens emotional bonds and support networks, and cultivates psychological safety, forming an emotional foundation for trust. (3) Identity: Exchange strengthens shared cultural cognition and

affect, while rituals and shared norms reconstruct a “we” boundary, producing identity fusion and common ingroup identity that extend trust beyond immediate peers.

Robustness and Boundary Conditions

Although robust, the effects are subject to contextual constraints. Policy environments shape effectiveness: trust-building is facilitated during periods of eased cross-strait relations but constrained under political tension. Exchange quality also matters: sustained, in-depth interactions foster stronger trust than short-term visits. Individual factors, such as prior cultural orientation and intercultural sensitivity, influence the degree of transformation. Future studies should test moderating variables to explore generalizability across contexts.

Policy and Practice Implications

Practical insights emerge. First, institutionalized platforms should anchor cross-campus cooperation, avoiding reliance on sporadic exchanges. Second, program design must ensure equal status, shared tasks, and institutional support to deepen interaction. Third, cultural identity cultivation can leverage shared resources such as classics reading, rituals, and heritage practices to strengthen collective identification. Fourth, social support systems—mentorship, peer counseling, and co-living—reduce isolation and build trustworthy communities. Finally, policy support from education authorities can expand the scale and sustainability of exchanges, fostering long-term social capital based on trust.

Section Summary

This study confirms the dual direct and mediated effects of cross-strait residential college exchange on student trust, with cultural identity as a pivotal mechanism. The findings enrich theories of educational exchange, identity, and trust, while providing actionable insights for institutional and policy innovation in cross-strait higher education. Future research should examine contextual moderators to refine understanding of the exchange–identity–trust chain.

VIII. Conclusion

This study adopted the core model of “Cross-strait Residential College Exchange → Cultural Identity → University Student Trust”, grounded in social identity theory and cross-cultural adaptation theory, and employed structural equation modeling (SEM) with Bootstrap methods to systematically examine the trust effects of cross-strait residential college exchange. The findings revealed several key insights.

First, cross-strait residential college exchange exerted a significant positive effect on cultural identity. By integrating academic, residential, and cultural dimensions into a holistic institutional design, residential colleges provide students with frequent and structured opportunities for cross-group interaction. These exchanges activate and reinforce shared cultural schemas within a common cultural context, thereby strengthening cultural identity.

Second, cultural identity significantly enhanced student trust. Cultural identity not only provides the cognitive framework of “who we are,” but also fosters belonging, emotional bonds, and reciprocal norms that constitute the psychological and behavioral foundations of trust formation.

Third, cultural identity played a partial mediating role between exchange and trust. On the one hand, exchange strengthened trust indirectly through the mediation of cultural identity. On the other, it directly enhanced trust via collaborative experiences and the development of social support networks. This reveals a dual mechanism of both direct and indirect effects.

Fourth, cross-strait residential college exchange demonstrated a robust positive effect on student trust. Institutionalized platforms, shared tasks, equal status, and long-term interaction emerged as critical conditions for trust-building, while variations in exchange quality, policy environment, and individual differences may serve as boundary conditions shaping effect strength.

Theoretical contributions of this study include empirically validating the “exchange–identity–trust” chain, extending sociological and psychological explanations of cross-group trust, clarifying the conceptual distinction between sense of belonging and cultural identity, and introducing the competence–affective trust framework into the study of cross-strait educational exchange.

Practical implications suggest the need to further institutionalize cross-strait residential college platforms, optimize exchange design, emphasize cultural identity cultivation, attend to students’ emotional experiences and social support, and strengthen policy support to expand the scale and impact of exchanges. Only through such measures can residential college exchange truly serve as a critical educational mechanism for fostering mutual trust and cooperation among cross-strait youth.

In conclusion, this study revealed the mechanism by which cross-strait residential college exchange fosters student trust through cultural identity, providing a new theoretical framework and empirical evidence for understanding educational exchange in “shared culture but cross-institutional” contexts. Future research may

further test and extend the model across different policy environments, generational cohorts, and multicultural samples, thereby deepening the understanding and application of the exchange–identity–trust chain.

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