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How Short-Term Tourism Experiences Shape Generation Z's Intentions for Long-Term Study in China: A Path Toward Sustainable Cross-Border Education

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ABSTRACT:
This study examines how short-term educational tourism and pure tourism experiences in China influence Generation Z international students' intentions to pursue long-term study in China, revealing how short-term experiences translate into long-term educational mobility within sustainable cross-border education development. Drawing on prospect theory and self-efficacy theory, an integrated analytical framework was developed. A group-based design and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) were employed. The results reveal significant differences between the two experience types. For educational tourism, perceived security and cultural adaptation are more critical, whereas for pure tourism, perceived risk and social media use frequency play more prominent roles. Cultural adaptation also indirectly influence long-term study intention through perceived returns. Overall, the study shows that short-term cross-border experiences facilitate international students' transition from short-term exposure to long-term study in China, strengthen China's sustained appeal as a study destination, and support sustainable cross-border education development.

Keywords: Educational tourism, Sustainable cross-border education development, Intention to pursue long-term study in China, Generation Z, PLS-SEM.

1. Introduction

In recent years, with deepening globalization and international educational cooperation, cross-border learning and educational tourism have become important components of international student mobility. Among the 264 million students enrolled in higher education worldwide, 6.9 million are international students studying across borders (UNESCO, 2025). Meanwhile, short-term cross-border mobility programs have expanded rapidly (Knight, 2012). These experiences provide opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and practical learning and increasingly shape students' later decisions about long-term study abroad.

China has become increasingly attractive in the educational tourism and international study market due to its rich educational resources, cultural heritage, and growing policy support (Wen & Hu, 2019). These policies promote short-term educational tourism and provide potential international students with direct opportunities to experience Chinese society and educational resources, thereby influencing their decisions

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about long-term study in China (Xu & Ho, 2024). In this study, educational tourism is defined as a short-term cross-border mobility experience primarily oriented toward learning, knowledge acquisition, cultural understanding, or academic development, and typically characterized by a certain degree of program structure, educational activity design, and organizational support (Bodger, 1998; Ritchie et al., 2003; Pitman et al., 2010). By contrast, pure tourism experience refers mainly to tourism activities centred on leisure, entertainment, sightseeing, and personal relaxation, which generally do not involve systematic educational objectives or formal learning arrangements (Dann, 1977; Crompton, 1979). Therefore, the distinction between the two does not depend solely on the length of stay, but is mainly reflected in three dimensions: participant intentionality, program structure, and experiential content. Specifically, educational tourism places greater emphasis on purposeful learning engagement, exposure to educational resources, and cognitive evaluation of future learning pathways, whereas pure tourism is more closely associated with destination image, affective enjoyment, and the leisure experience itself (Pitman et al., 2010; Chau et al., 2021). However, existing studies on long-term study abroad decisions mainly focus on structural factors such as tuition costs, educational quality, and visa systems (Lee, 2014; Bodycott, 2009). Research on how short-term mobility shapes global awareness and educational choices remains limited (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Paige et al., 2009; Abhayawansa et al., 2024). Moreover, the different mechanisms through which educational tourism and pure tourism experiences influence long-term study abroad intentions remain insufficiently explained (King & Raghuram, 2013; Williams & Hall, 2000; Erdei, 2020; Granja et al., 2024).

Against this background, examining the distinct effects of educational tourism and pure tourism experiences responds to the practical need for destination countries to enhance their attractiveness through diverse program pathways and promote sustainable cross-border education development. Therefore, this study introduces prospect theory and self-efficacy theory to develop an integrated analytical framework and reveal the underlying mechanism.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Influence of the Study Destination

The characteristics and image of the destination country are key motives shaping international students' study destination choices (Wen et al., 2019). A destination's educational resources, policy environment, and cultural atmosphere can significantly influence students' study intentions and behavioral choices (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Nafari et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2006).

Previous studies show that students often conduct preliminary investigations before choosing a study destination. In cross-border decisions marked by strong information asymmetry, such investigation has high diagnostic value. In real settings, students assess whether educational resources, policy convenience, and cultural atmosphere align with their goals. Through this process, they adjust expectations, reduce uncertainty, and transform the abstract image of a destination country into a more concrete and perceivable picture of life there (Wilkins & Huisman, 2011; Branco Oliveira & Soares, 2016).

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Earlier research has widely examined factors shaping study destination attractiveness. Regarding education and academic resources, higher education quality is a core consideration for international students. Eder et al. (2010) noted that students tend to choose countries and institutions with internationally recognized academic resources, and their subjective perception of higher education quality directly affects study choice. The institutional and policy environment also plays an important role. Ahmad and Hussain (2017) emphasized that visa convenience and financial support enhance institutional trust and increase accessibility. Cultural and social environments are also important. Jiao (2025) found that cultural similarity reduces uncertainty and anxiety in cross-cultural communication, strengthening identification and belonging. Eder et al. (2010) further noted that language familiarity influences learning convenience and cross-cultural communication. In practice, cost of living and quality of life are also influential factors (Ahmad & Hussain, 2017). Safety is another sensitive consideration. Yang et al. (2024) found that in the later stage of the pandemic, health environment and social stability became key factors in study destination choice. Peer effects and social networks should also not be ignored. Maringe and Carter (2007) argued that alumni groups and peer experience sharing enhance destination attractiveness through word of mouth. In addition, family background, academic performance, and labor market trends also influence students' study decisions (Bracht et al., 2006). However, although these studies reveal the importance of multidimensional destination characteristics, most existing research remains focused on static destination attributes and pays less attention to how students may change their destination perceptions through direct short-term tourism experiences.

2.2 The Influence of short-term Tourism on the Choice of Study Destination

Tourism is a dynamic system composed of tourists, destinations, and tourist mobility (Leiper, 1979). Based on duration, tourism can be divided into long-term and short-term tourism. In this study, short-term tourism is further divided into educational tourism and pure tourism experiences. The former emphasizes education and knowledge acquisition (Ritz, 2011), whereas the latter focuses on cultural experience, social interaction, and leisure activities (Albuquerque et al., 2024).

Educational tourism enables students to engage with the destination's education system and academic environment in advance, strengthening their trust in and identification with academic resources (Dou et al., 2024). Although pure tourism is not directly education oriented, it can still shape students' overall impressions through cultural immersion, social interaction, and environmental experience (Reisinger & Turner, 2003). Therefore, short-term tourism provides students with direct perceptions of the destination's educational, cultural, and social environment and influences their attitudes and intentions toward future long-term study.

Theoretically, this process is similar to expectation confirmation and continuance intention logic in information systems research. Expectation Confirmation Theory (ECT) suggests that individuals form expectations before experiencing a product or service; positive confirmation occurs when the actual experience exceeds expectations, while disconfirmation occurs when it falls short (Oliver, 1980). The Information Systems Continuance Model (ISC) further argues that users form satisfaction based on expectation

confirmation and perceived usefulness, and that satisfaction and perceived usefulness jointly shape continuance intention (Bhattacherjee, 2001).

Accordingly, the ECT-ISC framework can explain Generation Z's psychological processing as digital natives in information-overload and multi-stimulus environments (Hassoun et al., 2023). Specifically, the ISC model highlights a closed loop from confirmation to satisfaction and then continuance intention (Bhattacherjee, 2001). In this study, this mechanism is translated into a cross-stage pathway. Short-term educational tourism serves as a confirmation context in which prior expectations are tested and compared with real experience cues. When positive confirmation occurs, individuals develop higher satisfaction and transform positive experiences into long-term study intention. This reflects the causal logic of ECT concerning prior expectations, post-experience perceptions, and confirmation or disconfirmation (Oliver, 1980). In other words, the extent to which short-term tourism meets prior expectations improves satisfaction, which further promotes long-term study decisions.

For digital natives, real experience has stronger diagnostic value. It increases the weight of confirmation judgments, reduces the disturbance of noisy information, and stabilizes attitude evaluation, which is consistent with evidence on Generation Z's sensitivity to online perceptions (Liu et al., 2023). Educational tourism mainly enhances satisfaction with academic fit and capability development through classes, laboratory visits, and interaction with teachers and students (Dou et al., 2023; Li & Liang, 2020). By contrast, pure tourism strengthens positive perceptions of destination safety, public services, and social inclusiveness through cultural experiences and daily life contact, thereby generating satisfaction based on life adaptation and social integration (Lee & Kim, 2022; Ryoo & Cheung, 2021).

2.3 Prospect Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory

Prospect theory emphasizes loss aversion and risk sensitivity in decision making, suggesting that individuals are often more strongly influenced by potential losses than by gains of equal value (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). While prospect theory explains decision preferences under external risk, self-efficacy theory explains behavioral regulation based on internal capability beliefs. According to self-efficacy theory, individuals' beliefs in their ability to cope with challenges directly affect how they interpret the external environment and take action (Bandura, 1997).

In tourism research, prospect theory has been widely used to explain tourists' risk trade-offs in destination choice. Lin et al. (2024) found that it effectively explains tourists' risk attitudes and decisions under uncertainty, particularly through loss aversion and reference dependence. Park et al. (2024) applied reference dependence to multi-destination tourism, showing that a previously selected stop can become a new reference point that shapes tourists' evaluations of gains or risks at other destinations. Hung and Petrick (2012) introduced self-efficacy into the tourism decision model as a core personal ability variable to explain tourists' psychological mechanisms and behavioral outcomes when facing travel constraints.

In this study, prospect theory explains international students' attitudes toward destination choice. When students perceive high risk, their willingness to study abroad may

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decline. Perceived risk, perceived security, and perceived returns are key variables through which they balance losses and gains in prospect judgments. Perceived risk refers to individuals' subjective expectations of possible negative outcomes before making a decision (Stone & Grønhaug, 1993). In the context of international study, this may involve concerns about destination safety, visa policy, educational quality, or cross-cultural adaptation failure. Prior research shows that perceived risk significantly weakens international mobility willingness and destination preference (Reisinger & Mavondo, 2005). Since Generation Z has grown up in an environment of transparent information and rapid digital communication, they are more sensitive to negative destination information (Wang & Iahad, 2025). In educational tourism, poor class organization, weak communication with teachers and administrators, or administrative barriers in course selection, registration, visa procedures, or student status management may reduce students' willingness to extend short-term learning into long-term study (Bradly et al., 2025; Deng & Ritchie, 2018). In pure tourism, perceived safety problems during a short stay may significantly increase overall destination risk perception (Ryoo & Cheung, 2021). Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: In educational tourism experiences, perceived risk has a negative effect on the intention to study abroad.

H1b: In pure tourism experiences, perceived risk has a negative effect on the intention to study abroad.

Perceived security refers to individuals' subjective trust in the social stability, public safety, and educational support mechanisms of a destination (Yu et al., 2021). It includes not only public safety and public health systems, but also legal predictability, campus security management, and emergency response mechanisms. When individuals believe that a destination can provide reliable protection and a stable learning environment, their risk expectations decrease, thereby strengthening positive decision tendencies (Wang et al., 2023).

Trust in a study destination's public safety, medical system, legal protection, and campus security can significantly enhance Generation Z's sense of certainty about the external environment (Rončák et al., 2021; Agyeiwaah et al., 2021), which further affects their confidence in educational investment. In educational tourism, strong campus security, an appropriate teacher-student ratio, and clear emergency plans may lead students to perceive the institution as responsible and well organized, strengthening trust in the education system (Xu et al., 2025). In pure tourism, good social order during a short-term visit may encourage students to view the destination as a low-risk social environment (Mawby & Ozascilar, 2024). Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: In educational tourism experiences, perceived security has a positive effect on the intention to study abroad.

H2b: In pure tourism experiences, perceived security has a positive effect on the intention to study abroad.

Perceived returns refer to individuals' expected benefits in education, social life, and career development (Menon et al., 2017). In cross-border education decisions, perceived returns have a strong motivational effect and are a key predictor of study abroad motivation (Maringe & Carter, 2007). For Generation Z, whose values are often shaped

by development orientation and self-realization, perceived returns extend beyond academic advancement to include cross-cultural experience, social network expansion, and future career pathways (Zhu et al., 2025).

Educational tourism can directly shape students' evaluation of educational returns. For example, exposure to advanced teaching methods, research facilities, and academic guidance in academic camps allows students to perceive academic growth and professional fit, thereby increasing trust in educational returns (Arcodia et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2020). Pure tourism experiences mainly operate through social and daily-life return pathways. During short-term visits, students may meet peers from different countries, expand international networks, or experience daily-life convenience and the destination's economic potential, all of which can generate positive perceived returns (García et al., 2019). Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: In educational tourism experiences, perceived returns have a positive effect on the intention to study abroad.

H3b: In pure tourism experiences, perceived returns have a positive effect on the intention to study abroad.

Cultural adaptation refers to individuals' ability to manage differences, build social connections, and complete academic tasks in cross-cultural settings (Fong, 2000). Previous studies regard cultural adaptation as a direct reflection of cross-cultural self-efficacy, indicating the extent to which individuals believe they can cope with differences, establish relationships, and perform academic tasks in unfamiliar cultural environments (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Zimmermann, 1995).

For Generation Z, growing up in a highly connected digital era characterized by cultural diversity has strengthened their global awareness and information sensitivity (Blandi et al., 2022). Through the internet, social media, and AI platforms, they are continuously exposed to ideas and values from different cultures, which may increase psychological openness, inclusiveness, and confidence in cross-cultural interaction (Yamada, 2025). When students have stronger cultural adaptation, they are more open to unfamiliar cultures, adjust more quickly to new environments, and are more likely to develop a stable sense of belonging. This adaptive capacity makes them more willing to invest in a new educational and living system over the long term.

In educational tourism, positive feedback during short-term courses can strengthen students' beliefs in their own ability. In pure tourism, perceived social inclusion and interpersonal acceptance can reduce psychological distance and enhance belonging. In both cases, stronger cultural adaptation helps transform short-term travel into a stable intention to pursue long-term study in China. Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4a: In educational tourism experiences, cultural adaptation has a positive effect on the intention to study abroad.

H4b: In pure tourism experiences, cultural adaptation has a positive effect on the intention to study abroad.

AI literacy refers to individuals' ability to understand, use, and manage intelligent technologies in AI environments to support learning, decision making, and cross-cultural communication (Ng, 2021). In digital education settings, it is not only a technical skill but also a psychological belief reflecting individuals' confidence in using intelligent tools and

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benefiting from them (Long & Magerko, 2020). As digital natives, Generation Z relies heavily on intelligent platforms and AI algorithms for learning, social interaction, and information access. When students use AI technologies to better understand the cultural and educational environment of a study destination, cognitive risk may decrease, certainty about the study environment may increase, and their sense of self-control may strengthen, thereby enhancing their intention to pursue long-term study in China.

Generation Z has grown up in an environment shaped by data and algorithmic recommendation, and is accustomed to using AI tools for content filtering, knowledge acquisition, and emotional management (Chardonnens, 2025). Educational tourism provides direct opportunities to interact with AI technologies and digital learning platforms, such as AI translation tools, intelligent learning management systems, and virtual laboratory software (Neophytou et al., 2025). Students with higher AI literacy can search for academic materials more efficiently and use AI writing and analysis tools to improve coursework. These successful experiences strengthen learning confidence and reduce anxiety about unfamiliar education systems, thereby promoting long-term study intention.

In pure tourism experiences, AI literacy is reflected more in daily life and social settings. Individuals with higher AI literacy are better able to use AI maps, translation tools, payment systems, and recommendation systems to adapt quickly to local life, improve daily efficiency, and enhance perceived security (Talukder et al., 2025). Therefore, although educational tourism emphasizes AI-supported learning in educational settings, while pure tourism highlights AI's practical value in daily life, both strengthen students' intention to pursue long-term study in China by reducing situational uncertainty and enhancing self-efficacy. Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5a: In educational tourism experiences, AI literacy has a positive effect on the intention to study abroad.

H5b: In pure tourism experiences, AI literacy has a positive effect on the intention to study abroad.

A high level of cultural adaptation not only reduces psychological distance caused by destination cultural differences but also strengthens individuals' sense of control over the learning and living environment. This makes them more likely to view cross-cultural challenges as opportunities for self-growth and value enhancement, thereby increasing perceived returns (Shafaei & Razak, 2016; Setti et al., 2022). Individuals with strong cultural adaptation tend to believe that they can effectively manage academic tasks, social relationships, and daily life challenges, which can lead to higher value evaluations and expected returns (Martin et al., 2013). Ng et al. (2017) further noted that culturally adaptive individuals are more likely to gain emotional satisfaction and social support in cross-cultural environments, and thus perceive greater value from their learning experiences. This positive experience strengthens identification with studying abroad, making it both an academic investment and a path to self-realization and identity growth.

Educational tourism improves cultural adaptation mainly through integration into academic culture. For example, classroom group discussions require students to cooperate, express ideas, and solve problems in multicultural settings, improving communication flexibility and adaptability (Williams, 2005; Huang et al., 2025). As cultural adaptation increases, students can better perceive personal growth potential, which raises expected

educational returns and strengthens their intention to pursue long-term study in China. By contrast, pure tourism strengthens cultural adaptation through social and cultural immersion. During short-term visits, students experience cultural differences and social inclusion through festivals or interaction with local residents. When they perceive acceptance, their emotional belonging and social identity are strengthened. As cultural adaptation improves, they can transform inclusion and trust into perceived life-level returns (Chen et al., 2021; Hofhuis et al., 2023), making them more likely to view studying abroad as a high-value investment in personal growth and strengthening their intention to pursue long-term study in China. Based on this discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6a: In educational tourism experiences, cultural adaptation has a positive effect on perceived returns, which in turn influences the intention to study abroad.

H6b: In pure tourism experiences, cultural adaptation has a positive effect on perceived returns, which in turn influences the intention to study abroad.

2.4 Frequency of Social Media Use

In this study, frequency of social media use is treated as a moderating variable between cultural adaptation and intention to pursue long-term study in China. It refers to the frequency, duration, and participation level of social media use within a given period, reflecting individuals' activity in information search, social interaction, and content sharing in digital environments (Ellison et al., 2007). Prior research shows that social media use frequency can moderate the relationship between psychological variables and behavioral intentions. Karayalcin and Yaras (2024) found that higher use frequency strengthens the effect of social media attachment on brand cognition, while Joo et al. (2020) found that it strengthens the effect of subjective norms on visit intention.

In this study, social media use frequency is viewed as an external contextual moderator explaining how cultural adaptation affects long-term study intention under different levels of digital engagement. For high-frequency users, repeated exposure to study abroad communities, educational information, and peer experiences may strengthen identity and belonging, making cultural adaptation more likely to stimulate study motivation. By contrast, low-frequency users may form weaker behavioral intentions due to limited information flow and social connections. High-frequency users usually engage in denser information interaction and emotional resonance, which enhances familiarity with and trust in cross-cultural environments (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022; Hu et al., 2023), thereby amplifying the positive effect of cultural adaptation on long-term study intention in China. Whether in educational tourism or pure tourism experiences, Generation Z tends to transfer offline experiences into online spaces. Based on this discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Frequency of social media use moderates the relationship between cultural adaptation and the intention to study abroad, such that this positive effect is stronger at higher levels of social media use.

Based on prospect theory and self-efficacy Theory, this study examines the effects of educational tourism and pure tourism experiences on Generation Z's intention to pursue long-term study in China, and develops an integrated analytical model accordingly (see Figure 1).

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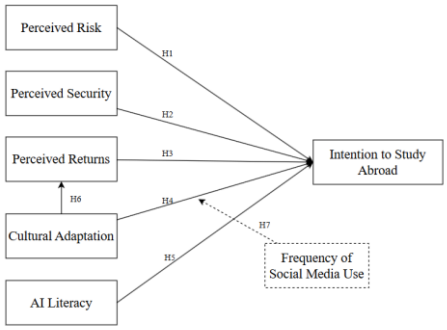

Figure 1: *Conceptual framework*

3. Methods

This study adopts a group-based design, dividing the sample into an educational tourism group and a pure tourism group. A questionnaire survey and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) were used to test the theoretical model and hypotheses. Convenience sampling was employed. Respondents were foreign international students currently studying in China who met three criteria: being Generation Z, having short-term travel experience in China before studying abroad, and subsequently choosing to study in China.

To ensure data quality, procedural controls were applied during data collection, and low-quality responses, including straight-line answers and responses with missing values, were removed. Tests for abnormal values, outliers, Mahalanobis distance, and common method variance (CMV) were then conducted. The results indicated that CMV risk was controlled and that the data met modelling requirements. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, and 216 valid responses were obtained, including 115 from the educational tourism group and 101 from the pure tourism group, with a valid response rate of 72%. Respondents came from Asian countries (65%) and Western countries (35%) and covered different genders, ages, and travel frequencies to ensure sample diversity.

4. Results

As shown in Table 1, most respondents were over 18 years old and mainly pursuing undergraduate or master's degrees. Notably, over three quarters reported monthly living expenses below RMB 6,000.

Demographic	Categories	Number	Percentage%
Region of your nationality (passport)	Asia	154	71.30
	Europe	9	4.17
	Africa	53	24.54
	North America	0	0
	South America	0	0
	Oceania	0	0
Age	24–26	70	32.41
	27–29	53	24.54
	21–23	53	24.54
	18–20	31	14.35
	15–17	9	4.17
Gender	female	110	50.93
	male	104	48.15
	no to say	1	0.46
	other	1	0.46
Current degree program (in progress)	Master' s degree	113	52.31
	Bachelor' s degree	60	27.78
	Associate degree	21	9.72
	High school	12	5.56
	Doctoral degree	10	4.63
Monthly expenses while studying in China (CNY)	1501–3000	65	30.09
	3001–4500	55	25.46
	4501–6000	44	20.37
	6001–7500	22	10.19
	more than 7501	18	8.33
	Less than 1500	12	5.56

Figure 2: *Demographic variables*

To ensure measurement reliability and validity, the study assessed internal consistency, indicator reliability, and convergent validity. As shown in Figure 3 and 4, the measurement model performed well overall, with all indicator loadings above 0.70, indicating strong measurement validity.

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Constructs	Items	Indicator Reliability	Convergent Validity	Internal Consistency Reliability	
		Outer Loadings	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)(rho_c)	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceived Risk	PRi1	0.789	0.715	0.909	0.866
	PRi2	0.896			
	PRi3	0.865			
	PRi4	0.827			
Perceived Security	PS1	0.894	0.781	0.935	0.907
	PS2	0.916			
	PS3	0.885			
	PS4	0.839			
Perceived Returns	PRe1	0.821	0.734	0.917	0.879
	PRe2	0.862			
	PRe3	0.884			
	PRe4	0.860			
Cultural Adaptation	CA1	0.771	0.702	0.904	0.857
	CA2	0.872			
	CA3	0.854			
	CA4	0.849			
AI Literacy	AIL1	0.858	0.721	0.912	0.871
	AIL2	0.831			
	AIL3	0.864			
	AIL4	0.843			
Intention to Study Abroad	ISA1	0.873	0.818	0.931	0.888
	ISA2	0.876			
	ISA3	0.880			
Social Networking Sites	SNS1	0.845	0.723	0.912	0.872
	SNS2	0.875			
	SNS3	0.873			
	SNS4	0.832			

Figure 3: *Measurement Model for the Constructs (Educational Tourism Group)*

Constructs	Items	Indicator Reliability	Convergent Validity	Internal Consistency Reliability	
		Outer Loadings	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)	Composite Reliability (CR)(rho_c)	Cronbach's Alpha
Perceived Risk	PRi1	0.698	0.573	0.842	0.750
	PRi2	0.829			
	PRi3	0.756			
	PRi4	0.738			
Perceived Security	PS1	0.843	0.633	0.873	0.806
	PS2	0.807			
	PS3	0.828			
	PS4	0.695			
Perceived Returns	PRe1	0.763	0.612	0.863	0.789
	PRe2	0.781			
	PRe3	0.791			
	PRe4	0.795			
Cultural Adaptation	CA1	0.752	0.549	0.829	0.725
	CA2	0.802			
	CA3	0.703			
	CA4	0.701			
AI Literacy	AIL1	0.837	0.568	0.838	0.738
	AIL2	0.778			
	AIL3	0.784			
	AIL4	0.591			
Intention to Study Abroad	ISA1	0.805	0.646	0.846	0.726
	ISA2	0.768			
	ISA3	0.837			
Social Networking Sites	SNS1	0.740	0.601	0.858	0.779
	SNS2	0.803			
	SNS3	0.755			
	SNS4	0.802			

Figure 4: *Measurement Model for the Constructs (Pure Tourism Group)*

The variance inflation factor (VIF) values for all predictors were well below 3.3, indicating no significant multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2021). In addition, the Fornell–Larcker matrices for the educational tourism and pure tourism groups, shown in Figure 5 and 6, indicate that the square roots of AVE for all latent constructs exceeded their correlations with other constructs, confirming discriminant validity.

	AIL	CA	ISA	PRe	PRi	PS	SNS
AIL	0.849						
CA	0.870	0.838					
ISA	0.851	0.847	0.904				
PRe	0.849	0.856	0.828	0.857			
PRi	0.591	0.665	0.584	0.649	0.846		
PS	0.854	0.820	0.845	0.865	0.540	0.884	
SNS	0.834	0.840	0.861	0.874	0.640	0.827	0.850

Figure 5: *Fornell and Lareker Criterion (Educational Tourism Group)*

	AIL	CA	ISA	PRe	PRi	PS	SNS
AIL	0.835						
CA	0.770	0.741					
ISA	0.666	0.615	0.804				
PRe	0.753	0.784	0.609	0.783			
PRi	0.713	0.783	0.660	0.713	0.805		
PS	0.730	0.692	0.586	0.778	0.676	0.846	
SNS	0.595	0.583	0.750	0.608	0.606	0.574	0.775

Figure 6: *Fornell and Lareker Criterion (Pure Tourism Group)*

Regarding predictive performance, Figure 7 and 8 show that both models have significant predictive relevance, with Q^2predict values above 0. However, the educational tourism group clearly outperforms the pure tourism group.

	Q^2predict	RMSE	MAE
ISA	0.792	0.462	0.341
PRe	0.725	0.532	0.394

Figure 7: *Predictive Power of the Items (Educational Tourism Group)*

	Q^2predict	RMSE	MAE
ISA	0.602	0.646	0.492
PRe	0.601	0.644	0.509

Figure 8: *Predictive Power of the Items (Pure Tourism Group)*

The final step in the structural model assessment is hypothesis testing, as shown in Figure 9 and 10.

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Path	Path Coefficient (β)	T-value	P-value	f^2	Effect Size Interpretation	Result
H1: PRi -> ISA	-0.009	0.137	0.891	0.000	None	Not Supported
H2: PS -> ISA	0.248	2.052	0.040	0.067	Small	Supported
H3: PRe -> ISA	-0.045	0.438	0.662	0.002	None	Not Supported
H4: CA -> ISA	0.223	2.482	0.013	0.049	Small	Supported
H5: CA -> PRe -> ISA	0.856	33.472	0.000	2.735	Large	Supported
H6: AIL -> ISA	0.217	2.340	0.019	0.045	Small	Supported
H7: SNS x CA -> ISA	0.054	1.217	0.224	0.011	None	Not Supported

Figure 9: *Moderation Analysis Summary (Educational Tourism Group)*

Path	Path Coefficient (β)	T-value	P-value	f^2	Effect Size Interpretation	Result
H1: PRi -> ISA	0.232	2.107	0.035	0.053	Small	Support
H2: PS -> ISA	-0.000	0.004	0.997	0.000	None	Not Support
H3: PRe -> ISA	-0.040	0.376	0.707	0.001	None	Not Support
H4: CA -> ISA	-0.040	0.357	0.721	0.001	None	Not Support
H5: CA -> PRe -> ISA	0.784	23.620	0.000	1.595	Large	Support
H6: AIL -> ISA	0.283	2.723	0.006	0.073	Large	Support
H7: SNS x CA -> ISA	0.167	2.378	0.017	0.054	Small	Support

Figure 10: *Moderation Analysis Summary (Pure Tourism Group)*

5. Discussion

The empirical findings support several key hypotheses concerning Generation Z's intention to study in China and reveal both similarities and differences between the educational tourism and pure tourism groups.

In the educational tourism group, the relationship between PRi and ISA was not supported. Although inconsistent with the original hypothesis, this finding aligns with prior studies suggesting that perceived risk may influence behavioral intention indirectly through trust, satisfaction, and destination image rather than functioning as a direct antecedent (Rather & Bhat, 2023; de Rooij et al., 2022). Lee and Kim (2022) similarly found that pandemic-related risk perceptions affect loyalty to a study destination mainly through cognitive and affective destination image. For Generation Z students, perceived safety risk may no longer directly suppress long-term study intention if they maintain basic trust in the host country's risk management and are satisfied with course quality and educational arrangements. By contrast, in the pure tourism group, the relationship between PRi and ISA was supported. Public security concerns or similar risks encountered during short-term visits may significantly increase perceived destination risk and inhibit long-term study intention (Ryoo & Cheung, 2021).

In the educational tourism group, the relationship between PS and ISA was supported. When students experience well-developed campus safety and course-related security arrangements, they are more likely to perceive the institution as responsible and well-organized, thereby strengthening trust in the education system (Xu et al., 2025). However, this relationship was not supported in the pure tourism group. One explanation is that when a destination is already perceived as generally safe, additional safety cues may not significantly increase intention. In this case, safety functions more as a threshold condition than as a continuous driver of intention (Sirakaya et al., 1997). Once safety reaches an acceptable level, it becomes a background condition rather than a key factor explaining differences in revisit or study intention (Yunus et al., 2024).

In both groups, the direct path from PRe to ISA was not supported. In the educational tourism group, this finding is theoretically reasonable. Gallarza and Gil Saura (2006) found that perceived value influences revisit and recommendation intention mainly through satisfaction rather than directly. Similarly, studies on educational tourism indicate that evaluations of educational returns are often first reflected in satisfaction and experiential recognition before being translated into long-term behavioral choices (Abdul Gani et al., 2023). In China's educational tourism context, Generation Z students may recognize potential returns such as academic development and career opportunities; however, these returns are often delayed, uncertain, and difficult to verify within a short period. Thus, perceived return is more likely to influence long-term study intention indirectly by enhancing satisfaction, identification, and attachment.

The same pattern was found in the pure tourism group. This is consistent with leisure and sightseeing tourism research. Haji et al. (2021) found that perceived value did not directly affect behavioral intention but operated through well-being and satisfaction. Similar findings in homestay and rural leisure contexts show that perceived value influences revisit and recommendation intentions indirectly through satisfaction and place attachment (Li et al., 2022). For Generation Z tourists visiting China mainly for sightseeing, visiting friends or relatives, or urban life experiences, the trip is primarily associated with leisure and social interaction. Educational and career returns remain vague

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potential benefits and are not central to their immediate decision-making. Therefore, their intention to study in China depends more on overall satisfaction than on rational evaluations of potential returns.

In the educational tourism group, the relationship between CA and ISA was supported. When students adapt successfully to different teaching styles, instructor interaction norms, and short-term course requirements, positive feedback may enhance self-efficacy and strengthen their willingness to continue studying in the same environment (Añorga, 2016). In the pure tourism group, this relationship was not supported. This finding is consistent with tourism behavior studies showing that cultural factors may shape destination image or satisfaction without directly influencing behavioral intention. Le Hong and Hsu (2024) found that perceived cultural distance affects cognitive and affective destination image but does not directly influence international student tourists' behavioral intention. Peng et al. (2025) also found that historical-cultural motivation and service value enhance satisfaction, while revisit intention is more strongly driven by satisfaction.

In both groups, the mediating pathway from CA to PRe to ISA was supported. Prior studies suggest that in educational and international student contexts, stronger adaptive capability can enhance academic and life adaptation and increase students' willingness to adopt new learning environments and technologies (Cheng et al., 2024; Rahmat et al., 2022). In tourism contexts, individuals with stronger adaptive and technological capabilities are also more able to use smart tourism technologies and AI tools effectively, which can enhance travel intention and destination loyalty (Huang et al., 2025; Miraz et al., 2025). This indicates that cultural adaptation experiences formed during short-term activities can improve evaluations of educational quality, living convenience, and development opportunities, thereby strengthening intention to continue studying in the same environment (Lu et al., 2024; Malota & Mucsi, 2025; Tsang & Nguyen, 2023). Even in pure tourism contexts, cultural contact and adaptation may first be integrated into perceived value and return evaluations before being translated into revisit, recommendation, or deeper stay intentions (Qin & Zhang, 2025; Valverde-Roda et al., 2022).

In both groups, the relationship between AIL and ISA was supported. This suggests that AI literacy may enhance students' ability to access, evaluate, and use digital information related to study destinations, thereby increasing their confidence in future study decisions. In educational tourism contexts, higher AI literacy may help students better understand academic systems, learning resources, and institutional information. In pure tourism contexts, it may enable visitors to use digital platforms and smart tourism tools more effectively, strengthening destination familiarity and confidence in long-term study decisions. This explanation is consistent with computer self-efficacy theory, which suggests that individuals' beliefs in their ability to use computer-related technologies effectively can influence their technology-use behaviour (Compeau & Higgins, 1995). Meanwhile, AI literacy may also make students more responsive to AI-enabled services, smart tourism tools, and digital consultation systems, thereby leading them to perceive the destination and its educational institutions as technologically advanced and supportive. This interpretation is also consistent with technology readiness theory, which suggests that individuals who are more willing to accept and use new technologies are more likely to respond positively to technology-supported environments (Parasuraman, 2000).

In the educational tourism group, the moderating effect of SNS on the relationship between CA and ISA was not supported. This suggests that social media does not always amplify the positive influence of cultural adaptation on long-term intention in study abroad and cross-cultural contexts. International students often use social media to maintain home-country social and cultural ties rather than to deepen integration into the host society. Omori (2022) found that social media helps international students maintain engagement with home-country social, cultural, and political issues, thereby reinforcing cultural maintenance rather than cultural transition. Compiegne (2021) further showed that online co-national networks actively shape students' social interaction and psychological adjustment abroad, but do not necessarily promote deeper local integration. Thus, social media may strengthen home-culture attachment and therefore does not significantly moderate the relationship between cultural adaptation and long-term study intention in educational tourism contexts.

In the pure tourism group, the moderating effect of SNS on the relationship between CA and ISA was supported. This finding is consistent with tourism behavior research on social media. Based on the theory of planned behavior, studies show that social media use and online review exposure can strengthen the influence of social cues on travel intention. Joo et al. (2020) and Shang et al. (2021) found that higher SNS use strengthens the relationship between subjective norms and rural destination visit intention, while Su et al. (2022) showed that perceived review reliability enhances the effects of trust on intention. Therefore, for pure tourism visitors whose cultural adaptation experiences are often still vague, continued exposure to positive study-related content on social media may amplify existing impressions and help transform short-term travel experiences into clearer intentions to pursue long-term study in China.

6. Contributions

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study reconceptualizes short-term cross-border experiences as differentiated antecedents of long-term study intention in emerging study destinations and brings international Generation Z mobility into tourism and destination management research. Moving beyond prior models that treat destination choice as a relatively static combination of push and pull factors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Ahmad & Shah, 2018), this study distinguishes between educational tourism and pure tourism experiences. It explains how educational quality cues, affective cues, and symbolic cues generated by these experiences shape destination image and attractiveness, which are then transformed into the long-term intention to study in China.

Theoretically, this study proposes an integrated decision-making framework for Generation Z. Based on the macro structure of push and pull theory, it incorporates expectation confirmation logic, ECT-ISC, prospect theory, and self-efficacy to explain the micro-level mechanisms through which short-term experiences are translated into intention. The model views short-term tourism as a high-diagnostic trial stage that verifies destination pull factors, updates prior expectations, and influences long-term study intention. This process is embedded in parallel evaluations of external risks and returns and internal capability beliefs. The findings show that perceived safety, rather than generalized risk or instrumental return, is the key predictor of intention, and its effect

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resembles a threshold mechanism rather than a linear loss-aversion logic. Meanwhile, perceived return influences intention indirectly through psychological and experiential mediators (Haji et al., 2021; Chen, 2023). Overall, the framework conceptualizes international student mobility as a destination choice process with tourism attributes, extends classical decision theories to digital, information-rich, and post-pandemic travel contexts, and clarifies the strategic role of short-term educational tourism in destination management.

This study also repositions cultural adaptation from a background control variable to a central, context-dependent mechanism of self-efficacy construction. The findings indicate that cultural adaptation significantly enhances perceived return and is closely related to intention, suggesting that anticipated sociocultural integration is not only a later outcome but also a cognitive resource and capability capital accumulated through short-term experiences (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Finally, social media use frequency does not significantly moderate the relationship between cultural adaptation and intention, although it has a positive direct effect. This suggests that digital media may operate through information availability, destination imaginability, and sustained relational connection rather than simply strengthening cultural adaptation effects. Overall, this study moves beyond static push-pull models and single-theory explanations, offering a multi-theoretical perspective on how educational tourism and pure tourism jointly shape Generation Z students' long-term commitment to emerging study destinations through psychological mechanisms and digital capabilities.

6.2 Practical Contributions

At the destination level, policymakers and destination management organizations should integrate short-term educational tourism into a coordinated framework of destination branding, talent attraction, and sustainable international education development. Destination attractiveness should be strengthened through stable governance capacity and high-quality public services. Specifically, multilingual information services should be made more accessible and credible, while transportation, safety, consultation, and complaint-response mechanisms should be improved to reduce uncertainty and friction costs for short-term visitors. These measures can enhance short-term experience quality and strengthen potential students' trust in China as a long-term study destination through visible institutional support, thereby promoting a more stable and sustainable inflow of international students.

At the university level, short-term programmes should be treated as preparatory platforms for sustainable cross-border educational development, with systematic experiential design encouraging students to progress to long-term study. Educational tourism programmes should emphasize authentic classroom experiences, academic tasks, instructor feedback, and learning support, allowing participants to directly perceive educational quality and academic fit. Pure tourism programmes should enhance perceptions of living convenience, cultural affinity, and social integration through campus visits, community experiences, public service demonstrations, and cross-cultural exchange activities. Although the two programme types operate through different pathways, both can transform abstract destination attractiveness into concrete and credible experiential evidence, strengthening Generation Z students' confidence in long-term study and life in

China and providing a more stable talent foundation for sustainable cross-border education development.

7. Implications and further research

This study still has several limitations. Firstly, the sample consisted of Generation Z international students with different short-term experiences, and the group structure was relatively concentrated. In particular, the pure tourism group had a relatively small sample size, which may have affected the stability and predictive performance of the group-specific model. Therefore, the findings related to the pure tourism group should be interpreted with caution. Future research should expand the sample size, increase sample heterogeneity, adopt larger and more balanced samples across different destinations, nationalities, and educational backgrounds, and conduct cross-group measurement invariance testing to ensure construct comparability. Secondly, another limitation concerns the non-significant direct effect of perceived risk on long-term study intention among educational tourists. Although this result may indicate that perceived risk is less salient in structured educational tourism contexts, this study did not examine whether perceived risk indirectly influences intention through mediating variables such as trust, satisfaction, perceived institutional support, or perceived security. Future research should incorporate these mediators to further examine the indirect pathways through which perceived risk affects Generation Z students' long-term study intentions. Thirdly, this study has not fully explained the mechanism linking AI literacy and long-term study intention. Although the findings indicate that AI literacy positively influences Generation Z international students' intentions to pursue long-term study in China, the present model did not formally test the mediating mechanisms underlying this relationship. Future research could include perceived uncertainty, information self-efficacy, and perceived institutional modernity as mediating variables to better explain how AI literacy is translated into long-term study intention. Finally, another limitation relates to the measurement of social media use. This study measured social media use in a relatively general way and did not distinguish between platform type, content exposure, or usage motivation. The non-significant moderating effect of social media use suggests that its role in educational tourism may depend on how and why international students use social media. Future research should further examine platform type, content type, and usage motives as conditional factors.

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