Factors of Western Cultural Characteristics Affecting University Students' Lifestyle in China

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Abstract

Background and Aims: In the context of cultural exchange, the clash between Chinese and Western cultures is subtly transforming the lifestyle of Chinese university students. To guide them in establishing a healthy lifestyle and properly understanding the impact of Western culture, this study explores the relationship between their lifestyle and Western values (such as individualism, rationalism, materialism, and competition).

Methodology: To achieve this, a questionnaire survey method was employed, targeting 544 university students from Huanggang Normal University in Hubei Province. The Health-Promoting Lifestyle Profile II (HPLP II) and other tools were used to measure lifestyle and related variables, and data were analyzed with SPSS.

Results: The results show that the overall lifestyle of Chinese university students is at a moderate level. Individualism, rationalism, and attitudes toward Western culture have significant positive impacts on their lifestyle. In contrast, the effect of competition is negative, while the effect of materialism is not significant.

Conclusion: Therefore, Western cultural values have a bidirectional influence on the lifestyle of Chinese university students, with rationalism and individualism being the primary positive factors, while competition may bring negative effects. It is recommended that universities guide students to adopt a dialectical view of Western culture to promote the formation of a healthy lifestyle.

Keywords: University Students' Lifestyle; Western Cultural Characteristics; Attitudes Toward Western Culture

Introduction

Lifestyle is a unified system of an individual's behaviors and beliefs (Adler, 1993), and it is deeply influenced by cultural background and life experiences (Schutz et al., 1979). It is reflected in various aspects, including interpersonal relationships, health responsibility, spiritual growth and self-actualization, stress management, nutrition, and exercise (Hoseini et al., 2013). Currently,

Chinese university students are facing the problem of an unhealthy lifestyle. Surveys show that 41% of students fail to meet the physical exercise standards, and 69.6% fail to meet the standards for fruit and vegetable intake (Liang et al., 2019). Hoseini et al. (2013) pointed out that they may also lack interpersonal care, motivation for spiritual growth, and stress management. Along with the unhealthy lifestyle, the incidence of anxiety and depression among Chinese university students remains high (Gao et al., 2021), and some students even face excessive stress, body image anxiety, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Bian et al., 2012). This indicates that the improvement of a healthy lifestyle among Chinese university students is an issue that cannot be ignored.

Meanwhile, the integration and collision of Eastern and Western cultures and their impact on the lifestyle changes of university students is a trend (Meijer, 2023; Hagler, 2014; Naruetharadhol et al., 2015). Helping Chinese university students establish a healthy lifestyle in the cultural trend is an important educational issue concerning China's future. Therefore, this study focuses on the impact of Western culture on the lifestyle of Chinese university students and proposes the research objectives based on this (see below).

Objectives

1. To investigate the relationships between Western cultural characteristics, attitudes toward Western culture, and university students' lifestyle in China.

2. To investigate the effects of Western cultural characteristics and attitudes toward Western culture on university students' lifestyle in China.

Literature Review

To study the impact of Western culture on the lifestyle of Chinese university students, it is necessary to understand the principles of cultural dissemination. According to Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding model, Western countries are the encoders of cultural dissemination, while Chinese university students are the decoders. Their attitudes toward Western culture may range from complete acceptance to partial acceptance or even total rejection. Therefore, this study examines two aspects separately: the dissemination of Western culture and university students' attitudes toward it, both of which may influence their lifestyle.

1. The relationship between Western cultural characteristics (individualism, materialism, rationalism, competition) and lifestyle

First, analyze from the encoding perspective. The impact of Western cultural characteristics (including individualism, materialism, competition, and rationalism) on non-English-speaking countries has been widely discussed (Meijer, 2023; Hagler, 2014; Naruetharadhol et al., 2015), with

both positive and negative effects. Previous studies have indeed mentioned the dual relationship between individualism, materialism, competition, and rationalism and the lifestyle of Chinese university students.

1) The impact of individualism: Previous research has shown that individualism helps Chinese university students discover their talents and enhance their independent thinking abilities (Xu, 2004), and assists university students in planning their career development and adapting to society (Xu-dong, 2020). However, an overemphasis on individualism can also lead to a lack of organizational responsibility among university students (Hansen, 2013), which in turn can affect their career development.

2) The impact of materialism: Previous research has shown that while materialism can motivate students to work and study hard, students with a higher tendency towards materialism are more likely to engage in credit consumption, thereby facing debt risks and neglecting their spiritual lives (Zhu et al., 2020). Moreover, excessive materialism can cause university students to neglect social interactions, leading to social narrow-mindedness (Chan & Prendergast, 2008).

3) The impact of rationalism: Previous research has shown that Chinese university students are increasingly using rational analysis and logical reasoning to view life and public policy issues, rather than relying on emotions or traditional viewpoints (Zhang & Chen, 2022). However, Dai (2019) pointed out that inappropriate instrumental rationality can lead students to neglect the understanding and application of knowledge, focusing only on evaluation outcomes (academic grades), thereby reducing attention to long-term personal development.

4) The impact of competition: Research on competition has shown that competition can be used as an educational tool to enhance university students' ability to apply knowledge and solve problems, promote teamwork, and improve stress resistance. However, excessive competition can reduce Chinese university students' use and focus on learning resources, thereby lowering academic performance (Chen et al., 2018), and some students may even neglect their physical and mental health to stand out (Zhang & Li, 2019).

2. Attitudes toward Western culture

Secondly, as decoders and recipients of culture, Chinese university students' attitudes toward Western culture (such as acceptance, partial acceptance, or resistance) can influence their lifestyle. On the one hand, some students follow Western consumerism, endorse Western cultural trends, and show an open and inclusive mindset (Zhang, 2023). On the other hand, some students emphasize local culture, and those with critical attitudes distance themselves from Western individualism and gender liberal concepts, preferring to adhere to traditional lifestyles (Lin et al., 2016). Both accepting and critical attitudes toward Western culture may have complex dual effects that require further exploration (Zhang, 2023).

3. Review of Previous Studies and Research Gaps

Previous research has described the impact of Western culture on the lifestyle of Chinese university students, but it remains fragmented and has the following limitations: First, there is still debate over whether the influence of Western culture is more positive or negative. Second, few studies have systematically explored how representative elements of Western culture, such as individualism and materialism, influence the lifestyle of Chinese university students as an integrated whole, nor have they often considered the perspective of cultural recipients. Third, research on the "lifestyle" of Chinese university students is not systematic enough, often focusing on a single dimension. This paper conducts a comprehensive discussion based on the concept of lifestyle by Hoseini et al. (2013). Fourth, there is a lack of quantitative empirical analysis on how Western culture and attitudes toward it affect the lifestyle of Chinese university students. Filling these gaps is the goal of this paper.

Conceptual Framework

This study takes the concept of lifestyle by Hoseini et al. (2013) as the dependent variable, and based on Hall's (1980) model and prior research, sets individualism, rationalism, materialism, competition, and attitudes toward Western culture as the independent variables, and then proposes the research hypotheses and theoretical model:

H1: Individualism can significantly affect university students' lifestyle in China.

H2: Materialism can significantly affect university students' lifestyle in China.

H3: Rationalism can significantly affect university students' lifestyle in China.

H4: Competition can significantly affect university students' lifestyle in China.

H5: Attitudes toward Western culture can significantly affect university students' lifestyle in China.
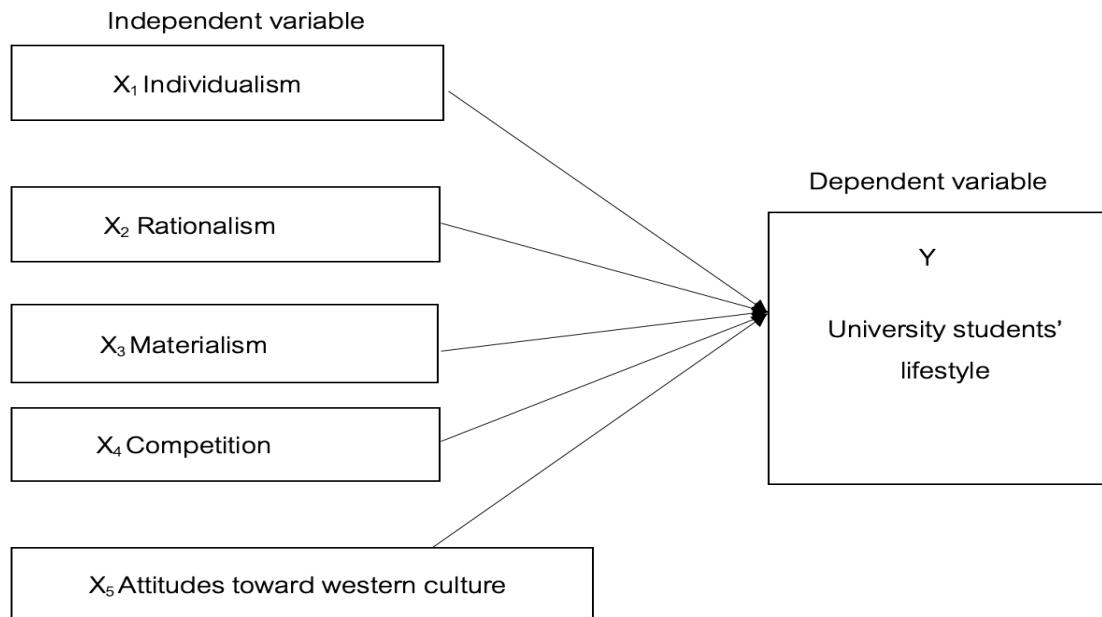
Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Methodology

The survey was conducted across 19 different universities at Huanggang Normal University in Huanggang, Hubei Province. The university has a total of 18,662 undergraduate students, among whom 544 students were selected as the research sample. These 544 students are majoring in different fields. A total of 544 paper questionnaires were distributed in this study, and all were successfully collected.

This study utilized various scales to assess university students' lifestyle, Western culture (individualism, materialism, rationalism, competition), and attitudes toward Western culture, with specific scales detailed in the table below. To ensure the reliability and validity of the scales, all scales underwent content validity analysis through expert scoring and IOC assessment in this study. Following adjustments (item deletion), a pilot survey was conducted with a sample of 50 students to perform reliability analysis using the alpha coefficient (specific details are shown in the table below).

Table 1 Research Instruments

Scale Name	N of Items (Revised)	Alpha Coefficient	Reference
Health-Promoting Lifestyle Profile II (HPLP II)	46(34)	0.96	(Walker, 1996)

Scale Name	N of Items (Revised)	Alpha Coefficient	Reference
Self-Construal Scale (SCS)	11(10)	0.91	-
Material Values Scale (MVS)	12(7)	0.92	(Richins & Dawson, 1992; Liao & Wang, 2017)
Rational-Experiential Inventory (REI)	13(8)	0.9	(Pacini & Epstein, 1999)
Competitive Attitude Scale (CAS)	11	0.89	(Menesini et al., 2018)
Scale for measuring attitudes toward Western culture	13(6)	0.87	(Hagler, 2014)

The data were analyzed using SPSS, which included calculating means and standard deviations, as well as conducting a correlation analysis. Additionally, multiple regression analysis was employed to examine the impact of individualism, materialism, rationalism, competitiveness, and attitudes toward Western culture on the lifestyle of Chinese university students.

Results

Using SPSS 26.0 for statistical analysis, Individualism (X_1) has the highest mean value (3.55), indicating that the sample group scored relatively high in terms of individualism. Rationalism (X_2) has a mean value of 3.26, which is slightly above average, suggesting that university students perform well in rational thinking. However, the mean values of Materialism (X_3) and Attitudes Toward Western Culture (X_5) are relatively low (2.57 and 2.42, respectively), indicating that the sample group is more conservative in these two aspects. Competition (X_4) has a mean value of 3.09, which is at a medium level, suggesting that university students have a certain degree of both enthusiasm and balance in their competitive consciousness. Lifestyle (Y) has a mean value of 2.49, which is at a medium level, indicating that university students still have room for further optimization in their overall lifestyle performance (including health responsibility, stress management, nutrition, and exercise).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of the Variables (n=544)

The Factors Affecting Lifestyle	M	S.D.	Levels
Individualism (X_1)	3.55	0.56	High
Rationalism (X_2)	3.26	0.58	Moderate
Materialism (X_3)	2.57	0.79	Low
Competition (X_4)	3.09	0.56	Moderate
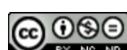
The Factors Affecting Lifestyle	M	S.D.	Levels
Attitudes Toward Western Culture (X_5)	2.42	0.77	Low
Lifestyle (Y)	2.49	0.48	Moderate

The results of the correlation analysis show that: (1) The correlation coefficient between lifestyle and individualism is 0.52; (2) The correlation coefficient between lifestyle and rationalism is 0.61; (3) The correlation coefficient between lifestyle and materialism is 0.10; (4) The correlation coefficient between lifestyle and competitiveness is 0.25; (5) The correlation coefficient between lifestyle and attitudes toward Western culture is 0.21. Among these, rationalism and individualism have the highest correlation with lifestyle, followed by competitiveness and individualism, and then materialism. The above correlations are significant at the 0.05 level. This indicates that the lifestyle of Chinese university students is associated with Western culture (individualism, rationalism, materialism, competition) and attitudes toward Western culture.

Table 3 correlation analysis (n=544)

Variables	X_1	X_2	X_3	X_4	X_5	Y
Individualism (X_1)	1.00					
Rationalism (X_2)	0.68[*]	1.00				
Materialism (X_3)	0.10[*]	0.18[*]	1.00			
Competition (X_4)	0.41[*]	0.47[*]	0.51[*]	1.00		
Attitudes Toward Western Culture (X_5)	0.13[*]	0.23[*]	0.56[*]	0.39[*]	1.00	
Lifestyle (Y)	0.52[*]	0.61[*]	0.10[*]	0.25[*]	0.21[*]	1.00

[*]The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level.

This study used SPSS 26.0 to conduct a regression analysis on the factors influencing the lifestyle of Chinese university students in order to explore their causal mechanisms. Before the analysis, the relationships between the factors and lifestyle were verified using Tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). The results showed that the Tolerance values for all factors were above the threshold of 0.2, and the VIF values were all below 5, indicating that there was no multicollinearity problem among the independent variables (see table below).

Table 4 Collinearity Diagnostics in Multiple Regression (n=544)

The Factors Affecting Lifestyle	Tolerance	VIF
Individualism (X_1)	0.52	1.91
Rationalism (X_2)	0.49	2.02
Materialism (X_3)	0.57	1.74
Competition (X_4)	0.57	1.76
Attitudes Toward Western Culture (X_5)	0.66	1.51

In regression analysis, B represents the regression coefficient, and β represents the standardized regression coefficient. The model has an R² value of 0.41, indicating that it explains 41% of the variance. The adjusted R² is 0.40, the F-statistic is 74.19, and the p-value is 0.00, confirming that the model is statistically significant. Rationalism (X2) and individualism (X1) are positive predictors of lifestyle, with rationalism (X2) having a more significant impact. The B value for X2 is 0.40, and the β value is 0.48; the B value for X1 is 0.19, and the β value is 0.22. Attitude towards Western culture (X5) also has a positive influence, with a B value of 0.08 and a β value of 0.13. However, competition (X4) has a negative impact, with a B value of -0.09 and a β value of -0.11. Materialism (X3) has no significant effect, with a B value of -0.01, a β value of -0.02, and a p-value of 0.60.

These results suggest that Chinese university students' lifestyles are influenced by various Western cultural values, with Rationalism and Individualism having a prominent positive influence, while Competition may have a negative impact. Attitudes Toward Western Culture are also positively related to lifestyle, reflecting the impact of cultural openness on students' lifestyles. Materialism does not show a significant effect in this model, suggesting that, when other factors are considered, materialism has a limited direct effect on lifestyle.

Therefore, the researcher builds an equation to predict affecting lifestyle of Chinese university students.

$$Y = 0.64 \text{ (Constant)} + 0.19\, X_1 + 0.40\, X_2 - 0.01\, X_3 - 0.09 X_4 + 0.08 X_5$$
$$ZY = 0.22\, X_1 + 0.48\, X_2 - 0.02 X_3 - 0.11 X_4 + 0.13\, X_5$$

Table 5 Multiple Regression Analysis of the factors affecting lifestyle of Chinese university students (n=544)

The Factors Affecting Lifestyle	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	0.64	0.12	-	5.42	.00
Individualism (X_1)	0.19	0.04	0.22	4.84	.00
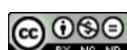
The Factors Affecting Lifestyle	B	SE	β	t	p
Rationalism (X_2)	0.40	0.04	0.48	10.27	.00
Materialism (X_3)	-0.01	0.03	-0.02	-0.53	.60
Competition (X_4)	-0.09	0.04	-0.11	-2.46	.01
Attitudes Toward Western Culture (X_5)	0.08	0.03	0.13	3.11	.00

Discussion

1. Lifestyle

Chinese university students scored an average of 2.49 on lifestyle, indicating a moderate level of engagement in healthy behaviors such as physical activity, nutrition, stress management, and interpersonal relationships (Adinma et al., 2017; Cascia et al., 2019). While students participate in some healthy behaviors, there is room for improvement. For instance, students maintain adequate social connections but have potential for developing stronger and more supportive relationships (Golu, 1974; Profis et al., 2016). In terms of health responsibility, students show some initiative but do not consistently prioritize healthy activities such as regular exercise or healthy eating (Profis et al., 2016; Hoseini et al., 2013). Additionally, students have made some progress in spiritual growth and self-actualization, but this area is not a core focus (Gallagher & Newton, 2009). Overall, students exhibit a certain level of health consciousness in their lifestyle, but have the potential for further enhancement.

2. Western cultural characteristics (Individualism, Rationalism, Materialism, and Competition):

1) Individualism (X_1): With an average score of 3.55 and a standard deviation of 0.56, Chinese university students place high importance on self-expression and personal development, striving for personal achievement and freedom (Yang, 2016). This trend reflects the influence of globalization and Western culture, making the younger generation more focused on self-worth and personal success. However, individualism also brings challenges such as mental health issues and reduced social support (Zhang & Han, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to find a balance between fostering individualism and promoting collective consciousness and social responsibility.

2) Rationalism (X_2): Scoring an average of 3.26 with a standard deviation of 0.58, Chinese university students exhibit a moderate level of rationalism (Hanson, 2017; Barker et al., 2021). Rationalism, which involves relying on logic, reason, and empirical evidence for decision-making, is an influential factor in shaping student behavior, but its impact varies across the sample. While many students tend to use rational thinking in various aspects of life, the depth of application of these principles differs.

3) Materialism (X_3): With an average score of 2.57 and a standard deviation of 0.79, university students show a relatively low level of materialism (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Most students value non-material aspects such as personal growth and social relationships more, although a portion of students exhibit higher materialistic tendencies. The low level of materialism may reflect an awareness of the negative psychological impacts of material pursuit (Wang et al., 2016).

4) Competition (X_4): Scoring an average of 3.09 with a standard deviation of 0.56, competition pressure is at a moderate level (Hayward & Kemmelmeier, 2007). While competition is a significant factor in students' academic and social lives, it is not overwhelming or extreme. A moderate level of competition may reflect a state of coexistence between motivation and challenge, where students recognize the importance of success without being overwhelmed by competitive pressures.

3. Attitudes Toward Western Culture (X_5)

With a score of 2.42 and a standard deviation of 0.77, Chinese university students generally exhibit a low level of positive attitude toward Western culture (Lin et al., 2016). This reflects a tendency among students to resist or be indifferent to the influence of Western values, practices, and norms. Research indicates that although globalization has exposed many Chinese students to elements of Western culture, their acceptance varies. Some students are critical of Western culture, especially individualism, gender equality, and liberal social views, preferring to prioritize traditional Chinese values (Tsai & Zhou, 2015). Additionally, some students selectively absorb elements of Western culture that resonate with them while retaining traditional practices (Lolokote et al., 2017). Overall, Chinese university students adopt a selectively open attitude toward Western influence, but their cultural attachment to traditional values and practices remains dominant (Lee & Loke, 2005).

The correlation and regression analyses reflect the relationships between individualism, rationalism, materialism, competition, attitudes towards Western culture, and lifestyle.

First, individualism can promote the lifestyle of Chinese university students. Data analysis shows that individualism (r=0.52, p<0.05) is highly correlated with lifestyle and has a significant impact on it (β=0.19, p<0.05), confirming Hypothesis H1. Against the backdrop of globalization, Western individualism has influenced Chinese university students through media such as advertisements and films (Kitayama et al., 2009; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008). This has prompted them to express more personal needs in consumption, social interactions, and personal interests, break free from collectivist constraints, and develop independent thinking and self-actualization.

Second, materialism is correlated with the lifestyle of Chinese university students (r = 0.10, p < 0.05), but its impact on lifestyle is not significant (β = -0.01, p > 0.05), confirming Hypothesis
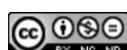
H2. University students' materialism is related to their focus on brands and fashion, but the correlation is weak (Kitayama et al., 2009). In contrast, individualism and free choice have a greater impact on lifestyle. University students are more concerned with self-actualization, academic achievement, and spiritual fulfillment rather than material enjoyment.

Third, rationalism can promote the lifestyle of Chinese university students. Data analysis shows that rationalism (r=0.61) is highly correlated with lifestyle and has a significant impact on it (β=0.40, p<0.05), confirming Hypothesis H3. Rationalism emphasizes the importance of reason and logic (Mutiani et al., 2022), prompting university students to exhibit more rational behavior in consumption, career choices, and future planning, and to focus on spiritual growth and self-actualization (Hanson, 2017).

Fourth, competition has a dual effect on the lifestyle of Chinese university students. Correlation analysis shows that competition is positively correlated with lifestyle (r=0.10, p<0.05), but regression analysis indicates that it hurts lifestyle (β=-0.09, p<0.05). Moderate competition helps university students with self-actualization and spiritual growth (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008), while excessive competition can lead to anxiety and stress (Hayward & Kemmelmeier, 2007; Smither & Houston, 1992), confirming Hypothesis H4.

Fifth, attitudes toward Western culture are positively correlated with lifestyle (r = 0.21, p < 0.05) and influence the improvement of the lifestyle of Chinese university students (β = 0.08, p < 0.05). Chinese university students' attitudes can be divided into openness, resistance, and dialecticism, each affecting lifestyle changes. Open-minded students tend to choose independent living, freelance careers, or pursue self-actualization (Kitayama et al., 2009). Those who are resistant adhere to traditional values and collectivism, leading to a more conservative and low-consumption lifestyle (Mukerji, 1983; Rassuli & Hollander, 1986). Dialectical students recognize the innovation and freedom in Western culture while being aware of potential negative impacts such as materialism and cultural conflicts (Dandy & Pe-Pua, 2010). These results show that attitudes toward Western culture have a positive impact on the formation of lifestyle, confirming Hypothesis H5.

This study conducted a questionnaire survey among university students at a university in Huanggang, Hubei Province, and found through descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis that: The health level of Chinese university students' lifestyles is slightly above average and has room for improvement. They emphasize individualism and rationalism, pay attention to competition, but have a relatively low focus on materialism. They maintain a conservative yet open attitude towards Western culture, with traditional values still being dominant. Lifestyle is highly correlated with individualism and rationalism, moderately correlated with attitudes towards Western culture and competition, and has a low correlation with

materialism. Individualism, rationalism, and attitudes towards Western culture can promote the improvement of lifestyle, while competition may weaken this improvement, and materialism has a limited impact.

Based on these findings, this study constructed a model, which is based on the concept of lifestyle proposed by Hoseini et al. (2013) and references Hall's (1980) Encoding/Decoding model. The model incorporates Western cultural factors such as individualism, rationalism, materialism, competition, and attitudes towards Western culture to explain the influence of Western culture on the lifestyle of Chinese university students and to provide theoretical support and empirical evidence for fostering a healthy lifestyle. However, this study has limitations: the sample is singular, limited to university students from a specific region and institution, and the generalizability of the conclusions needs further validation. The research method is also singular, relying solely on questionnaire surveys, and the rigor of the study needs to be enhanced.

Recommendation

To promote the improvement and healthy development of Chinese university students' lifestyles, this study proposes the following recommendations.

1) Suggestions for Students: Engage in group activities to balance individualism and collectivism, enhancing social responsibility. Develop rational thinking through debate or logic courses. Set realistic goals in competitions to avoid stress and foster healthy competition. Focus on personal growth and spiritual pursuits like reading or community involvement. Adopt a balanced view of Western culture, engage in cross-cultural exchanges, and respect local culture.

2) Suggestions for University Administrators: Strengthen values education to balance individualism and collectivism. Offer critical thinking courses to develop rational thinking. Organize competitions and provide mental health support to create a healthy competitive environment. Promote healthy consumption through campus media, reduce materialism, and conduct cross-cultural education. Provide sports and mental health facilities to encourage good habits.

3) Suggestions for Researchers: Expand sample diversity and use diverse methods (e.g., qualitative analysis or focus groups) to advance research in this area.

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