

# Mechanism Underlying the Influence of International Travel on Adolescents' Learning Emotion and Attitudes: A Social Learning Theory Perspective

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## Abstract

Against the backdrop of increasing cross-cultural mobility opportunities, overseas study experiences among adolescents have become increasingly common. However, the mechanisms by which such experiences shape their learning emotions and attitudes remain poorly understood. This study, grounded in social learning theory, surveyed 30 participants with overseas study tour experience. Employing a qualitative research methodology combining face-to-face interviews, online one-on-one interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and proxy-completed questionnaires, it systematically collected participants' personal information, study tour characteristics, and interview implementation details. The research focused on investigating the long-term impact of study tours on learning emotions and attitudes, the social learning processes (observation, imitation, internalization) in cross-cultural study tours, and the role of self-efficacy and self-differentiation development in shaping learning emotions and attitudes. Results indicate that participants' study tour commencement ages ranged from 8 to 21 years old, with experiences spanning multiple countries and regions including the United States, Australia, and South Korea. This study aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which studying abroad influences adolescents' learning emotions and attitudes. It provides empirical support for applying social learning theory to adolescent cross-cultural development while offering practical guidance for parents and educators seeking to enhance youth learning through global mobility.

## Keywords

International Travel, Adolescents, Learning Emotions, Learning Attitudes, Social Learning Theory

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## 1. Introduction

As globalization and intercultural exchange accelerate, significantly enhanced opportunities for overseas travel and cross-cultural immersion are being made available to adolescents during their formative years (Bugtong, 2025; Heppner & Wang, 2014; Nelson & Luetz, 2021). Numerous studies have indicated that cross-cultural experiences have a profound impact on adolescents' knowledge construction, emotional experiences, and learning attitudes; scholars have pointed out that although short-term cross-cultural immersion is limited in duration, it can lead to lasting cognitive and attitudinal changes. Nada and Araújo (2017) argue that the experience of residing in a foreign nation during a sojourn provides extensive opportunities for students' multicultural learning. In addition, Dutton (2019) studied short-term immersion outcomes over three to eighteen months after return—discovering continued critical reflection leading to meaningful changes, in which it demonstrates how the profound, time-bound experiences impact cross-cultural experiences on adolescents. In addition, engaging in immersions has been linked to the development of intercultural competence (Kavanaugh, 2025; Nelson & Luetz, 2021; Onosu, 2021), emotional intelligence (Nelson & Luetz, 2021; Rokos, 2024), cultural intelligence (Ott & Michailova, 2018; Wood & St. Peters, 2014), and self-awareness (Sobkowiak, 2019; Wang & Wanger, 2025). Consequently, it is very significant to appreciate the mechanism underlying the influence of international travel on adolescents' learning emotions and attitudes.

Building on this foundation, extant research demonstrates that both short-term and long-term international travel contribute meaningfully to adolescents' intercultural development and personal growth. Barker (2016) reveals that intercultural awareness is developed through comparing and critically assessing home- and host-culture constructs, while intercultural sensitivity is shaped through a home-culture lens and then renegotiated during interactions with host-culture individuals. Short-term immersion programs—exemplified by Bugtong's (2025) six-day cultural exchange in Indonesia—demonstrate that even brief exposure can strengthen intercultural competence by increasing recognition of cultural diversity and encouraging the reconsideration of cultural prejudices. Similar findings appear in Angwenyi's (2014) study of U.S. high school students, where travel of four weeks or less enhanced global awareness, cultural sensitivity, and perceived readiness for college—suggesting that structured reflection can make short-term experiences educationally impactful. Longer time scales reveal cumulative benefits: Clark (2023) found that repeated international travel during childhood is associated with more advanced communication abilities and deeper intercultural understanding in adulthood. Research involving specific youth populations extends these insights; focusing on rural adolescents, Burnette (2023) showed that international travel supports affective development and cultural competence through experiential and transformative learning, while simultaneously identifying financial and institutional barriers that restrict access.

In a different yet related line of inquiry, family travel studies highlight unique

learning mechanisms. Children's family vacations are experienced as meaningful opportunities for enjoyable, novelty, and strengthened social bonds, with such perceptions shaped by activities and interactions with parents, siblings, and extended family members. These trips balance new experiences with familiar routines, ultimately reinforcing family relationships and contributing positively to children's overall well-being (Hilbrecht et al., 2008). Wu et al. (2021) conceptualized family vacations as informal learning environments in which children acquire knowledge, skills, and wisdom through everyday interactions with family members. Tang et al. (2024), drawing on Social Learning Theory, demonstrated that travel away from home triggers internalization-based learning, strengthening adolescents' self-efficacy, self-differentiation, and behavioral maturity. At a structural level, van't Klooster (2014) showed that greater cultural distance generally yields stronger gains in cross-cultural and personal competencies, though results vary across individuals.

Across these strands, several patterns emerge. First, it is travel that consistently enhances adolescents' intercultural competence, affective development, and self-efficacy, as demonstrated in both short-term immersion programs (Bugtong, 2025; Angwenyi, 2014) and repeated childhood travel experiences (Clark, 2023). Second, institutional and family travel contexts appear to offer distinct learning pathways: school- or program-based travel tends to rely on structured activities and educator facilitation (Bugtong, 2025; Burnette, 2023), whereas family travel fosters learning through informal, everyday interactions and intra-family observation (Wu et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2024). Third, the literature varies in theoretical depth, with some studies focusing on developmental outcomes such as cultural sensitivity and communication competence (Clark, 2023; Angwenyi, 2014), whereas others clarify the underlying mechanisms—for instance, the internalization-based learning process elicited by away-from-home travel (Tang et al., 2024) or the role of cultural distance in shaping competence development (van't Klooster, 2014).

A notable research gap is revealed by these studies—one that concerns longer-term, cross-cultural family travel and its specific influence on adolescents' learning emotions and learning attitudes, particularly in non-Western cultural contexts where travel experiences and family structures may diverge (Wu et al., 2021). This gap underscores the need for further empirical inquiry. To fill this gap, guided by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977; Tang et al., 2024), the way long-term international travel shapes adolescents' learning emotions and learning attitudes will be examined in the present study, with a focus on the observational, internalization, and self-regulatory processes that unfold across extended cross-cultural exposure.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Social Learning Theory and Adolescents' Learning

Previous research has shown that adolescents' learning is not acquired solely through direct experience, but also through observation, imitation, and internali-

zation—which is a core principle of Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977; O’Leary & Matusitz, 2025). Bandura’s social learning theory posits that individuals learn by observing, imitating, and internalizing the behaviors of others, a process that unfolds through the interaction of personal factors, environmental influences, and behavior. The core concept of this theory is self-efficacy, which is an individual’s belief in their own ability to succeed; this belief develops gradually through mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and the regulation of emotional states (Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022). Clark (2023) shows that teenagers who participate in cross-cultural travel at a younger age often develop stronger communication skills and exhibit greater confidence when dealing with unfamiliar environments, demonstrating how observational learning in multicultural contexts shapes their adaptive behaviors. Burnette’s (2023) study of rural adolescents extends this finding by revealing that international travel encourages curiosity and openness toward new cultures, but also that travel experiences are filtered through individual, social, and environmental factors—aligning with Bandura’s triadic reciprocal model.

Comparing these studies reveals an important distinction: institution-organized travel (e.g., school-sponsored trips) often embeds structured learning activities that intentionally promote reflection (Clark, 2023), whereas family or informal travel relies more on naturalistic, spontaneous observational learning from parents and peers (Wu et al., 2021). These differences indicate that the learning mechanisms activated during travel vary significantly across different contexts. Based on these findings, this study introduces social learning theory to examine how adolescents develop their learning emotions and attitudes during long-term international travel—an area that still requires further exploration in existing research.

## **2.2. Self-Differentiation, Self-Efficacy, and Adolescents’ Learning**

Self-differentiation, defined by Bowen (1978) as the ability to maintain both emotional and cognitive independence within family systems, is a key component of adolescent development. Wang et al. (2024) find that achieving self-differentiation is a crucial milestone in adolescent development; during this stage, adolescents further expand and consolidate their level of self-differentiation by navigating the interactions and tensions within family relationships. Family travel, in turn, provides a supportive context for this process, allowing adolescents to explore their connections with themselves, family members, and their cultural environment. Travel experiences can accelerate this process, as unfamiliar environments require adolescents to balance autonomy with emotional connection, prompting more independent judgment and autonomous decision-making. Tang et al. (2024) show that such “away-from-home” contexts enhance both self-efficacy and self-differentiation through internalization-based learning, particularly when adolescents must navigate novel challenges. This mechanism-focused understanding differs from Wu et al. (2021), who emphasize learning outcomes—knowledge,

skills, and wisdom—rather than the psychological processes shaped by travel. As adolescents successfully manage new tasks during travel, their self-efficacy strengthens, reinforcing confidence and a willingness to act independently (Tang et al., 2024).

While Wu et al. (2021) focus on *what* adolescents learn during travel, Tang et al. (2024) explain *how* they learn through observational and affective processes. This study further expands upon the two research paths mentioned above, exploring how self-efficacy and self-differentiation jointly shape adolescents' learning emotions and attitudes during long-term cross-cultural contact—a relationship that has not been explicitly examined in existing research.

### 2.3. Influence of Travel on Adolescents' Learning

Existing empirical studies consistently show that travel experiences can promote the development of intercultural competence, emotional development, and cognitive flexibility in adolescents. Bugtong (2025) and Angwenyi (2014) both find that even short-term immersion can improve cultural sensitivity and global awareness, though the effects may depend on guided reflection. Longer-term or repeated travel, however, appears to yield more cumulative developmental benefits. Clark (2023) shows that ongoing intercultural exposure fosters sophisticated communication abilities in adulthood, while Burnette (2023) documents affective and cultural development among rural adolescents despite socioeconomic barriers.

Family travel studies provide complementary insights. Wu et al. (2021) highlight family members as informal educators during travel, while Tang et al. (2024) identify deeper psychological mechanisms such as stress-triggered internalization processes that foster behavioral adaptation. At a structural level, van't Klooster (2014) demonstrates that heightened cultural distance can amplify competence development, though benefits vary among learners.

Previous research has shown that international travel can enhance adolescents' intercultural competence, emotional development, and cognitive flexibility; however, relevant studies still have shortcomings in several key aspects. First, much of the evidence stems from short-term immersion programs (e.g., Bugtong, 2025; Angwenyi, 2014), while the long-term effects of extended family-based cross-cultural travel remain insufficiently explored. Second, the literature indicates that institutional travel relies on structured pedagogical strategies, whereas family travel operates through informal modeling and naturalistic interaction (Wu et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2024), yet little is known about how these distinctive learning conditions shape adolescents' learning emotions and learning attitudes over time. Third, although scholars increasingly highlight mechanisms such as internalization, self-efficacy, and self-differentiation (Bowen, 1978; Tang et al., 2024), these processes have not been systematically linked to adolescents' emotional and attitudinal learning outcomes in long-term travel contexts. Filling these research gaps is crucial for understanding how the core processes of social learning theory—

observation, imitation, and self-regulation—function in real-world, firsthand cross-cultural experiences.

Therefore, to advance theory and enrich empirical understanding, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do adolescents describe the long-term influence of international family travel on their learning emotions and learning attitudes?

RQ2: What social learning processes—including observation, modeling, and internalization—shape adolescents' emotional and attitudinal learning during extended cross-cultural travel?

RQ3: How do developments in self-efficacy and self-differentiation during long-term international travel influence adolescents' learning emotions and learning attitudes?

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in Social Learning Theory (SLT) (Bandura, 1977). Emphasizing observational learning and the role of social context, the study was exploratory and inductive in nature, aiming to examine how adolescents interpreted, constructed, and internalized learning-related emotions and attitudes during international study tours. Data were primarily collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, supplemented by open-ended questionnaires and field notes.

#### **3.2. Participants and Sampling**

The study involved a total of 30 participants who had previously participated in overseas study tours. All participants had joined international study tours led by the researcher over the past decade, which enabled sustained access to participants and ensured contextual familiarity with their learning environments. The study tours spanned multiple countries and regions across Asia, Europe, Oceania, and the Americas, including South Korea, the United States, Australia, Japan, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, and France. The itineraries varied in duration, educational focus, and cultural exposure, and several participants had taken part in more than one tour.

Participants' ages during the study tours ranged from 8 to 21 years old, while their ages at the time of data collection ranged from 9 to 22 years old (See **Table 1**). This wide age range allowed for the inclusion of diverse developmental stages and reflective capacities. The sample was purposefully constructed to balance diversity and representativeness, encompassing adolescents with different travel frequencies, destinations, and learning experiences.

#### **3.3. Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection followed a closed-loop process of *appointment-interview-organization*. One to two days prior to each interview, the research objectives, duration,

format, and recording procedures were communicated to participants and parents via WeChat. For younger children, icebreaker questions were used at the beginning of interviews to establish rapport. Participants aged 8 - 12 were prioritized for in-person interviews conducted in quiet and familiar settings, whereas participants aged 13 and above completed either online audio/video interviews or open-ended written questionnaires.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of participants.

No.	Gender	Age at Study Abroad (Years)	Current Age (Years)	Interview Date	Interview Duration (Minutes)	Format (Interview or Open Questionnaire)	Country/Region Route
1	Male	11	19	2025.12.14	-	Open Questionnaire	South Korea, United States
2	Female	10	16	2025.12.10	11	Self-Administered Questionnaire	United States, Finland, Sweden
3	Male	14	22	2025.12.10	-	Open Questionnaire	United States, etc.
4	Female	10	18	2025.12.12	-	Open Questionnaire	South Korea, etc.
5	Female	10	19	2025.12.13	-	Open Questionnaire	South Korea
6	Female	11	20	2025.12.10	-	Open Questionnaire	South Korea, etc.
7	Male	9	17	2025.12.13	-	Mother-Proxy Questionnaire	United States
8	Male	14	21	2025.12.7	-	Open Questionnaire	United States, South Korea, etc.
9	Male	13	14	2025.12.15	-	Open Questionnaire	Australia
10	Female	10	19	2025.12.10	-	Open Questionnaire	South Korea, United States
11	Female	10	18	2025.12.13	-	Open Questionnaire	South Korea
12	Female	8	16	2025.12.13	-	Open Questionnaire	Japan
13	Male	14	21	2025.12.10	-	Open Questionnaire	United States
14	Male	8	9	2025.12.7	22	Face-to-Face One-on-One Interview	Australia
15	Male	8	9	2025.12.7	15	Face-to-Face One-on-One Interview	Australia
16	Male	13	14	2025.12.7	25	Online One-on-One Interview	Australia
17	Male	13	14	2025.12.10	-	Open Questionnaire	Australia
18	Female	11	18	2025.12.15	-	Open Questionnaire	United States
19	Male	12	13	2025.12.13	-	Mother-Proxy Interview	Australia
20	Female	8	15	2025.12.15	-	Open Questionnaire	United States
21	Female	13	14	2025.12.14	8	Self-Administered Questionnaire	Australia
22	Female	16	17	2025.12.14	-	Open Questionnaire	Finland, Sweden, Switzerland
23	Female	8	9	2025.12.7	5	Mother-Proxy Questionnaire	Finland, Sweden

## Continued

24	Female	10	10	2025.12.8	-	Open Questionnaire	Finland, Sweden
25	Female	17	18	2025.12.5	-	Open Questionnaire	Finland, Sweden
26	Female	21	21	2025.12.7	8	Self-Administered Questionnaire	Switzerland, France
27	Male	13	14	2025.12.7	12	Sister-Proxy Questionnaire	Australia, Switzerland, France
28	Female	10	20	2025.12.6	-	Open Questionnaire	United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden
29	Female	8	17	2025.12.12	-	Open Questionnaire	United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, France
30	Female	8	17	2025.12.12	-	Open Questionnaire	United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, France

Data collection methods included face-to-face one-on-one interviews, online one-on-one interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and proxy responses provided by relatives when participants were unable to complete interviews independently. All non-written responses were audio- or video-recorded to capture emotional expressions and contextual cues. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim within 24 hours of completion.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each participant using an interview guide designed to encourage reflection on learning attitudes, emotional experiences, and social interactions during international travel. Semi-structured interviews were adopted due to their demonstrated effectiveness in qualitative research, as they allow for in-depth exploration while maintaining a clear research focus (Abdullah, 2019; Ruslin et al., 2022). The interview questions were organized around three overarching themes: cross-cultural experiences, diverse perceptions, and growth and insights. The core interview questions addressed four dimensions: cross-cultural adaptation, experiential perception, social collaboration, and perceived long-term impact. Question wording was adjusted by age group, with younger participants receiving concrete and imagery-based prompts, while older adolescents were asked to engage in deeper reflective discussion. Interviews were conducted in a conversational manner, with probing questions and follow-up prompts used to clarify responses and explore emergent topics.

### 3.4. Field Notes

Field notes were recorded by the researcher. The field notes were compiled through a combination of real-time documentation and post-event supplementation. Mobile memos, audio and video recordings, and photographs were used to document unexpected incidents, student reactions, and on-site decision-making processes. These records were supplemented with reflective notes following the completion of each itinerary. After the trips, additional materials—including WeChat public account posts, parent communications, parental feedback, social media updates, and diagnostic reports—were integrated to enrich and validate the records, forming a comprehensive documentation chain.

The field notes focused on “imperfect experiences” in cross-cultural study tours and covered three core event categories: adult errors, student adaptation challenges, and systemic risks. A total of 11 typical cases across multiple routes in the United States, South Korea, Finland, Australia, Japan, and Sweden were documented, accompanied by photographs, videos, and supporting materials. All field notes were anonymized and encrypted for storage and categorized by “country/route + event type” to facilitate triangulation with interview data.

To address potential memory bias associated with retrospective accounts—particularly participants’ recollections of emotional states experienced several years prior—this study employed a triangulation strategy that integrated retrospective interview data with contemporaneous field notes recorded during the study tours. Specifically, historical field notes documented in real time or shortly after key events (including mobile memos, audio/video records, photographs, and post-itinerary reflections) were used as temporal anchors when interpreting interview narratives. During analysis, participants’ retrospective emotional descriptions (e.g., anxiety, fear, security, confidence) were systematically compared with contemporaneous observations of behavioral reactions, emotional expressions, and situational contexts recorded in the field notes. Rather than treating discrepancies between retrospective narratives and historical records as errors, such divergences were analytically retained as meaningful indicators of emotional reinterpretation and developmental change over time. This triangulation process helped distinguish between immediate emotional responses during cross-cultural encounters and later reflective reconstructions, thereby enhancing the credibility of interpretations concerning long-term emotional and attitudinal development.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and each transcript and written note was read multiple times. Descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments were recorded during initial readings. Preliminary coding was conducted using Microsoft Excel. Participant expressions were prioritized when naming codes and themes, and conceptually similar codes were clustered together. A summary table of themes with detailed descriptions was created, and poorly represented themes were excluded.

A grounded theory analytic approach was employed to identify underlying mechanisms and relational patterns (Charmaz, 2011; Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). Data analysis proceeded through iterative coding and constant comparison. Open coding was conducted by analyzing each phrase of the interview data, comparing, classifying, and conceptualizing textual units (Layder, 1993). Through repeated comparison and revision, initial concepts and categories were identified. Axial coding was then applied to examine relationships among these categories, merging closely related concepts into broader thematic groupings. Finally, selective coding was used to identify a core category and to construct its relationships with the major thematic categories. Theoretical saturation was achieved through this circular and iterative coding process.

### **3.6. Researcher Reflexivity**

Throughout the research process, the researcher engaged in continuous reflexive practice. Reflexivity was applied to data interpretation, ethical decision-making, and the construction of analytical categories to minimize bias and enhance analytical transparency.

### **3.7. Ethical Considerations**

Procedural, situational, and relational ethics were strictly observed throughout the study. Prior to participation, the researcher fully explained the purpose, procedures, and potential risks of the study both verbally and through an information letter attached to a consent form. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their parents or guardians, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of real names, and identifying information related to participants and host community members was excluded from reporting. Only the researcher had access to participants' real identities. Situational ethics were addressed through ongoing ethical reflection during data collection and analysis. Relational ethics were upheld by maintaining reciprocity, respecting participants' perspectives, and incorporating their feedback into interview design and interpretation.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1. Thematic Analysis of Data**

A total of 12 topics were found:

Theme 1: Initial discomfort and cross-cultural emotional reaction (Culture Shock).

This kind of reaction refers to the sudden change of culture experienced by the interviewee, who needs to face life alone overseas, and will feel very nervous in a strange environment, resulting in cross-cultural emotions. Language barriers, unfamiliar food, and uncertainty about daily life generated anxiety and unease, particularly during the early stages of cross-cultural exposure. As one participant

noted, “The food in the United States is terrible, and life is hard to adapt to” (No. 7), illustrating how difficulties in meeting basic physiological and habitual needs can intensify feelings of cultural shock. These initial emotional reactions reflect the embodied and situational nature of early cross-cultural discomfort.

Theme 2: Feeling supported and interacting with society is the key to cross-cultural adaptation.

Specifically, it refers to the comfortable environment and comfortable learning style that the interviewee experienced when experiencing cross-culture overseas, including encouragement from overseas teachers to speak proactively, being cared for by team members, feeling accompanied by others, teachers responding to each child in a timely manner, feeling the warmth of humanity, and feeling the friendliness of foreign classmates. These feelings of being supported and socially interacting are the keys to cross-cultural adaptation. For example, Interviewee No. 14 believes that he can adapt to overseas life because:

But after the actual experience, I didn’t think so. I felt that it would be good if I could communicate in English, and it would be quite easy to adapt to it. I can accept Sydney’s continuous classes, diet, daily routine, etc. There is nothing particularly difficult to adapt to. I feel reassured and safe with teachers around me.

Number 14’s example shows that feeling supported and socially interacting are key to cross-cultural adaptation. Because in a foreign country, getting help when you need it makes people feel warm and reassured. Therefore, in cross-cultural exchanges, it is very important to feel supported and interact with society.

Theme 3: Perception of the difference between educational learning and classroom experience at home and abroad.

This perception includes that when interviewees experience different education and classes overseas, they feel that more classroom time is given to students. Classes are not a constraint, but a process of enjoying learning. They feel that there are basically no assignments in overseas classes, and the class is very free and free. Just raise your hands to speak without interrupting the teacher. The classroom atmosphere is active and the teaching method is different. It is not score-oriented. I observe that students actively participate in the class. Students are more relaxed and active. It allows students to think proactively, makes learning more fun, and makes me more motivated. It makes me more willing to learn and more effective. For example, Interviewee No. 29 felt different teaching methods because:

This class is not an art class, but a geography class. I originally thought this was strange... but then I realized that this is another way for us to remember knowledge, instead of just writing questions and endorsements. This method can make me more willing to understand the knowledge and remember it unconsciously, without being so deliberate.

One participant (No. 29) recalled that the interviewee’s perception of the differences between educational learning and classroom experience at home and abroad. Because in the United States, the homework given by geography teachers is to complete a painting. The content of the painting is to find the landforms

mentioned in class and draw them. This is not a method of writing and endorsing questions. The interviewees understand and remember the knowledge unconsciously, and are more willing to understand and have the initiative. Therefore, in cross-cultural exchanges, it is meaningful to experience different foreign education and classrooms.

Theme 4: Behavioral change from worry to trying.

Such behavioral changes include: in overseas cross-cultural experiences, I found that everyone is very tolerant, took a small step, stepped out of my comfort zone, tried to do it, and changed myself. I found that English communication is not as difficult as imagined. After long-term English communication, I can use body language to know how to solve problems through flexibility, do it boldly, and make myself more confident. I am getting bolder, overcome my lack of confidence, and believe that action is more important than the pursuit of perfection. For example, Interviewee No. 8 believes that daring to try and change oneself will make oneself more confident because:

I dare not speak a foreign language... Be willing to dare to try, change yourself bit by bit, and then become more confident in communicating.

As one participant described (No. 8), the behavioral change of the interviewee was from worrying to trying. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, interviewees usually have worries and concerns, and they will also experience the behavioral change from worrying to trying. These are normal and meaningful experiences.

Theme 5: Self-adjustment and the development of coping strategies.

These formations refer to the interviewees stepping out of their comfort zones in cross-cultural experiences, adjusting themselves by listening to others, speaking more, observing and familiarizing themselves with the environment, not pursuing perfection, focusing on their own unique perspectives, believing that the cultures of different countries are different, and they do not need to learn, but must accept recognition, adjust themselves, but not force them, learn to accept and adapt to different eating habits, and gain from adjusting themselves. They feel that they have strong adaptability and experience respect and tolerance. For example, Interviewee No. 5 believes that he will make self-adjustments and form coping policies during cross-cultural experiences because:

“Yes, I usually observe and become familiar with the environment.”

The example of Respondent No. 5 shows the formation of the Respondent’s self-adjustment and coping strategies. Therefore, in cross-cultural exchanges, interviewees usually make self-adjustments when facing new environments and form coping policies. These are the meaning of cross-cultural experience.

Theme 6: Re-understanding of “integration” and cultural differences.

This kind of re-understanding means that during the cross-cultural experience, the interviewees feel that their living habits are very different. They will try their best to be humble and feel two-way understanding. They do not deliberately change themselves for the sake of integration. They think that there is no need to

adjust themselves and do not affect others. They just boldly be themselves overseas and do not lose themselves for integration. They will try new possibilities. They believe that integration requires more understanding and tolerance, respect each other, and learn to integrate. They feel that they are affected, and believe that integration is also a form of respect. For example, No. 4 said, “Yes, but I wouldn’t force myself to do things I don’t like. You can try different things, and if you don’t like something, just say no.”

Theme 7: Awareness of rules, freedom and order.

This understanding is reflected in the fact that the interviewees found that there are many differences between overseas and domestic rules, and that overseas teachers and students are relatively free. They observed that Finnish high-speed trains do not check tickets. Americans also value rules. Overseas rules are more humane and inclusive. They understand rules as consultative and believe that rules should be flexible. Rules are not to restrict freedom, but to ensure everyone’s high-quality freedom. Overseas, they do not feel constrained by rules. They realize that rules are not just to be followed, but to allow everyone to get along comfortably. They understand that rules restrain bad people and do not hinder good people. The sense of rules overseas is the embodiment of civilization. They feel that social rules are built by behavior, and find that overseas rules are more humane, more applicable, and more willing to abide by them. For example, Interviewee No. 6 believes that rules are not to restrict freedom, but to ensure high-quality freedom for everyone because:

If everyone only cares about their own convenience, the whole system will be chaotic and everyone will be inconvenient in the end. “This made me understand the rules again - it is not to restrict freedom, but to ensure that everyone can have high-quality freedom.

Participants’ accounts (No. 6) suggested that it shows the interviewee’s understanding of rules, freedom and order during overseas cross-cultural experiences. This is a very important component of the cross-cultural experience.

Theme 8: Increase self-efficacy.

This reflection refers to feeling that there have been changes in oneself, daring to speak up, being more willing to communicate actively, improving oral and listening skills, believing that experience is helpful for improving English, believing that experience will help to deal with it more calmly in the future, enjoying study tours, becoming more cheerful, happy, and rewarding, and feeling that one has strong adaptability. I think adapting to differences; making myself more open, thinking that the experience is special and giving me a sense of accomplishment, making me more independent and calm, which will help me not be afraid of new environments in the future; I think that studying abroad has improved my ability to deal with academic problems, and I have become more willing to communicate proactively, and have exercised the courage to face difficulties. I find that I have become more cheerful, and I have learned to appreciate people who are different from me. I feel very proud to be able to travel independently overseas. I am grate-

ful for the study tour experience, which makes me feel confident and secure. For example, Interviewee No. 2 enjoyed the study tour during the cross-cultural experience and became more cheerful and happier because:

I feel that in this process, I have become more cheerful, and I feel that getting along with them makes me happier.

Example No. 2 shows that cross-cultural experience increases the interviewee's self-efficacy. This is the important meaning of cross-cultural experience.

Theme 9: Changing perceptions of what "excellence" means.

These changes are reflected in changing the definition of excellence. They believe that daring to try and communicate will be very helpful to themselves in the future. The ability to communicate and solve problems is more important than grades. Continuously challenging oneself means excellence. The definition of excellence is diverse and multi-dimensional. Comprehensive ability is more important than simple scores. The definition of excellence has changed from learning to multi-faceted excellence. The evaluation criteria have been adjusted, the value behind thinking habits has been adjusted, and the experience has given people spiritual gains. I believe that study tours have given me a more comprehensive understanding of excellence. For example, Interviewee No. 10's definition of excellence changed after cross-cultural experience. He believed that the definition of excellence is diverse because:

There are changes. After studying abroad, I feel that other qualities such as "being able to communicate" and "dare to try" are also particularly important. for example..., the definition of excellence should be diverse.

As illustrated by No. 10, cross-cultural experience will change the interviewee's perception of the definition of "excellence". This is also an important part of cross-cultural experience.

Theme 10: A deep understanding of the differences between overseas life and culture.

These cognitions refer to feeling that the cultures of various countries are very different, including observing that Japan's parenting styles are completely different, racial and gender discrimination in British schools, realizing that Japan's definition of protection is completely different, and over-protection can limit growth, and observing that the Japanese social atmosphere is very serious, Respect for the elderly, working even at the age of 80, South Korea values the collective, things can be handled faster, everyone has a sense of dedication and help, Sydney has a slow pace of life and high consumption, Singapore has different government decisions, Americans have different thinking, Swiss have different codes of polite behavior, foreign teachers maintain a sense of distance as a form of respect, etc. For example, after having a cross-cultural experience, interviewee No. 30 came into contact with local people and observed polite behavior codes that were different from those in China because:

I think it has to do with culture. When ordering in Switzerland, we were so entangled in which flavor we wanted that we forgot to say hello to the store man-

ager. The store manager told us to say hello first when ordering. This is more polite.

As illustrated by No. 30 shows, cross-cultural experience will enable the interviewee to form a deep understanding of overseas life and cultural differences. This is also the impact of cross-cultural experience.

Theme 11: The formation of the ability to live independently.

The formation of these abilities refers to the fact that many of the first times in life are achieved during study tours. They believe that cross-cultural experiences are full of challenges and surprises, and getting along is building a new consensus among differences. They believe that experiences make themselves more independent and calm, and gain independence and self-confidence. They believe that experiences help solve problems independently, and it is common to solve problems independently overseas. For example, Interviewee No. 11 believed that cross-cultural study tours made him independent because:

Many of my firsts in life were during these study tours. The experience of studying and traveling has made me independent and self-reflective earlier, and I am happy to see these growths.

The example of No. 11 shows that cross-cultural experience can promote the formation of independent living abilities and is the visible result of cross-cultural experience.

Theme 12: How overseas study tours change life trajectories.

This change refers to the fact that after the interviewees experienced cross-cultural experiences, they chose to study overseas for high school, undergraduate, and graduate studies, which changed their life trajectory. For example, Interviewee No. 12 chose to attend a Japanese high school after studying in Japan. Because:

I have come to Japan to attend high school.

The example of No. 12 shows the changes in the interviewee's life trajectory caused by overseas study tours. Cross-cultural experiences have a profound impact on teenagers.

It is important to note that the depth and form of self-differentiation and cognitive restructuring varied across participants' developmental stages. Participants who experienced international travel at younger ages (approximately 8 - 12 years old) tended to demonstrate these processes primarily through behavioral adjustment and emotional regulation, such as increased willingness to try new activities, reduced anxiety in unfamiliar settings, and emerging independence in daily practices. In these cases, self-differentiation was expressed implicitly through coping strategies and action-oriented adaptation rather than through explicit verbal reflection.

By contrast, participants who were older adolescents or young adults at the time of travel (approximately 15 - 21 years old) articulated more explicit forms of cognitive restructuring and self-differentiation. These participants more frequently reflected on shifts in values, identity boundaries, and definitions of "excellence,"

and engaged in conscious comparison between cultural systems, educational norms, and personal goals. Cognitive restructuring at this stage involved higher levels of abstraction and meta-cognitive awareness.

Despite these differences in expression and depth, the overall adaptive pathway identified in this study remained consistent across age groups. Developmental stage shaped how self-differentiation and cognitive restructuring were manifested, rather than whether these processes occurred.

#### 4.2. The Theoretical Framework Generated after Selective Coding

To strengthen the analytical connection between the empirical findings and the proposed theoretical framework, the twelve themes identified in Section 4.1 are explicitly mapped onto the sequential stages of the Self-growth Adaptation Process Model (Figure 1). Each stage of the model is grounded in specific thematic clusters, ensuring that the framework is directly derived from participants' accounts rather than an imposed priori.

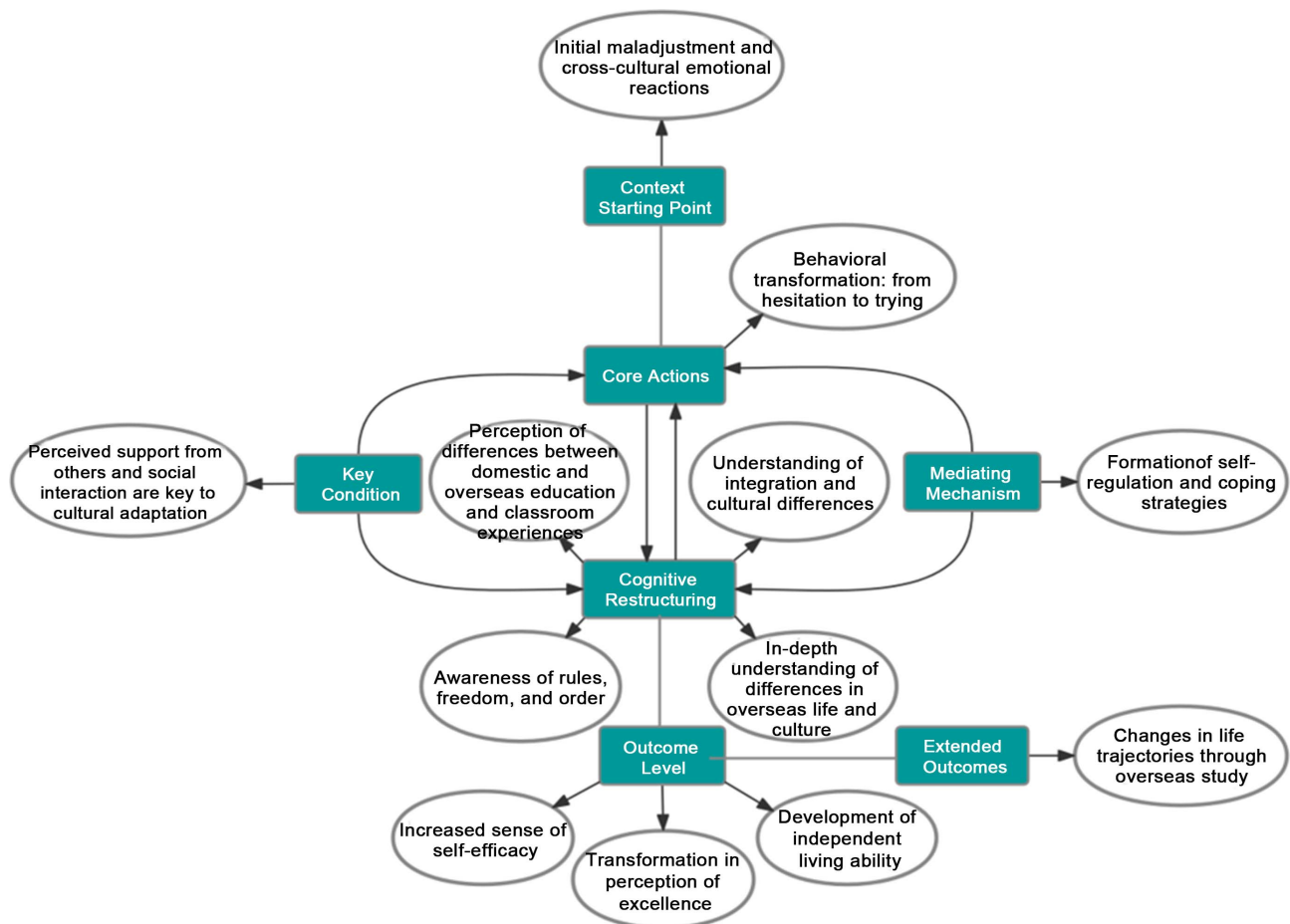


Figure 1. Self-Growth adaptation process model in cross-cultural situations.

Figure 1 illustrates a self-growth-oriented process of cross-cultural adaptation that unfolds through several interrelated stages. At the situational starting point,

adolescents encounter discomfort and emotional impact when first entering a cross-cultural environment. This initial phase is characterized by culture shock, anxiety, and uncertainty, as individuals must suddenly cope with unfamiliar languages, lifestyles, and social norms. Such experiences correspond to *Theme 1: Initial Discomfort and Cross-Cultural Emotional Responses*, highlighting that emotional unease is not an exception but a foundational condition of cross-cultural entry.

Building on this initial state, the model identifies supportive interaction as a key condition that reduces uncertainty and perceived risk. When adolescents feel supported by teachers, peers, family members, or members of the host society, they gain a sense of safety and belonging that facilitates further engagement. These supportive social interactions play a crucial role in easing emotional tension and enabling adaptation, as reflected in *Theme 2: Feeling supported and interacting with society are keys to cross-cultural adaptation*. Support thus functions as an enabling environment rather than a direct outcome of adaptation.

Within this supportive context, adolescents begin to engage in core actions, marked by a proactive behavioral shift from worrying to trying. Instead of remaining constrained by fear of making mistakes, they gradually step out of their comfort zones, attempt communication, and experiment with new ways of acting. This transition represents a decisive move from passive concern to active participation, captured in *Theme 4: Behavioral change from worrying to trying*. Such action-oriented engagement is central to initiating deeper learning and adaptation processes.

As these actions accumulate, an intermediary mechanism emerges in the form of self-adjustment and coping strategies. Adolescents learn to regulate their emotions, lower unrealistic expectations, observe social cues, and flexibly adapt to new environments. These strategies mediate between external challenges and internal stability, allowing individuals to manage stress while maintaining a sense of self. This stage corresponds to *Theme 5: Formation of self-adjustment and coping strategies*, emphasizing that adaptation involves ongoing self-regulation rather than one-time change.

Through sustained interaction and self-adjustment, adolescents undergo cognitive reconstruction, developing a more nuanced understanding of integration, rules, and cultural differences. They begin to reinterpret what it means to “integrate,” recognizing that adaptation does not require losing oneself but balancing respect for others with self-consistency. At the same time, they gain deeper insights into social rules, freedom, order, educational practices, and everyday cultural norms across contexts. This cognitive shift is reflected across multiple themes, including *Theme 6: Re-understanding of “Integration” and Cultural Differences*, *Theme 7: Awareness of rules, freedom and order*, *Theme 10: Deep understanding of overseas life and cultural differences*, and *Theme 3: Perception of the differences between educational learning and classroom experience at home and abroad*.

At the result level, these cognitive and behavioral changes culminate in a comprehensive improvement of self-efficacy, values, and practical abilities. Adolescents report greater confidence in communication, problem-solving, and independent living, alongside shifts in how they define success and excellence. Excellence becomes less about narrow academic performance and more about adaptability, courage, and holistic competence. These outcomes align with *Theme 8: Increased self-efficacy*, *Theme 9: Changing perceptions of the definition of “excellence”*, and *Theme 11: The formation of the ability to live independently*.

Finally, for some individuals, the process extends into structural changes in life trajectories. Cross-cultural experiences influence long-term educational and career decisions, such as choosing to pursue further education abroad or reorienting personal goals. This extended impact is captured in *Theme 12: How overseas study tours change the trajectory of life*, indicating that the effects of overseas study tours can persist well beyond the immediate experience.

In summary, selective coding reveals that overseas study tours are not merely episodes of cultural adjustment but constitute a self-growth-oriented cross-cultural adaptation pathway. Beginning with initial discomfort, adolescents progress through supportive interaction and proactive engagement, develop self-adjustment strategies, reconstruct their cognitive frameworks, and enhance self-efficacy and values—sometimes leading to lasting transformations in their life trajectories.

In all, the Self-growth Adaptation Process Model is not an abstract theoretical construct but a grounded framework synthesized directly from the twelve empirically identified themes, each corresponding to a specific stage or mechanism within the adaptation process

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Summary of Research Findings

This study aimed to explore the long-term effects of overseas study tours on adolescents' learning emotions, learning attitudes, and self-development, clarify the social learning mechanisms involved in their cross-cultural adaptation process, and reveal the mediating roles of self-efficacy and self-differentiation ability in shaping learning emotions and attitudes. Through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding of interview data from 30 adolescents with overseas study experience, the core findings in Part IV indicate that overseas study is not merely a cultural adaptation process but rather a self-growth-oriented pathway to cross-cultural adaptation.

This study provides a comprehensive interpretation and enhancement of the core findings in Part IV around three research questions. First, regarding Research Question 1, the results clearly demonstrate that long-term overseas family study tours exert a sustained and profound positive impact on adolescents' learning emotions and attitudes. This impact manifests not only in emotional shifts during the program—from anxiety and unease toward curiosity, engagement, and a sense of accomplishment—but also in a transformation of learning attitudes. Adoles-

cents move from passive acceptance driven by external constraints toward proactive learning guided by intrinsic motivation, self-growth, and competency development. This directly addresses the question of whether long-term effects occur and how they manifest. Second, addressing Research Question 2, the study further elucidates “how” this transformation occurs at the process level. It identifies observation, imitation, and internalization as the core social learning mechanisms operating throughout the study tour: adolescents continuously observe the interaction styles and value orientations of teachers, peers, and local community members. They selectively imitate positive behaviors and, through repeated practice, internalize these into stable cognitive structures and behavioral tendencies. This process drives the adaptation of learning emotions and the transformation of learning attitudes. Finally, addressing Research Question 3, the discussion emphasizes the critical moderating and driving roles of self-efficacy and self-differentiation capacity in the aforementioned process. It indicates that successful experiences of independently completing tasks and overcoming challenges in the study tour context significantly enhance adolescents’ self-efficacy. Meanwhile, the capacity for self-differentiation—maintaining personal boundaries while embracing cultural differences—helps them develop a rational, open-minded, and non-conformist learning attitude. By organically integrating outcomes, processes, and psychological mechanisms, this study constructs an explanatory framework: triggered by external cross-cultural contexts, operated through social learning mechanisms, and ultimately internalized as long-term changes in individual learning emotions and attitudes. This framework systematically addresses all three research questions.

## 5.2. Theoretical Implications

Previous research on cross-cultural adaptation and overseas study programs has primarily focused on describing cultural adaptation challenges or identifying key factors influencing the adaptation process and outcomes, such as language proficiency, cultural distance, and social support (Angwenyi, 2014; Clark, 2023). These studies often conceptualize cultural adaptation as an individual’s gradual adjustment to an external cultural environment, emphasizing adaptation outcomes rather than the agentive and constructive nature of the individual within it (Barker, 2016; van’t Klooster, 2014). This study breaks from this traditional perspective, revealing that overseas study programs are fundamentally self-directed pathways for adolescent cross-cultural adaptation. Their uniqueness manifests in three aspects: First, it constructs a complete chain of “environmental stimuli (initial discomfort and cultural differences)—mediating mechanisms (supportive interactions, proactive attempts, self-adjustment strategies)—developmental outcomes (cognitive restructuring, enhanced self-efficacy, altered life trajectories)” to clarify the internal logic of adolescent self-development in cross-cultural settings; second, it emphasizes the proactivity and constructiveness of individuals during adaptation, demonstrating that adolescents are not passive recipients of cultural in-

fluences but active constructors of their own growth through proactive interactions and strategic adjustments; Third, it expands the research scope of overseas study programs' impact, extending beyond short-term cultural adaptation to long-term cognitive restructuring and life trajectory changes, revealing the profound and enduring effects of cross-cultural experiences on adolescents.

This study advances the existing theoretical framework in two ways. On the one hand, it enriches social learning theory in cross-cultural contexts. Previous social learning theories have predominantly applied to individual learning studies within monocultural settings, primarily explaining observation, imitation, and internalization mechanisms in classroom learning or everyday socialization processes (Bandura, 1977; Koutroubas & Galanakis, 2022). However, their operational mechanisms remain insufficiently validated in the highly dynamic and significantly diverse context of cross-cultural study tours. Based on a long-term intercultural study tour context, this research validates the effectiveness of observation, imitation, and internalization in adolescents' cross-cultural learning and adaptation. Specifically, it reveals how adolescents regulate learning emotions and attitudes by observing others' behaviors, selectively imitating, and continuously internalizing social norms. This expands the applicability and explanatory power of social learning theory in cross-cultural and developmental research (Bandura, 1977; Tang et al., 2024). Furthermore, this study complements and refines existing cross-cultural adaptation theories. Traditional frameworks (e.g., the U-curve theory) predominantly describe the phased emotional fluctuations during adaptation, emphasizing a linear progression from discomfort to adjustment (Barker, 2016; van't Klooster, 2014), while paying less attention to individuals' agency and internal psychological development throughout the process. This study integrates cognitive, behavioral, and developmental perspectives to construct a self-growth-oriented theoretical framework for cross-cultural adaptation. It reveals that cultural adaptation is not merely an external adjustment process but also an internal journey of growth and transformation accompanied by enhanced self-efficacy and self-differentiation. This framework offers a novel theoretical perspective for understanding adolescents' cross-cultural adaptation. By demonstrating how adolescents learn through emotional regulation, behavioral adjustment, and reflective reinterpretation, this study extends existing models of experiential learning. These age-related differences further suggest that the self-growth adaptation process is developmentally sensitive, with younger adolescents expressing adaptation behaviorally and older participants engaging in reflective restructuring.

### **5.3. Practical Implications**

#### **5.3.1. Implications for Adolescents**

Research indicates that overseas study programs provide adolescents with a highly authentic and challenging environment for learning and growth. The value lies not in avoiding discomfort, but in developing coping skills amid uncertainty. Based on these findings, adolescents participating in such programs should view

initial feelings of tension, confusion, and discomfort as normal reactions to cross-cultural entry—rather than signs of personal inadequacy—thereby fostering a more open mindset toward cultural differences and environmental changes. Simultaneously, active engagement in social interactions proves crucial. By proactively communicating with teachers, peers, and local community members, adolescents not only practice language and communication skills in real-world contexts but also learn behavioral patterns and value orientations through continuous observation and imitation, gradually enhancing cross-cultural understanding and social adaptability. Furthermore, the study indicates that the development of self-regulation abilities serves as a key mediating mechanism for emotional stability and attitudinal shifts. Adolescents can alleviate cross-cultural stress and develop more mature coping strategies by listening, observing, accepting differences, and lowering perfectionist expectations. Finally, engaging in reflective reviews of study abroad experiences—systematically organizing emotional shifts, attitude transformations, and skill enhancements—helps transform short-term experiences into long-term internal resources that sustainably influence subsequent learning and development.

### **5.3.2. Implications for Parents**

This study indicates that parents are not merely logistical supporters during their adolescents' overseas study tours; they are significant indirect factors shaping the learning environment and growth atmosphere. Before the program, parents can help children develop realistic and stable expectations by guiding them to understand the destination's cultural background, lifestyle, and educational characteristics, thereby reducing anxiety about unfamiliar environments. During the program, research findings suggest that moderate, rather than excessive, emotional support is particularly crucial. Parents should monitor their child's emotional state and adaptation process, offering understanding and encouragement while avoiding over-interference in their independent attempts and problem-solving, thus preserving space for the development of adolescents' self-efficacy. After the program concludes, parents can facilitate reflection through dialogue and shared review, guiding children to consider how the experience influenced their learning emotions, attitudes, and self-perception. This helps integrate fragmented experiences into a clearer understanding of personal growth. Furthermore, when some adolescents adjust their academic or developmental paths due to the study tour, parental respect and support enable them to maintain emotional connection while advancing self-differentiation and independent decision-making.

### **5.3.3. Implications for Practitioners**

For organizers and implementers of overseas study tours, this research emphasizes that such programs should be understood as holistic processes promoting adolescents' social learning and self-development, rather than isolated cultural visits or course arrangements. During the program design phase, the intensity of cross-cultural experiences should be progressively structured based on adolescents' developmental characteristics and adaptive capacities. This gradual ap-

proach guides them into learning and living environments with more pronounced differences, thereby mitigating emotional stress from initial cultural shock. Throughout program implementation, practitioners serve not only as guardians of rules and safety but also as vital role models for social learning. On one hand, they should provide essential support in language communication, daily adaptation, and academic arrangements. On the other hand, they must foster an interactive atmosphere of respect, inclusivity, and encouragement through their own attitudes and behaviors, enabling adolescents to develop positive coping strategies through observation and imitation. Following the program, systematic follow-up feedback mechanisms help assess long-term impacts and inform subsequent program refinements, thereby continuously enhancing the educational value of overseas study tours in promoting adolescents' holistic development.

#### **5.4. Research Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study provides a relatively in-depth exploration of the mechanisms underlying the impact of overseas study tours, several limitations remain. First, the research sample primarily consists of study tour participants familiar to the researchers, potentially exhibiting homogeneity in family background, educational resources, and participation motivations, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could enhance representativeness by expanding sample sources to include adolescents from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, regions, and educational stages. Second, this study primarily relied on retrospective interview data. Although triangulation was achieved through multiple rounds of coding and field notes, memory bias may still have influenced findings. Future studies could employ synchronous field observations and longitudinal tracking designs to capture real-time emotional shifts, behavioral responses, and interaction patterns during study tours, yielding more granular process-oriented data. Furthermore, subsequent research could compare differences across age groups, genders, or study tour types while incorporating quantitative methods to test the proposed “self-growth-oriented cross-cultural adaptation process” model, thereby achieving deeper theoretical and methodological expansion.

### **6. Conclusion**

Overall, the core contribution of this study lies in revealing that overseas study tours are not merely one-way processes of cultural adaptation or knowledge acquisition, but rather a journey of cross-cultural learning and development centered on self-growth. Research indicates that adolescents do not passively respond to environmental changes during overseas study tours. Instead, through continuous social interaction and social learning, they progressively construct their understanding of self, learning, and the world amidst discomfort and challenges. From initial emotional shock to the formation of self-regulation strategies, and further to cognitive restructuring, enhanced self-efficacy, and strengthened self-differentiation abilities, overseas study programs provide a crucial opportunity for

adolescents to undergo long-term transformations in emotional regulation and learning attitudes. Their profound value extends beyond language proficiency or cultural knowledge acquisition, manifesting instead in the development of an open worldview, the establishment of proactive learning orientations, and the sustained accumulation of psychological resources. For families, educators, and society, understanding this self-growth-oriented path of cross-cultural adaptation enables more conscious support and guidance for adolescents' overseas study experiences. This ensures such journeys become a vital force propelling lifelong development.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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