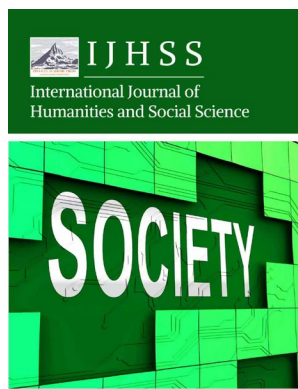*Review*

The Role of Gender Role Socialization in Mediating the Influence of Cultural Background on Educational Motivation of Chinese and American Gen Z Women

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Abstract: This study aims to explore how gender role socialization acts as a mediating variable to regulate the influence of cultural background on the educational motivation of Gen Z women in China and the United States. Using the systemized literature review method and based on the Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), this paper proposes a theoretical framework that posits that cultural background (collectivism vs. individualism) does not directly determine educational motivation. Instead, it shapes different gender role expectations through socialization channels such as family, school, media, and peers, thereby influencing whether women perceive education as an intrinsic or instrumental value. Chinese Generation Z women, under collectivist cultural norms, tend to emphasize the practical value of education (such as economic security and family responsibilities), while American Generation Z women, influenced by individualist cultural upbringing, place greater emphasis on the intrinsic value of education (such as self-actualization and personal expression). To understand the educational choices of Gen Z women, we must adopt a cross-cultural perspective and consider the interaction between cultural and gender factors, which provides inspiration for educational practice and policy making.

Keywords: gender socialization; educational motivation; expectancy-value theory; China-US comparison; cross-cultural

1. Introduction

Imagine two girls, Xinyi and Lily, both born in 2008, top of their class. They are both high-achieving, from financially secure families, and eager to make a difference—one in Shanghai, one in Chicago. Their dreams look nothing alike. Xinyi plans to study finance: "Something practical," she says, "so my family feels secure." Lily chooses theater and psychology because she wants "to tell stories that matter." One seems driven more by stability, the other by meaning. These contrasting motivations may not be universal but may hint at how cultural upbringing can influence the way equally capable young women approach education.

Opportunities for education are expanding worldwide and are more available than ever before for Gen Z women, as reflected in the increasing number of young women from developing countries like Uzbekistan pursuing higher education abroad, empowered by greater institutional access and global academic mobility [1]. Yet even when socioeconomic access appears similar, outcomes still diverge. Large-scale datasets confirm that after controlling for family income, parental education, school quality, and prior achievement, gender role socialization and cultural background remain significant

predictors of motivation. For example, OECD's PISA 2018 reports that girls show higher academic motivation (β = +0.19, SE = 0.03) even after full SES and school controls [2]. A UK PISA study using propensity score matching finds that gender norms independently predict motivation (β = 0.22, SE = 0.05) beyond income and parental education [3]. TIMSS 2019 analyses reveal a female task value gap of −0.15 SD [4], while Finnish sibling fixed-effects models still show a female motivation effect (β = 0.10, SE = 0.02) after accounting for family and school factors [5].

So why do equally capable young women in different countries make such different choices about their education? Perhaps beyond access, differences in motivation—shaped by societal expectations from an early age—also play a crucial role.

This paper explores how gender role socialization mediates the influence of cultural background on the educational motivation of Gen Z female students in China and the United States. Influenced by distinct historical contexts, economic models, and cultural traditions in China and the United States, Generation Z women demonstrate markedly divergent understandings and choices regarding the value of education. This phenomenon points to deeper sociocultural mechanisms that transcend individual factors.

Current research typically attributes this disparity to macro-cultural value dimensions, specifically the opposition between collectivism and individualism. However, how cultural values are internalized by individuals and transformed into concrete behavioral motivations remains an enigma. This study posits that gender role socialization serves as the key to unlocking this cultural puzzle. Acting as a core mediating mechanism between cultural context and personal motivation, it converts cultural norms into gender-specific "cultural scripts" through daily social interactions. These scripts guide women in self-perception, success definition, and educational value assessment.

This study examines how gender role socialization moderates cultural influences on educational motivation among Generation Z women in China and the United States. Building upon Eccles et al.'s Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), we demonstrate that differences in educational motivation between Chinese and American women stem not from innate differences in talent or interests but rather from culturally shaped gender expectations transmitted through socialization processes.

2. Research Framework

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) to integrate and critically evaluate existing empirical studies in order to construct an explanatory theoretical model.

Literature sources: Searches were conducted in Google Scholar, Web of Science, and other academic databases. Keywords included "gender socialization," "educational motivation," "expectancy-value theory," "Generation Z," "China–U.S. comparison," "cross-cultural," and so on.

Filter criteria: Prioritize peer-reviewed empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods) and high-quality theoretical reviews published between 2000 and 2024.

Analysis framework: The thematic analysis method was adopted to identify core themes such as "cultural values," "gender socialization channels," and "EVT motivation dimensions," and to sort out the logical relationships among them.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

3.1. Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) and Educational Motivation

The Expectancy-Value Theory serves as a cornerstone framework for understanding academic motivation. It posits that individuals' achievement choices (such as educational decisions) are shaped by two key factors: their expectations of success and their subjective evaluation of task value. Task value can be further categorized into:

1) **Intrinsic value:** the pleasure and enjoyment of doing a task.

2) **Practical value:** the relevance of task outcomes to personal short- or long-term goals, such as education being seen as a tool for achieving career success or financial independence.

3) **Achievement value:** reflects the importance of task results to individual identity or self-concept, such as education being internalized as a sign of personal achievement or a symbol of social status.

Within the EVT framework, educational motivation formation depends not only on individual expectations of success (such as self-efficacy beliefs) but also heavily on the diversified evaluation of educational values. For Gen Z women, these value assessments are not isolated but embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts. For instance, intrinsic values may drive individuals' passion for knowledge itself, while practical values emphasize functional returns from education, such as enhancing employability. This structural difference in value priorities reveals why women from different cultural backgrounds exhibit distinct considerations in educational decisions: collectivist cultures tend to highlight the dominance of practical and achievement values, whereas individualist cultures place greater emphasis on the core role of intrinsic values.

Furthermore, EVT highlights the mediating role of social factors (such as family, school, and peer groups) in shaping value cognition. These elements influence women's internalization of educational values by transmitting cultural norms. For instance, gender role socialization may affect women's judgment of "success expectations," leading them to prioritize societal expectations over personal preferences when evaluating educational worth.

Focusing on the cross-cultural differences in intrinsic value and utility value, these two aspects best reflect the cultural logic behind educational motivation in China and the United States.

3.2. Macro-Level Cultural Influences: Collectivism versus Individualism

3.2.1. China (collectivism)

China's education system is deeply shaped by its collectivist cultural roots, largely influenced by Confucianism. Values such as group harmony, respect for authority, and social cohesion are embedded within the schooling structure. These values manifest through hierarchical teacher-student relationships and a collective classroom identity that prioritizes group goals over individual expression [4]. Empirical studies confirm these cultural patterns: a meta-analysis of 74 studies found teacher-student relationships correlated more strongly with achievement in China ($r = .26$) than in Western countries ($r = .16$), reflecting more hierarchical relationships [5]; Hofstede's indices likewise show China scoring far higher in power distance (80/100) and collectivism (80/100) compared to the U.S. (40/100 and 20/100) [6]; and large-scale survey data from PISA reveal similar patterns, with hierarchical authority and group harmony consistently emphasized [2, 5].

Even among educators, Western-trained teachers often encounter challenges integrating into China's collectivist school culture due to differences in professional expectations [7]. These findings illustrate how collectivist values are not only historical and cultural but are actively reinforced and negotiated through educational policy and classroom practices [8]. The culture emphasizes interdependence, family obligations, and social harmony. Education has traditionally been regarded as an important tool for enhancing prestige, achieving economic advancement, and providing security for families [9].

3.2.2. American (individualism)

American culture is widely recognized for its deep-rooted commitment to individualism, which is evident across educational, psychological, and societal systems. This cultural orientation prioritizes autonomy, personal achievement, and self-reliance, as values reinforced early in the education system. Textbooks and curriculum content in the U.S. frequently emphasize individual success and independent moral decision-making.

This focus aligns with a broader philosophical stance found in educational psychology, where the "psychologism" of the American model tends to minimize social context in favor of personal agency. Cross-cultural studies demonstrate that U.S. students consistently score higher on internal locus of control and self-efficacy: for instance, American workers scored M = 4.82, SD = 0.77 on work locus of control compared to M = 3.91, SD = 0.84 in China, t(412) = 10.12, p < .001, d = 1.11 [10].

At a deeper level, individualism also permeates American psychological frameworks, including positive psychology, where personal growth and self-determination are core principles. For example, perceived autonomy support strongly predicted life satisfaction among U.S. undergraduates (β = .42, p < .001), a relationship substantially weaker in collectivist samples. Similarly, self-determination theory interventions consistently find that autonomy explains a significant portion of variance in wellbeing (e.g., 23–31% R^2 across U.S. college samples).

These educational and cultural patterns not only shape students' self-concept but also reinforce a national identity that equates personal freedom with success. Thus, American individualism is not just a philosophical idea but a lived experience reinforced by pedagogy, psychology, and popular narratives. Large-scale surveys further illustrate this: the Gallup Student Poll reported that 74% of U.S. students agreed education should help "discover passions and talents," compared to 49% in the OECD average (PISA 2018 attitudinal items) [11]. Likewise, a Pew Research Center study found 67% of American parents ranked "helping children become independent thinkers" as a top educational goal [12]. This is a culture that values independence, self-expression, and personal uniqueness. Education is more often seen as a path to explore oneself, pursue passions, and realize personal potential [11,12].

3.2.3. Collectivism versus Individualism

This difference in value orientation not only stems from historical traditions (such as China's Confucianism emphasizing collective responsibility and family honor, while the United States promotes individual independence and self-actualization) but has also been continuously reinforced in contemporary social institutions and practices. Under China's collectivist cultural framework, social norms tend to view individual success (including educational achievements) as a form of feedback and contribution to families and communities, with individuals' educational choices often requiring consideration of family expectations and societal aspirations. Consequently, in China's education system, practical values (such as securing stable careers to ensure family economic security) and achievement values (such as enhancing family and social status and fulfilling parental responsibilities) are often prioritized [13].

In contrast, American individualist culture encourages individuals to make decisions based on personal interests, talents, and inner fulfillment. Against this backdrop, the intrinsic value of education (enjoying the learning process and satisfying intellectual curiosity) is closely linked to personal goals (such as self-exploration and personality development), with intrinsic value typically serving as the core driving force for American Gen Z women's educational investment [13].

The rapid development of globalization and information technology, particularly the widespread adoption of social media, is enabling Generation Z to engage with and integrate diverse cultural values. Large-scale Pew surveys report that 72% of Gen Z Americans have daily interactions with peers abroad via social media, compared to 41% of Millennials, while in China, over 85% of urban Gen Z report exposure to foreign cultural products weekly [14,15]. Such findings suggest that digital globalization may partially blur the traditional boundaries between collectivism and individualism, creating opportunities for new-generation women to redefine educational significance through reinterpretation [14,15].

However, cultural logic deeply embedded in social structures—particularly through gender role socialization—continues to fundamentally shape women's perceptions. CEPS data indicate that 63% of Chinese female students report parental influence as a decisive

factor in major choice, compared to 34% among U.S. female students, highlighting enduring cultural imprints on educational pathways [16].

3.3. The Mediating Role of Gender Role Socialization

Cultural values do not automatically shape individuals—they are transmitted through the socialization of gender roles. This means society uses family expectations, educational practices, media portrayals, and peer norms to send implicit and explicit messages to girls about "what women should look like" and "what women should pursue."

In the cultural environment of China, gender role socialization transforms collectivist values into expectations for women to become "virtuous wives and mothers," seek "stable careers," and act as "family breadwinners." Surveys show that 73% of Chinese Gen Z women cite economic stability and family responsibility as their main educational goals [17]. Families often highlight education as a tool for future security, leading girls to select pragmatic majors. Cross-cultural research finds Chinese women are 22% more likely than American women to choose practical majors like education or business [18]. In school, gender bias persists: only 27% of Chinese girls are encouraged into STEM compared to 61% of boys, and 65% of female engineering students report being steered by teachers or family toward "gender-appropriate" fields [19,20].

Media portrayals also reinforce these roles. Studies show 82% of women influenced by media role models see education as a path to balancing work and family, rather than as a passion. Quantitative comparisons confirm that Chinese women score significantly higher on achievement and practical values, while intrinsic value scores are lower ($p < 0.05$) [21,22].

In the American context, gender role socialization encourages autonomy, passion, and independence. Over 70% of American parents support their daughters in pursuing interests even when financial returns are uncertain, compared to only 38% in China [23]. American Gen Z women also score 0.54 standard deviations higher than Chinese women on intrinsic motivation for STEM [24]. Studies of motivation find American students score 18% higher than Chinese peers on curiosity and interest-driven learning. Longitudinal studies of U.S. STEM interventions show significant increases ($p < 0.01$) in women's self-efficacy and identity exploration, further framing education as a path of self-definition [9].

Thus, gender role socialization acts as a translator, turning collectivist or individualist cultural values into daily scripts. For Chinese Gen Z women, education is about achievement and security. For American Gen Z women, it is about passion and empowerment. These differences show how macro-cultural norms shape micro-level educational motivations in lasting, quantifiable ways.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

4.1. Research Conclusions

4.1.1. Conclusion 1

Generation Z female students exhibit significant and consistent cross-cultural differences in their perception of task value. While the Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) provides a framework for understanding motivational dimensions, it is the interplay between cultural norms and gender role socialization that makes these differences particularly pronounced. This finding lays the groundwork for exploring the specific manifestations of utility value and intrinsic value orientations.

According to the analysis of differences in educational values between China and the United States, Chinese Generation Z female students tend to emphasize the practical value of education, which is reflected in the accumulation of knowledge and the construction of knowledge systems. Meanwhile, their American peers place greater emphasis on the intrinsic value of education, such as cultivating students' creativity, self-confidence, and independent spirit. This difference not only reveals the existence of cross-cultural

disparities but also highlights their directional characteristics: a collectivist social environment tends to reinforce instrumental motivations, while an individualist cultural background leans more toward self-expression goals. These clear value orientations lay the foundation for exploring the mechanisms that form such patterns.

4.1.2. Conclusion 2

The influence of cultural background on educational values operates indirectly, mediated through gender role socialization, which determines whether girls perceive education as a tool for fulfilling responsibilities or a vehicle for self-expression. From the perspective of Expectancy-Value Theory, this mediating effect explains why Chinese and American girls with equivalent abilities make systematically different academic choices. This difference stems not from innate preferences, but from culturally constructed gender scripts.

Gender role socialization serves as a crucial mediating mechanism: the influence of cultural background on educational motivation is indirect, which can only be realized through the mechanism of gender role socialization. Socialization agents such as families, schools, and media transform cultural norms into gender-specific expectations, thereby influencing women's interpretation of the significance of education.

4.2. Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study have important theoretical and practical significance.
Theoretical significance:

It deepens our understanding of EVT and emphasizes the intersectionality of cultural and social gender factors when applying this theory. Motivation is not a pure individual psychological construction, but a product of social culture.

Practical implications:

1) For educators: They must possess cultural sensitivity and gender awareness. In China, efforts should be made to emphasize the practical value of education while encouraging girls to explore their personal interests and inner passions more actively; in the United States, students can be helped to better plan the instrumental value of education when pursuing self-actualization.

2) To policy makers: Promote curriculum and education reform, break down gender stereotypes in subject and career choices, and expand a wider space for identity among all students.

3) To parents: Reflect on the gendered expectations they unintentionally pass on to their children, and encourage them to make educational choices based on their own interests and abilities, rather than social gender norms.

4.3. Limitations and Future Directions

This study builds a theoretical framework based on literature review, and its validity needs to be verified by future empirical research.

Future research could:

1) Adopt a mixed research method (combining quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews) to longitudinally track the evolution trajectory of gender role identity of Gen Z women in China and the United States and its interaction mechanism with educational value beliefs;

2) Introduce variables such as social media usage frequency and content preferences to quantitatively analyze how digital media reshape traditional gender socialization patterns through algorithmic push and virtual community interaction;

3) Conduct interdisciplinary collaboration (e.g., education, communication, and cultural psychology) to design culturally adaptive intervention experiments

    and test specific strategies to weaken the transmission of gender stereotypes (e.g., developing critical media literacy courses);

4) Expand the comparison dimension, increase research on Generation Z women in other collectivist/individualist countries (such as Japan and Sweden), and analyze the different paths of cultural value infiltration in the process of globalization;

5) Focus on intergenerational differences and explore the stratified performance of educational motivation in urban and rural areas, social and economic status, sexual minority groups, and other intersecting identities, so as to deepen the understanding of the complexity of "gender role socialization."

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