

# Drivers of China Students' Behavioral Intentions Toward Educational Tourism in Malaysia: An S-O-R Model Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The global international education sector has observed a consistent rise in students from China seeking overseas academic pursuits, with Malaysia standing out as a compelling destination due to its cultural diversity, cost-efficiency, and high-caliber educational offerings. Despite Malaysia's growing appeal among Chinese international learners, there remains a notable research gap regarding the specific factors shaping their decision-making process to pursue educational tourism in this Southeast Asian nation. This conceptual paper applies the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory to develop a cohesive analytical framework. The proposed model identifies perceived price attractiveness and intercultural communication as primary stimuli (S), openness to experience as the mediating organism (O), and behavioral intention towards educational tourism as the ultimate behavioral response (R). By integrating key literature and theoretical perspectives, this conceptual paper offers practical implications for Malaysian higher education institutions, policymakers, and education marketers to design targeted strategies for attracting and supporting Chinese students. Furthermore, the framework lays a foundation for future empirical research to validate the proposed relationships and deepen understanding of student mobility in emerging education markets.

**Key words :** International students, behavioral intention, educational tourism, S-O-R Theory, openness to experience

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, studying abroad has evolved from a niche option into a mainstream educational choice for Chinese students, driven by rapid economic development, the growth of the middle class, and increasing recognition of the non-pecuniary benefits of international education (Hu, 2022). Chinese learners increasingly view overseas study as a pathway to holistic personal development, encompassing enhanced self-awareness, enriched life experiences, academic advancement, and the acquisition of cross-cultural competencies (China Daily, 2024). This perceptual shift has contributed to a substantial rise in the number of Chinese students pursuing tertiary education overseas, with official data from China's Ministry of Education reporting that

outbound student numbers reached 703,500 that solidifying China's position as the world's largest source of international students (Ministry of Education, China, 2022).

Amid these trends, Malaysia has emerged as a competitive player in the global education market. Ranked ninth globally for higher education quality by UNESCO, Malaysia offers a unique blend of Eastern and Western cultural influences, English-medium instruction, and cost-effective academic programmes (UNESCO, 2020). Since implementing higher education reforms in 1996, the country has successfully reversed student outflow trends, attracting international learners from over 100 countries and establishing itself as a regional hub for international education (UNESCO, 2022). Malaysia's appeal is further enhanced by its high quality of life, multicultural environment, and access to world-class educational resources through partnerships with renowned international universities (Li et al., 2022).

Despite Malaysia's growing prominence as an education destination, existing research on Chinese students' behavioral intention towards educational tourism has primarily focused on Western countries, leaving emerging markets like Malaysia under-explored. Previous studies have highlighted challenges faced by international students in non-Western nations, such as cultural adaptation and academic resilience, but few have examined the specific factors influencing students' initial decision to choose these destinations (Singh, 2021). Additionally, there is a dearth of research investigating how factors like price perception and intercultural communication interact to shape students' openness to experience and subsequent behavioral intention towards educational tourism (Brewer et al., 2019). This research gap is particularly significant amid increasing competition among Southeast Asian nations, including Singapore and Thailand, for international students (Yee et al., 2018).

To address these limitations, this conceptual paper integrates core findings to develop a comprehensive framework explaining the key drivers of Chinese students' intention to study in Malaysia. By applying the S-O-R Theory, this paper proposes that external stimuli (perceived price attractiveness, intercultural communication) influence students' internal psychological states (openness to experience), which in turn motivate behavioral responses (behavioral intention towards educational tourism). The following sections provide an overview of the underpinning theory, a detailed literature review of the proposed constructs, a discussion of the conceptual framework, and conclusions with implications for future research and practice.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Perceived Price Attractiveness and Openness to Experience**

Price constitutes a critical factor in consumer decision-making, representing the monetary sacrifice required to obtain a product or service (Zeithaml, 1988). In international education, perceived price attractiveness denotes learners' personal assessment of the affordability and value for money of studying abroad, including tuition fees, living costs, and related expenses (Calvo-Porrall & Levy-Mangin, 2017). Malaysia's competitive advantage in this regard is well-documented, with UNESCO highlighting the nation's cost-effective international education programs compared to Western destinations (UNESCO, 2020).

Research has demonstrated that perceived price attractiveness significantly influences students' willingness to consider studying abroad and their openness to new experiences (Reardon et al., 2022). When learners perceive an educational program as affordable and valuable, they are more

likely to overcome psychological barriers to foreign study (e.g., fear of financial burden) and become more open to exploring new cultural and academic environments. Additionally, positive price perceptions can enhance students' overall satisfaction with their study abroad and travel experience, thus fostering stronger emotional bonds with educational institutions and reducing price sensitivity (Tran et al., 2022). For Chinese students, who often consider the financial implications of overseas study for their families, perceived price attractiveness plays a pivotal role in shaping openness to experience and subsequent decision-making (China Daily, 2024).

## 2.2 Intercultural Communication and Openness to Experience

Intercultural communication refers to the exchange of information, ideas, and cultural values between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Samovar et al., 2013). It involves developing intercultural competence, including understanding cultural differences, adapting communication styles, and building cross-cultural relationships (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). For international students, effective intercultural communication is essential for successful cultural adaptation, academic performance, and mental well-being (Kim & Kim, 2016). Malaysia's multicultural environment characterized by a blend of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Western cultures provides ample opportunities for intercultural interaction (UNESCO, 2020). Research has established a strong positive relationship between intercultural communication and openness to experience (Neuliep, 2012). When students engage in meaningful cross-cultural interactions, they develop greater appreciation for cultural diversity, become more open to new ideas and perspectives, and enhance their ability to adapt to unfamiliar environments. Conversely, intercultural communication apprehension fear or anxiety associated with interacting with individuals from different cultures can hinder students' openness to experience and impede cultural adaptation (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997). For Chinese students, who may face language barriers and cultural differences when studying abroad, the availability of supportive intercultural communication environments in Malaysia significantly influences their openness to experience and intention to study there (Li et al., 2022).

## 2.3 Openness to Experience and Behavioral Intention towards Educational Tourism

Openness to experience, as a core dimension of the Big Five personality framework (McCrae & Costa Jr, 1997), is defined by inherent curiosity, cognitive flexibility, tolerance for novelty, and a proactive willingness to engage with unfamiliar ideas, cultures, and environments. This trait serves as a critical psychological antecedent to decision-making in contexts marked by uncertainty and cross-cultural exposure particularly in educational tourism, where individuals must navigate new academic systems, social norms, and cultural landscapes (Velliari, 2016).

Extant research has consistently validated the positive correlation between openness to experience and international education intentions. For instance, Velliari (2016) found that students with high openness scores are 2.3 times more likely to prioritize study-abroad opportunities, driven by intrinsic motivations to expand cultural horizons, challenge cognitive schemas, and acquire contextually diverse skills. This relationship is particularly salient for Chinese students, who often frame overseas study as a holistic investment in personal development (China Daily, 2024) a goal inherently aligned with the exploratory and growth-oriented nature of openness to experience.

From a psychological mechanism perspective, openness to experience mediates the translation of external stimuli (e.g., perceived price attractiveness, intercultural communication opportunities) into behavioral intention by reducing risk aversion and enhancing perceived value of cross-cultural engagement. Students with high openness are more likely to interpret Malaysia's multicultural

environment (UNESCO, 2020) and cost-effective programs as “growth opportunities” rather than “potential challenges,” thereby strengthening their resolve to pursue educational tourism in the country. Conversely, low openness to experience may mitigate the impact of external incentives: even if students perceive Malaysia as affordable or culturally accessible, a lack of curiosity or tolerance for ambiguity may deter them from committing to overseas educational tourism (Neuliep, 2012).

#### 2.4 Underpinning Theory: Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory

The S-O-R Theory, originally developed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) in environmental psychology, serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. The theory posits that external stimuli (S) trigger cognitive and emotional reactions within an organism (O), which ultimately lead to specific behavioral responses (R). This framework has been widely adopted in consumer behavior research to explain how environmental factors influence individuals’ psychological states and subsequent decisions (Sadom, 2022).

In the context of international education, the S-O-R Theory provides a valuable lens to understand the complex interplay between external factors and students’ behavioral intention towards educational tourism. This study defines key constructs as follows:

- *Stimuli (S)*: Perceived price attractiveness and intercultural communication are identified as primary external stimuli influencing Chinese students’ decision-making processes. These factors represent environmental and contextual variables shaping students’ perceptions of studying in Malaysia.
- *Organism (O)*: Openness to experience a core personality trait characterized by curiosity, willingness to embrace new ideas, and tolerance for ambiguity is positioned as the mediating organism. This psychological construct reflects students’ internal responses to external stimuli and their readiness to engage with new cultural and academic environments.
- *Response (R)*: Behavioral intention towards educational tourism, defined as students’ conscious plan to pursue higher education and travel experiences in Malaysia, constitutes the ultimate behavioral outcome of the S-O-R process.

By mapping these constructs onto the S-O-R framework, this study aims to provide a systematic understanding of how external factors interact with students’ psychological traits to influence their behavioral intention towards educational tourism. The following literature review elaborates on the theoretical relationships between these constructs.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

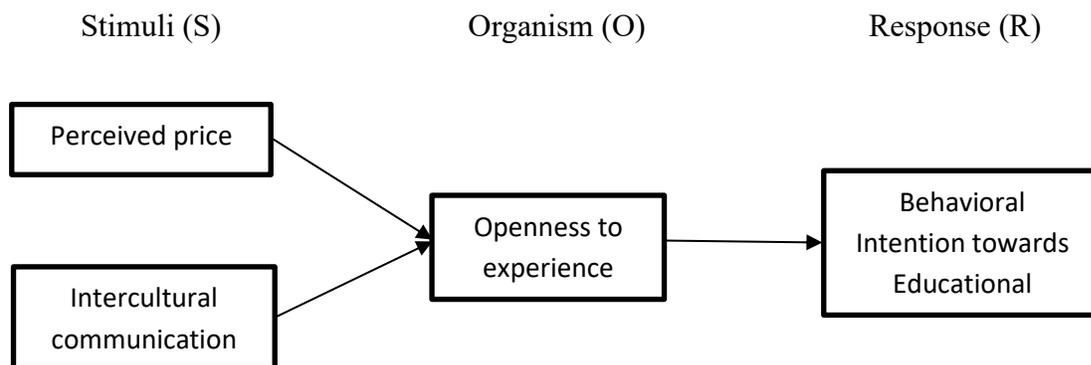
This study employs a conceptual research design that synthesizes and critically evaluates existing scholarly literature to construct a theoretically coherent framework grounded in the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) theory. Instead of relying on empirical data collection, the methodology centres on integrating prior findings related to perceived price attractiveness, intercultural communication, openness to experience, and behavioral intention toward educational tourism. This approach is suitable given the limited research on Chinese students in emerging education destinations such as Malaysia and establishes a structured theoretical foundation for future empirical validation.

The development of the proposed model follows a theory-driven analytical process, in which key constructs are systematically mapped onto the S-O-R sequence—stimuli (external factors), organism (psychological state), and response (behavioral intention). Through the consolidation of empirical insights and alignment with established theoretical principles, the study clarifies the mechanisms through which external educational stimuli shape student decision-making. Importantly, this conceptual framework functions as a basis for future quantitative studies, enabling researchers to empirically test the proposed relationships and examine the mediating role of openness to experience.

#### 4.0 DISCUSSION

Based on the S-O-R Theory and the reviewed literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework that explains the key drivers of Chinese students' intention to study in Malaysia (see Figure 1). The framework outlines the sequential relationships between external stimuli—namely perceived price attractiveness and intercultural communication—the mediating organism (openness to experience), and the behavioural response (behavioural intention towards educational tourism). Positioned within the S-O-R paradigm, this model provides a structured explanation of how environmental and contextual factors shape students' internal psychological readiness and, ultimately, their decision-making processes.

The proposed framework offers significant theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it integrates insights from past studies and extends the application of the S-O-R Theory into the context of international education, offering a more holistic understanding of what influences Chinese students' behavioural intention in emerging education markets. It also emphasises the importance of psychological traits in connecting external stimuli and behavioural outcomes which is an element often underexplored in prior research. Figure 1 illustrates how openness to experience serves as the mediating variable linking these external factors to students' behavioural intention, as follows:



**Figure 1 :** Proposed conceptual framework

Practically, the framework offers valuable implications for Malaysian higher education institutions, policymakers, and education marketers. Firstly, to enhance perceived price attractiveness, institutions should emphasize program cost-effectiveness, offer scholarships and financial aid to Chinese students, and provide transparent information on tuition fees and living

costs. Secondly, to promote intercultural communication, institutions should create supportive multicultural environments, offer language support programs, and organize cross-cultural activities facilitating interaction between Chinese and local students. Thirdly, institutions should proactively collaborate with Chinese education intermediaries, alumni networks, and social media influencers to promote studying in Malaysia and foster positive social perceptions of international education in the country. Finally, to enhance students' openness to experience, institutions should design academic and extracurricular programs encouraging curiosity, cultural exploration, and personal growth.

The proposed framework also has limitations requiring attention in future research. Firstly, as a conceptual model, it needs empirical validation using quantitative data. Future studies should conduct surveys among Chinese students to test proposed relationships and verify the mediating role of openness to experience. Secondly, the framework focuses on three key stimuli, but other factors such as institutional reputation, academic quality, and geographic proximity may influence Chinese students' behavioral intention towards educational tourism. Future research should expand the model to include these variables. Thirdly, the framework is specific to Chinese students studying in Malaysia, and its generalizability to other student populations and destinations may be limited. Future studies should replicate the research in other cultural and educational contexts to test model robustness.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper develops a comprehensive framework explaining the key drivers of Chinese students' intention to study in Malaysia. By applying the S-O-R Theory, the paper identifies perceived price attractiveness and intercultural communication as key external stimuli, openness to experience as the mediating psychological construct, and behavioral intention towards educational tourism as the ultimate behavioral response. The proposed framework provides a theoretical foundation for future empirical research and offers practical implications for Malaysian higher education institutions, policymakers, and education marketers to attract and support Chinese international students.

As the global education market evolves, it is essential for emerging destinations like Malaysia to understand the specific needs and motivations of Chinese students. By addressing the factors highlighted in this framework, Malaysia can enhance its competitiveness in the global education market, attract more Chinese students, and achieve its goal of becoming a global education hub. Future research should validate the proposed framework using empirical data, expand the model to include additional variables, and explore its generalizability to other student populations and destinations.

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