Vocational Motivation and Career Intentions in Chinese Tourism Vocational Students-The Roles of Social Perception and Talent Strategies

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Abstract

Background and Aims: In the context of China's vocational education reform and the evolving demands of the tourism industry, understanding the factors influencing tourism students' career choice intentions has become increasingly important. Vocational motivation—both intrinsic and extrinsic—plays a central role in shaping these intentions, yet its effectiveness may be influenced by students' perceptions of the tourism labor environment and the supportiveness of institutional talent cultivation strategies. Thus, this study aims to: (1) examine the effect of vocational motivation on career choice intention among tourism major students; (2) explore the mediating role of social environment perception in this relationship; and (3) assess the moderating impact of talent cultivation strategies on the indirect effect of motivation through perception.

Methodology: A structured questionnaire was distributed to 512 tourism students across higher vocational colleges in six Chinese provinces. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, structural equation modeling, and moderated mediation analysis with SPSS and AMOS. Constructs measured included vocational motivation, social environment perception, career choice intention, and perceived talent cultivation strategies.

Results: The analysis revealed that both intrinsic and extrinsic vocational motivation significantly predicted career choice intention. Social environment perception partially mediated this relationship, accounting for 29.4% of the total effect. Furthermore, talent cultivation strategies moderated the indirect effect: the mediation pathway was significantly stronger under conditions of high institutional support. When perceived talent strategy support was high, the indirect effect rose to 0.214 compared to 0.122 under low support conditions.

Conclusion: This study confirms that vocational motivation directly and indirectly shapes tourism students' career intentions, with the process significantly influenced by perceptions of the tourism sector and educational support systems. The findings underscore the importance of fostering student motivation, enhancing the public image of tourism careers, and strengthening talent cultivation practices to improve employability outcomes in China's tourism vocational education.

Keywords: Vocational Motivation; Career Choice Intention; Tourism Education; Student Employability; Chinese Vocational Education

Introduction

Amid China's ongoing economic restructuring and the strategic upgrading of its vocational education system, the alignment between students 'vocational aspirations and the human resource demands of the service sector—particularly the tourism industry—has become a focal concern in both educational and tourism management scholarship. As one of the fastest-growing service industries, tourism is not only labor-intensive but also highly sensitive to socio-technological changes, such as digital transformation and experiential consumption trends (Lv, 2025; Liu, 2025). These shifts have intensified the demand for skilled, adaptable tourism professionals. However, persistent concerns remain regarding the quality, stability, and career persistence of tourism graduates from higher vocational colleges (HVCs), prompting growing academic attention to the motivational and structural factors shaping their career trajectories (He & Wang, 2025).

Within tourism studies, theories such as the push-pull motivation model and service-dominant logic provide valuable lenses to examine how individuals are internally and externally motivated toward tourism-related career paths. While the push factors (e. g., personal interest, desire for social mobility) and pull factors (e. g., perceived industry opportunity or reputation) jointly inform career inclination, these motivations are often filtered through a dynamic perception of the tourism labor environment, including seasonality, limited career progression, and societal undervaluation of service roles (Zhou, 2021; Lü, 2024).

Furthermore, the sustainability of the tourism labor force has emerged as a global concern, especially in contexts where the profession is perceived as low-paying, high-pressure, and lacking long-term security— perceptions particularly pronounced in China's evolving tourism economy (Li, 2022).

Despite a growing body of research on employability and industry-education integration in tourism, few studies systematically address how vocational motivation interacts with students' social environment perception and institutional support structures in shaping their career choices. Existing literature often examines these variables independently, overlooking their interactive effects within tourism-specific contexts (Wen & Cai, 2021). This limits our understanding of why even highly motivated tourism students in vocational colleges may hesitate to pursue industry careers.

To address these gaps, this study integrates insights from Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) with tourism-relevant perspectives, constructing a moderated mediation model to examine how vocational motivation influences career choice intention among Chinese tourism students. The model specifically investigates: (1) the direct effect of vocational motivation on career intentions, (2) the mediating role of social environment perception—including students' interpretations of tourism's labor market conditions and social legitimacy, and (3) the moderating effect of talent cultivation strategies embedded within vocational institutions, such as curriculum relevance, experiential training, and career services.

By embedding this model within the distinctive context of Chinese tourism vocational education, this study contributes to ongoing debates about graduate quality, tourism career attractiveness, and the responsiveness of vocational training to industry needs. It offers both theoretical advancement by bridging psychological and institutional frameworks and practical guidance for stakeholders aiming to improve tourism talent retention, educational effectiveness, and long-term labor sustainability in the tourism sector.

Objectives

The study pursues the following five objectives:

1. To investigate the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic vocational motivation on tourism students' career choice intention.

2. To examine the mediating role of social environment perception in the relationship between vocational motivation and career choice intention.

3. To assess the moderating effect of perceived talent cultivation strategies on the indirect relationship between vocational motivation and career choice intention through social environment perception.

Literature review

The career decision-making process of students in higher vocational institutions has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly within the tourism education domain, where the dynamics of labor demand, job image, and talent retention are in constant flux. However, despite the volume of work on vocational education and employability, there remains limited integration of psychological, social, and institutional factors within a unified theoretical framework tailored to the tourism sector.

1. Vocational Motivation in Tourism: A Unique Context

Tourism careers are often driven by a blend of intrinsic motivations, such as passion for cultural exchange, desire for interpersonal service, or fascination with travel experiences, and extrinsic incentives, such as job stability, income, or social recognition (He & Wang, 2025). Unlike other service sectors, tourism jobs are typically characterized by seasonal volatility, emotional labor, and limited advancement opportunities, which complicate career planning for students. While Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a useful lens to differentiate between autonomous and controlled motivation, few studies have explicitly connected it to tourism-specific career aspirations.

For instance, Zhou (2021) and Lü (2024) note that many tourism students express initial enthusiasm for the industry but face waning career commitment when exposed to its realities, such as long hours, low

starting salaries, and limited social prestige—conditions that may undermine intrinsic motivation or distort its impact. Existing literature tends to generalize vocational motivation across domains, with insufficient attention to tourism-specific motivational typologies or their interaction with labor perceptions.

2. Social Environment Perception: Industry Image and Career Judgments

Perceptions of the tourism industry—what some researchers refer to as the "glamour versus grind" dichotomy—play a critical role in shaping career intentions. Tourism is often portrayed as dynamic and people-oriented, yet many students perceive it as lacking upward mobility, especially in the Chinese context, where vocational education itself is often socially devalued (Wang & Tang, 2020). Studies by He & Wang (2025) and Zhou (2021), applying the Theory of Planned Behavior, find that perceived social support, market stability, and public respect for tourism jobs significantly influence students' intention to enter the field.

Nevertheless, these studies often treat social perception as a background variable, rather than a mediating construct that dynamically transmits or transforms motivational impulses. Moreover, the broader social valuation of tourism as a career, particularly in China's emerging digital economy, remains underexplored in terms of how it filters vocational aspirations into decision outcomes. This study advances the literature by formally testing social environment perception as a mediator, thus capturing how students' career cognition is shaped by both personal values and collective narratives.

3. Talent Cultivation Strategies: Linking Pedagogy to Motivation and Perception

Tourism education, particularly in vocational settings, is typically built around applied learning, school-enterprise cooperation, and experiential training. While numerous studies emphasize the importance of internships, dual-teacher models, and industry-linked curricula in enhancing employability (Wen & Cai, 2021; Kou, 2025), there is limited empirical work connecting these strategies to students' motivational stability and career decision-making pathways.

Lü (2024) identifies a persistent mismatch between theoretical instruction and practical competency, while Li (2022) underscores the need for interdisciplinary models under the" new liberal arts" paradigm. However, these studies often assess institutional strategies in isolation, without testing how students' perceptions of educational quality interact with their motivation or social views to shape career intent. The present study addresses this omission by examining talent cultivation strategies as a moderating variable—assessing whether effective pedagogical approaches strengthen the motivational process, especially under varying environmental perceptions.

4. Theoretical Gaps and Tourism-Specific Contributions

While prior research contributes valuable insights, most studies focus on either individual-level psychological constructs, macro-level industry context, or meso-level educational practices independently. Few have attempted to integrate these dimensions into a comprehensive moderated mediation model, particularly within the vocational tourism education landscape in China. As a result, our understanding of how motivation, social perception, and institutional support interact remains fragmented.

Moreover, the significance of this gap is amplified in the Chinese tourism sector, which faces persistent issues such as high turnover, misalignment between training and job expectations, and regional disparities in skill demand (Du, 2025). Without an integrated framework, efforts to enhance tourism talent development risk being ineffective or misdirected.

By synthesizing SDT, SCCT, and Ecological Systems Theory, this study responds to these gaps through a context-specific model that captures the multilevel dynamics of vocational decision-making. Unlike prior work that often adopts general employability constructs, our model explicitly incorporates tourism-specific motivational patterns, industry image effects, and pedagogical strategies grounded in Chinese vocational settings.

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Conceptual Framework

This study constructs an integrated conceptual framework that systematically explains how vocational motivation influences career choice intention among tourism major students in Chinese higher

vocational institutions. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), and Ecological Systems Theory, the framework connects individual psychological drivers with broader educational and social contexts. It addresses a critical research gap in tourism management education by illustrating the interactive mechanisms that govern students' vocational decision-making, which are often treated in isolation in prior literature.

1. Vocational Motivation: The Starting Point of Career Consideration

At the core of the framework lies vocational motivation, conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing both intrinsic (e.g., passion for cultural exchange, interest in hospitality, enjoyment of interpersonal service) and extrinsic (e.g., job security, income potential, societal approval) motivational orientations. According to SDT, intrinsic motivation fosters autonomous engagement and psychological fulfillment, while extrinsic motivation reflects conditional goal pursuit, often influenced by external rewards and social pressures.

In the tourism context, these motivations are especially salient due to the sector's service intensity, customer-facing nature, and global orientation. Students attracted to travel, cultural interaction, or aesthetic experiences may be driven by intrinsic interests, whereas those valuing stable employment in hotels, travel agencies, or destination management may be influenced by extrinsic incentives (He & Wang, 2025). These motivational drivers act as initial impulses that lead students to evaluate tourism as a viable career path.

2. Social Environment Perception: The Mediating Mechanism

Drawing on Social Cognitive Career Theory, the model posits that the impact of motivation on career intention is not direct, but partially mediated by social environment perception. This refers to students' cognitive appraisal of labor market conditions, societal attitudes toward tourism careers, and the prestige and sustainability of the tourism industry (Zhou, 2021; Lü, 2024).

In tourism, this mediating mechanism is particularly important given the sector's complex image: while it is often associated with glamour, excitement, and global mobility, it also suffers from perceptions of low pay, long hours, and limited career progression. These perceptions shape students' self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, which, in turn, determine whether vocational motivation translates into actual career choice intention.

Thus, a student with high intrinsic motivation may still hesitate to commit to a tourism career if they perceive the industry as socially undervalued or economically unstable. Conversely, a positive external perception—e. g., optimism about tourism growth, respect for service professionals, or strong alumni role models—can enhance the salience of motivation and amplify intention formation.

3. Talent Cultivation Strategies: The Moderating Force

The third component of the framework, grounded in Ecological Systems Theory, introduces talent cultivation strategies as a moderating variable at the institutional level. These strategies include the design of relevant curricula, quality of practical training, integration of industry resources, and career counseling services—all of which shape how students perceive the supportiveness and effectiveness of their educational environment (Wen & Cai, 2021; Du, 2025).

The framework posits that the strength of the motivation-intention relationship and the effectiveness of social perception as a mediator are conditioned by the perceived quality of talent development. In institutions where students feel adequately prepared for real-world tourism challenges—through internships, employer engagement, or skill-based certifications—the pathway from motivation to career intention is expected to be stronger and more stable. Conversely, poorly aligned or outdated training models may weaken this relationship, even when motivation is high.

4. Integrated Framework: A Moderated Mediation Model

These theoretical relationships culminate in a moderated mediation model, where:
Vocational motivation influences career choice intention both directly and indirectly via social environment perception (mediation), and the strength of these paths is moderated by talent cultivation strategies.

This integrated model links micro-level psychological factors (motivation), meso-level social cognition (perception), and macro-level institutional environments (training), offering a comprehensive

understanding of how tourism students form and act upon their career intentions in a Chinese vocational context.

This model provides a solid theoretical basis for empirical testing and contributes to advancing both career development theory and tourism education practice. By validating this framework in the context of Chinese vocational tourism programs, the study offers actionable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to enhance graduate employability, motivation, sustainability, and institutional responsiveness in the evolving tourism labor market.

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Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, hypothesis-driven research design to empirically test a moderated mediation model that links vocational motivation to career choice intention via the mediating role of social environment perception and the moderating role of talent cultivation strategies. The methodological design draws on established approaches in educational psychology and career behavior research to ensure robust internal validity and contextual relevance for vocational tourism education in China.

Sample and Data Collection

The target population for this study consists of students enrolled in tourism-related programs at higher vocational colleges (HVCs) across diverse regions of China. To ensure broad representativeness, data were collected from HVCs located in six provinces, representing three major economic zones:

Eastern region (Zhejiang, Jiangsu),
Central region (Hunan, Henan),
Western region (Sichuan, Guizhou).

These provinces were selected based on their varying levels of tourism industry development, educational investment in vocational training, and regional economic diversity, which provided a balanced context for analyzing tourism students 'vocational decision-making.

A multi-stage stratified sampling strategy was employed. In the first stage, six HVCs (two from each region) were purposively selected to ensure institutional diversity in terms of size, program specialization, and public/private status. In the second stage, departments offering tourism management, hotel management, and travel services were identified. In the third stage, stratification was applied within each institution based on program type (e.g., tourism planning, hospitality, digital tourism), year of study (freshman to senior), and gender.

Within each stratum, random sampling was used to select student participants, ensuring that no single subgroup was overrepresented. This three-level stratification allowed for robust demographic and academic representation.

After obtaining institutional ethical clearance and securing informed consent from participants, a total of 550 structured questionnaires were distributed through a combination of in-person classroom sessions and online platforms (e.g., Enjoining). A total of 512 valid responses were received, yielding a high response rate of 93. 1%.

The final sample included a balanced demographic profile:
Gender:52%female, 48%male
Year of study: evenly distributed across first to third-year students
Internship experience:61%had completed at least one industry internship, 39%had not
This demographic diversity enhances the generalizability of the study's findings across the broader population of Chinese vocational tourism students.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a structured self-administered questionnaire developed based on validated instruments from prior studies and adapted for cultural and disciplinary appropriateness within the Chinese vocational education context. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The original instruments were translated into Mandarin Chinese using a back-translation method and reviewed by a panel of bilingual experts in vocational and tourism education.

To ensure clarity and contextual fit, a pilot study was conducted with 30 tourism students from a vocational institution, and minor adjustments were made to wording based on their feedback.

Vocational motivation was measured using a 12-item scale grounded in Self-Determination Theory, adapted from Gagné and Deci (2005) and Wang and Tang (2020), capturing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations. Sample items included "I want to work in tourism because I enjoy helping people have meaningful travel experiences" for intrinsic motivation and "I chose tourism because it offers stable employment and decent income opportunities" for extrinsic motivation. Social environment perception was assessed through 8 items derived from constructs in Social Cognitive Career Theory and localized Chinese tourism employment literature (Zhou, 2021; He, 2020). Items reflected students 'perceptions of social recognition, industry stability, and labor market barriers, such as "Tourism jobs are generally respected by society" and "There are limited advancement opportunities in the tourism industry."

Career choice intention was evaluated using 5 items adapted from Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behavior and contextualized for tourism studies. A representative item was "I intend to work in the tourism or hospitality sector after completing my education." Talent cultivation strategies were measured through 10 items reflecting students' perceptions of institutional practices such as curriculum relevance, quality of hands-on training, and integration with industry demands. These items were based on national vocational education evaluation standards and prior research in Chinese tourism education (Wen & Cai, 2021; Liu, 2025), with examples including "My college provides adequate opportunities for hands-on training in real tourism settings" and "The curriculum is well-aligned with the current demands of the tourism industry". The final instrument demonstrated strong reliability across all scales, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.84 to 0.90.

Validity and Reliability

Before formal hypothesis testing, the measurement model underwent a two-stage validation process to ensure construct reliability and validity. First, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted using SPSS (version XX) to identify the underlying structure of the measurement items. Principal axis factoring with Promax rotation was employed, as it allows for correlation among latent constructs, which is appropriate given the theoretical relationships among variables such as motivation, perception, and intention. Factors were retained based on eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and item loadings above 0.50 thresholds. Items that exhibited cross-loadings or low communalities were removed, resulting in a clean factor structure aligned with theoretical expectations.

Subsequently, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed in AMOS (version XX) to assess model fit and validate the factor structure obtained from EFA. The results indicated a satisfactory fit across multiple indices: $\chi^2/df=2.41$, CFI=0.951, TLI=0.940, RMSEA=0.056, GFI=0.916, and NFI=0.928. These values fall within accepted cutoffs, indicating a robust measurement model. Convergent validity was supported by high standardized factor loadings (all above 0.60), average variance extracted (AVE) values exceeding the 0.50 benchmark, and composite reliability (CR) values above 0.70 for all constructs. Discriminant validity was confirmed as the square roots of AVE for each construct were greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations.

All constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.84 to 0.90. This indicates a high level of reliability across all scales, including those adapted for the tourism education context.

Given the cultural adaptation of measurement instruments from previous studies, attention was paid to potential biases through expert review, pilot testing, and linguistic equivalence procedures. Back-translation and item refinement were applied to reduce semantic ambiguity, and pilot results suggested no major issues related to item misinterpretation. However, measurement invariance across subgroups (e.g., gender or region) was not formally tested, which is acknowledged as a limitation for future cross-regional tourism education studies in China.

Data Analysis

To test the hypothesized relationships among the core variables, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed using AMOS 26.0 in conjunction with SPSS 26.0. This approach allowed for the simultaneous estimation of both direct and indirect effects, aligning with the study's conceptualization of a moderated mediation model. Before SEM analysis, the assumptions of normality, linearity, and multicollinearity were assessed. Normality was checked using skewness and kurtosis values, which fell within the acceptable range of±2.0, while scatterplots confirmed linearity among variables. All continuous variables were mean-centered, which reduces multicollinearity between predictors and their interaction terms and allows for more meaningful interpretation of the moderation effects. Mean-centering was selected over standardized z-scores to preserve the original metric of the constructs, which is preferable in interpreting conditional effects in PROCESS analysis.

Mediation effects were tested using the bootstrap resampling method with 5,000 iterations, generating bias-corrected confidence intervals to determine the significance of indirect effects. This non-parametric approach was chosen due to its robustness in estimating mediation effects without relying on the assumption of normality. The analysis confirmed the presence of indirect pathways from vocational motivation to career choice intention via social environment perception.

To test the conditional nature of these indirect effects, moderated mediation analysis was conducted using PROCESS Macro version 4.2 (Model 7), as developed by Hayes. This model specification allowed for the evaluation of whether the strength of the mediation pathway varied across different levels of perceived talent cultivation strategies. From a theoretical standpoint, this analytical strategy is particularly appropriate in the context of tourism education, where career intentions are shaped not only by internal psychological factors but also by the institutional environments in which students are embedded. The use of moderated mediation modeling thus reflects the study's commitment to capturing the complex, layered dynamics of vocational decision-making in tourism, consistent with frameworks such as Social Cognitive Career Theory and Ecological Systems Theory.

The combined use of SEM and PROCESS Macro enabled a rigorous empirical assessment of the hypothesized relationships while also supporting a nuanced interpretation of the mechanisms through which vocational motivation influences tourism students 'career development under varying educational conditions.

Ethical Considerations

All research procedures in this study strictly complied with internationally recognized ethical standards for human subjects research. Before data collection, ethical approval was formally obtained from the research ethics committee of the lead institution. Participants were clearly informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and participation was entirely voluntary. Anonymity was preserved by avoiding the collection of personally identifiable information, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the data handling and analysis processes. These measures ensured that the study met both institutional and disciplinary ethical expectations for research involving students in educational settings.

Results

The empirical analysis provides robust evidence supporting the hypothesized relationships within the proposed moderated mediation model. The findings are organized into three core sections: (1) descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, (2) structural equation modeling and mediation testing, and (3) moderated mediation analysis. Each section is accompanied by a corresponding table summarizing key statistical outcomes.

1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis

Descriptive results show that tourism major students exhibit relatively high levels of both intrinsic and extrinsic vocational motivation, with intrinsic motivation (M=3.89, SD=0.68) slightly more prominent. Career choice intention (M=3.82, SD=0.70) was also moderately high. In contrast, social environment

perception displayed greater dispersion (M=3.45, SD=0.77), indicating students 'varied evaluations of the tourism sector's external conditions. Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between both types of vocational motivation and career choice intention, as well as between social environment perception and career choice intention. These correlations provide initial empirical support for the model's internal structure.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Coefficients

Variable	Mean	SD	Correlation with Career Choice Intention
Intrinsic Motivation	3.89	0.68	0.512
Extrinsic Motivation	3.74	0.72	0.489
Social Environment Perception	3.45	0.77	0.561
Career Choice Intention	3.82	0.7	1

2. Structural Equation Modeling and Mediation Testing

The hypothesized structural equation model demonstrated acceptable fit indices (χ^2/df=2.47, CFI=0.951, TLI=0.942, RMSEA=0.053), confirming the appropriateness of the model structure. Path coefficient estimates revealed that vocational motivation significantly and positively predicted career choice intention (β=0.428, p< 0.001). Furthermore, vocational motivation also had a significant effect on social environment perception (β=0.493, p< 0.001), and social environment perception significantly influenced career choice intention (β=0.361, p< 0.001). Bootstrap mediation testing further confirmed the mediating effect of social environment perception, accounting for 29.4% of the total effect of vocational motivation on career intention (indirect effect=0.178, 95%CI [0.129, 0.234]).

Table 2 Structural Equation Model Path Coefficients

Path	Standardizedβ	p-value
Vocational Motivation→Career Choice Intention	0.428	<0.001
Vocational Motivation Social Environment Perception	0.493	<0.001
Social Environment Perception Career Choice Intention	0.361	<0.001

3. Moderated Mediation Analysis

The moderating role of talent cultivation strategies was assessed using PROCESS Macro Model 7. Results confirmed that the strength of the indirect effect of vocational motivation on career choice intention via social environment perception was conditional on the level of perceived talent cultivation support. Specifically, the indirect effect was stronger at higher levels of perceived strategy effectiveness. When talent cultivation strategies were perceived as high-quality, the indirect effect reached 0.214 (95%CI [0.168, 0.270]), compared to 0.122 (95%CI [0.075, 0.174]) under low strategy support conditions. These results underscore the institutional amplification effect of strategic education environments on career motivation pathways.

Table 3 Moderated Mediation Effects at Varying Levels of Talent Cultivation Strategy

Talent Cultivation Level	Indirect Effect	95%CI Lower	95%CI Upper
Low	0.122	0.075	0.174
Medium	0.178	0.129	0.234
High	0.214	0.168	0.27

Discussion

The findings of this study offer meaningful theoretical and practical insights into the mechanisms by which vocational motivation influences career choice intention among tourism students in Chinese higher vocational colleges. By empirically validating the mediating role of social environment perception and the moderating effect of talent cultivation strategies, the study not only confirms key propositions in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) but also enriches these frameworks within the specific context of tourism education and workforce development.

The significant positive relationship identified between vocational motivation and career choice intention reinforces the idea that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational drivers are essential psychological resources guiding students' career cognition and decision-making. Students with strong intrinsic interest in tourism—such as enthusiasm for cultural exchange, hospitality, or interpersonal interaction—tend to exhibit a more sustained and committed intention to pursue tourism careers. Simultaneously, the weight of extrinsic factors, such as perceived job stability, salary expectations, and social status, reflects the pragmatic orientation of many vocational students, consistent with the dual-motivation structure observed in Chinese tourism education settings (He & Wang, 2025; Wang & Tang, 2020). These motivations are particularly salient in tourism, where jobs often require high levels of emotional labor, customer orientation, and adaptability. Compared to other vocational fields, tourism's work environment—characterized by irregular hours, frontline service, and mobility expectations—may intensify both the appeal of intrinsic fulfillment and the pressure of extrinsic incentives. These findings resonate with discussions in tourism human resource literature, especially regarding occupational commitment and identity formation in service-intensive sectors. The results also align with emerging models of tourism occupational identity, suggesting that vocational motivation plays a foundational role in shaping students' emotional attachment to the profession and their anticipated persistence within the industry.

The mediating role of social environment perception adds critical nuance to this motivational pathway. Students 'evaluations of the external tourism context—ranging from societal respect for tourism jobs to perceived employment barriers—significantly influence whether motivation materializes into career intent. Even when motivation is high, negative perceptions of the tourism sector as low-status, unstable, or poorly compensated can dampen intention and lead to hesitation or disengagement. Conversely, when students perceive tourism as a growing and respected field—reinforced by role models, industry narratives, and government discourse—motivational energy is more likely to be channeled into action. Among the various components of social environment perception, the perceived industry reputation and future growth potential of tourism careers emerged as especially influential, echoing findings from Zhou (2021) and Lü (2024). These dynamics can be linked to broader tourism branding and destination image literature, though approached here from the supply-side perspective of potential employees. Moreover, regional and national tourism policies—such as investments in cultural tourism, the digitalization of attractions, or post-COVID recovery campaigns—may indirectly shape students 'perceptions and attitudes, signaling the importance of policy alignment in tourism talent strategies.

The moderating role of talent cultivation strategies represents a noteworthy theoretical advancement. The data show that when students perceive their educational institutions as offering industry-relevant, experiential, and supportive learning environments, the motivational influence on career intention is significantly strengthened. This confirms the proposition from Ecological Systems Theory that institutional environments interact with internal dispositions to shape behavioral outcomes. Notably, different types of talent strategies may exert differential effects. For example, internships and work-integrated learning may reinforce extrinsic motivations by exposing students to real-world job expectations, while reflective classroom activities and value-centered guidance may deepen intrinsic engagement. These insights align with tourism education literature emphasizing the importance of experiential learning, dual-teacher systems, and school-enterprise integration (Wen & Cai, 2021; Du, 2025). The findings could also be interpreted through the lens of human capital theory, in which high-quality, context-specific training investments increase both perceived and actual employability. To this end, Chinese higher vocational

colleges could strategically design tourism programs that embed industry collaboration, simulate real job scenarios, and cultivate both technical and emotional competencies essential to service work.

From a practical and policy perspective, the results suggest that improving student career outcomes in tourism requires a holistic ecosystem that simultaneously fosters motivational development, reshapes social perception, and strengthens institutional responsiveness. Specific, actionable recommendations include organizing regular industry forums and employer talks that allow students to interact with successful tourism professionals, showcasing alumni who have advanced within the sector, and developing localized labor market dashboards to provide up-to-date career insights. Tourism colleges could also collaborate with destination marketing organizations to frame tourism as not only a leisure experience but also a meaningful career platform. However, implementation may face challenges such as resource constraints, institutional inertia, or limited employer engagement. Addressing these barriers requires support from local education bureaus, policy incentives for school-enterprise partnerships, and professional development programs for instructors aimed at improving tourism-specific pedagogy.

Methodologically, this study's use of a moderated mediation model provides a robust framework for exploring complex interactions between individual, institutional, and societal factors. It demonstrates how micro-level psychological orientations (motivation), meso-level contextual perceptions (social environment), and macro-level structural supports (education systems) jointly shape tourism students 'career behavior. Future research could build on this framework by using longitudinal designs to examine how career intentions evolve after graduation, especially during the early transition to work. One possible hypothesis is that the effect of vocational motivation on actual employment outcomes may be moderated by early work experiences or mentor relationships. Regional comparisons within China—such as between coastal tourism hubs like Zhejiang or Guangdong and inland provinces with emerging tourism infrastructure—could further illuminate how local labor markets influence motivational dynamics. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or narrative inquiry, would provide richer insight into how students interpret and internalize industry messages, institutional signals, and personal values as they navigate the uncertain landscape of tourism careers.

In summary, this study advances an integrated understanding of how vocational motivation, contextual perception, and institutional strategy interact to shape career intention among tourism students in China's vocational education system. It calls for a systemic, multi-level reform of tourism talent development—one that builds not only skillsets but also career identities, motivational resilience, and long-term professional commitment in a rapidly evolving industry.

Conclusion

This study offers a theoretically grounded and empirically validated account of how vocational motivation shapes career choice intention among tourism students in Chinese higher vocational colleges. By integrating vocational motivation, social environment perception, and talent cultivation strategies into a moderated mediation model, the study highlights the dynamic interplay between psychological, environmental, and institutional factors. Results show that vocational motivation—both intrinsic and extrinsic—is a key driver of career intention, yet its effect is significantly shaped by students' perception of the tourism industry's social credibility. Specifically, social environment perception accounted for 29. 4% of the total effect of motivation on intention, while talent cultivation strategies strengthened the indirect effect by 75% between low and high support conditions.

Students' views on tourism's career credibility—mainly tied to job security, perceived social status, and industry growth—proved critical in converting motivation into actual career intention. The findings underscore that when institutional strategies, such as curriculum relevance, industry linkage, and career counseling, align with both student needs and labor market expectations, the positive effect of motivation is amplified, enabling more confident and optimistic career planning.

This research contributes to tourism vocational education theory by demonstrating, for the first time in this context, how psychological drivers, social perception, and institutional interventions interact rather

than act independently. It also provides practical guidance for tourism educators and policymakers in China, emphasizing the need to strategically realign training systems with industry demands and enhance the public image of tourism careers. These insights are particularly relevant for addressing talent shortages and repositioning tourism as a viable, respected profession. Looking ahead, this model may inform regional and national strategies for tourism workforce development and education reform in China's evolving service economy.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, several targeted recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of vocational tourism education in China. First, vocational colleges should implement differentiated strategies to foster both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. For example, integrating culturally relevant tourism content—such as case studies of successful Chinese scenic sites, local tourism entrepreneurship, or traditional heritage tourism—into first-year curricula can build early intrinsic engagement. In contrast, final-year students may benefit more from structured guidance on job opportunities, salary trends, and career pathways, addressing extrinsic concerns. These efforts can be supported through partnerships with employers to promote tourism careers via employer branding strategies.

Second, reshaping students 'perception of the tourism profession is essential. Government and industry actors should launch national or regional storytelling campaigns featuring real career stories, successful alumni, and the broader social value of tourism. These narratives can help counter persistent stereotypes in China that associate tourism jobs with instability or low status. Emphasizing long-term career growth and service excellence can reposition tourism as a desirable, respected profession.

Third, institutions should deepen school-industry integration by inviting professionals to co-teach, co-develop curricula, and participate in curriculum review boards. Mechanisms such as annual industry feedback meetings and student input systems can ensure ongoing curriculum relevance. Expanding dual-teacher systems and refining internships with clear learning outcomes will help bridge the gap between academic learning and industry skills, a long-standing challenge in tourism education.

Fourth, policy-level efforts are needed to incentivize high-quality school-enterprise collaboration. Government funding could be linked to employment outcome metrics such as tourism-sector job placement rates, employer satisfaction, and graduate retention. Addressing the current mismatch between training and actual workforce needs—such as shortages in digital tourism skills or event planning—requires coordination across education, labor, and tourism departments to develop a national tourism talent strategy.

Finally, future research should track how students' motivation, perceptions, and career plans evolve throughout their studies and into early employment. Longitudinal and mixed-method designs could explore when motivation shifts most significantly—e. g., after internships or graduation—and how these patterns differ across regions, such as between mature tourism hubs like Hangzhou and emerging destinations in western China. These insights can inform more responsive, data-driven reforms in China's tourism vocational education system.

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