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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA COMMUNICATION ON PAKISTANI STUDENTS' CHOICE OF CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION: A MIXED-METHOD QUALITATIVE STUDY ON PEER CREDIBILITY, DESTINATION IMAGE, AND DECISION ACTIVATION

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Abstract
Social media platforms have transformed international student mobility by acting as dynamic, decentralized peer-information ecosystems. This study investigates how Chinese higher education is portrayed across digital platforms and how prospective Pakistani students interpret, evaluate, and utilize online narratives to make study-abroad decisions. Utilizing an exploratory qualitative mixed-method design, the study combines a quantitative codebook and qualitative thematic analysis of N = 200 social media comments (Facebook, YouTube, TikTok) with semi-structured in-depth interviews of N = 20 prospective, admitted, and current Pakistani students in Chinese universities. Codebook analysis reveals that student discussions focus primarily on Information Seeking regarding application procedures (23.0%), Peer-Generated Trust (15.5%), Scholarship Competition & Uncertainty (14.0%), Cost & Affordability (13.5%), and Career Mobility (12.0%). Empirical matrix triangulation demonstrates strong convergence across datasets regarding multi-platform information ecosystems, the superior credibility of student-generated vlogs over commercial agents, and active cross-checking behaviors against official university portals. However, a significant divergence emerges regarding selective positivity: while promotional posts and vlogs construct an aspirational image of modern campuses and generous funding, comment interactions and lived experiences expose hidden structural obstacles, including age limits, documentation complexity, and language barriers. The study establishes that social media functions not merely as a promotional medium, but as a peer-driven guidance infrastructure where decision-making unfolds as a social,

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cumulative, and iterative process. Policy implications for university admissions and scholarship authorities are discussed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become a decisive information space for prospective international students, fundamentally reshaping how individuals discover, evaluate, and choose foreign higher education destinations and institutions (Keystone Education Group, 2025; Li et al., 2025). Digital channels such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp, and WeChat now serve as primary touchpoints for accessing granular details regarding scholarship opportunities, application logistics, living expenses, campus climate, and institutional reputation (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Pawar & Islam, 2025). In this digital environment, social media does not operate merely as a passive medium for institutional announcements; rather, it actively mediates student aspirations, risk perceptions, and mobility expectations through peer-generated vlogs, experiential commentary, and community-based advice (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Jayadeva, 2024).

China has emerged as one of the premier higher education hubs in Asia for Global South students, particularly from Pakistan. This educational mobility corridor is strongly bolstered by fully funded Chinese Government Scholarships (CSC), provincial funding schemes, the strategic infrastructure framework of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and deepening bilateral socio-economic ties (Kayani et al., 2015; Li et al., 2025; Yasmin et al., 2022). Chinese universities and recruitment agencies increasingly utilize digital platforms to market academic programs in Pakistan (Ahmad & Kai, 2026; Li et al., 2025). Simultaneously, enrolled Pakistani students actively produce digital content ranging from informal YouTube vlogs to TikTok shorts sharing their daily routines, academic experiences, and scholarship advice.

Despite this heightened digital visibility, significant empirical gaps remain in the higher education mobility literature. Existing research on social media and international student recruitment focuses predominantly on Western study destinations (such as the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia) or treats international cohorts as a homogeneous demographic (Agyapong & Yuan, 2022; Reddy, 2014). Consequently, limited scholarship systematically examines how students from the Global South negotiate digital narratives when contemplating non-Western education hubs like China. Specifically, there is a paucity of empirical work evaluating how prospective students cross-check peer-generated electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) against official institutional communications, or how online selective portrayals shape lived application realities.

To address these empirical and context-specific gaps, this study investigates the impact of social media communication on Pakistani students' choice of Chinese higher education by examining both digital representations and subjective interpretations. Guided by an exploratory qualitative mixed-method approach, the research combines a codebook frequency analysis of N = 200 anonymized social media comments with in-depth semi-structured interviews of N = 20 prospective, admitted, and currently enrolled Pakistani students. The investigation is driven by two central research questions:

RQ1: How is Chinese higher education portrayed to Pakistani students across social media platforms, and what are the dominant thematic frequencies and narrative patterns within audience interactions?

RQ2: How do Pakistani students interpret, evaluate, and utilize social media information when making decisions to study in China, and how do peer-generated narratives interact with official verification practices?

2. Literature Review

The relevant literature synthesizes research across higher education marketing, digital eWOM

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dynamics, study-abroad influencers, and Global South student mobility factors.

2.1 Higher Education Digital Marketing And Ewom

Higher education institutions globally have integrated social media into recruitment strategies to enhance brand equity, demonstrate campus culture, and foster direct interaction with prospective applicants (Peruta & Shields, 2017; Rutter et al., 2016). However, research indicates that institutional social media accounts often deliver one-way promotional messaging that fails to address granular student concerns regarding daily survival, visa approval probabilities, or post-graduation employment (Pinar et al., 2011). Consequently, prospective applicants increasingly rely on informal eWOM channels where organic peer interactions fill informational voids left by official university marketing (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011).

2.2 Student-Generated Vlogs and Study- Abroad Influencers

Recent scholarship highlights the rise of 'study-abroad influencers' current students or alumni who produce digital content offering insider advice on scholarships, admission tactics, and overseas living (Jayadeva, 2024). These creators cultivate parasocial relationships with followers, offering psychological reassurance and step-by-step guidance. Peer-generated vlogs are celebrated for visual authenticity because they depict unpolished aspects of daily student life, such as dorm accommodation, halal food sourcing, and classroom dynamics (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016). Nevertheless, scholars caution that influencer content can suffer from selective visibility, overemphasizing personal success stories while glossing over structural hurdles such as language barriers or visa rejections (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

2.3 Destination Image of Emerging Hubs: China

China's positioning as an emerging destination for international students rests on significant state investments in higher education, institutional rankings, and generous scholarship schemes (Li et al., 2025; Yasmin et al., 2022). For students from Global South nations, digital content showcasing state-of-the-art research laboratories, modern urban infrastructure, and affordable living establishes a highly attractive destination image (Tan & Wu, 2016). Empirical studies confirm that scholarship availability, low tuition fees, and perceived safety serve as powerful pull factors for Pakistani students considering study in China (Kayani et al., 2015). Beyond academic logistics, audience discussions cover daily survival concerns and intercultural communication challenges experienced by international cohorts on Chinese campuses (Ahmad & Ahamed, 2024).

2.4 Push-Pull Dynamics in Pakistani Higher Education Mobility

Pakistani international student mobility is driven by strong push factors, including intense domestic university admission competition, economic volatility, and limited domestic employment avenues (Kayani et al., 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Conversely, pull factors include fully funded foreign scholarships, international degree recognition, and opportunities for upward socio-economic mobility (Casas Trujillo et al., 2020; Yasmin et al., 2022). While existing literature documents these broad macro-level drivers, limited research explores how micro-level social media interactions alter student risk perceptions, mediate peer trust, or trigger final university application choices. This educational mobility corridor is strongly bolstered by fully funded Chinese Government Scholarships (CSC), provincial funding schemes, the strategic infrastructure framework of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its associated media narratives (Jan & Ahmad, 2026; Kayani et al., 2015), and deepening bilateral socio-economic ties. To interpret these micro-level dynamics, the study draws on a set of complementary theoretical lenses, outlined in the following section, that together explain how credibility is assigned, how destination

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perceptions form, and how peer interaction translates into concrete decisions.

3. Theoretical And Conceptual Framework

Building on the gaps identified in the literature review, and rather than relying on a single restrictive model, this study integrates three complementary theoretical frameworks to conceptualize digital international student mobility: Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and Source Credibility Theory, Destination Image Theory, and Social Learning Frameworks. Together, these frameworks guide the study by explaining, respectively, why peer-generated content is trusted, how that content shapes students' perceptions of China as a study destination, and how repeated peer interaction ultimately activates the decision to apply.

3.1 Electronic Word-of-Mouth (eWOM) and Source Credibility Theory

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) refers to any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former students about an institution or destination, made available to a multitude of people via the internet (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Grounded in Source Credibility Theory (Filieri & McLeay, 2014), information adoption depends heavily on perceived source expertise, trustworthiness, and homophily (perceived similarity between message sender and receiver). In international education, peer-generated eWOM such as student vlogs, unscripted comment replies, and forum discussions is routinely perceived as vastly more authentic and trustworthy than official university prospectuses or commercial agency advertising (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Jayadeva, 2024). Prospective students attribute higher credibility to peers because they share similar socio-economic backgrounds and cultural anxieties.

3.2 Destination Image Theory (Cognitive and Affective Dimensions)

Destination Image Theory posits that an individual's mental representation of a geographic location consists of cognitive attributes (evaluations of tangible costs, safety, academic infrastructure, and employment prospects) and affective attributes (emotional feelings, inspiration, and aspirational appeal) (Bigné et al., 2001; Tan & Wu, 2016). In higher education marketing, social media content shapes both dimensions: cognitive portrayals emphasize fully funded CSC scholarships and modern laboratory facilities, while affective portrayals showcase international lifestyle, cultural adaptation, and personal transformation (de la Hoz-Correa & Muñoz-Leiva, 2019; Li et al., 2025).

3.3 Social Learning and Decision Activation

University choice is rarely a single, isolated decision event; rather, it is a social, iterative, and cumulative learning process (Pawar & Islam, 2025). According to Social Learning Theory, individuals acquire behaviors, attitudes, and decision confidence through continuous observation, interaction, and peer reinforcement within social networks. Online communities (Facebook scholarship groups, WhatsApp applicant chats, comment sections) serve as interactive problem-solving hubs where peer encouragement acts as a 'decision catalyst,' transforming general interest into concrete application behavior. Taken together, these three frameworks form the conceptual lens through which the study's methodology, findings, and discussion are subsequently developed and interpreted.

4. Methodology And Research Design

4.1 Research Rationale and Design

This study employs an exploratory qualitative mixed-method design combining quantitative content coding of social media comments with in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews. Combining quantitative frequency distribution of audience comments with qualitative thematic interpretation enables empirical triangulation, enhancing analytic depth, rigor, and credibility (Morriss, 2024).

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4.2 Dual Dataset and Sampling Strategy

Data collection comprised two distinct but complementary datasets:

Dataset 1 (Social Media Comments): A purposive sample of N = 200 user comments was extracted from public Facebook scholarship groups ('Study in China', 'CSC Scholarships Pakistan'), YouTube student vlogs, and TikTok scholarship posts published between 2023 and 2025. Inclusion criteria required comments to explicitly discuss Chinese higher education, CSC scholarships, application logistics, or living experiences from a Pakistani perspective. All comments were anonymized and assigned unique identifiers (C1 to C200).

Dataset 2 (Semi-Structured Interviews): Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with N = 20 Pakistani students who were actively applying to, recently admitted by, or currently enrolled in Chinese universities. Participants were recruited via Facebook international student groups, WhatsApp scholarship networks, and academic referrals. Interviews lasted 15–30 minutes, were conducted online in English or Urdu, audio-recorded with consent, and fully transcribed.

4.3 Analytical Procedure

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2024) six-phase thematic analysis framework (familiarization, initial coding, category development, thematic search, review, and definition):

1. First-Cycle Codebook Analysis: The N = 200 comments were subjected to inductive first-cycle open coding. Codes were categorized into 12 discrete, mutually exclusive functional categories to establish numerical frequency distributions and percentage weights across audience discussions.
2. Second-Cycle Thematic Analysis: Interview transcripts were coded independently to extract overarching narrative themes regarding information channels, trust negotiation, visual authenticity, and decision activation.
3. Empirical Triangulation: Findings from the comment frequency analysis and interview themes were integrated into a systematic Triangulation Matrix to evaluate empirical convergence, divergence, and complementary insights.

4.4 Trustworthiness and Ethical Compliance

Trustworthiness was ensured through intercoder checking (comparing independent coding across research team members), audit trail documentation, and member checking with select interview participants (Morriss, 2024). Ethical approval was maintained by fully anonymizing all participants, removing personal handles, securing digital data in encrypted storage, and securing informed consent.

5. Results And Findings

The findings are structured into three sections: (5.1) Codebook frequency analysis of the N = 200 social media comments (RQ1); (5.2) Qualitative thematic analysis of student interview narratives (RQ2); and (5.3) Matrix triangulation demonstrating dataset convergence and divergence.

5.1 Quantitative Codebook and Qualitative Analysis of Social Media Comments (RQ1)

To map how Chinese higher education is portrayed and discussed in online spaces, all 200 social media comments were coded inductively into 12 primary analytical categories. Table 1 presents the complete codebook, detailing category descriptions, raw comment counts, and percentage distributions.

Table 1: Codebook and Category Frequencies of Analyzed Social Media Comments (N = 200)

Code Category	Description	No. of Comments (%)
Information seeking – procedures	Inquiries on CSC docs, SOP, visa, email response	46 (23.0%)

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Trust in peer-generated content	Reliance on seniors, vloggers, comment replies	31 (15.5%)
Scholarship uncertainty & competition	Quotas, luck, selection bias, renewal criteria	28 (14.0%)
Cost & affordability	Stipends, living expenses, rent, food costs	27 (13.5%)
Career & future mobility	Post-grad jobs, PhD prospects, degree value	24 (12.0%)
Distrust of agents / commercial content	Skepticism toward admission agents, scams, sponsored posts	22 (11.0%)
Language barriers	Chinese language requirement, English medium availability	21 (10.5%)
Cultural & religious adjustment	Halal food sourcing, prayer facilities, culture shock	19 (9.5%)
Emotional concerns	Loneliness, homesickness, social isolation	15 (7.5%)
Safety & discrimination	Racism concerns, gender safety, campus security	14 (7.0%)
Decision activation	Expressing direct motivation or applying post-video	11 (5.5%)
Social mobility framing	Framing scholarship as middle-class upward mobility	10 (5.0%)

Note: N = 200 comments; 268 total code assignments allowed across categories.

As detailed in Table 1, social media audience interactions are dominated by practical, procedural, and trust-related themes:

Information Seeking and Procedural Navigation (23.0%):
The single largest category of comment interactions involves prospective students seeking practical advice regarding application assembly, document attestation, and university response times. Commenters frequently express frustration with slow official email communication from admissions offices and turn to peer forums for guidance. For example, commenter C1 wrote: 'Bhai please guide about CSC documents, your video helped a lot,' while C14 noted: 'Why don't universities reply to emails?' Commenters actively seek step-by-step instructions for navigating the Chinese Scholarship Council (CSC) application portal (C26).

Peer Credibility vs. Intermediary Distrust (15.5% vs. 11.0%):
A central dynamic in the online discourse is the stark contrast between strong trust in peer-generated content and profound skepticism toward commercial admission agents. Commenters repeatedly warn peers against paid consultants who charge exorbitant fees or issue fraudulent documents. As C3 stated: 'I don't trust agents anymore, only seniors can tell the truth,' while C72 warned: 'Avoid paid admission consultants, they scam.' Authenticity is attributed to current international students who candidly disclose both benefits and hardships (C6, C21).
Scholarship Competition, Affordability, and Career Mobility (14.0%, 13.5%, 12.0%): Scholarship availability is framed as a critical enabler for middle-class Pakistani students facing financial constraints. Commenters evaluate China as an affordable alternative to Western institutions (C4). However, anxiety regarding scholarship quotas, selection fairness, and GPA renewal

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requirements is prominent (C7, C19, C128). Regarding post-graduation outcomes, commenters express keen interest in whether Chinese degrees yield employment in China, PhD admission globally, or recognition by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan (C12, C18, C57).
Cultural Adaptation and Emotional Realities (9.5%, 7.5%, 7.0%): Beyond academic logistics, audience discussions cover daily survival concerns, including halal food availability (C17, C40, C135), language barriers (C10, C44), homesickness (C23, C47), and safety or discrimination concerns (C5, C28, C50). Commenters utilize social media to seek practical coping strategies from senior students already residing in China.

5.2 Qualitative Analysis of Interview Data (RQ2)
Thematic analysis of the N = 20 student interviews illuminated how students navigate social media during their decision-making journey across six sub-themes:
1. Multi-Platform Information Ecosystems: Participants utilize platforms strategically based on specific informational needs. Facebook groups and WhatsApp applicant communities provide real-time peer troubleshooting and document templates; YouTube vlogs offer visual immersion into campus environments and dormitories; and WeChat is adopted as a formal, authoritative communication channel once students connect with institutional administrators or supervisors in China.
2. Format-Driven Authenticity: Interviewees overwhelmingly identified unscripted student vlogs as the most influential content format. Visual depictions of lecture halls, cafeterias, and city transit were perceived as transparent reflections of reality, contrasting sharply with polished, marketing-oriented institutional promotional videos.
2. Trust Negotiation and Verification Practices: While social media content sparks initial interest, students execute systematic verification. Information gathered from vlogs or Facebook groups is routinely cross-checked against official Chinese university portals, CSC guidelines, and HEC equivalence criteria. Social media serves as an initial heuristic rather than a final authority.
4. Motivational Framing and Anxiety Reduction: Exposure to success stories of fellow Pakistani students studying in China reduces psychological distance and alleviates fear of foreign relocation. Visual evidence of thriving peer communities fosters self-efficacy and inspires prospective students to submit applications.
5. Selective Positivity and Hidden Obstacles: Participants noted that main social media posts often underrepresent structural hurdles such as strict age restrictions, complex medical check procedures, language barriers in laboratory settings, and bureaucratic delays. These omitted details are typically discovered only through deep comment reading or lived experience.
6. Cumulative and Community-Based Decision Dynamics: Decision-making is rarely triggered by a single post. Instead, it develops iteratively through months of repeated exposure, peer interaction in WhatsApp groups, and continuous validation from senior mentors.

5.3 Empirical Matrix Triangulation
To strengthen qualitative rigor, findings from the interview analysis were cross-evaluated against the 200 social media comments using a systematic Triangulation Matrix. Table 2 illustrates the alignment and convergence between datasets.

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Table 2: Matrix Triangulation Comparing Interview Themes with Social Media Comment Analysis

Interview Theme	Evidence from Interviews	Corresponding Comment Theme	Convergence / Divergence
Platform Ecosystems	Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, WeChat play distinct roles across application stages.	Information seeking – procedures	Strong Convergence (Both highlight multi-platform reliance)
Content Format & Authenticity	Vlogs seen as highly authentic; promotional posts viewed with caution.	Trust in peer-generated content vs. agent distrust	Strong Convergence (Both show peer vlogs preferred over marketing)
Trust & Verification	Social media info is systematically cross-checked against official sites.	Skepticism toward agents; calls for peer verification	Strong Convergence (Both treat social media as initial guide)
Motivational Activation	Peer success stories reduce fear and boost application confidence.	Decision activation & social mobility framing	Strong Convergence (Both show peer stories act as catalysts)
Selective Portrayals & Hidden Barriers	Interviews reveal hidden age limits, bureaucracy, and language barriers.	Ambivalent destination image in comment sections	Partial Convergence / Divergence (Vlogs overemphasize positivity; comments/interviews reveal barriers)
Cumulative Decision Dynamics	Decisions develop iteratively over months of community interaction.	Comment sections as collective learning spaces	Strong Convergence (Both demonstrate social, cumulative decision-making)

The triangulation matrix demonstrates powerful empirical convergence on five core dimensions: multi-platform ecosystem navigation, the supremacy of eWOM authenticity over institutional marketing, active cross-checking behaviors, motivational decision activation, and collective social learning. The single key point of divergence centers on selective portrayals: while main video content constructs an optimistic destination image, deep comment threads and lived student interviews expose hidden structural hurdles.

6. Discussion

This study examined how Chinese higher education is portrayed across social media platforms and how Pakistani students interpret and utilize digital narratives to make study-abroad choices. By synthesizing quantitative codebook frequencies with qualitative interview narratives and matrix triangulation, the discussion advances three interrelated theoretical and empirical contributions.

First, the findings demonstrate that social media operates not merely as a marketing channel, but as a decentralized, peer-driven guidance infrastructure. Faced with bureaucratic opacity,

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slow email response times from admissions offices, and confusing visa guidelines, prospective students leverage digital peer networks as dynamic problem-solving forums (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Pawar & Islam, 2025). Comment sections in Facebook groups and YouTube vlogs function as virtual advisory desks where experiential knowledge is crowdsourced in real time, echoing the Social Learning perspective outlined in the conceptual framework, whereby decision confidence accumulates through repeated peer observation and interaction rather than a single moment of persuasion.

This informal guidance function, however, does not operate in isolation from questions of trust. In alignment with Source Credibility Theory (Filieri & McLeay, 2014) and eWOM research (Cheung & Thadani, 2012), student trust is strongly anchored in perceived homophily and unvarnished peer disclosure. Commercial educational agents are widely distrusted due to the prevalence of fee exploitation and fraudulent documents (Jayadeva, 2024). Yet student trust in social media is not unconditional or naive. Instead, applicants engage in 'negotiated trust,' routinely cross-checking peer claims against official university portals, CSC guidelines, and HEC equivalence frameworks. Social media thus acts as an entry point for discovery, while formal institutional channels serve as necessary verification anchors, a pattern that positions peer-driven infrastructure and official communication as complementary rather than competing sources of information.

This negotiated interplay between peer narratives and formal verification also shapes how students come to perceive China as a study destination. The study extends Destination Image Theory (Bigné et al., 2001; Tan & Wu, 2016) within the context of Global South educational mobility. Social media portrayals construct a highly pragmatic destination image of China: cognitive attributes emphasize fully funded scholarships, modern laboratories, and affordable living expenses, positioning China as an accessible alternative to expensive Western universities (Li et al., 2025; Yasmin et al., 2022), while affective attributes cultivate hope and self-efficacy, framing study in China as a realistic pathway toward socio-economic upward mobility. Nonetheless, audience interactions reveal an ambivalent destination image, one that acknowledges language barriers, cultural distance, and emotional isolation alongside its aspirational appeal. Read together, these three contributions indicate that Pakistani students' engagement with social media is neither passive consumption nor uncritical trust, but an active, cumulative process of information-seeking, verification, and image negotiation that ultimately shapes their decision to pursue higher education in China.

7. Conclusion And Implications

This study provides one of the first qualitative empirical accounts of how social media communication shapes Pakistani students' higher education mobility to China. By triangulating N = 200 social media comments with N = 20 student interviews, the research establishes that social media functions as a peer-driven guidance infrastructure where trust, aspirational motivation, and institutional verification intersect.

7.1 Practical and Policy Implications

1. University Admissions & CSC Authorities: Chinese university international admissions offices and scholarship bodies (CSC) should enhance official digital communication by creating student-centered procedural guides that transparently outline eligibility criteria, age caps, documentation requirements, and language expectations.
2. Official Peer Ambassador Programs: Institutions should formally recruit and train current international students as official digital brand ambassadors to provide authentic, reliable peer guidance while eliminating reliance on predatory commercial agents.
3. Student Media Literacy: Prospective applicants must practice critical digital media literacy, using student vlogs for experiential insights while strictly verifying procedural requirements through official government and university portals.

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7.2 Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on Pakistani students within the China mobility corridor and its cross-sectional qualitative design. Future research should employ quantitative survey instruments, longitudinal tracking of applicant cohorts across different admission cycles, and comparative analyses spanning other Belt and Road student source countries in South and Southeast Asia.

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