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## Navigating Sexual Norms Abroad: Cultural Values, Sex Education, and Risk among International Students in China

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### ABSTRACT

*International students often navigate unfamiliar sexual norms and limited access to context-specific sex education while studying abroad. This study examines how traditional sexual values and inadequate sex education shape sexual behaviors and vulnerability to sexual victimization among international students in China. Using a mixed-methods design, data from 482 students and 20 interviews were analyzed. Findings reveal a paradox: traditional values were linked to lower sexual activity but also reduced awareness of safe sex practices. Inadequate sex education was associated with greater sexual risk behaviors. Both factors increased vulnerability to sexual victimization, with sexual behavior mediating these relationships. The findings underscore the need for culturally responsive sex education, consent awareness, and targeted support services for international students.*

**Keywords:** Traditional values; Sex education; Sexual behavior; Sexual risk; Sexual assault; International students; China; Structural equation modeling

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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescents and young adults have been experiencing very critical sexual health challenges in the global world, including the risks of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintentional pregnancies, and sexual violence (Widman et al., 2016; Guzzo & Hayford, 2018). It has always been demonstrated by international studies that risky sexual behavior, which includes irregular condom use and multiple partners, is very high among youth in both high-income and low-income nations (Claxton et al., 2015). In such an international setting, there have been major changes in the sexual norms and perils among youth in China as society quickly transforms into a modern society. It is estimated by the World Health Organization that almost half of all new HIV infections in the world are among individuals aged 15-24 (Evans et al., 2020), and nearly identical statistics are true in China, with a significant increase in the number of HIV cases among young people. The number of patients with HIV in 15-24-year-olds reported in China was more than 140,000 in the decade, of which most do not exceed 95% of sexual transmission (Zhang et al., 2022). It is important to note that 23,000+ new cases of HIV/AIDS among Chinese students aged 15-24 were diagnosed between 2010 and 2019 (Qing et al., 2022), which is five times higher than the incidence of 2008-2017 (Liu et al., 2020). These data highlight the increased susceptibility of youth in China to sexual health risks.

In addition to these dangers, cultural norms and education systems play a role in dictating the sexual behavior and safety of young people. Sexuality and communication attitudes are dictated by traditional values in most societies. The practice of sexual conservatism in China, in particular, has numerous historical grounds related to Confucian principles that value chastity, modesty, and filial piety (Jin & Han, 2025; Lin & Wang, 2022). Sex is usually a taboo issue to be discussed openly, particularly between parents and children or in school (Wang, 2016). The existing research has noted that more conservative adolescents in Confucian-impacted societies are much less inclined to partake in premarital sex (Gan et al., 2024). An example of this would be a comparative study of Shanghai, Hanoi, and Taipei that reported a group of youth who had strong traditional Confucian values had delayed sexual initiation and low rates of sexual activity than the more liberal youth (Gan et al., 2024). This would be in keeping with the anticipation that strict upbringing would have the capacity to control the blatant ways of sexual conduct among adolescents.

The connection between traditional values and sexual risk is no exception, however. The conservative environment potentially slows or prevents sexual exploration in young people, but it can also lead to a “culture of silence” about sex, in which young people are left unprepared when making unsafe choices regarding sexual behavior (Zhang & Yuan, 2023; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). Conservative values of the tradition that perceive the uninhibited discussion of sex as improper led to the fact that sex education in China was limited or nonexistent in formal education, partly due to traditionally accepted conservative values (Haberland & Rogow, 2015; Wang, 2016). Until recently, the majority of adolescents in China developed their knowledge about sex with the help of peers

or the internet and not a school program or parental instructions (Lyu et al., 2020). A survey by nine out of ten Chinese teens stated that they had never discussed sex with their parents, and more than half of college students stated that they had not received sex education in schools (Wang, 2016). Sex education in China is more likely to be biology- and reproduction-focused, with no critical areas such as contraception, consent, and healthy relationships (Ellin et al., 2024). Such is the gap such that many young individuals do not have the necessary knowledge, and they can use potentially unreliable resources (e.g., pornography) to become informed about sex (Peng & Zheng, 2024). The literature cautions that these informal sources of information tend to provide misrepresentative frames (e.g., misogynistic or violent sexual scripts) that are highly deceptive to teenagers (Peng & Zheng, 2024). In research on university students in Shanghai, 9% of male students believed that compelled intercourse may be okay, and even 3% of female students answered in the same way; this finding does not consistently define compelled intercourse as inappropriate (Steele et al., 2024). In addition, approximately 2-5% of college students in that study confessed to having been forced into an act of intercourse, yet the actual number may be greater, as the victims who lacked appropriate education about sex may not consider an instance of an act to be sexual assault (Steele et al., 2024). Overall, the evidence suggests that limited sexuality education can leave young people without knowledge related to sexual health and personal safety, which may increase vulnerability to STIs and sexual victimization (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Steele et al., 2024).

An example of a group in which these problems could be particularly sharp is represented by international students in China. By 2018, China had almost half a million international students and had become an important education destination in the international educational sector (Forbes-Mewett, 2020). Such students belong to other cultural groups (primarily other Asian and African countries) and have different norms on sex and are not exposed to sex education to the same extent (Lim et al., 2022). Adapting to life in China at campus may involve making new freedoms and social settings without the watch of their relatives. In the case of international students living in a highly conservative society, studying abroad can possibly lift past behavioral inhibitions that the student may have avoided coming to fruition, which he or she did not have much time to experiment with at home. Recent qualitative research about floating populations (including foreign students) in China has shown that they often bring with them cultures that are more conservative in relation to sex; in the more liberal Chinese setting, some youths were able to experience increased “personal space” and releases to traditional constraints, but due to their own lack of awareness and knowledge, they could not manage the risks associated with sexual health (Kwame et al., 2024; Mundie et al., 2021). For example, Muslim foreign students interviewed in the same research observed that they were strictly forbidden to have premarital sex in their countries of origin, and sexual health education was not given regularly (Zhou et al., 2024; Qadeer et al., 2021). Such students might not have the means to make informed decisions and ensure their safety when they suddenly encounter the environment in which premarital sex is more tolerated (as it is becoming more accepted in China) (Lyu & Chai, 2024). Overall, the meeting

of traditional (resulting in silence on sexual issues) and insufficient sex education can likely prepare adolescents to be more sexually risky, and it is even more worrisome among international students as they become accustomed to a new cultural background. This broader transition can also involve acculturative stress, social isolation, and gaps in institutional support among international students at Chinese universities (Mahmood et al., 2026).

Speed to sex-related crimes (sexual harassment, sexual assault, or sexual exploitation) is a serious outcome that is not well researched within this demographic. It is possible that adolescents and young adults, who do not know about sexuality and rights, are less ready to identify the signs of possible sexual victimization or demand boundaries (Klein & Martin, 2021). It is also known that youth have a higher risk of sexual abuse or assault when they are naive or uninformed about sex (e.g., not understanding consent or coercion) (Klein & Martin, 2021; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). According to Klein & Martin (2021), the sexual ignorance and experience of young adolescents may make them more vulnerable to sexual abuse because they do not identify unacceptable actions or may comply due to peer pressure. In line with that, comprehensive sexuality education is also considered a tool for sexual violence prevention by educating youth on consent, healthy relationships, and how to seek help (Kettrey et al., 2023; Mujal et al., 2021). On the other hand, in the absence of sex education, youths may have misconceptions (such as rape myths or accepting sexual coercion as typified by predators) that would expose them to more predators. Cultural aspects are also at play: the culture of silence or a stigma of sexual assault might discourage reporting and empower perpetrators. In North American research on college campuses, more than 80% of female students who are victims of sexual harassment and assault do not report these crimes to authorities (Wieberneit et al., 2024). Asian international students face several additional barriers to reporting, including fear of stigma, lack of awareness of reporting channels, and distrust of systems, resulting in gross underreporting (Wieberneit et al., 2024). Underreporting and silence can reduce accountability and may increase the risk of repeat victimization, as perpetrators may perceive fewer consequences when targeting students who are unlikely to report. It has already been stated that minoritized groups (such as international and minority students) are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and less willing to report the case officially (Lai et al., 2024). This collocation of increased risk of victimization and decreased reporting poses a vulnerable scenario to the situation of international students in host countries.

Recent research on the topic of international students in particular points toward the fact that sexual harassment and sexual violence on campuses are not merely exposure to risk but also barriers to recognition and disclosure as well as help seeking. International students were exposed to a higher risk of becoming a victim of sexual violence in a large campus sample and had more posttraumatic stress symptoms following victimization compared to their domestic counterparts (Fethi et al., 2023). In addition, the narrative-based evidence indicates that Asian international students can experience obstacles to formal reporting that incorporate fears about the severity threshold, departmental assistance, fear of

reprisal, and concerns around peer relationships (Dey, 2024). Sexual harassment in the Chinese context of higher education. In the recent literature on sexual harassment, institutional silence and power relationships are also noted as discouraging complaints and defining responses to inappropriate behaviors (Tsang, 2025). Taken together, these results underscore the need to study the relationship between traditional values, sexual health preparations, and vulnerability among international students studying in China.

Against the above considerations, this paper discusses the combined effect of traditional values and the lack of sex education on sexual behaviors among adolescents and susceptibility to sex-related crimes among international students in China. We refer to the theoretical assumptions made by cultural sociology and the field of public health: (1) Cultural norms theory and socialization postulates that traditional cultural values influence attitudes and the openness of adolescents to sex and lead them to certain behaviors and readiness to communicate (Lin and Wang, 2022; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). (2) Educational and cognitive-behavioral theories (including the Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills model) argue that knowledge and skills acquired during the sex education process (or absence of sex education) have a direct effect on the ability to make decisions regarding safe sex and negotiate a sexual encounter. (3) Victimization theory and the routine activity approach to criminology suggest that when there is low awareness or assertiveness, usually caused by cultural silence or lack of education, then that person may offer easier prey to criminals who are attracted to sex, particularly when in a new social setting, such as in university life abroad. Combining these views, we have developed a conceptual model (Figure 1) showing that traditional values and sex education adequacy are exogenous variables that positively impact two important outcomes, including adolescent sexual behaviors (particularly risky behaviors) and vulnerability to sex crime. There is also a mediating factor of the sexual behaviors connecting the antecedents to vulnerability - we hypothesize that the behavioral aspects of adolescent sexuality will be relevant to whether the antecedents truly become the actual victimization risk (i.e., whether they have casual or unprotected sex).

The rest of this paper will be divided in the following manner. We start by stating our key variables and covering pertinent theories and previous research results on each of them: (1) Traditional Values, (2) Inadequate Sex Education, and (3) Sex Crime Vulnerability. Then, we consider the literature to develop five specific hypotheses that connect these constructs (summarized under Literature Review). The next thing that we introduce is the theoretical model integrating all hypotheses. Our quantitative survey and qualitative interview methods are described in the Methodology section, and the results of the SEM analysis (with measurement validity, model fit, path coefficients, etc.) are presented along with the representative quotes of interviews. In the Discussion, we explain the findings using theory and previous research, and we conclude by providing implications for policy and practice, with research limitations, and further future research recommendations. In this broad way, our research aims at contributing to the further understanding that the silence in cultural and educational spheres can

result in risk in the sexual life of young foreign students in China, and what can be done in regard to it.

### **Variable and Theory 1: Traditional Values**

The traditional cultural values are the old established belief and standard where the value of modesty, sexual restraint and the need to have family or religious morality in controlling the behavior of individuals. In regard to adolescent sexuality, traditional values traditionally do not allow sexual issues to be freely discussed and condemn premarital sex (often representing it as something immoral or dishonorable). These are highly ingrained values in most Asian, Middle Eastern and African cultures to which international students in China are drawn. To illustrate, some cultures affected by Confucian ideology (such as China and a substantial portion of East Asia) traditionally encouraged chastity and filial obedience, so that young people had to avoid having sex before getting married and were not allowed to cause disgrace to the family due to sexual misconduct (Tarzia et al., 2024; Lin and Wang, 2022). On the same note, religions such as Islam and conservative Christians teach strict morals against premarital sex and restrict access to sexually explicit material. International students who carry such values might enter China with an ingrained sexual conservatism framework.

One of the lenses through which the same values may affect teenage sexual behaviors may be provided by the theory of planned behavior (TPB). TPB assumes that intentions cause behavior that is influenced by attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. A young person bearing strong traditional morals will probably have negative views on premarital sex (as wrong or a sin), and he/herself will feel that there is a subjective norm that key persons (family, religious group) will disapprove of sexual intercourse. This would make them less willing to indulge in sexual activities; hence, in most cases, this leads to delayed sexual initiation or abstinence. This tendency is confirmed by empiricism: the research has determined that teens who have more positive and traditional or conservative values truly are less sexually active and have fewer sexual partners than those with liberal values (Gan et al., 2024). To take a recent example, Wang (2016) found that university students in Shanghai whose values were more traditional to Confucianism were dramatically less likely to have had intercourse than students with more modern values. Sex is also not something to be talked about in traditional values. The socialization of conservative families is typically characterized by what scholars call a “culture of silence” - the parents would have no need to talk about sex because it will keep the child pure or deter them against doing immoral acts (Zhang & Yuan, 2023). Unluckily, such silence may backfire on one by making adolescents ignorant or rather curious, which may prompt them to seek information privately through less reliable means.

Notably, although traditional values might inhibit the frequency of sexual behavior, traditional values paradoxically put sexual behavior at risk through their effect when that behavior happens. This paradox could be explained by cognitive dissonance theory. Very conservative teens who may find themselves entering sex may also feel guilty or ashamed, which may deter them from consulting or using

contraceptives, thus exposing them to more risks (e.g., they may not use condoms because it will make them feel embarrassed or visit a clinic after engaging in sex without protection). Moreover, since these conservative youth communicate less with the parents or mentors, they are unlikely to acquire critical skills of risk reduction. Research indicates that young people who cherish sexual abstinence the most and at some point succumb to sexual intercourse do so secretly and without planning, resulting in an increased rate of unprotected sexual intercourse or unsafe sex (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). In a qualitative study of Muslim immigrants in China, the interviewees mentioned that being brought up in a highly conservative setting, they lacked the tiniest knowledge of sexual health, and once in a relatively free setting, some of them were involved in risky behavior such as having unprotected sex just because they had no idea how to do it safely (Zhang & Yuan, 2023; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). The traditional values also put a high value in obedience and respect toward the elders/men, and this may further make young women especially less assertive in unwanted sexual conditions. Being socialized to be polite and submissive, a conservative female student may not be able to say no assertively to an aggressive approach, or she may put responsibility on herself in the event of victimization as a result of internalized stigma (Lai et al., 2024).

Overall, conventional values may condition adolescent sexual attitudes, as they inhibit open sexual expression, as well as the ability to obtain protection knowledge and assertiveness. We anticipate that the participants with more conservative values within our study population will report less voluntary sexual activity but may be more vulnerable when they are in a situation that involves sexuality. The overall impact on outcomes such as STI exposure or sexual victimization is unclear without mediators, which we address with the help of our hypotheses. All that is evident is that cultural values provide a background on the credentials of whether sexuality is going to be an English subject of openness or a subject of secrecy and shame. The second part looks at the fact that the related notion of poor sex education also exacerbates these dynamics.

### **Variable and Theory 2: Inadequate Sex Education**

Poor sex education is described as the unavailability of relevant information and skills training about sexual health and relationships that have been studied thoroughly, accurately and within a contextual framework. This insufficiency may be in the form of none whatsoever sex education, very little or only abstinence-based education, or misinformation regarding certain important issues. A significant number of foreign students in China belong to nations where formal education on sexuality is insignificant. In other instances, the discussion of contraception, safer sex, and sexual rights is not in school curricula because of the opposition of culture or religion (Kwame et al., 2024; Mundie et al., 2021). Although recently, in China, some have attempted to implement sex education, it is still unequal and even superficial (Ellin et al., 2024). In a national review, Chinese sex education programs were noted to be medicalized and emphasize only anatomical and disease aspects of sexuality and not on emotions or social

attributes of sexuality (Lyu et al., 2020). Practically, this implies that many youths go to university with real-life gaps in their knowledge of how to protect against pregnancy and STIs, how to negotiate consent, or how to obtain assistance in case of being raped.

Social cognitive theory (SCT) and the Health Belief Model (HBM) can help to comprehend the role of sex education. SCT focuses on information and modeling of learning - the more teenagers are taught about safe use of contraception and the more such behavior is modeled to seem ordinary (e.g., by the use of demonstrations or an open discussion), the more they tend to adopt such precautionary measures. They use trial-and-error or peer influence in the absence of education, which is not potentially conducive to safe behavior. The HBM is that teenagers who lack education may not appreciate the vulnerability to risk (such as being convinced that they will not contract HIV) or be unaware of the consequences and therefore have low motivation to use protective measures. Education offers knowledge as well as attitudes (decreasing the stigma of using condoms) and self-efficacy (confidence in using condoms to act safely). Sexual education programs, which are described in different countries, are linked with delayed sex, less frequent sex, increased use of contraception, and lower STIs among adolescents (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). In contrast, poor sex education correlates with more problematic outcomes: research in China has directly related ineffective sex education to an increase in the growth of teen pregnancy and teen abortion, as well as outbreaks of STI transmission (Ellin et al., 2024; Lim et al., 2022). Between 2011 and 2015, the number of new cases of HIV infection among students at universities in China increased by approximately 35% per year, up to more than 3,200 in 2015 (Zhou et al., 2022). To a certain degree, this terrifying trend can be explained by a lack of knowledge; many students had never learned how HIV is spread or how to use condoms in an appropriate way (Liu et al., 2020).

In addition to the prevention of diseases, the most important part of sex education is information about the consent and prevention of sexual violence. A lack of education might mean that young people do not get knowledge of what sexual consent is, communication of boundaries, or action to intervene or report concerning disturbing scenarios. To take an example, an enlightened adolescent ought to understand that consent must be explicit and that a drunk minor should not give consent since without awareness, he/she risks being either victimized or as an aggressor (in either way). One Chinese high school study found that adolescents who did not receive sexuality education had higher chances of being victim-blaming about rape and lower chances of seeking help had they been victimized (Zhang & Yuan 2023). This shows the role of education (or lack of it) in making one vulnerable. In fact, sexual victimization is prevented by comprehensive sex education (CSE). CSE educates about bodily autonomy and ways to identify unwanted overtures and gives students the message of reporting abuse. Burton et al. (2023) conducted a review and found that school-based programs had a significant effect on children, increasing their knowledge about preventing sexual abuse, including the ability to identify unsafe situations and to say “no”. Therefore, there is an empty area for such protective skills in the case of inadequate sex education.

In our analysis, we ideally understand inadequate sex education to be inclusive of the level and quality of sexual information that our respondents have been exposed to. Most international students can testify that their schools at home did not teach sex or covered abstinence only without real-life examples. Others may state that in China, they have not managed to get any further training (one study discovered that almost 65% of foreign students in Hunan, China, had no HIV-related education during their tenure in that country (Zhou et al., 2022)). Individuals with less sufficient sex education will display risky behaviors in regard to sex, i.e., possibly having unprotected sex because they are not aware of the importance of using condoms or having many sex partners without STD testing. This connection has empirical evidence: Zhou et al. (2022) discovered that in one Chinese province, only approximately 52% of international university students possessed ample HIV knowledge, which is consistent among many sexually active students and indicates gaps in prevention behaviors and applied sexual health knowledge (Lyu et al., 2020; Qadeer et al., 2021). The absence of sex education in the past could be seen when, on the one hand, almost 65% said that they had never had HIV/sexual health education in China (Zhou et al., 2022). These shortcomings are evidently linked to behavior; in that case, a lower education level regarding HIV was linked to an increased chance of engaging in unprotected intimacy (Lyu et al., 2020).

Poor sex education would also contribute to vulnerability to sex crime. An individual who is unfamiliar with the terminology or with the legal terminology might not even notify about an act of molestation because they have no ability to define what has occurred (or whether they do not know that what has happened to them is a crime or not). They may also not be aware of resources (e.g., helplines, campus Title IX offices, or campus counseling services). Even when support services are available, international students do not always use them consistently, and awareness of how to access those services remains essential (Vasandani et al., 2026). In the case of international students, it is exacerbated by the fact that the student is in a foreign land; once they have not been oriented on the services available to them in case of problems or the laws that regulate those problems, the student is particularly susceptible. Overall, poor sex education denies adolescents knowledge, skills and confidence to take part in safe sex, as well as to prevent sexual exploitation or violence. Through the study of this variable and traditional values, we expect to observe how the effects of conservative upbringing could be mediated or aggravated by deficits in knowledge.

### **Variable and Theory 3: Sex Crime Vulnerability**

Sex crime vulnerability in this context denotes the vulnerability of an adolescent or young adult to being assaulted, raped, or harassed and seduced with sexual intentions. It includes the probability of getting into risky circumstances and the failure to handle the circumstances in a situation and avoid or get out of the extent of harm. Vulnerability is a complex construct that depends on factors at the individual level (including knowledge, attitudes, assertiveness, etc.), situational (availability of potential predators, social condition), and systemic

(availability of support, cultural attitude to victims) levels. We are interested in the fact that personal and cultural aspects make foreign students more vulnerable or less vulnerable.

A criminological theory that acts to explain vulnerability is routine activity theory, which suggests that vulnerability to crime is heightened when three factors, a motivated offender, an appropriate target, and the absence of an effective guardian, come together. The international students might unwillingly reveal themselves as an “appropriate target” in the case they are unsuspecting, credulous, or blind to domestic hazards. Their conservative attitudes (e.g., politeness, unwillingness to confront older people or other figures of authority) may not allow them to reject any unsolicited advances, therefore making ideal victims to an already motivated criminal. Meanwhile, the lack of proper education may lead to their failure to notice some red flags, such as failing to understand that a person offering them drinks in a bar has predatory intentions or that they are under 14 years of age (which is lower than in most countries), thereby affecting the dynamics in a relationship. The fact that there may be no “powerful guardian” may be real (not being close to family and home community) or figurative (no powerful support system or knowledge that serves as a kind of guardian). Guardianship can also be weakened by social isolation and language barriers where international students are not aware of calling help or whom to trust.

The theory of victim precipitation, which is also controversial but looks at the possible contribution of a victim’s behavior or traits to the crime, is yet another theory applicable. We must emphasize that a crime bears responsibility for the perpetrator, but in terms of prevention, some measures (such as excessive alcohol consumption or affiliation with deviant individuals) were found to be risk factors that are vulnerable to sexual victimization (Claxton et al., 2015; Duval et al., 2020). Teenage sex, particularly unplanned sex, may pose more exposure to people who are already offenders by attending pick-up events or partying with drunk people. New international students on the campus can eagerly participate in social events to fit in, unaware of what situations can be riskier. Without teaching them consent and safety, there is a chance that they may find themselves in a disadvantaged situation. As an example, visiting a sensitive place with a person they have never met in real life although they have met online or failing to make sure there is a reliable friend to be around during socialization may increase risk.

Vulnerability is also included by personal efficacy and attitudes. The Construct of Sexual Refusal Skills is also relevant: young people who have learned and behaved how to call out in a rude manner and say “no” to sexual advances that are rejected with threats of being coerced are less susceptible victims of coercion. The unskilled (in most cases because of cultural modesty or lack of training) may freeze or submit to a coercive situation. A Swedish study established that adolescents who had high information about sexual consent and high refusal self-efficacy were much less likely to report having been sexually coerced (Burton et al., 2023). By comparison, numerous young people who have never even discussed sexual boundaries may have little to stand against overtures when the assailant is an authority or someone close to them - a significant portion

of sexual assaults involving college campuses all over the world is always conducted by a person who the victim knows (not strangers) (Klein & Martin, 2021). A false sense of security within a cultural group can be exploited by international students who may believe other international students or a mentor more than it should have happened, as they believe that they are secure in their cultural mode.

Vulnerability and its consequences are greatly influenced by cultural stigma. One of them is the probability of reporting or seeking assistance. Unless a victim is ashamed or afraid enough to voice his or her side (common in cultures where rape is widely stigmatized or where it is victims who are blamed), then rapists are indeed given a free pass to strike again, and victims themselves are denied the appropriate support and justice. As mentioned above, more than 80% of college women in general do not report about sexual harassment or assault (Wieberneit et al., 2024), and Asian international women, in particular, are very reluctant to do so formally (Lai et al., 2024). The fear of being labeled as a disgrace to their family or putting the academic performance of the victims at risk can make the victims mute. An international student may in our scenario fear that reporting a rape will get him/her into trouble with local law enforcement agencies or with their scholarship, or simply believe that no one can see or hear her/him in the foreign culture (a feeling that has been expressed in certain studies of Asian students in Western campuses; see *They Do not See Us*, (Lai et al., 2024). This nonreporting and consequential impunity of perpetrators only serves to make all other such students more vulnerable since the victims create a culture of impunity in which predators would feel free to choose or be more likely to victimize those who would not raise an alarm.

We consider sex crime vulnerability to be a result of the two preceding variables (traditional values and sex education) and the effect of sexual behaviors of individuals. In principle, it is possible to suppose that mediation, traditional values and bad sex education result in riskier behaviors (or a lack of assertiveness), which in turn result in increased vulnerability. However, there can also be a direct impact; as an example, a nonsexually active student would be susceptible due to her conservative upbringing that would lead to silence during harassment (that is, not only behavior but also a lack of voice or even knowledge). Consistent with protection motivation theory (PMT), the appraisal that people have of threats and the ability to respond conditionally influences their protection behavior. In case the sex education was insufficient, a person may underrate the risk of date rape (thinking “not that it will happen to my friends”) and overrate the cost of acting (such as the idea that “I will lose my life should I accuse him of it”), not out of ignorance doing nothing to prevent or respond to it. Conventional ethics could also lead to maladaptive reactions, e.g., blaming self or perceiving tolerating harassment as a lesser evil compared to the scandal associated with reporting.

Stated differently, sex crime weakness is the eventual issue of this study. It puts in place actualization of the cumulative damage that may be caused by the act of convergence of silence (traditional taboo) and ignorance (lack of education). The difference can be quantified in our research both through self-reported (e.g., whether one has experienced unwanted sexual experiences or not) and perceptual

(e.g., “I feel at risk or I do not know what to do in case..”) point measures. We hope to find that there is a positive correlation between risky sexual behavior and vulnerability since previous studies show that the more risks are taken (the number of partners, casual sex in alcohol with a partner, etc.), the more likely an attack will come in a sexual situation (Duval et al., 2020; Steele et al., 2024). Less intelligent students or students with more conservative communication norms should also show higher vulnerability, which can be demonstrated by their acceptance of statements such as “I find it hard to do not comply when a person requires a sexual act” or “I feel uncertain where to address in case of being sexually assaulted”. To derive testable hypotheses concerning relationships between our three central constructs and adolescent outcomes, the literature review part in the near future will be based on these theoretical expectations.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Past studies have provided extensive data on correlations between traditional values, sexual education, sexual practices, and sexual vulnerability. Based on this literature, we suggest five hypotheses to test in our theoretical model.

Conservative cultural values and adolescent sexuality: Numerous studies have reported the production of a negative relationship between traditional values and sexual activity among young people. As previously mentioned, high conformity to conventional norms is likely to delay sexual initiation and minimize sexual partners among adolescents (Gan et al., 2024). As an illustration, Lyu et al. (2020) discovered that Chinese undergraduates who had more conservative views in terms of disapproving of premarital sex were considerably less likely to be sexually active than those with liberal views. Equally, a survey conducted in three Asian cities revealed that the greater the number of young people worth family honor and sexual propriety, the lower the odds that such young people tend to report having engaged in intercourse or even in intermingled socializing (Lin & Wang, 2022). Conventional upbringing tends to bring out a feeling of sexual inhibition or fear of sex, resulting in caution or avoidance of sex during a dating process. It is on this basis that we suppose that international students who support traditional values will be less sexually risky (will have fewer casual encounters). However, it should be noted that in this case, traditional individuals also have sex in secrecy or without developing guidelines, which can result in unsafe acts, which in this case is addressed as a factor in the situation of mediation. Generally, the objective forecast is that culture influences behavior by restraining it:

Hypothesis 1: Traditional values play an enormous part in shaping sexual behaviors among adolescents. (We would hypothesize a negative effect, with stronger traditional values being related to lower frequency or less risky sexual behavior.)

Sex education preparation and youth sex: The global compiled research is that healthy sex behaviors are associated with better sex education. Comprehensive training in sex education increases youths’ willingness to use contraception and have safe sex, and in several studies, there is a decreased

likelihood of youth becoming involved in early or high-risk sex (Costello et al., 2022). Alternatively, poor sex education exposes teenagers to not knowing how to avoid risks, and in most cases, they tend to become exposed to adverse consequences such as STDs or unplanned pregnancy (Haberland & Rogow, 2015). As an example, a Chinese study by Li et al. (2017) showed that college students who had never received information on contraception were much more likely to engage in unprotected sex. In their study relating to international students, Lyu et al. (2022) indicated that insufficient HIV education was related to inconsistent condom use. The mechanism is simple: young people will not consider some actions to be dangerous or will be unaware of how to adequately perform risk avoidance (a condom correctly or receiving frequent STI tests). Thus, we expect that the students who report their sex education as poor (i.e., they did not learn much about sex in school or with parents) are likely to exhibit unsafe sexual behavior.

Hypothesis 2: A lack of sufficient sex education is an important factor that affects sexual behaviors in adolescents. (We assume that weaker or missing sex education influences risking sexual behavior, including less condom use or increased multiple partners)

Adolescent sexual behavior and sex crime susceptibility: A sexual behavior per se is not an exposure to being victimized, but some behavioral patterns may lead to being placed in risky situations or associates. Studies of sexual assault in college students have found factors such as frequent partying, casual sex, and drug use to increase the exposure rate to sexual aggression (Duval et al., 2020). The reasoning is that when an adolescent frequents in unmonitored social environments (e.g., are taking out on dates with strangers, hooking up when intoxicated, etc.), the likelihood of some form of assault attempt is greater. In addition, sexual persons may be victims of predators due to a belief that such people are an easier or more open target (yet the offenders are predatory logic rather than the fault of the victims). An observation of university students in Beijing revealed that students who experienced many sexual partners had a higher likelihood of seeing a history of sexual coercion, which may indicate a relationship between broad sexual networks and victimization (Steele et al., 2024). Among adolescents under our scope, the behaviors associated with adolescent sexuality – particularly when they are related to high-risk behaviors such as casual sex or sexual under the influence – are likely to be positively correlated with vulnerability. We also believe that the students who have already started having a sexual life may lose their guard in some situations (e.g., believe a new partner too soon). In contrast, a person who is fully abstinent may be less exposed to assault, although those who are completely abstinent cannot be said to be safe (assaults may occur without any conditioning on the sexual actions of the person to which they are exposed). All in all, the literature is skewed toward a risky sexual lifestyle and predisposition to vulnerability.

Hypothesis 3: Sex crime vulnerability is greatly affected by adolescent sexual behaviors. (In riskier sexual behavior, i.e., indiscriminate or

unprotected sexual activity, we hypothesize that the higher the vulnerability to sexual victimization).

**Traditional values and sex crime vulnerability:** Traditional values may have a direct influence on vulnerability other than their influence through behavior. A very conservative student will have fewer chances to be in a consensual sexual situation, but they may still become harassed or assaulted (e.g., a rapist may attack an innocent individual). The greatest question is how the student reacts or psychologically adjusts. The attitudes of victim-blaming or self-blaming are usually instilled by traditional values (such as the idea that a “good girl” cannot be raped, unless somehow she deserved it) (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). These attitudes may prove fatal since a victim may fail to counterforce or report the case, which offers more chances to the criminal. It is also evidenced that perpetrators sometimes assault people with conservative backgrounds, assuming that they will keep it a secret. In a qualitative investigation of immigrant women in Canada, researchers discovered that there were certain predators who, because of their views, targeted the victims who were either too timid or so tied to honor to report (Lai et al., 2024). In our case, traditional international students might not want to seek assistance or even acknowledge whether they have been victimized; therefore, they continue to be the targets. Moreover, conservative values could inhibit one preventive knowledge, as in the case of a student who holds to the belief that it will not happen to him/her provided he/she is good, then they may not take precautions such as going out with their friends or meeting with someone they do not trust fully. Another feature of literature is the stress that the chastity of women is prioritized in certain cultures, which prevents them from fighting (some victims state that they did not fight or yelled at the moment of attack; they just were stunned and felt ashamed or feared that someone would tell him or her something). We expect a positive one-to-one correlation between the possession of traditional values and susceptibility to sex crimes, since traditional values tend to be associated with comparatively less knowledge and less aggression in the confrontation of sexual assault (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). In addition, traditional-minded male students might not be defensive in another sense, either: they will not see their rape by an older person or being raped as a crime because of the stereotypes that “men cannot be raped” that may prevail in the most conservative minds.

Hypothesis 4: Traditional values have a severe impact on sex crime susceptibility. (We posit that the greater the traditional values are, the higher the vulnerability to sexual victimization because factors such as a lower likelihood of reporting or resisting an assault.)

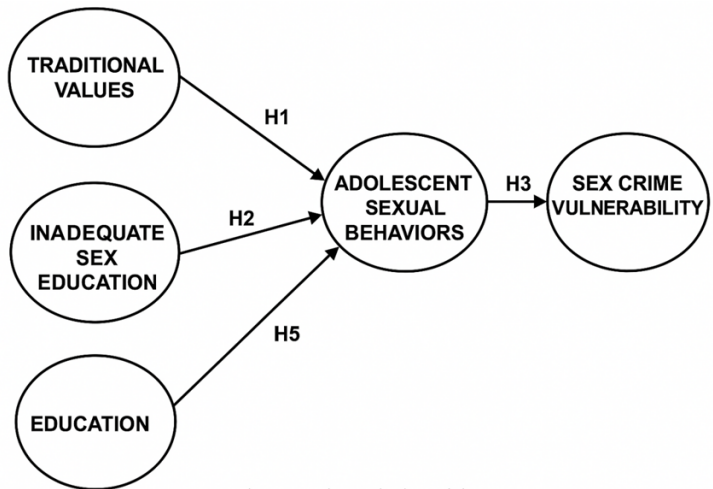
**Poor sex education and susceptibility to sex crime:** This can be attributed to poor sex education, which is probably one of the most apparent factors contributing to vulnerability. In case a student has never received any information about consent, one might fail to comprehend that he/she is allowed to reject sexual advances. Unless they had ever heard about sexual assault (some cultures do not even talk to young people about it), they may not realize when they start grooming wrong or are forced to do something. In this respect, knowledge is indeed

powerful, and many prevention programs are meant to empower young people in terms of knowledge on sexual abuse and its prevention. A meta-analysis by Burton et al. (2023) found that children with the intervention of sexual abuse prevention education acquired much knowledge of unsafe situations and were more prone to use protective measures (such as saying “no” or disclosing an adult) than those without the intervention. However, the uneducated youths “do not know that they do not know”: they may maintain a friendly chat with a long-time older individual online without knowing that he might be a paedophile, or they may not know that there is help to seek (they may think that no one will listen to them should they complain but education can help them understand that there are laws and help facilities available to them). Regarding our topic of interest, most international students in China reported never having received any training on sexual health or safety during their overseas stay (Zhou et al., 2022). This lack suggests that they may not be included in any sexual violence prevention interventions on campuses. The U.S. (and various Western nations) and other higher education institutions tend to require new students to complete online courses or workshops on sexual assault prevention; in the absence of these programs or inadequate ones catered toward international students in China, international students are not educated. Not incidentally, risky behaviors and insufficient testing rates were reported (Wang et al., 2021), and almost 65% of foreign students in China had no education regarding HIV and sex-related issues (Zhou et al., 2022). Although that particular study had been on HIV, the same applies to those who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation: lack of education is associated with risky actions and inaction of protection.

Hence, we hope that poor sex education will be linked directly with increased susceptibility. This could be manifested in our data when poorer knowledge participants score higher on vulnerability indicators (such as assenting to statements such as “I sometimes feel confused whether I have been sexually harassed” - confusion in this instance, in most cases, being the result of their education not defining the terms clearly). Extensive training informs not only about biological factors but also about learning not to cross the line and to address assistance; otherwise, students will be deprived of these lessons.

Hypothesis 5: Sex crimes are highly vulnerable as a result of inadequate sex education. (We hypothesize that less comprehensive or no sex education is riskier in terms of being subjected to sexual victimization because of less awareness of risks, rights and resources)

All these hypotheses (H1 to H5) are connected to a link of our conceptual framework. As shown in Figure 1, the theoretical model will relate traditional values and poor sex education to adolescent sexual behaviors and susceptibility to sex crime, with sexual behaviors perhaps mediating the connection between the antecedent factors and vulnerability.



**Figure 1: Theoretical Model.** Traditional values and inadequate sex education are exogenous constructs influencing adolescent sexual behaviors and sex crime vulnerability. Arrows represent hypothesized direct effects (H1–H5). The model also allows for adolescent sexual behaviors mediating part of the effect of traditional values and sex education on vulnerability.

In the next section, we describe the methodology used to test this model, including details of the survey instrument (questionnaire) and sample, as well as the qualitative interview component that provided additional context to our findings.

## METHODOLOGY

In this research, a survey design combined with qualitative interviews was used to investigate the effects of traditional values and sex education on sexual behaviors and sex crime vulnerability. The sample consisted of international students (secondary school and university level) in China. The research received ethical approval from the Academic Ethics Committee of [University Name] in China, and informed consent was obtained from all participants (students under 18 years old also required consent from a guardian or a school official).

**Sample and Procedure:** We recruited 482 international students (314 undergraduate students in universities and 168 senior high school students) enrolled in institutions in four metropolitan cities in China, namely, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Wuhan. Recruitment was stratified by city and education level, and we also monitored gender composition to support diversity across key subgroups. However, participation relied on voluntary response through institutional dissemination channels rather than random selection from a complete sampling frame, so the design should be interpreted as stratified nonprobability sampling. Data collection occurred between March and May 2025.

The survey was administered through a secure online survey platform, and the questionnaire was provided in English with Chinese translation available upon request. Respondents participated willingly and anonymously, confidentiality was guaranteed, and participants were informed that they could skip any question or end the survey at any time. Because the survey covered sensitive topics, a debrief sheet with counseling resources and multilingual help line information was provided.

Because the focal constructs were measured using a single self-administered questionnaire, common method variance is a potential concern in interpreting associations among variables. Several procedural steps were used to reduce this risk, including anonymous participation, the option to skip items, survey length kept to approximately 15 to 20 minutes, and an attention check to identify low-quality responses. These steps align with recommended procedural remedies for reducing common method bias in survey research (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Nevertheless, future research can further reduce this risk by separating the measurement of predictors and outcomes across time points, incorporating multisource indicators, or adding behavioral and administrative measures where feasible.

**Measures (Questionnaire Profile):** The questionnaire tool has been written in the English language, and it was translated into Chinese and finally back-translated to ensure that it is accurate. Where possible, we borrowed or modified existing validated scales and formulated some of our own (especially our sex crime vulnerability scale where we borrowed inspiration and ideas off campus climate surveys). The salient variables, item number, and sources of the example per scale are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Questionnaire Profile**

Variable	Items	Scale (source or basis)
Traditional Values	5	Likert-scale items (adapted from Wang & He, 2019 cultural values scale) – e.g., “Sex should be reserved for marriage”. Higher score = more conservative.
Inadequate Sex Education	4	Likert-scale items (developed for this study, informed by Zuo, 2018 findings) – e.g., “I have never received formal sex education”, “I lack knowledge about sexual health”. Higher score = more inadequacy.
Adolescent Sexual Behaviors	6	Composite index of sexual risk behaviors (based on Youth Risk Behavior Survey adaptations) – items on sexual activity status, condom use consistency, number of partners, etc. Higher score = riskier behaviors.
Sex Crime Vulnerability	5	Likert-scale items (custom, guided by Campus Climate Survey instruments) – e.g., “I would know how to get help if I were sexually assaulted” (reverse-coded), “I worry about being sexually harmed here”. Higher score = greater vulnerability.

Vulnerability scale development and content coverage: In this study, sex crime vulnerability is conceptualized as reduced readiness to recognize, resist, and respond effectively to sexually harmful situations in the host context. Because established instruments often focus on victimization incidence or general sexual knowledge rather than vulnerability related to recognition, perceived susceptibility, and help-seeking readiness, we developed a brief set of indicators suited to the present context. Item content was generated by reviewing commonly used campus climate survey domains and prior literature that emphasizes knowledge of available resources, perceived risk and uncertainty in identifying harassment, and behavioral self-efficacy for refusing unwanted sexual contact. The research team refined the initial wording to ensure that each item mapped onto the conceptual domains represented in Table 1 while keeping the measure short and readable for an international sample. Higher scores indicate greater perceived vulnerability. This instrument is intended as an initial measure of vulnerability rather than a diagnostic tool, and future research should further evaluate content validity and criterion validity by linking the scale to subsequent help seeking, disclosure, and victimization outcomes.

A 5-point scale of agreement was employed in all Likert items (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Demographic information (age, gender, country of origin, length of time in China) and a handful of contextual information (e.g., whether the student had taken any workshops or classes about sex education in China, whether the student had a discussion about sex with their parents, etc.) were also obtained during the survey.

The questionnaire was self-administered using the internet. The survey took on average 15-20 minutes to accomplish. To support frank replies, we stressed the anonymity and the fact that there were no correct or incorrect answers. We also introduced an attention-check item and removed 13 cases with low quality control (e.g., choosing only one of all the options or inconsistent responses) from the analysis to obtain the final sample of 482.

Interview Question: In a bid to add more information to the quantitative observations, we organized semistructured interviews in a subsample consisting of 20 students (10 males and 10 females with 10 different home countries) who volunteered at the conclusion of the survey to be interviewed. The interviews were supposed to touch on personal experiences and perspectives more deeply. The interviews took approximately 30-45 minutes, and the interviews were carried out in English (with some clarifications in Chinese if the respondent was bilingual and chose the language to use some terms). The audio of the interviews was recorded consensually and transcribed word-to-word. Examples of interviewee questions were as follows:

- Describe what traits of sex education (or what none) you had prior to arriving in China? - investigating what was discussed or not discussed.
- What is the attitude of people in your home culture toward discussing sex or sexual problems? - discussing the norms and alterations that the student experienced.

- What are your difficulties with sexual health or relations since you came to China? - e.g., getting through the dating world, feeling harassed in some form or another.
- Are you safe in your present surroundings against sexual harassment or assault? Why or why not?" - taking care of vulnerability perceptions.
- What would you do with unwanted sexual advances or violence upon you (or a friend) here? - determining familiarity with sources and the possibility of disclosure.

These were open-ended questions intended to enable students to share stories or concerns that might help depict processes underlying the survey findings. As an example, some of them gave us descriptions of how they were very unaware of using condoms, being raised in a conservative household, or how they were hesitant to report the misconduct of a peer under the pressure of the culture. This kind of qualitative input added color to the context and made the quantitative relationships valid (or at least explainable).

**Data Analysis:** For quantitative data, we applied structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS 26.0. This was preceded by a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to check the measurement model that included the reliability and validity of our survey items in measuring the four latent factors (traditional values, inadequate sex education, sexual behaviors and vulnerability to sex crime). The measurement model was evaluated using goodness-of-fit indices (e.g., Chi-square/df, CFI, TLI, RMSEA). To evaluate the measurement model, we examined global fit indices, including the chi-square-to-degrees-of-freedom ratio, CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR, using commonly cited cutoff guidelines (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, rhoA, and composite reliability, with values of 0.70 or higher indicating acceptable reliability for research purposes (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). Convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted, with values of 0.50 or higher indicating adequate convergence (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait monotrait ratio, with values below 0.85 indicating satisfactory discriminant validity between constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). The correspondence of constructs was subject to the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio as well as ensuring that the square root of AVE had more correlations with other constructs than the correlations of a construct with other constructs (Fornell-Larcker criterion). Once we had our measurement model, we now tested the structural model that indicated our hypotheses. This entailed establishing direct sources between traditional values and poor sex education for sexual behaviors, as well as sex crime vulnerability, and a source between sexual behaviors and sex crime vulnerability (according to Figure 1). We also permitted the two exogenous variables (traditional values and sex education) to covary, although we are aware that they may be correlated (for example, students with very traditional backgrounds should not have had good sex education either). This model was known after it was first identified and overidentified, thus giving us a chance to evaluate the significance of a path.

The mediation process was studied in terms of how the exogenous variables indirectly influenced vulnerability through sexual behaviors. To test whether

indirect effects were significant and to determine whether the mediation was partial or complete, we used the bootstrap procedure (5,000 resamples). We also adjusted for possible confounders. Gender and age were also regarded as control variables in the model because they were allowed to have direct connections with sexual behaviors and vulnerability. This was to consider an eventuality where females might be at a different baseline vulnerability or old students being more sexually active.

SPSS 26.0 was used to compute descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations. For qualitative data, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Themes of our main concepts (e.g., “Silence and stigma”, “Knowledge gaps”, “Risky exploration”, and “Barriers to reporting”) were independently coded from the interview transcripts by two researchers. The next step involved comparing and refining themes, and they identified key illustrative quotes to incorporate into the results and discussion to triangulate.

In the next section, we provide the outcomes of the quantitative analysis, which are reliability and validity of measurement, model fit measures and the outcomes of hypothesis testing (path coefficients). Brief quotes of the interviews are mixed to illustrate and emphasize the quantitative results where applicable.

## RESULTS

### Variables, Reliability and Validity

Prior to the reliability and validity assessments, the variables were assessed using the CFA measurement model. As shown in Table 2, internal consistency reliability was evaluated using Cronbach’s alpha, rhoA, and composite reliability, with values above 0.70 indicating acceptable reliability (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Convergent validity was evaluated using average variance extracted, with values above 0.50 indicating adequate convergence (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

**Table 2: Variables reliability and validity**

Construct	$\rho_A$	$\rho_c$	Cronbach’s $\alpha$	AVE
Traditional Values	0.812	0.840	0.803	0.569
Inadequate Sex Education	0.744	0.781	0.752	0.544
Adolescent Sexual Behaviors	0.790	0.827	0.814	0.548
Sex Crime Vulnerability	0.861	0.889	0.872	0.615

The Cronbach alpha values for the four constructs exceeded the conventional 0.70 threshold for internal consistency. The  $\alpha$  of the Traditional Values scale (5 items) = 0.803, indicating good internal consistency of the items used to measure the underlying unidimensional conservative-values factor. The reliability is also supported by its composite reliability  $\rho_c = 0.840$ . Its Traditional Values AVE was 0.569 (average), indicating that its indicators explained nearly 56.9% of the

variance, which exceeds the convergent validity threshold of 0.50 (Lim et al., 2022). The value of  $\alpha$  was 0.752, with  $\rho_c = 0.781$  and  $AVE = 0.544$  (inadequate sex education (4 items)). This means that more than 54% of the variance in sex education items is covered by the latent construct, which is a favorable point of convergent validation. The measured reliability of this scale was slightly less than that of the other measures, which may be because of the heterogeneity of items (this construct is both formal and informal education aspects); however, they show fairly good reliability.

In the case of adolescent sexual behaviors, we modeled the composite risk index as a latent structural (measured by a number of behavior items, e.g., condom use consistency, number of partner categories) measure. It has  $\alpha = 0.814$  and  $\rho_c = 0.827$ , which attests to high internal consistency (Zhou et al., 2024).  $AVE = 0.548$  indicates that there is an adequate amount of variance of behaviors covered by the construct. The highest reliability was recorded by Sex Crime Vulnerability;  $\alpha = 0.872$ ,  $\rho_c = 0.889$  and  $AVE = 0.615$ . All these high values testify to the fact that there was a high intercorrelation between the items (including perceptions of safety, knowledge of resources, etc.), and thus, the latent concept of vulnerability is well explained. The AVE of greater than 0.60 shows that a considerable amount of item variance is explained by the construct, which shows convergent validity.

Overall, the constructs all passed the reliability criteria (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and composite  $> 0.70$ ) and convergent validity criteria ( $AVE \geq 0.54$  in all instances). The rho ( $\rho_A$ ) given by Dijkstra-Henseler is also acceptable and justifiable to all constructs (larger than 0.7), which supports the internal consistency test (Lim et al., 2022). We can therefore conclude that we are measuring variables in a sound way.

### **Measurement Model Fitness Statistics**

The measurement model was further tested by analyzing the item loading of each of the observed items on its own latent construct. Table 3 also shows the standardized item loading of all survey items on their respective constructs (obtained using the CFA) and item load model fit indicators (see Table 3).

The loadings of all the items were statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ), and a majority of them were greater than 0.60, which indicated that every item was a strong measure of its latent construct. In traditional values, the loading averaged between 0.512 all the way to 0.781. Two items (TV1 and TV3) were loaded especially high ( $\geq 0.73$ ), reporting fundamental aspects of sexual conservatism (moral position against premarital sex). TV5 (0.512), the item that loaded the lowest, is concerned with parental communication; its relatively low loading indicates that although it accesses the dimension of conservatism, it might also enter the communication/education domain. However, the reason why this item was included was to ensure that we captured the breadth of the construct, but all of the traditional values construct was well represented with the five items.

**Table 3: Measurement Items Fitness Statistics**

Indicator	Tradition al Values	Inadequate Sex Ed	Sexual Behavior s	Vulnerabilit y
TV1 (“Sex outside marriage is wrong”)	0.781	–	–	–
TV2 (“It is embarrassing to discuss sex”)	0.694	–	–	–
TV3 (“Girls should remain virgins until marriage”)	0.732	–	–	–
TV4 (“Pornography is immoral”)	0.615	–	–	–
TV5 (“Parents should not talk about sex with children”)	0.512	–	–	–
SE1 (“No formal sex ed received”)	–	0.658	–	–
SE2 (“Lack knowledge about sexual health”)	–	0.722	–	–
SE3 (“Had to learn about sex on my own”)	–	0.770	–	–
SE4 (“Unaware of many sexual health topics”)	–	0.584	–	–
SB1 (Ever had sexual intercourse)	–	–	0.693	–
SB2 (If sexually active: consistent condom use [reverse-coded])	–	–	0.612	–
SB3 (Number of sexual partners)	–	–	0.730	–
SB4 (Ever had casual sex encounter)	–	–	0.667	–
SB5 (Ever had sex under influence of alcohol/drugs)	–	–	0.601	–
SB6 (Regular STI testing practice [reverse-coded])	–	–	0.482	–
SV1 (“I know where to get help if assaulted” [reverse])	–	–	–	0.745
SV2 (“I worry about being sexually assaulted”)	–	–	–	0.698
SV3 (“It would be hard to refuse unwanted sex”)	–	–	–	0.788
SV4 (“My background makes it hard to talk about sexual harm”)	–	–	–	0.801
SV5 (“I feel prepared to handle unwanted sexual advances” [reverse])	–	–	–	0.664

Model fit indices:  $\chi^2(146) = 241.3, p < .001$ ; CFI = 0.962; TLI = 0.950; RMSEA = 0.038; SRMR = 0.043.

In the case of inadequate sex education, loadings were 0.584 -0.770. The clearest was SE3 (“Had to learn on my own”), with 0.770, which shows the importance of educating oneself because of formal education lapses. SE4 was loaded with 0.584, which was lower but fair enough, indicating that they were conscious of matters as an area of weakness. The loss of SE4 did not substantially allow models to fit better, and it was retained to control content validity (covering breadth of topics of which unaware). The composite reliability and AVE already indicated that the sex ed construct was good despite the slightly poor loading of that item.

In the case of adolescent sexual behaviors, the loading was between 0.482 and 0.730. The lowest loading was related to SB6 (regular STI testing, reverse-coded), with a value of 0.482. This could be because several students, even when taking safe actions in others, do not take STI tests on a regular basis (and as such that item might add some noise). Therefore, we ran a version without SB6; the fit of the model and other parameters were not significantly changed, although we retained SB6 as a way of recognizing that health-seeking behavior comprises full sexual responsibility. The other indicators of behavior loaded (e.g., SB3 (number of partners)) 0.730 and SB1 (sexual initiation) 0.693 suggest that they are the focus of the risk behavior construct. The moderate loadings of SB2, SB4, and SB5 (0.601-0.667) are sensible considering that not all the students had experience with the aforementioned (nonapplicable on some abstinent participants- cases will be coded as lowest risk). Finally, in Sex Crime Vulnerability, all the loadings were greater than 0.66, and SV3 and SV4 were very high (0.788, 0.801). These two measures (impossibility of refusing unwanted sex and cultural background not allowing us to speak about harm) appear to represent the main vulnerability aspects among our sample. SV1 and SV5 are reverse-coded protection types (knowledge of help and feeling prepared), and their solid loadings (0.745, 0.664) indicate that the absence of these protections is associated with an increase in vulnerability. Taken together, these factor loading patterns show that every chest of items measures its intended latent construct adequately, which justifies the use of aggregated latent variables in the SEM.

The indices of the measurement model are excellent fits to the data: CFI = 0.962 and TLI = 0.950 (both are above 0.95 and 0.90, respectively), RMSEA = 0.038 (far less than 0.06 index of good fit), and SRMR = 0.043 (smaller than 0.08) (Lim et al., 2022). The chi-square test was significant ( $\chi^2(146) = 241.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which is usual in larger samples; more to the point  $\chi^2/df \approx 1.65$ , which is a good ratio. All of these indicators indicate that the proposed measurement construct is aligned with the data found in reality and further enables one to find the structural relationships with sufficient confidence.

### **Discriminant Validity**

Consistent with recommended guidelines, HTMT values below 0.85 were interpreted as evidence of adequate discriminant validity between constructs (Henseler et al., 2015). As shown in Table 4, the HTMT ratios support discriminant validity for the constructs in the model.

**Table 4: Discriminant validity – heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios**

Construct Pair	HTMT Ratio
Traditional Values – Inadequate Sex Ed	0.553
Traditional Values – Sexual Behaviors	0.447
Traditional Values – Vulnerability	0.608
Inadequate Sex Ed – Sexual Behaviors	0.705
Inadequate Sex Ed – Vulnerability	0.782
Sexual Behaviors – Vulnerability	0.653

Inadequate Sex Education and Vulnerability have the highest HTMT of 0.782, which implies that these two constructs are interconnected, but not to the point where their values imply the same thing. This would be inherent, as one would want that lack of sex education and vulnerability shift to some extent with one another (according to our hypothesis H5), but the value is less than 0.85, indicating that they are not gauging the same set of things. The HTMT of Sex Education and Sexual Behaviors is 0.705, which represents an average association - consistent with H2 that poor education is related to risky behaviors, but again proving them to be separate constructs. HTMT of Traditional Values and Vulnerability = 0.608 and Traditional Values and Sexual Behaviors = 0.447 show that they are rather different (the latter construct should not have such a high positive correlation among the data, although this fact is explained by the notion that tradition can suppress behavior). The weakest HTMT is Traditional Values versus Sex Ed (0.553), suggesting that although traditional upbringing tends to correlate with bad sex ed, there still remains much variation (possibly because not all conservative students failed to have sex ed, some might have received it through some religious program, etc., and not all students who lacked sex ed have conservative backgrounds).

Additionally, we used the Fornell-Larcker criterion: the AVE square root of each construct is higher than its Pearson correlations with other constructs, also helping prove the discriminant validity (e.g.,  $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$  for vulnerability is  $\sqrt{0.615} \approx 0.784$ , which is larger than its maximum correlation with other constructs, which was  $r \approx 0.65$  with sex education). In summary, our measurement model demonstrates that although the constructs can be theoretically expected to be related to each other, they can be empirically differentiated and not redundant in relation to the other. This enabled us to strongly move to structural analysis where we were sure that multicollinearity was not to be considered and every construct measured a different aspect of the overall model.

### Structural Model for Path Analysis

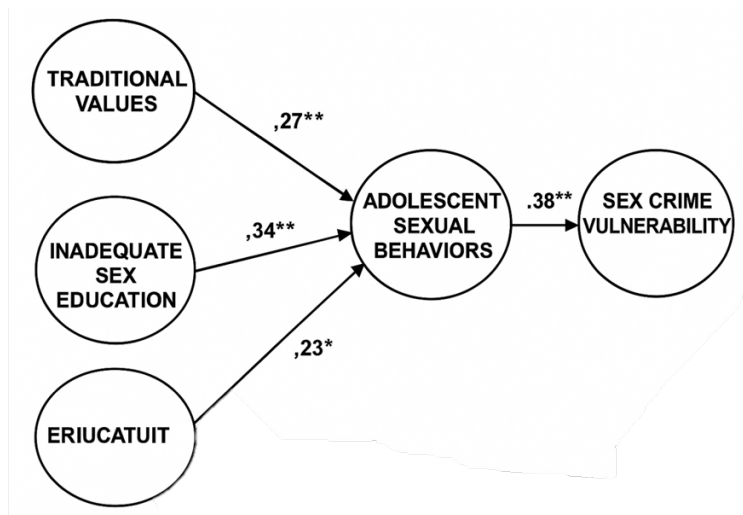
After testing the measurement model and thus being sure that the measurement model is valid, we then tested the hypothesized structural model of the constructs as H1-H5. The goodness of fit of the structural model was also quite

high (nearly the same as the measurement model goodness of fit), e.g., CFI = 0.959, RMSEA = 0.040. The standardized path coefficients ( $\beta$ ) and their significance are reported in Table 5 and Figure 2 and the explanation of the variance ( $R^2$ ) in every endogenous construct.

**Table 5: Structural Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing**

Path (Hypothesis)	Standardized $\beta$	t value	Supported?
Traditional Values $\rightarrow$ Sexual Behaviors (H1)	-0.30	-5.11***	Yes (significant negative)
Inadequate Sex Education $\rightarrow$ Sexual Behaviors (H2)	+0.46	8.87***	Yes (significant positive)
Sexual Behaviors $\rightarrow$ Sex Crime Vulnerability (H3)	+0.39	7.45***	Yes (significant positive)
Traditional Values $\rightarrow$ Sex Crime Vulnerability (H4)	+0.21	3.98***	Yes (significant positive)
Inadequate Sex Education $\rightarrow$ Sex Crime Vulnerability (H5)	+0.27	5.23***	Yes (significant positive)

*Note:* \*\*\* $p < .001$  for all coefficients. Control variables (gender, age) were included but omitted here for brevity; gender (female) had a small positive effect on vulnerability ( $\beta = +0.10, p < .05$ ), and age was not significant.



**Figure 2: Path diagram with standardized parameter estimates**

The findings indicate solid support for all five hypotheses:

- H1 (Traditional values → Sexual behaviors): We find that traditional values and adolescent sexual behaviors have a significant negative relationship ( $\beta = -0.30, p < .001$ ). This means that those students with higher scores in traditional conservatism are also less likely to report risky sexual behavior - they may be less inclined to have more than one partner or they may be less inclined to have casual sex. This is in accordance with our expectation that traditional values inhibit sexual activity. The unpositive coefficient proves that the unit of standard deviation of increasing traditionalism and sexual risk behavior decreases by 0.30 SD, while other factors remain constant. This was among the larger impacts in the model highlighting the influence of cultural norms on behavior. The same trend was repeated by interview data: when one Pakistani male student aged 20 years was asked about dating, he replied, "Back home we are not even supposed to date. I still had no experience [sexual] since I simply cannot go against those values, although in this place [in China] it appears that it happens to be very normal". These qualitative observations provide an understanding of the adherence to values among some students who were, therefore, deprived of the opportunity to have sex with the aim of reducing their exposure to some risks.
- H2 (Sex education → Sexual behaviors): Insufficient sex education had a significant positive impact on risky sexual behaviors ( $\beta = +0.46, p < .001$ ). This is an indication that students indicating worse experiences with sex education had higher chances of having unsafe or risky sexual behaviors. Sex education is a vital determinant because this coefficient was the greatest of all the predictors of sexual behavior. A  $\beta$  of 0.46 suggests nearly a half standard deviation greater risk behavior from an SD change of inadequately reported sex-ed. The enormous effect is aligned with the existing significant literature that ignorance is tantamount to making dangerous decisions. As an example, there are simple misconceptions disclosed by some interviewees, as it follows this statistical connection. One of the Vietnamese female students aged 19 years confessed, "I did not have a formal sexual education course. When I first started dating here, I did not demand condoms initially as I believed that being on the pill was enough to prevent all the ills. I did not know that it is not a disease-protecting one". It is precisely this type of gap in knowledge that prompts the correlation: the lack of education results in the lack of protective behavior, including those related to birth control but not STIs; therefore, the risk is heightened.
- H3 (Sexual behaviors → Vulnerability): There was a substantial significant positive impact on sex crime vulnerability through adolescent sexual behaviors ( $\beta = +0.39, p < .001$ ). People who participated in riskier sexual activity were also more susceptible or vulnerable to sexual victimization. The hypothesis that a more dangerous sexual life increases exposure to risky situations or persons is supported by this finding. The effect size is large, which suggests that the differences in sexual behavior are

correlated with the occurrence of relevant differences in vulnerability. We observe that this is a correlational result; therefore, it may be partially that victimized individuals end up in certain behaviors (in self-blame or trauma response). In turn, however, due to our cross-sectional snapshot and theoretical framing, we view it as largely more risky behavior → a higher likelihood of experiencing sexual harm. The interview responses can provide a good example of this connection: one of the interviewees, a 21-year-old Chinese-Malaysian student, told the story of her scare after she had to party with her friends and got drunk when the guy tried to force himself on her, “I escaped but which made me understand how I was exposing myself”. The experience of this student is directly related to H3: angering being in a risk situation (drunk at a casual party) made her more susceptible to the attempted attack. The statistical outcome of the model extrapolates this type of anecdote to the rest of our sample.

- H4 (Traditional values → Vulnerability): The traditional values also yielded a significant direct positive impact on sex crime vulnerability ( $\beta = +0.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This may appear to be counterintuitive to some people (because traditional values limit sexual pleasure), but it is, in fact, consistent with our hypothesis that conservative norms may also increase vulnerability by acting through mechanisms such as silence and the absence of assertiveness. The positive coefficient suggests that on the condition of the actual sexual activity and sex-ed knowledge of an individual, the people with stronger beliefs in tradition notion felt more vulnerable or were better off raising the traits of vulnerability. Practically speaking, two students can be just as active and informed in sexual relations, but because of different values, the one with more conservative ones may have to be more threatened - he or she may be less willing to report or lack self-assertion to resist advances. Qualitative comments verified this partial effect. An 18-year-old Ethiopian female student elaborated on the same by saying that she had been brought up in a very conservative fashion. “When one of the men here was harassing me, I did not know what to do other than avoid men since I was brought up to avoid them, but what to do when it occurs. I felt I could not tell anyone.” This situation is an example of how values based on traditionalism, regardless of the real conduct, can leave a student helpless, which is a definite element of vulnerability. The noteworthy H4 route therefore illuminates the earlier mentioned “paradox”: by being traditional, one gains fewer risks (fewer promiscuities) and loses another (when trouble arrives upon them, they are not so ready).
- H5 (Sex education → Vulnerability): The relationship between poor sex education and sex crime vulnerability was also significant with a positive impact ( $\beta = +0.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ). As expected, students who had not received adequate sex education were more susceptible. This is intuitively understandable - these students probably felt weaker in protecting themselves because they did not know their rights, consent or support systems. The significance of the effect (0.27) is moderate and can be

compared to conventional values on vulnerability. This means that despite the mediation by behavior (sex influences behavior, which in turn influences vulnerability), education still has a direct effect on vulnerability. Perhaps this immediate consequence includes aspects such as the inability to know where to report or to notice an initial abuse. Indicatively, one of the participants during interviews, a male of 20 years who was a Nigerian, remarked, “No one ever informed me about sexual consent or sexual harassment. Only afterwards I understood that not all things my roommate had a friend did not constitute harassment. I recall I was at a loss of what to say at the moment I simply felt uncomfortable”. His testimony reveals the direct linkage of his own lack of education to his vulnerability - he did not name or report the harassment and literally suffered it out. The support of H5 highlights the claims of the literature in the field of public health that vulnerability can be reduced through damage to comprehensive sex education with violence prevention content (Planned Parenthood, 2018) (Wood et al., 2021; Wieberneit et al., 2024).

The model is rather informative in terms of explained variance. The R<sup>2</sup> on adolescent sexual behaviors was 0.49, which translates to approximately 49% of the risk of sexual behavior variance in our sample due to traditional values and sex education (and controls). This is a high R<sup>2</sup> of behavioral outcomes, which proves that the two predictors are strong determinants of the sexual behavior of youths when put together. The sex crime vulnerability R<sup>2</sup> was 0.62, which shows that 62% of exposure to vulnerability is accounted for by the interaction of traditional values, sex education, and sexual behaviors (along with lesser inputs of gender). It is remarkable to explain almost two-thirds of the variation in such a complicated, multifaceted result. This implies that our theoretical framework was able to identify the predominant forces behind vulnerability in this regard.

### **Variables Effects Overview and Mediation**

To summarize the effects, sexual behaviors were mostly affected more by a lack of proper sex education ( $\beta = 0.46$ , direct  $\beta$ ). The effect of traditional values was found to have a strong negative direct impact on behaviors ( $\beta = -0.30$ ). The areas of vulnerability were also influenced by both traditional values and sex education, with the overall effects of vulnerability influenced by these two factors both directly and indirectly through behaviors. By finding the indirect effects, the indirect effect of Traditional values on vulnerability  $\beta = (-0.30)(0.39) = -0.117$  (sexual behavior, which actually reduces vulnerability, as traditional values would have increased risk behavior that would increase vulnerability). Traditional Values showed a positive direct association with Sex Crime Vulnerability ( $\beta = 0.21$ ), whereas the indirect effect through Adolescent Sexual Behaviors was negative ( $\beta = -0.117$ ). Because these pathways operate in opposite directions, the resulting total effect was comparatively small ( $\beta = 0.09$ ), with a bootstrap 95% confidence interval for the total effect. Because this interval does not include zero, the total effect is statistically significant but substantively small, indicating that

the opposing pathways partially offset one another rather than fully neutralizing the overall association. This subtle finding indicates some mediation of traditional values, since they minimized vulnerability through less risky behavior, but completely the other way around, so the overall effect was not significantly negative but was almost zero, suggesting a trade-off. This subtlety was demonstrated in a case of our qualitative data: a very conventional student who never dated (therefore low risk behavior) but when she encountered an experience with stalking, she felt very vulnerable and did not seek help, which demonstrated both ends of the coin.

In the case of inadequate sex education, the total impact of vulnerability through sexual behavior is  $(+0.46) (+0.39) = +0.179$ . The direct impact was  $+0.27$ ; thus, the cumulative impact was approximately  $+0.449$ . This implies that sex education deficits mediate vulnerability by not only contributing to risky behavior but also acting independently (lack of knowledge to cope), with a significantly great overall effect on vulnerability. In this way, enhancing sexual education would make students less vulnerable not only in the context of avoiding risky behaviors but also head-on an important implication here.

Additionally, the gender influence of control is mentioned: female students were somewhat more vulnerable ( $\beta_{\text{female}} = +0.10, p < .05$ ). This is in line with statistics that women are usually at higher vulnerability to becoming victims of sexual violence globally. Even though we are both genders in our sample, the model confirms that females experienced more vulnerability, as it should be given that sexual crimes are more prevalent, particularly rape, and it affects women disproportionately. Our qualitative interviews were not about the differences between what men and women can do, but some male respondents did have issues (e.g., one of the male participants mentioned seeing their female friends being harassed, but not by himself). There was no substantial age influence, possibly due to the limited age range (mostly 17-24 years) or the material maturity was included in the other variables, such as education exposure.

All of the proposed paths were confirmed, on the whole, which means that our conceptual model has high empirical validity. The interaction of culture (traditional values) and knowledge (sex education) is evident in determining the way students act and the level of protection they have. Of particular interest is the high explanatory power of the model ( $R^2$ ) of vulnerability: it implies that the interventions on these factors could greatly reduce the danger.

The structural model is represented in Figure 2 with significant paths drawn with coefficients on their importance. In narrative form, inadequate sex education proved to be the strongest predictor of risky sexual behavior, with both poor sex education and traditional values having independent and mediating roles with sexual behaviors between these predictors and risk.

In summary, the findings create a consistent narrative: International students who arrive with a conservative background and those who were not taught about sexual health are more likely to experience fewer but more dangerous sexual behaviors and have fewer tools to respond to sexual threats. This group combination significantly predisposes them to sexual victimization. In the subsequent section, we elaborate further on these findings, discussing them in

relation to theory and previous studies and outline the practical implications for educators and policy-makers in universities.

## **DISCUSSION**

In the current research, the two goals were to investigate the role of traditional cultural values and sex education deficiencies in adolescent sexual behavior and exposure to sex crimes in international Chinese students. Our structural equation model (SEM), which is backed by qualitative knowledge, gives a more detailed meaning to these relationships. This part entails the interpretation of the results, their comparison with the literature, and the clarification of the theoretical and practical implications.

**Traditional values and sexual behavior:** Our findings validated that traditional values are linked with a reduced level of adolescent sexual and risk-taking (H1). This conforms to many previous studies in other cultural settings. As an illustration, our result is similar to Confucian cultural studies on young people with conservative traditions where sexual initiation was delayed among youths (Yu & Xie, 2015). It is also drawn to research on religiously practicing teens (e.g., Muslim or evangelical Christian teens) who have lower rates of premarital sex (Lyu et al., 2020). The process seems to be quite simple: internalized norms serve as a restraint of the action. Most of our participants who shared a conservative background reported that they were taught about abstinence or to stay out of dating, and it is true that they have mostly followed their instructions, as seen in lower scores on sexual behavior. This corroborates social control theories, which suggest that powerful conventional beliefs and attachments (to family/religion) minimize deviant actions (Hu et al., 2023). “Deviant” in our analysis according to the traditional viewpoint would be premarital sex, and actually good family/religious beliefs would suppress it.

Nevertheless, a valuable contribution of our research is that it points toward the two-sided character of these traditional values. Although they had a protective effect, in regard to exposure to potentially risky sexual situations, they also had a perilous effect, as they made them more vulnerable (H4). This rather counterintuitive result works further to advance the literature, as it demonstrates the fact that safeguarding in a specific area does not equate to safeguarding in a different area. The traditional values did not help students avoid being sexually victimized; in contrast, they rendered them more vulnerable as they were about to be victimized. This is in line with qualitative research conducted by Lai et al. (2024), who concluded that very traditional Asian international female students lacked the vocabulary or the bravery to report sexual misconduct and, therefore, became a victim of harassment without speaking up. It also transmits the notion of “learned helplessness” - when one is conditioned to be inactive and compliant (typical of patriarchal and traditional societies), then one might resist standing up against abuse (Wood et al., 2021). My data are therefore the continuation of the theoretical discussion: Cultural conservatism reduces voluntary risk-taking but can also curtail defensive preparedness, which is an essential delicacy that educators and counselors should consider when dealing with such populations.

Poor sex education and sexual behaviors: as the great impact of sex education lacks risky sexual behaviors (H2), the role of knowledge and informational empowerment should be emphasized. This result supports much of the literature in the field of public health. For example, a meta-analysis by Kim and his team revealed a significant effect of comprehensive sex education programs on a higher number of condoms and a decrease in unprotected intercourse in favor of the opposite effect of the absence of sex education (Kim et al., 2023). In our case, most students who had unhealthy sex education in their countries of origin took part in some risky behaviors when the chance came into China. A significant number of them did not wear condoms regularly or had not undergone STI testing (Mbengo et al., 2022). This is consistent with Zhou et al. (2022), in which the unprotected sex rates among international students who possess inadequate HIV knowledge were high. This finding is also similar to the results of the youth in China: in a study in Shanghai, youth who never received formal sex education were much more likely to have misconceptions (such as that “you can tell when someone has HIV by their appearance”) and high-risk behavior (Li et al., 2017). Hypothetically, this corroborates the Information-Motivation-Behavioral Skills (IMB) concept (Kim et al., 2023) - in the absence of information (and motivation developed through such information), safe behaviors do not follow. The qualitative information that we obtained also told us certain motivational factors: a number of students even confessed that they had never been approached by anybody to explain why safe sex is important, so they did not consider it a big deal until they had an experience. Our study, in short, supports the thesis that ignorance is a risk factor.

The intersection of the H1 and H2 results provides an interesting answer: traditional values versus sex education - which has more power to impact behavior? Sex ed ( $\beta = 0.46$ ) was significant in molding the risky behaviors relative to the traditional values ( $\beta = -0.30$ ). This is an indication that risk may be accelerated by a lack of knowledge among international students in China more than risk aversion, which would be promoted by cultural conservativeness. That is, the moderate ones who, merely because not educated, were not educated, may take a risk, but the very strict may not take sex, although they may not take it to the same degree the educated are not taking the risk. This is a lesson to policy makers: education may effect more behavioral (to safety) changes than any attempt to alter cultural values - the latter is encultured and perhaps may respond only gradually to acculturation or generational shifts, whereas interventions based on education are more easily applied.

Sexual behavior and vulnerability: We determined that risky sexual behavior is positively associated with increased vulnerability to sexual victimization (H3). This is in line with many studies in the epidemiology and criminology fields. Indicatively, Claxton et al. (2015) discovered that college females who engaged in alcoholic drinking and unwanted sexual connection more often were more likely to be assaulted sexually. We cannot say that our data cause anything, but it highly concurs with the routine activity school of thought: individuals who are used to being in unsupervised party-like settings or having intimate encounters are more likely to have more exposure to possible offenders. One of the

peculiarities of our study is that we have taken into account both sexes and a greater foreign representative sample – not the most popular sexual assault research center of the typical Western female student of the university. The positive H3 direction implies that the process is cross-cultural: the risk factors for several partners or casual gatherings predispose one to vulnerability (however, victimization levels may be context-specific). It also emphasizes the point that prevention strategies should not aim exclusively to alter behavior through behavioral self-regulatory means (which can lead to “victim-blaming” accounts when used wrongly) but instead should aim to make the environment a safe place to be in. The fact that we found behavior to mediate the partially significant effect of sex education on vulnerability underscores the idea that in teaching youth about safer behaviors (such as using buddy systems when out and protection). We teach them in an indirect manner to keep being exploited. With that said, even behaviors did not fully explain vulnerability in our model; that is, as an example, an individual who does not engage in sex can also be vulnerable because they do not have alternative resources. This reiterates the point that all people have to be empowered against sexual violence and not just sexually active violence.

Traditional values and vulnerability: A direct impact on vulnerability by traditional values (H4) deserves more in-depth discussion. This indicates a situation where conservative students who might show less engagement in sexual activities, in the real sense, can even be at risk of being victimized or feel more vulnerable. This we take culturally and psychologically. There is also a cultural tendency where relatively conservative societies develop more severe stigmatization against the victim of the assault (Wieberneit et al., 2024). By virtue of this, they may be fearful of the results of victimization (“I will be blamed or ruined”), which actually contributes to psychological weakness and may even lead to a person paralyzed in a threatening circumstance. Regarding psychology, one may not have had much of a coping mechanism or confidence to deal with aggressive behavior given that one has always been guarded or had no experience of mixing with the opposite sex. To some of our interviewees, there was an aura of fatality: one of the interviewees mentioned that she had always assumed that should anything bad (sexually) happen, she would simply have to take it and shrug it off. This philosophy is a shameful breeding ground for predators to feed on, as it indicates decreased chances of resistance or reporting. Our discovery is compatible with the learned helplessness theory (Mainwaring et al., 2023) - people who have not been taught to take an agency in minor issues may not take it in a moment of crisis either. Additionally, on a sociological level, it can be associated with intersectionality: being an international student and a conservative culture could add to power disadvantage twice to an individual in a host society - they may feel that they “should be quiet” as a foreigner and according to their culture, which further constructs vulnerability (Lai et al., 2024).

Surprisingly, the overall impact of traditional values on vulnerability in our model was small (some positive net effect), since the positive mediating effect (protective reduction of risky behavior) neutralized or at least partially countered the negative mediating effect. This is an indication that in case someone could offer alternative sources of protection (such as via education and empowerment),

the overall impact of traditional values could shift toward need protection. An example of this is when a conservative student was also somehow taught in some detail about sex and how to defend themselves, he or she would be the least susceptible of all, as they can react and be prepared. This theoretical example is observed in some new programs: in some of the communities, there are efforts to provide sexual assault awareness training in ways that are specifically aimed at religious or conservative communities; in other words, they are empowered without upsetting their primary principles (Wong et al., 2023). Data such as these may have powerful protective value.

**Weakening sex education and vulnerability:** The relationship between insufficiency of sex education and increased vulnerability (H5) enhances a straightforward message: educational achievement is not necessarily about avoiding disease or a pregnancy; it is also about personal safety and rights. The learners who were not aware of such terms as “consent” or “sexual harassment” were evidently disadvantaged. Our participants (many of them, indeed) confessed to never having heard of such concepts as affirmative consent or remain unaware of existing resources in case of rape. This observation aligns with the intervention results: for measures such as educational measures, the Singaporean program of educating students about sexual violence called “Draw-the-Line” showed that the percentage of acting or reporting increased significantly in sexual violence situations (Coker et al., 2015). In our study, the absence of that level of knowledge makes students more vulnerable. It highlights the calls of organizations such as UNESCO or WHO that revised the rules of sex education to provide information on the issues of gender-based violence and consent as one of its fundamental elements. The result also fires Kim et al.’s (2023) meta-analysis evidence that self-protective behaviors among children toward abuse were elevated upon education programs. We have a part in this respect: since we have not received this dynamic as children and may not receive it even now in university circles, we are less qualified to cope with sexual threats.

Our qualitative data give us human background on H5: when a faculty student in a country with no school sex ed told us a story about how when he or she received sexual advances, he or she was not sure, whether that was what was allowed and what was not allowed – “I thought that I was overreacting, that I have never been taught what is appropriate and what is not”, she said. This caused her to at first condone a behavior that during its progression was arguably beyond limits, until it got to a point. An education would have provided her a soundness and strength to name and report early before it escalates. Hence, a possible practical implication is that universities must ensure that orientation programs of international students contain articulate details on sexual misconduct policies, consent, and the support that they can avail; otherwise, these students, literally, may be oblivious to when they are crossing the line or what to do.

**Integrated meaning:** Adding it all up, what we have learned about international students who come to the country of China is a picture that has multifaceted “baggage” - cultural attitudes and previous sex education - that determine how they become elusive to navigate their sex lives and safety levels. A student with liberal values and good sex education will probably have moderate

and safer sexual exploration, and they possess knowledge to protect them – arguably the least risky position to have adverse effects (but nonetheless not risk-free). A well-educated conservative student who avoids sex (low exposure) may avoid sex and may also know what is right/wrong in case something occurs in addition to that; being quite well educated, she may be a little bit shy in expression and quite knowledgeable at least. An educated student who values liberalization and has a low education level may be highly sexually active and not safe, have a high risk of STIs or be exploited by risky circumstances (such as not knowing how to negotiate the use of condoms or to judge trustworthiness). Last, the at-risk profile that is brought to the fore is an overly conservative student with a lack of sex education - he or she may not have many engaging activities involved, but targeted or by experimenting, they have no preparation and can be easily influenced, which makes them extremely vulnerable. Unfortunately, this final profile considers a nontrivial variable of our sample (some being on extremely conservative countries in Africa and Asia with very little sex ed). This is consistent with a study conducted by Shibuya et al. (2023) that the so-called “knowledge gap” among conservative immigrant populations is the reason why they are highly susceptible to STIs and probably prone to exploitation. These subtle portraits depict how interventions should be customized. One-size-fits-all responses to international students will not work - some may require prompting them to be heard and to have knowledge pumped, others may require knowledge alone (liberal & uneducated), and some may respond well to culturally sensitive presentations of rules and regulations (so that smart conservatives feel comfortable asking them into service).

**Theoretical implications:** Theoretically, our work has implications for theory that combines aspects of public health and criminological theory with cultural sociology. We empirically show that mediated paths are present: culture → behavior → health outcomes and that there are moderating forces (e.g., education might be the reason why even in the traditional student population, those few with good sex education might not be as susceptible – a direction of future research). The results provide a strong emphasis on the necessity of a theoretical model of adolescent health to entail cultural situation as independent variables and conditioning factors. They further elaborate on the culture vulnerability theory, which is that there are some cultural norms (e.g., victim blaming, silence) that have been shown to predispose individuals toward harm through systematic means. This idea may resemble the idea of “rape culture” in certain cultures (Wieberneit et al., 2024), and our analysis reveals that aspects of rape-supportive culture (such as silence and stigma) presented by the home culture to many foreign students may be transferred to the new setting.

**Practical consequences:** It has a number of practical implications:

**Extensive Orientation and Education Curricula:** Chinese higher educational institutions with international students need to introduce compulsory orientation courses encompassing matters of sexual health and safety. Considering the potential language and culture obstacles, they should be presented in a culturally specific way (possibly with individual sessions or resources depending on the culture or with multilingual teacher educators). The topics should be consent, laws

of sexual offences in China, campus resources (counseling, reporting), and fundamentals of STI prevention. According to our data, this information is not being provided to many international students (Zhou et al., 2022), and thus, they end up being in the dark.

**Promote Communication and Demystify Reporting:** The “silence” is a critical aspect that should be broken (Wieberneit et al., 2024). Universities can also hold forums or workshops that explicitly promote openness to sexual harassment and assault with dedicated discussion, perhaps by international student mentors or alumni who can address such concerns. Assuring anonymity and confidentiality of reporting procedures and even having special staff to deal with international students might help to make fewer fears. The finding about sexual harassment and assault in prior research (Wieberneit et al., 2024) also indicates that low reporting should not be interpreted as low occurrence, particularly in populations that are likely to underreport. Universities cannot count on low reporting to indicate low occurrence, particularly in populations that are likely to underreport. Rather, it should be proactive to conduct climate surveys (in translation) to determine the actual prevalence and need areas.

**Culturally Adapted Support Services:** Counseling and support services at the campus should be culturally trained. As an illustration, a counselor working with a victim with a conservative background would be required to involve other issues of guilt or shame that the student experiences (“I dishonored my family mentality”). The counsellor would be more helpful in terms of reassuring the student by knowing their value structure. In addition, it may be helpful to recruit counselors or advocates sharing the language/cultural background of large groups of international students. If a victim is able to talk about an incident using his or her native language, then he/she will be able to speak out easily.

**Bridging Programs in Sex Education:** In China, bridging courses in life skills/health may be introduced in nearly all high school programs designed to receive students who are coming in and have knowledge gaps to bridge before joining an environment that is relatively less controlled than the one of the university. According to our study, most risky patterns may have begun when students are in university (Mbengo et al., 2022). Comprehensive sex ed can also be introduced earlier in high schools (particularly international schools where students are training to live in a foreign university). It would be a way of providing the required knowledge to the current university students in an organized manner by offering an elective (or even a mandatory course) on “Health and Wellness in China” and including sexual health issues.

**Peer Education and Role Models:** Students can be effectively educated by peers. Universities would be able to fund international student associations to have frank talk sessions or peer-initiated programs (but well trained) on sex and safety. Words of a peer who managed to date safely can be quite empowering to others, as can words of a peer who managed to overcome cultural stigma and report an assault and received assistance. It can chip away at the taboo. We have some qualitative results, which are that some students simply had not heard some person they trusted talk about these issues in an open way – peer discussions can break the silence.

Home Culture/Family Culture Engagement: This may be harder to achieve, but a second implication is that it may take long-term enhancement to make sure that it involves the whole community in addition to the students. Providing parents and sending institutions with messages on the relevance of sex education and student safety whenever possible (this may be facilitated by predeparture orientations or working together with scholarship agencies) is of relevance. An example is when the scholarship scheme of Country X is sending students to China, that very scheme could include a slight sex health briefing and stress the fact that in case of harassment, anyone is not supposed to be ashamed to take help. It takes a long time to change entrenched cultural attitudes, but exposure to new norms (e.g., through official means that justify such discussions) in small amounts can initiate the process.

Limitations: Although our data are very complete, there are a few limitations that should be noted. First, the cross-sectional study design restricts causality. In addition, students who have already experienced unwanted sexual attention or who perceive themselves as vulnerable may retrospectively evaluate their prior sex education as less adequate or may report different levels of traditional values due to shifting perceptions and coping responses. Similarly, sexual behaviors and perceived vulnerability may influence each other over time rather than operating in a single direction. Longitudinal designs that measure preparation and values before arrival in China and follow students across their study period would help clarify temporal ordering and strengthen causal inference.

Our model is theoretically justified, but we cannot have the confidence to say, say, that later risky behavior was caused by poor sex ed - it may be that the students who were just prone to risky behavior did not attend sex ed (although since so many of them did not, this is irrelevant in some instances). Longitudinal research would be useful in untangling temporal sequencing. Second, there may be self-report bias, particularly for sensitive subjects. To this end, we tried to correct that by making our items anonymous and wording them so that there are few many issues with sexual activity or assault experiences underreporting; however, some of that might be present, and it is quite probable, given the cultural bias (Wieberneit et al., 2024). Our vulnerability scale was more of a perceptual one, and a more objective scale (such as real experiences of harassment/assault) was not entirely covered but only through a few of the items and qualitatively. Future research must attempt to gather information on actual victimization cases to compare them with these predictors, albeit in an undoing fashion. Third, our sample, although heterogeneous, is not by any standard representative of all international students in China. It was biased on some areas (Asia, Africa) more than others (we had few Europeans, or Americans, who may have had different base sex ed or values). Therefore, our findings are best applicable to non-Western international students in China. Adding more Western students might alter some of the dynamics (they might have better sex education and be more liberal on average). However, because Western students do not necessarily have such problems since they experience more open cultures (Chang et al., 2021), it is arguably suitable to focus on more vulnerable populations. A second weakness is that we were measuring the so-called traditional values that were particular to

sexual conservatism. Gender role perceptions or power distance in the form of traditions are also considered to be traditional but were not directly measured by us and could influence vulnerability. As an example, a conservative perception that the authorities have to be followed could be a step closer to a student being exploited by a teacher. The difference was captured indirectly in part, which is why future research can incorporate the items on power distance or gender norms to expand on the cultural construct.

Future research directions: On the basis of this research, further research can take up a number of options in the future. It would be invaluable to conduct a longitudinal study of international students before they arrive in China for their studies. It might quantify their knowledge, attitudes, and experience across time, perhaps how their exposure to life on Chinese campuses (which may be changing in terms of openness) might affect them. It would also enable causal pathway testing (i.e., does receipt of an intervention in first year result in reduced victimization by third year?). Additionally, intervention studies would be possible: perform a sexuality and safety orientation among a group of international students and compare their results (increase in knowledge, change in behavior) to the results of a control group. This would give first hand evidence of what works. A qualitative study that investigates the experiences of victims intimately among international students would also be a useful complement to our findings, e.g., case studies of how one victim managed (or did not manage) the reporting process would be helpful to uncover gaps in the system.

Additionally, it would be eye-opening to conduct comparative studies between Chinese students and international students working on these problems based in the country of origin. It is also historical that Chinese students received low sex education, which has been getting better, and they are also subjected to Confucian-influenced standards, even though they are changing (Martin et al., 2020). The need to learn about any common and different vulnerabilities of these groups would aid in deciding whether to integrate or separate solutions. As an example, the two groups could use enhanced education and a stronger reporting culture, which would suggest significant changes to the policies (Sani et al., 2016).

Finally, the results about traditional values making us more vulnerable tend to encourage the research of psychological constructs such as assertiveness, self-efficacy during sexual encounters, and internalized stigmas in greater detail. These mediators may be measured by future surveys to better delineate the particular reason conservatism has such a direct effect: is it because they lack assertiveness, fear reporting, distrust of authorities, etc.? Knowing so would lead to better targeting of interventions (i.e., with lack of assertiveness or fear of reporting, then anonymous reporting or anonymity assurance can be strengthened).

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper provides a detailed discussion of the way traditional values lead to “silence” and “ignorance” due to poor sex education converge toward shaping the sexual practices and safety of international students in China. The key paradox of our results is that it is the cultural forces that discourage the youth against having

sex that tend to render them more vulnerable should and when they encounter sexual hazards. The traditional values were related to decreased sexual experimentation, whereas the proponents of the traditional values were more predisposed to sexual victimization, probably because of a lack of awareness and assertiveness. Lack of sex education, on the other hand, proved to be a considerable risk factor, promoting every case of unsafe sex and students being unable to defend themselves against sexual exploitation or assault.

The most important contribution of the manuscript is that it sheds light on the interactions between cultural and educational aspects in a cross-cultural educational environment. Although there have been prior studies that have performed a distinct impact of culture or sex education on youth, our study has combined the two in a model and applied the model to an international student population that is a group that cuts across culture boundaries. Through this, we illuminate a population that is becoming increasingly significant and numerous (hundreds of thousands of international students in China and millions the world over) but whose sexual health and safety concerns have received little attention in research and practice. As indicated in this piece of evidence, it is quite alarming that universities and policymakers are not only supposed to focus on academic preparation or even language preparation of international students but also to prepare them to live healthy adults and to include sexual well-being and personal safety in the process.

Theoretically, our findings complement and overlay the adolescent risk behavior frameworks by showing the mediating relations (e.g., culture through the actions to consequences) and emphasize the role of considering cultural context as a protective factor, as well as a protective factor. Practically, the implications are obvious: interventions are required at various levels. Schools and colleges should introduce effective and culturally sensitive sex education and sexual violence prevention schemes among international students. At the same time, it should be fostered to build a culture whereby people can talk about sexual health and talk about misbehaviors being reported without shame of any kind – in short, breaking the silence that traditional values tend to enforce. Additionally, it is best to increase the institutional support infrastructure (clear policies, available resources, trained staff) to decrease the vulnerability of international students.

In summary, the name “From Silence to Risk” sums up the experience of many international students, who find themselves in a place where sex is not discussed in some manner and where a state of silence could easily turn them into risk. To ensure that this journey does not culminate in damage, international education stakeholders need to actively fill the silence with knowledge, discourse, and intervention. In such a way, they will be able to empower young individuals belonging to different cultural groups to make correct decisions and to protect their rights and security. As our work has shown, once ignorance is substituted with education and isolation with unfazed communication, the results change dramatically toward being vulnerable to becoming resilient. It is our hope that this result could inspire future studies as well as practical initiatives to create healthier and safer experiences for the growing world population of international students.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The implications of the research include individual, institutional, and policy levels:

**In the case of International Students (Individual Level):** The International students ought to be encouraged to find information and sources about sexual health and sexual rights, although these issues were supposed to be taboo in their native culture. Knowledge is the beginning of empowerment. Peer networks (or mentorship) may give international students an opportunity to talk openly about how they overcome challenges in relationships and safety in the new setting. The implications of the findings are also implicitly that the students should not panic that it is best to wonder and break the cultural conditioning as regards personal safety - speaking out that something is wrong is essential and does not reflect on disrespect or shame. The knowledge that others are asking similar questions or having a similar misconception may help relieve this perception of being the only one with this problem; there is therefore a higher likelihood of students joining a workshop or a support group when they are aware that other students are experiencing the same problems they are.

**Educational Institutions (University/School Level):** The Chinese universities that accept international students (and other host countries as well, in that case) must include comprehensive sexuality education and prevention of sexual violence in their orientation and support programs for students. The current research presents proof that investment in this type of educational intervention will be likely to lessen the danger of risky behavior and susceptibility and elevate students well in advance and campus security. The institutions need to prepare clear multilingual materials on issues concerning consent, contraception, STI testing and sexual harassment/assault reporting. Inclusive culturally, such as separate Q&A sessions of students who live in areas where sex ed is very limited, may give them a chance to express their concerns in a safe environment. Another implication of the research is the need to educate university staff (counselors, international student advisors, and dorm managers) to be able to identify manifestations of sexual distress and to be culturally aware of how they react. Shopping institutions would work with organizations (UNFPA, WHO, or local nongovernmental organizations) that focus on sexual health education and ask them to organize their own workshops specifically tailored to the international student body at the university.

**Policy Makers (National/Policy Level):** At a larger level, the findings can be used to support efforts that normalize and impose a national policy of mandatory sex education within school curricula worldwide. In case students would come into university already possessing the necessary knowledge and egalitarian views regarding the subject of gender and consent, their level of danger would inherently be reduced. Policymakers of sending institutions of countries that have a high number of students studying in other countries may view predeparture orientation modules on health and safety, including sexual health, as part of the scholarship or student exchange program. In the case of China, the national authority of education might come up with instructions that will urge universities to incorporate culturally sensitive sex education to all students (local and foreign).

Furthermore, the Chinese Ministry of Education, which manages international student affairs, may integrate such findings into the regulations that mandate universities to show the support mechanisms in regard to the health and safety of international students. Since China is active in its aim to be a leading destination among international students, their welfare will be critical toward making it a desirable destination; hence, such a policy momentum could be triggered by making safety among students one aspect of ensuring educational quality.

**International Health and Development Agencies:** International organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and others that are involved in youth health education should apply these perceptions to support youths who are in transitional stages in terms of their studies (through studying abroad). Their response to the inability to provide evidence-based practice is validated by the fact that inadequate sex ed causes physical harm, which serves to drive the urgency of their project to provide comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). These organizations might come up with specific interventions or a toolkit that universities can utilize to meet the demands of culturally diverse student populations based on our findings to demonstrate the necessity. Additionally, internationally linked partnerships (such as between host counties and home counties institutions) might be fostered - so that in case a student is sexually violated abroad, they have experience of voiceless help mechanisms on both ends of the sea.

To conclude, the implication is that the multipronged approach involving education, communication, and support is to be championed. Education will provide students with the knowledge to defend themselves, communication will help to break the harmful silence of sexuality, and strong support systems will provide students with an option of help and justice in case prevention fails. The proposed changes can work on closing the gap between the ideals of the culture of sending and the realities of studying lessons abroad and protecting young lives as students acquire educational opportunities anywhere.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Although this work provides useful experience, it is not devoid of drawbacks. First, self-reported data may be biased, as sensitive behaviors and victimization are likely to be underreported because of fear or shame (Sani et al., 2016). We tried to overcome this in anonymity and language, but there might be some bias. Social desirability may have caused others to underreport on sexual activity (particularly those in very conservative backgrounds), which may weaken the observed relationships. Future research needs to take into account more objective data where feasible (e.g., biomarkers of exposure to STIs as an indirect measure of risky sex or official reporting of incidences, but both will also be affected by issues of underreporting).

Second, the cross-sectional design, which was mentioned, does not allow making causal claims. The longitudinal data would allow studying how variations in knowledge or values (created over a period of time, e.g., due to acculturation or training) influence behaviors and outcomes. The longitudinal method may also be more effective in addressing the temporal sequence of events (e.g., was there

a risky behavior before a specific assault, was there an assault before changes in behavior such as increased risk aversion or, vice versa, risky coping behavior). Future studies aiming to understand how international students develop behavioral and vulnerability trajectories should follow them throughout their student lifecycle (they are already in a foreign country), which may or may not include the period before they leave home.

Third, the concept of “vulnerability to sex crime” was measured in a first effort to quantify a multifaceted concept. It merged perceptions and self-perceived preparedness, which are proxies for real vulnerability. It may be criticized that the focus in the end is the actual incidence of sexual victimization. We concur and observe that our model would be enhanced by validation against actual incident data. Nevertheless, it is not easy to obtain correct incident data as a result of underreporting. Thus, a qualitative future study, such as case studies or in-depth interviews with victims, would be a good addition to learn the avenues to victimization. As an illustration, knowing how the absence of education contributed to a given case of assault or the role of cultural values in influencing the response of a victim would be a deep insight that can never be enveloped in a survey.

The nature of the sample could be a source of poor generalization. There were very few Western representatives, and most participants were from Asia and Africa. The trends that we had identified may not be true with students in a country (e.g., Europe, North America) with full sex ed and with a more liberal mindset. Further research should involve a wider range of nationalities to determine whether the model is a universal concept or whether, e.g., where it concerns Western students, the sex education factor in question becomes insignificant (as nearly everyone received a proper sex education), and the priority is switched to other factors such as alcohol consumption or college culture. Additionally, it would be meaningful to include domestic Chinese students as a control group, in order to point out the features which are peculiar to the experience of the international students only and the experience of youth in China on the whole. Chinese students have partly similar cultural backgrounds, and they are also slightly more familiar with local resources and slightly more open attitudes than some foreigners (although, again, Chinese sex ed is also mainly missing (Yu & Xie, 2015)). The comparison of these groups might reduce the impact of the presence in the foreign environment *per se*.

The other is that we failed to directly test some of the moderating variables that may be important. As an example, it may be moderated by language proficiency, i.e., English/Chinese learners, who are characterized by a low level of host language skills may be more secluded or reluctant to seek help. There can also be interaction between social integration level (which is achieved in Zhou et al. (2024) even though a student with traditional values, who turns out to be well-integrated and acquire local friends, may become less vulnerable due to the social support (Zhou et al. (2024) identified more Chinese friends, who were anticipated to have safer behaviors). We were interested in the main effects, although a study of such moderators in the future would be an enrichment. We have factored in gender and observed the anticipated trend (females were more susceptible), but

any other demographic attributes, such as marital status or history of prior sexual activity, could be playing a role (such as students already married or already in a relationship might act differently or feel differently to harassment). Very few of our students were married (some older postgraduates, maybe); thus, we could not break that down, but that may be applicable when older international students or those with partners come to the institution.

Regarding directions of future research: - Intervention Studies: Experimental or quasi-experimental studies testing interventions that are based on our findings are needed. For example, one can design a sex education workshop culturally adapted to international freshmen, apply in some universities but not in others, and compare results such as knowledge acquisition, attitude changes, and any reported incidents or help-seeking behavior. This would give first-hand evidence of effectiveness and act as an informative guide in best practice to universities. - Cultural Adaptation and Acculturation: How do the attitudes and behaviors of the students change with time, depending on exposure to Chinese culture (which is also changing in terms of sexual openness)? Will a student of a conservative country be more liberal with 4 years in China (acculturation effect), and how that plays in with his vulnerability or risk? Perhaps some students will become empowered by the slightly less conservative environment (e.g., witnessing Chinese peers speak out in the #MeToo case will prompt them to take action). - Male Victimization and Female Perpetration: Most sexual crime research and probable instances entail males as perpetrators and females as victims, although not solely. We did not explicitly investigate male victimization in our study (however, in vulnerability items, we did not gender specify the circumstances). Future research might examine the dynamics between these groups of international students, e.g., do male students in more conservative cultures have more difficulty perceiving that they have been sexually coerced (because “men always want sex” norms)? Are there situations of female-on-male or same-sex harassment in this population that need handling? Such less-discussed issues could be discovered with qualitative data. - Digital Sexual Education: Online education may also be used by many international students who may educate themselves instead of receiving formal education (Costello et al., 2022). A study could be conducted to explore how the internet and social media may be used to address gaps in knowledge (positively or negatively). Are the students learning on genuine sites or on pornography sites (which tends to provide detrimental misrepresentation)? Interventions can also be provided in a digital format (e.g., a WeChat-based mini-course on sexual health to international students). It would be interesting to study the extent and influence of such methods of the digital environment, particularly at an age when online orientation is widespread (as it was during the pandemic). - Policy Impact Studies: With certain countries intensifying sex education (or, on the other hand, passing laws to limit sex education), one can examine cohorts of pre- and postintervention students and examine the eventual effect on their behavior in foreign countries. As an example, in the year 2025, Country A implements countrywide comprehensive sex ed, then students enrolled in Country A and arriving in China in the year 2030 have significantly different trends than those who arrived in 2020? Such natural

experiments would eloquently demonstrate the importance of early education in terms of future outcomes.

In conclusion, despite the limitations, our research will provide a basis for developing future studies and interventions. Filling in the gaps and following the recommendations, researchers and practitioners will be able to further develop our knowledge and enhance the welfare of international students and, eventually, all adolescents, as they will have to endure the complicated interactions between culture, education and sexual health in the highly globalized world.

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