Article

A Study on the Rising Trends of Chinese Students' Motivations for Higher Education in Malaysia

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Abstract: In 2013, Malaysia became a partner country of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signing in-depth cooperation agreements to align the BRI with Malaysia's "Ekonomi MADANI" Framework. In 2025, Malaysia formally became a BRICS partner country, while concurrently serving as the ASEAN Chair and the Country Coordinator for China-ASEAN Relations. Against this backdrop, China-Malaysia cooperation and exchanges in higher education have continued to deepen. Currently, however, Chinese students have a wide range of study destination options, leading to the phenomenon of "multi-destination diversification" in their choices. As bilateral educational cooperation continues to deepen, Malaysia has emerged as an increasingly important educational investment option for Chinese students due to its cost advantages, English-medium academic environment, and geographical proximity. Nevertheless, the rapidly expanding Malaysia study abroad market faces challenges, including inconsistent information standards, unstable expectations regarding degree accreditation, and insufficient transparency in application procedures. These issues have resulted in a structural imbalance characterized by high consultation intention but low application conversion rates. This study has three primary objectives: to identify the core barriers hindering the transition from intention formation to application conversion among Chinese students considering studying in Malaysia; to analyze the demand structure of these prospective students; and to construct comprehensive student profiles. In doing so, this research seeks to explain why interest in studying in Malaysia arises, why hesitation persists, and why destination choices diverge during the implementation phase.

Keywords: malaysia; higher education; study abroad; student motivation; student profiling; decision making

Received: 10 March 2026
Revised: 28 April 2026
Accepted: 08 May 2026
Published: 11 May 2026

1. Background

In 2013, Malaysia signed agreements to deeply align the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with its "Ekonomi MADANI" Framework. According to data from the Belt and Road Portal, China-Malaysia cooperation has yielded substantial achievements over the past 13 years, establishing Malaysia as a model of regional economic integration and a paradigm for China-ASEAN BRI collaboration. China has remained Malaysia's largest trading partner for 16 consecutive years, and Malaysia is China's second-largest trading partner and largest source of imports among ASEAN member states. In 2024, bilateral trade between China and Malaysia reached USD 212 billion, representing a nearly thousand-fold increase since the establishment of diplomatic relations. The Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park has attracted cumulative investments totaling RMB 11 billion, and with the full completion of expansion works, the throughput capacity of Kuantan Port is projected to increase from 26 million tons to 52 million tons.

As pragmatic bilateral cooperation continues to undergo qualitative upgrading and enhancement, China-Malaysia collaboration and exchange in the higher education sector have deepened correspondingly. According to data disclosed by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education on August 26, 2025, as of December 31, 2024, the Malaysian higher

education system enrolled a total of 1,251,552 students, among whom 155,986 were international students and 56,198 were Chinese students, accounting for a proportion as high as 36% and constituting the largest source country. This indicates that China has become a vital source market for the internationalization of Malaysian higher education, and that studying in Malaysia is transitioning from a niche alternative option toward a regional educational migration phenomenon with a realistic scale foundation [1, 2]. As illustrated in Figure 1, from 2020 to 2024, the scale of Chinese students studying in Malaysia and the associated online attention exhibited a dual-growth trend, with market attention and actual enrollment scale rising in tandem. The left axis of Figure 1 shows the number of Chinese students studying in Malaysia, and the right axis shows the Baidu Index trend. Both curves display an upward trajectory, reflecting the simultaneous expansion of actual enrollment scale and societal attention. This phenomenon provides an important research context and significance for the present study.

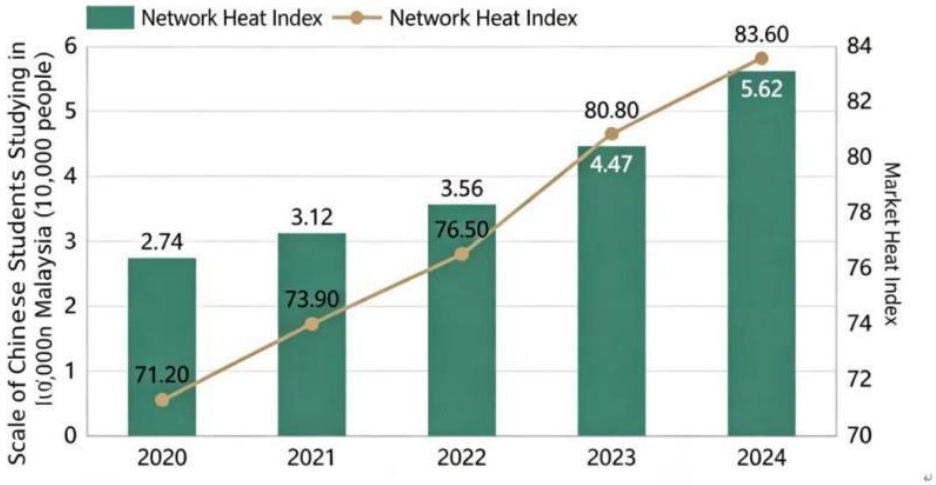

Figure 1. Trend chart of the scale and market heat of Chinese students studying in Malaysia. Data Source: Official Statement of Malaysia's Ministry of Higher Education in 2025

Against the backdrop of the global internationalization of higher education shifting from a "unipolar Western orientation" to "multi-destination diversification," the overseas study decision-making of Chinese students is evolving from mere "destination preference" into a trade-off encompassing "cost-risk-return-policy convenience."

This study selects Chinese students pursuing education in Malaysia as the research object. In contrast to earlier perspectives that treated studying in Malaysia as a singular alternative pathway, contemporary families now place greater emphasis on the equilibrium among affordability, the verifiability of academic credentials upon return, the employment realization rate, and policy stability [3]. The study focuses on answering four core questions: "Who is going? Why are they going? Why do they hesitate? And when does conversion occur?"

Note: This table organizes key policy milestones and core data concerning China-Malaysia higher education cooperation from 2020 to 2025, encompassing information from official statistical definitions, policy documents, and market trends [4].

To further address the phenomenon of Chinese students studying in Malaysia and to investigate the questions of "who is going, why they are going, why they hesitate, and when conversion occurs," this study reviews the relevant higher education policies of China and Malaysia [4]. Table 1 presents the key policy milestones, core data, and corresponding market significance in the field of China-Malaysia study abroad and higher education from 2020 to 2025, thereby further clarifying the policy background and market foundation of studying in Malaysia.

Table 1. Overview of China--Malaysia Study Abroad and Higher Education Policies

Time	Key Facts or Milestones	Significance for the Study Abroad Market to Malaysia	Source
Overall Status of China's Education Sector (2025)	There are 30.395 million senior high school students, 39.540 million undergraduate and junior college students, and 4.300 million postgraduate students on campus	It indicates that the three target cohorts (undergraduate, master's, and doctoral students) all have sufficient potential student sources, which constitutes a critical overall population base for demand for study in Malaysia.	National Bureau of Statistics, 2025 National Economic and Social Development Statistical Bulletin
As of December 31, 2024	The total student enrollment in Malaysia's higher education system is 1,251,552, including 155,986 international students. Among them, Chinese students number 56,198, making China the largest source country	It demonstrates that the Chinese student cohort has established a solid, scalable foundation in the destination market, and study in Malaysia is no longer a marginal choice	Press Statement by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, August 26, 2025
Overall Environment of Malaysia (2025)	Malaysia's total population is 34.2 million, and the carrying capacity of the higher education system remains stable.	It provides a demographic foundation for educational service supply, living accommodation capacity, and the enhancement of international student absorption capacity.	Department of Statistics Malaysia, Current Population Estimates 2025
Trend (2020–2025)	The scale of study in Malaysia has gradually recovered post-pandemic, with concurrent growth in discussion volume and positive sentiment on social media platforms.	It indicates that the market has transitioned from a recovery phase to a new selection period, with students prioritizing efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and risk verifiability	Compiled from Figures 1-1 and 1-2 of the Report
Stage of Sino-Malaysian Higher	English-taught programs, dual-degree pathways, regional springboard opportunities, and a	It determines that study in Malaysia offers the dual attraction logic of "cost advantage" and	Summarized from literature review and

Education Cooperation	relatively favorable cost structure have emerged as core attractive features	"pathway springboard" simultaneously	pre-questionnaire interviews

Table 1 illustrates the scale of higher education in China and Malaysia, as well as the current status of educational exchange and cooperation between the two nations over the past five years. From a comparative perspective, China has approximately 30.39 million general senior high school students, approximately 39.54 million undergraduate and vocational college students, and approximately 4.3 million postgraduate students. China thus possesses an ample potential student source across bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels. From Malaysia's perspective, the total population of Malaysia is approximately 34.2 million, with a total student body of approximately 1.25 million within its higher education system, including roughly 156,000 international students and approximately 56,000 Chinese students. Chinese students constitute the largest proportion—36%—of the total international student population. From a curricular perspective, Malaysian higher education is predominantly English-medium, capable of providing adequate educational assurance and living capacity. Furthermore, its "twinning program" system offers international students opportunities to pursue further studies in partner countries engaged in international exchange and cooperation. For example, University Putra Malaysia offers a twinning program with Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, whereby students, upon completion of the Malaysian phase of study, directly proceed to advanced study in the Singapore phase [5]. This policy provides numerous international students with a "springboard" to study in Singapore, conferring certain cost and school choice advantages.

However, studying in Malaysia still encounters considerable thresholds from the perspectives of the external competitive environment, social dimensions, technological dimensions, and policy dimensions. From the perspective of the external competitive environment, Open Doors 2025, released by the Institute of International Education, indicates that the number of international students enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions reached 1,177,766, signifying that global educational mobility remains within a high-intensity competitive bracket. Against the backdrop of policy fluctuations in traditional destinations and rising application uncertainties, some families regard Southeast Asia as a regional option with more manageable risks. Consequently, Malaysia's geographic accessibility, cultural compatibility, and cost controllability coalesce into a combined advantage [6, 7]. Yet, in comparison with traditional study abroad destinations, "degree recognition-employment realization" remains the most sensitive risk point at the terminal end of the decision-making process. From the social dimension, the downward permeation of "involution" (intense domestic competition) has intensified pressures in the postgraduate entrance examination and employment markets. Families in first-tier cities are increasingly inclined to utilize international educational resources as a form of risk hedging instrument. From the technological dimension, decentralized social media platforms represented by Xiaohongshu and Zhihu, through algorithmic recommendations, have dismantled the information monopoly traditionally held by study abroad agencies and have reshaped Generation Z's perception of the quality of Malaysian education. From the policy dimension, the China-Malaysia Mutual Visa Exemption Agreement formally entered into force on July 17, 2025. According to the announcement issued by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Malaysia, holders of ordinary passports traveling to Malaysia for short-term activities such as tourism, family visits, or business, with a single stay not exceeding 30 days, are eligible for visa exemption. This arrangement significantly reduces the costs associated with preliminary site visits and cross-border contact. However, study activities require the processing of the corresponding student visa, indicating that "facilitated travel" does not equate to "zero-barrier educational access."

In recent years, the manner in which domestic families perceive studying abroad has undergone a marked transformation. Malaysia's inclusion in a growing number of

families' shortlists is attributable not only to relatively controllable costs but also to the broad coverage of English-medium instruction, comparatively clear application pathways, and an overall decision-making threshold lower than that associated with the US-UK-Australia route. Nonetheless, the surge in market interest has not been fully translated into a commensurate application conversion rate. Having noted this mismatch phenomenon, the research team proactively engaged with the Beijing Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Cooperation Organization (Malaysia). According to operational data provided by this commissioning entity for 2024, a cumulative total of 1,020 consultations for studying in Malaysia were received that year, yet only 308 cases were ultimately confirmed and completed as service engagements, comprising 58 study tour participants, 165 bachelor's degree applicants, 60 master's degree applicants, and 25 doctoral degree applicants [8]. The substantial front-end consultation volume juxtaposed with the attrition of back-end conversion populations corroborates the quintessential industry characteristic of the Malaysia study abroad market: "high consultation interest, slow conversion."

A recurrent phenomenon currently observed is that of "high consultation interest, slow conversion." Interviews with study abroad agencies indicate that many students exhibit strong initial intentions, yet encounter delays, hesitation, or even redirection at critical junctures such as school selection, document preparation, contract signing, or fee payment. This phenomenon demonstrates that intention does not equate to behavior and that a rupture exists between front-end motivation and back-end execution [9]. Centering on this rupture, this paper focuses on answering three questions: First, which factors propel the formation of the intention to study in Malaysia, and do stable differences exist among distinct groups? Second, how do risk perception, family support, and information channels collectively influence application behavior? Third, at which specific junctures is the transition from intention to implementation most susceptible to impediments, and what approaches can enhance conversion efficiency? The research objective is to transform "a widely discussed phenomenon" into "a mechanism that can be tested and explained."

2. Literature Review

From the perspective of domestic research progress, early studies on Chinese students studying abroad predominantly focused on traditional destinations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, with research themes primarily centered on study abroad motivation, educational returns, and cross-cultural adaptation. In recent years, as the international education landscape has evolved from a "Euro-American center" toward "multi-polar diversion," research on Southeast Asian destinations has increased notably. Malaysia, owing to its relatively manageable tuition fees, flexible academic structures, high proportion of English-medium programs, and geographic proximity, has become a key alternative option subjected to comparative evaluation by Chinese families. Family decision-making criteria have shifted from a sole focus on "elite school prestige" to a comprehensive evaluation framework encompassing "affordability, degree certifiability, and employment realizability." At the same time, although study abroad agencies aspire to provide Chinese students' families with comparably detailed information regarding study destinations, school selection, and program choice, information asymmetry persists in the detailed matching process between agencies, students, and destinations [10]. This asymmetry leads students, after seeking information from multiple sources, to ultimately develop distrust toward study abroad agencies based on this information asymmetry, thereby culminating in the market mismatch predicament characterized by "high consultation intention, low application conversion."

From the perspective of international research progress, foreign literature places greater emphasis on institutional matching and employment return assessment in cross-border educational choice [11]. Institutional reputation, curriculum structure, accreditation accessibility, and alumni networks are typically treated as quality signals to

explain student decision-making under conditions of incomplete information. Research focusing on Chinese students enrolled in Malaysia specifically analyzes the influence of three core dimensions—quality perception, cost management, and career expectations—on study abroad decision-making. The QS World University Rankings, grounded in the context of Malaysian private higher education, delves into the intrinsic logic of cross-border student mobility and institutional adaptation mechanisms. Classic migration theory, from a regional perspective, explores the formation patterns and developmental characteristics of cross-border education hubs in Southeast Asia. Such studies provide methodological inspiration for this paper; however, the degree of family involvement and budget constraint mechanisms evident in those contexts differ markedly from those applicable to the Chinese sample. Without localization, there is a risk of underestimating the role of family consultation and intermediary services during the back-end application phase.

Overall, the existing literature has reached a relatively clear consensus on variable identification. Individual motivation, family resources, destination attractiveness, and risk perception jointly influence study abroad decision-making. Research conclusions also fairly consistently indicate that study abroad behavior exhibits pronounced phasic characteristics; that is, the front-end "cognition formation--intention strengthening" and the back-end "material preparation--application execution--outcome realization" do not follow the same logic. The aforementioned research provides a solid theoretical foundation for this paper. Nonetheless, three notable deficiencies persist. Methodologically, studies remain predominantly reliant on single statistical tests or qualitative summaries, exhibiting insufficient continuous modeling of the "intention--application--conversion" linkage, thereby rendering the intermediate breakpoints difficult to explain. In terms of sampling, research has been disproportionately concentrated on coastal universities or major metropolitan areas, with relatively inadequate investigation of inland cities and budget-sensitive populations. In terms of mechanism, variables such as media influence, risk perception, and family support have often been discussed in isolation, lacking path testing and effect decomposition within a unified analytical framework. Furthermore, existing research has paid insufficient attention to "dynamic decision-making" across the temporal dimension. The majority of studies employ cross-sectional data to interpret intention levels at a specific time point, rarely tracking the changing trajectories of the same sample cohort through the stages of consultation, preparation, application, and outcome feedback, thereby rendering it difficult to identify the true location of conversion breakpoints. To address this gap, this paper incorporates items pertaining to stage status and bottleneck identification within the questionnaire and, in conjunction with model results, conducts phasic interpretation. Building upon the aforementioned deficiencies, this paper constructs a "Push--Pull--Risk--Norm--Conversion" analytical linkage centered on the issue of Chinese students studying in Malaysia [12]. It employs a comprehensive approach combining questionnaire survey, difference testing, cluster analysis, logistic regression, and structural equation modeling (SEM) for verification. The study aims to answer both "why intention arises" and "why conversion proves difficult," thereby furnishing more actionable evidence for study abroad decision support and service governance. Additionally, this study integrates the classical Theory of Planned Behavior and the Push--Pull--Mooring (PPM) Theory to investigate the study intentions and perceptions of international students considering Malaysia, thereby providing decision-making recommendations.

3. Research Methods

Building upon the foundation of existing research, this study designed the questionnaire content across three dimensions—destination cognition, study abroad intention, and potential influencing factors—and continuously revised it through in-depth interviews and a pilot survey to ensure satisfactory content validity [4]. The questionnaire comprises three parts in total: individual background information, study abroad cognition and intention, and a scale measuring influencing factors. Table 2

presents the results of the pilot survey scale validation, wherein Cronbach's alpha coefficient was employed to test the reliability of core constructs such as push variables and pull variables, thereby verifying the internal consistency of the pilot survey scales and providing data support for the revision and refinement of items in the formal questionnaire.

Table 2. Results of the Pilot Survey Scale Validation

Validation Stage	Construct	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Pilot Survey Scale	Validation Push Variables (Study Abroad Motivation)	6	0.83
Pilot Survey Scale	Validation Pull Variables (Destination Attractiveness)	8	0.87
Pilot Survey Scale	Validation Perceived Risk	8	0.89
Pilot Survey Scale	Validation Subjective Norm	5	0.77

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were all above 0.77, with that for Perceived Risk reaching an excellent level of 0.89, indicating good internal consistency across all constructs. The coefficient for Subjective Norm (0.77), while approaching the lower threshold, was addressed by adding items in the formal questionnaire for reinforcement, thereby ensuring the reliability stability of the scale within the formal sample. To ensure that the questionnaire not only served the research objectives but was also comprehensible and user-friendly for respondents, thereby enhancing the quality of the formal questionnaire, a pilot survey was conducted prior to formal distribution. Specifically, the pilot questionnaire was distributed online via the Wenjuanxing platform, with 120 questionnaires randomly disseminated among the target population, ultimately yielding 102 valid responses, resulting in an effective pilot response rate of 85.00%. Based on the feedback received, revisions were made to address issues such as semantic ambiguity, insufficient option coverage, and illogical skip patterns, and these revisions informed the subsequent optimization of stratified sampling quotas.

To avoid the biases associated with single-city convenience sampling, this paper adopts the population of Chinese students associated with applying to, studying at, or having graduated from Malaysian higher education institutions as the aggregate proxy indicator for the target population. Calculated based on a 95% confidence level, $p = 0.5$, and a margin of error $d = 0.05$, the theoretical minimum sample size was approximately 385. After introducing a design effect (deff) of 1.3, this figure expanded to 501. Further allowing for a 15% anticipated non-response/invalid response rate, the minimum recommended distribution volume was approximately 590. During formal execution, to ensure adequate observations across groups intending to pursue master's/doctoral degrees, across different city-tier groups, and across groups with varying institutional backgrounds, the research team expanded the actual collection scale to 1,061 responses, significantly exceeding the theoretical minimum requirement [13]. The platform collection process generated a sample chain of "1,061 raw returns → 1,020 substantive responses → 1,016 valid for modeling," satisfying the analytical requirements for descriptive statistics, cluster analysis, structural equation modeling, and logistic regression analysis. The sampling calculation in this study adhered to standard survey statistical norms, sequentially employing the basic sample size formula, the design effect correction formula, and the invalid questionnaire compensation formula to complete the sample size determination.

Tables 3 through 8 present the design and execution results of the stratified sampling employed in this study abroad survey. They sequentially specify the sampling quotas and

actual completion status for each target tier (bachelor's, master's, doctoral), as well as the secondary sampling distributions based on hometown city tier and prior institutional background. The sampling process is presented in a layered, interconnected manner, ensuring the representativeness of the sample, the rationality of its structure, and the scientific rigor of subsequent empirical analyses.

Table 3. Stratified Sampling Proportions

Primary Stratum	Corresponding 2025 Official Population	Population Size (10,000s)	Population Proportion (%)	Proportionally Allocated Sample (n=1020)
Bachelor's Target Tier	General Senior High School Students	3,039.5	40.94	418
Master's Target Tier	General & Vocational Undergraduate Students	3,954.0	53.26	543
Doctoral Target Tier	Enrolled Postgraduate Students	430.0	5.79	59
Total Target	Population Proxy Aggregate	7,423.5	100.0	1020

Table 4, based on the 2025 official overall statistical data, proportionally allocates Chinese enrolled students across the three target tiers of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, forming a scientifically grounded primary stratification framework. The proportionally allocated sample served as an execution reference benchmark, though moderate adjustments were made during actual execution to ensure the analytical viability of the master's and doctoral intent groups [13].

Table 4. Results of Primary Stratified Sampling

Primary Stratum	Official Population Proportion (%)	Proportionally Allocated Sample	Actual Completed Sample	Actual Proportion (%)	Execution Notes
Bachelor's Target Tier	40.94	418	196	19.22	Corresponds to bachelor's application intent group; controlled total volume during execution to avoid excessive concentration.
Master's Target Tier	53.26	543	610	59.80	Taught and research master's combined for statistics; serves as the core primary cohort.
Doctoral Target Tier	5.79	59	214	20.98	Moderate oversampling implemented to ensure analytical viability of the high-decision-threshold group.

Total	100.0	1020	1020	100.0	Forms the primary execution sample structure.

Table 4 indicates a deviation between the actual completed sample and the proportionally allocated sample. The primary reason for this deviation is the deliberate moderate oversampling implemented for the doctoral target tier to ensure the analytical viability of the high-decision-threshold group [4].

Table 5 shows that the distribution of city tiers covers the full spectrum from first-tier cities down to county-level towns, with third-tier cities and below accounting for 33.63% of the sample, ensuring adequate representation of inland and budget-sensitive populations. Institutional background is primarily concentrated in general first-tier universities (40.39%), while also accommodating 985/211 and second-tier/private college backgrounds, thereby ensuring the applicability of the research findings across groups with varying resource endowments (As shown in Table 6).

Table 5. Results of Secondary Stratification: City Tier and Institutional Background

Secondary Structure Variable	Category	Sample Size	Proportion (%)
Hometown City Tier	First-tier	165	16.18
Hometown City Tier	Hometown City Tier New First-tier Cities	199	19.51
Hometown City Tier	Hometown City Tier Second-tier Cities	313	30.69
Hometown City Tier	Hometown City Tier Third-tier Cities and Below	343	33.63
Prior Institutional Background	985/211 Universities	218	21.37
Prior Institutional Background	Double First-Class Universities	198	19.41
Prior Institutional Background	General First-tier Universities	412	40.39
Prior Institutional Background	Second-tier / Private Undergraduate Colleges	99	9.71
Prior Institutional Background	Vocational Colleges	57	5.59
Prior Institutional Background	Other	36	3.53

Table 6. Summary of Sample Inclusion: City Tier, Institutional Background, and Channel

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Prior Institutional Background	Vocational Colleges	57	5.59
Prior Institutional Background	Other	36	3.53

This survey primarily relied on an electronic questionnaire platform for data collection, thereby minimizing manual entry errors. To facilitate subsequent research, we completed item coding, variable naming, option value assignment, and data transformation, and imported the data into analytical software packages including SPSS, Excel, and AMOS. A total of 1,061 questionnaires were collected during the formal survey. Following collection, the questionnaires were screened according to uniform criteria, resulting in the deletion of 45 abnormal questionnaires: 18 due to excessively short completion times, 12 due to patterned responses in scale items, and 15 due to logical inconsistencies. A final total of 1,016 valid questionnaires was retained, yielding an effective response rate of 95.76%, which meets the requirements for subsequent analysis.

This paper employed four categories of methods to test data quality: randomness testing, discrimination testing, reliability testing, and validity testing. First, randomness testing: Runs test results indicated that, at a significance level of 0.05, the sample sequence did not exhibit significant non-randomness, indicating that the sample extraction and collection processes possessed acceptable random characteristics. Second, discrimination testing: The method of comparing high and low groups was utilized to test the discrimination of scale items; all core items exhibited statistically significant differences between the high and low groups, indicating that the items possessed satisfactory discriminatory power. Third, reliability and validity testing: The test results indicated that the randomness, reliability, and construct validity of the questionnaire data all met analytical standards and could be used for subsequent difference analysis, regression analysis, and structural equation modeling [14]. The data analysis methods employed in this study also included descriptive statistical analysis, independent samples t-test/one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), logistic regression modeling, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM). These methods were employed to accomplish sample characterization, testing of group differences, identification of factors influencing behavior, and validation of core path relationships.

4. Research Results

Overall, the sample is not concentrated among extremely high-income or extremely low-barrier groups but rather aligns more closely with a middle-stratum student cohort characterized by a mindset of "budget controllability and a desire to pursue academic advancement via a more secure pathway." The sample is predominantly composed of individuals intending to pursue master's degrees (59.8%), with due consideration also given to bachelor's and doctoral levels [15]. In terms of geographic distribution, third-tier cities and below constitute the largest single source (33.63%), with inland and non-first-tier cities collectively accounting for over 60%, thereby reflecting the study's attentiveness

to budget-sensitive populations. A notable 80.30% of respondents remained in the domestic planning phase, and 80.20% reported having encountered information misinformation. This provides direct corroboration of the quintessential market characteristic of "high consultation interest, slow conversion" in the context of studying in Malaysia. The core contradiction has now shifted from "awareness of Malaysia" to "whether one believes this pathway is sufficiently transparent, stable, and worthy of investment."

Multiple response analysis reveals that study abroad agencies achieved the highest outreach rate (62.45%), yet the substantial proportions attributable to recommendations from relatives and friends (52.25%) and platforms such as Zhihu/Douban (47.55%) indicate that personal networks and in-depth content platforms likewise wield significant influence. Mean scores for various motivations cluster within the range of 3.78 to 3.84, indicating minimal disparity in the relative importance of different motivations and suggesting that decisions to study in Malaysia are predominantly driven by composite motivational forces. At the level of value expectations, the sample places the greatest emphasis on ranking recognition, budget controllability, application convenience, and the extensibility of employment prospects within Southeast Asia. At the level of risk concerns, attention is concentrated on issues pertaining to degree certification, program quality, language adaptation, and service transparency. From this, it can be discerned that studying in Malaysia is not simply a "low-cost substitute," but rather a rational choice centered upon "verifiable returns within a defined budget."

This study reveals the typical characteristics, core pain points, and behavioral inclinations of three distinct student segments. The Prudent Balancers (38.39%) emphasize pathway stability, the Cautious Wait-and-See Group (33.27%) prioritize risk mitigation, and the High-Intention Resourceful Group (28.35%) focus on efficiency and matching precision [16]. These three segments collectively constitute the fundamental ecosystem of the current Malaysia study abroad market. The differentiation among these three segments is manifested not merely in the level of intention but, more importantly, in whether they possess stable conditions for execution, whether they are readily swayed by risk-laden narratives, and whether they have already formed clear outcome-oriented judgments. In other words, the value of segmentation lies not in "labeling students" but in "identifying distinct service logics corresponding to different bottleneck points."

The Prudent Balancers typically regard studying in Malaysia as a pathway that warrants serious consideration yet demands meticulous calculation. Members of this segment are neither prompted to make hasty decisions by promotional fervor nor inclined to abandon the option entirely in response to negative publicity. They exhibit heightened sensitivity to budgetary boundaries, degree certification, and program quality. Their willingness to proceed is predicated upon stable information dissemination standards, predictable application procedures, and clear explication of graduation outcomes. In terms of execution characteristics, this group is most susceptible to becoming stalled at the stage of "reconfirming details."

The Cautious Wait-and-See Group is characterized by a weighting of risk that supersedes the weighting of opportunity. Rather than lacking the desire to go, they are more apprehensive about "encountering unforeseen problems after arrival." Members of this segment are exceptionally sensitive to social evaluation, credential prestige, cultural adaptation, and service credibility. Should any single aspect—whether certification, employment prospects, or living support—remain ambiguous, they will promptly revert to a state of watchful waiting. The hesitation exhibited by this cohort is typically not triggered by a single variable but rather results from the cumulative superimposition of multiple minor risks.

The High-Intention Resourceful Group does not lack the impetus to study abroad and possesses relatively favorable conditions for practical execution. They tend to place Malaysia on their destination shortlist at an earlier stage, are capable of accommodating a higher budget, and are more attentive to institutional fit, temporal efficiency, and subsequent developmental opportunities. For members of this segment, the question is

not "whether to go" but rather "how to complete the screening, application, and transition processes with greater efficiency." This group is most prone to experiencing intolerance toward low-quality services. If information is repetitive, response times slow, or program recommendations lack sufficient granularity, they—while not necessarily abandoning the intention to study in Malaysia—are more likely to pivot toward alternative destinations or pursue more direct application pathways.

From a managerial perspective, the three student segments do not represent mutually isolated markets but rather three archetypal states along the decision-making continuum for studying in Malaysia. Some individuals already possess the conditions to proceed and merely require a clear pathway [17]. Some harbor initial intentions but have yet to establish sufficient trust. Still others, though willing to invest, place greater emphasis on efficiency and long-term value. Precisely for this reason, uniform messaging strategies typically succeed only in elevating consultation volume but struggle to concurrently enhance conversion rates. The true significance of cluster analysis lies in deconstructing "why individuals who share an interest in studying in Malaysia make divergent choices." It signals that subsequent mechanism analyses and policy designs cannot remain tethered to the aggregated sample mean but must instead return to the decision-making logic specific to each student segment: clarifying rules for the Prudent Balancers, mitigating perceived risks for the Cautious Wait-and-See Group, and enhancing efficiency for the High-Intention Resourceful Group. Only thus can the segmentation results be translated into actionable market strategies.

5. Conclusion

This study further delineates the strategic matching tailored to different student segments with respect to studying in Malaysia. Firstly, the student segments for studying in Malaysia primarily encompass three principal types: Prudent Balancers, Cautious Wait-and-See, and High-Intention Resourceful. The strategic matching framework comprises four dimensions: "segment characteristics," "core pain points," "strategic focus," and "priority touchpoints." The strategic design imperative necessitates a shift from uniform marketing toward tiered service delivery. For budget-sensitive groups seeking stable progression, the emphasis should be placed on highlighting pathway clarity and outcome verifiability. For risk-averse groups, priority should be accorded to providing certification explanations, milestone reminders, and contingency fallback options. For the High-Intention Resourceful Group, service focus should pivot toward efficiency, matching precision, and fostering long-term developmental connections.

For the Prudent Balancers, the service emphasis should center on "articulating each step clearly." What members of this segment most fear is not the cost per se, but rather the nebulous zones that lie beyond explicit costs. Therefore, service providers should furnish detailed fee breakdown tables, application milestone checklists, certification process descriptions, and illustrative examples of post-graduation trajectories, enabling both students and parents to conduct comparative evaluations within a unified information framework. For the Cautious Wait-and-See Group, communication emphasis should be shifted earlier to encompass risk explanation and family deliberation phases. Beyond routine program introductions, this should include certification Q&As, case studies of returning graduates' employment outcomes, parent-oriented communication materials, and illustrations of typical failure scenarios. What this group requires is not unidirectional promotion that "this program is excellent," but rather answers to the question "what should be done if things go wrong?" For the High-Intention Resourceful Group, the strategy should evolve from "demonstrating feasibility" to "demonstrating superiority." Given that members of this segment already possess the willingness to proceed, persisting with rudimentary promotional content and generic Q&A may paradoxically degrade their experience. A more suitable approach entails providing customized school/program selection recommendations, articulation of the alignment between curriculum and career pathways, showcasing alumni networks and internship opportunities, and minimizing non-essential communication friction. Conversion support for this segment should be

underpinned by responsiveness, matching precision, and the articulation of long-term developmental value.

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