The Impact of Social Identity on Chinese College Students' Decisions on Returning Home for Employment: The Mediating Effect of Psychological Distance and the Moderating Effect of Belongingness

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were 1) to investigate how social identity impacted Chinese college-student decisions to return to their hometowns for employment after graduation by studying the perception of social identity, 2) to investigate the dynamic decisions to return home process for employment, 3) to explore the interactions between belongingness psychology and decisions to return home for employment, 4) to investigate how decision-making processes impacted the decisions to return home among college graduates. By applying a snowball sampling method, the initial participants were selected from university students who were the researcher's personal networks. The statistical method of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was used for evaluation of 518 respondents from 23 provinces of China who participated in this study.

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The findings revealed that social identity had a significant impact on the decision to return home. The study suggested that strengthening local identities and reducing psychological distances through targeted policies and educational initiatives could encourage more graduates to return to their hometowns, thereby supporting regional development and talent retention. This research could fill a significant gap in literature and offer valuable directions for future studies and practical applications.

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, a significant shift emerged in China's higher education landscape, with an increasing number of college students choosing to return to their hometowns for employment, moving away from the traditional appeal of staying in bustling first-tier cities. For instance, in 2022, 47 percent of students who pursued their higher education outside their home provinces decided to return to their native provinces for employment (Zou, 2023). This evolving trend underscores the intricate relationship between students' career choices and regional development, making it a compelling subject for scholarly exploration. On one hand, it represents an effort to achieve a more balanced regional distribution of skilled human resources, contributing to the socio-economic development of China's less urbanized areas. Additionally, it highlights the importance of strengthening community and familial bonds, a shift with both sociocultural and sociopolitical dimensions. While some policy analysts view this migration pattern as a value-neutral phenomenon, the persistent regional disparities in college graduate employment remain a pressing issue in China.

Higher education is essential for the acquisition of human capital at the regional level. The choice made by college students about their employment location might lead to the migration of human resources across various locations (Abramovsky et al., 2007; Faggian & McCann, 2009; Zhao, 2016). Moreover, it possesses the ability to modify the distribution of human resources across various locales, hence impacting the economic development of those regions (Ha et al., 2016; Suzuki & Suzuki, 2016). The departure of a substantial number of university students would lead to a phenomenon known as brain drain, particularly in regions with undeveloped economies (Wilson, 1992). Therefore, these areas will have limited success in their efforts to enhance their regional economy through the expansion of higher education.

Addressing the complexities of career choices and regional mobility. To formulate effective policies to curb brain drain, one must comprehend the factors that influence graduates' decisions to return home for employment. reverse the brain drain and to attract more college graduates to a given region.

2. Literature Reviews

2.1 Related Theories

Social identity, psychological distance, and sense of belonging are indeed important factors for college students to choose to return to their hometowns for employment. Social identity, When choosing a job location, college students will consider the development level and employment opportunities of their hometown. The higher the level of economic development in the hometown, the greater the employment opportunities and development space provided, and the greater the attractiveness to college graduates. In addition, there is a higher proportion of returnees who find "iron rice bowls" in their hometowns, such as working in government agencies, scientific research institutions, or other public institutions, This reflects a social recognition and acceptance of returning to their hometowns for employment.

Psychological distance, When college students choose their employment location, psychological distance is also an important factor. Once, many college students aspired to develop in first tier cities, but over time, more and more graduates choose to return to their hometowns for employment, and non first tier cities and grassroots have become their new choices. This change reflects the rationalization of college students' employment outlook and their recognition of their hometown, as well as the change in psychological distance.

Sense of belonging, Sense of belonging is another important factor for college students to return to their hometowns for employment. Home is the cradle of everyone's growth, and for many people, it is an emotional attachment. Returning to their hometowns for employment can allow college students to feel the warmth and support of their families, while also enabling them to better integrate into the local society and establish their own social networks. In summary, social identity, psychological distance, and sense of belonging collectively influence the employment choices of college students,, leading to an increasing number of them choosing to return to their hometowns for employment and contribute their efforts to the development of their hometowns.

2.2 Hypotheses Development

The subjective perception of social connections and intimacy significantly affects college students' identification with social groups, and various dimensions of psychological distance play a key role in shaping college students' perception, cognition, and decision-making processes. This intimate relationship promotes a stronger sense of identification with their inner group. Thus, the following hypothesis can be derived:

H1a: Social identity positively impacts college students' closeness of temporal psychological distance.

H1b: Social identity positively impacts college students' closeness of spatial psychological distance.

H1c: Social identity positively impacts college students' closeness of social psychological distance.

H1d: Social identity positively impacts college students' closeness of hypothetical psychological distance.

When college students consider returning home for employment, their social identity linked to their hometown or cultural heritage might play a pivotal role. For instance, students who strongly identify with their hometown community or have a sense of pride in their cultural roots may feel a stronger inclination to return home for employment.Thus, the following hypothesis can be derived:

H2: Social identity positively impacts college students' decisions to return home for employment.

The impact of psychological distance on career decision-making can be attributed to the way individuals assess risk. College students working in a new city or industry may require greater psychological distance as they need to establish new connections, face new challenges, weigh the importance of each factor, and ultimately make decisions..Thus, the following hypothesis can be derived:

H3a: Closeness of temporal psychological distance positively affects college students' decisions to return home for employment.

H3b: Closeness of spatial psychological distance positively affects college students' decisions to return home for employment.

H3c: Closeness of social psychological distance positively affects college students' decisions to return home employment.

H3d: Closeness of hypothetical psychological distance positively affects college students' decisions to return home for employment.

The closeness of psychological distance will have a certain impact on social identity, thereby affecting the decision of college students to return home for employment. Social identity influences psychological distance, brings college students closer to their hometown, strengthens emotional connections, and

cultivates a sense of belonging. Thus, the following hypothesis can be derived:

H4a: Closeness of temporal psychological distance positively mediates the relationship between Social identity and college students' decisions to return home for employment.

H4b: Closeness of spatial psychological distance positively mediates the relationship between social identity and college students' decisions to return home for employment.

H4c: Closeness of social psychological distance positively mediates the relationship between social identity and college students' decisions to return home for employment.

H4d: Closeness of hypothetical psychological distance positively mediates the relationship between social identity and college students' decisions to return home for employment.

A high-level sense of belonging may buffer the negative impact of various dimensions of psychological distance on weakening social identity and maintaining stronger perceptual connections with the group. Thus, the following hypothesis can be derived:

H5a: Belongingness positively moderates the relationship between social identity and closeness of temporal psychological distance.

H5b: Belongingness positively moderates the relationship between social identity and closeness of spatial psychological distance.

H5c: Belongingness positively moderates the relationship between social identity and closeness of social psychological distance.

H5d: Belongingness positively moderates the relationship between social identity and closeness of hypothetical psychological distance.

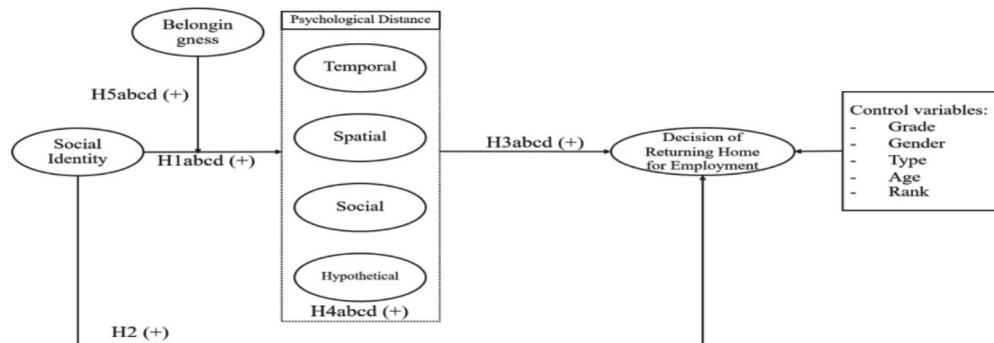Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study.

Figure 1 The Conceptual Framework

3. Research Methodology

The focus of this study is on college students who are pursuing their education outside their hometowns. Selecting first- to fourth-year students, This group often develops a strong attachment to their alma mater and may also explore opportunities beyond their home regions. There is a lack of official statistics on the number of students studying at universities outside their hometowns. To address this, the study will employ a sample size that is ten times the number of indicators in the largest construct, in line with the requirements for PLS-SEM analysis (Marcoulides & Saunders, 2006)The sample size is 340..A snowball sampling method will be employed, and the survey will be conducted using the Chinese online questionnaire platform, Wenjuanxing. The initial participants were asked to help distribute the questionnaire to other university students. This expansion was continuing until data saturation. By the end of data collection, 518 respondents from 23 provinces of China participated in this study.

Regarding the questionnaire development process, the scale items of each variable are adopted from existing scales that have been applied in prior research. The scale mainly includes: Measurement of Social Identity. Measurement of Closeness of Psychological Distance. Measurement of Decisions for Returning Home for Employment. Measurement of Belongingness, In addition, it includes control

variables such as: Gender, Size of Hometown, Type of University, Grade. A 5-point Likert scale will be employed for all measurements.

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics of the Respondents

Among 397 participated university students, 128 (32.2%) were male students and 269 (67.8%) were female students. Moreover, 127 (32.0%) 1st year students, 102 (25.7%) 2nd year students,132 (33.2%) 3rd year students, and 36 (9.1%) 4th year students provided valid responses in this study. Next, the majority of students were studying at a public university (340 students, 85.6%), and 57 (14.4%) students were studying at a private university in China. Lastly, there were 15 (3.8%) students from tier 1 cities, 44 (11.1%) students from new tier 1 cities,61 (15.4%) students from tier 2 cities, 47 (11.8%) from tier 3 cities, 104 (26.2%) from tier 4 cities, and 126 (31.7%) from tier 5 cities.

4.2 Measurement Model Analysis

Before the structural model assessment, all the required thresholds should be satisfied (Hair et al., 2019). Since this study includes only reflective constructs, the factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha (CA), composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) and discriminant validity should be calculated (Hair et al., 2021).the constructs were tested and they were found that the factor loadings of the indicators were higher than 0.7,with the significance at the 0.5 level, which was tested using bootstrapping (5,000 times). In addition, cross-loadings were measured, and the findings showed that the loading of each indicator was greater for its stipulated construct than for any of the other constructs (Hair et al., 2019). Therefore, the findings confirmed the indicator's reliability and discriminant validity as shown. CA and CR were tested to check the quality of construct reliability. The results illustrate that all of the values were above the threshold value of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019); the square roots of the AVEs exceed their correlation with other constructs. which fulfills the requirement of discriminant validity. all HTMT

ration test results ranged from 0.070 to 0.487,lower than the threshold of 0.85 (Hair et al., 2019),which suggests that all constructs were independent of each other; in other words, the discriminant validity was satisfactory. Full variance inflation factor (VIF) statistics were used to assess multicollinearity. VIFs with latent constructs between 1.001 and 1.952, which prove there was no problem of multicollinearity. By calculating eigenvalues, total variance, the results indicate that CMB is not a major issue in this study.

4.3 Structural Model Analysis

Firstly, The PLS algorithm with 300 iterations and bootstrapping 5000 times was applied to test the path coefficients of the latent constructs and their significance accordingly. According to Figure 2: The R^2 values of the endogenous constructs were examined, and the results indicate that the model has weak explanatory power regarding the decision to return home for employment.
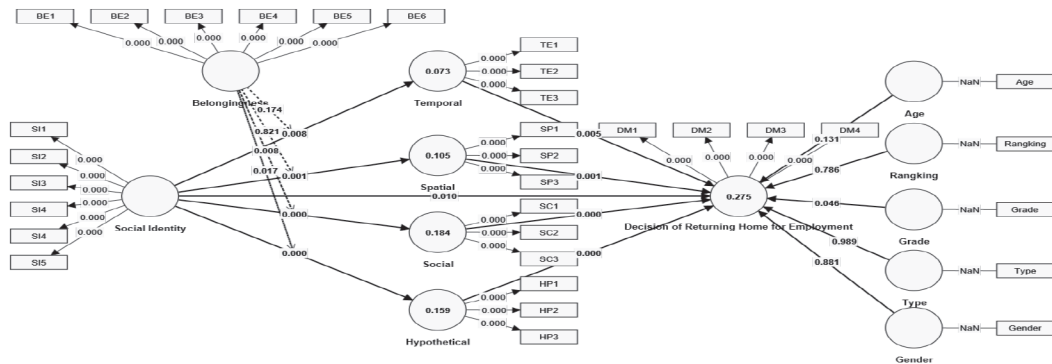

Figure 2 The Results of Structural Model.

Secondly, assesses all exogeneous variables are presenting a small effect size. And assess the PLS path model's predictive accuracy in this study, the findings illustrate that the proposed model demonstrates a small predictive relevance for decision of returning home for employment.

Thirdly, All hypotheses were checked with the path coefficients and the significant level. According to Table1: Social identity has positive and significant impact on temporal dimension, spatial dimension, social dimension, and hypothetical dimension, and decision of returning home for employment. Besides, among four dimensions of psychological distance, the power of influencing on decision of returning home for employment, in order of significance are: social dimension, hypothetical dimension, spatial dimension, and temporal dimension. The belongingness is a moderator that can increase the degree of impact from social identity on psychological distance and it has significant and positive moderating effect on social dimension, and hypothetical dimension. However, the moderating effect on temporal dimension and spatial dimension were not statistically supported in this study.

Table 1 The Results of Direct Effects in Hypotheses

Hypotheses		Beta Coefficient	T statistics	P values
H1a	Social Identity → Temporal dimension	0.146	2.635	0.008
H1b	Social Identity → Spatial dimension	0.213	3.459	0.001
H1c	Social Identity → Social dimension	0.204	3.954	0.000
H1d	Social Identity → Hypothetical dimension	0.253	5.204	0.000
H2	Social Identity → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	0.133	2.567	0.010
H3a	Temporal dimension → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	0.123	2.782	0.005
H3b	Spatial dimension → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	0.166	3.367	0.001
H3c	Social dimension → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	0.228	4.634	0.000
H3d	Hypothetical dimension → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	0.174	3.542	0.000

Table 1 The Results of Direct Effects in Hypotheses (cont)

	Hypotheses	Beta Coefficient	T statistics	P values
H5a	Belongingness x Social Identity → Temporal dimension	0.069	1.361	0.174
H5b	Belongingness x Social Identity → Spatial dimension	-0.012	0.227	0.821
H5c	Belongingness x Social Identity → Social dimension	0.11	2.665	0.008
H5d	Belongingness x Social Identity → Hypothetical dimension	0.119	2.381	0.017
	Control Variables			
	Grade → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	-0.12	1.996	0.046
	Gender → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	0.015	0.149	0.881
	Type → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	0.002	0.014	0.989
	Age → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	0.089	1.511	0.131
	Ranking → Decision of Returning Home for Employment	-0.012	0.271	0.786

Fourthly, proposed that psychological distance also plays a positive mediating role in social identity and decision of returning home for employment. After bootstrapping estimation (5000 times), mediating effects were analyzed based on the regulation and steps applied by Zhou et al. (2021). spatial dimension, social dimension and hypothetical dimension play a complementary and partial mediating effect among social identity and decision of returning home for employment. However, there was no mediating role of temporal dimension since the indirect effect was not statistically supported in this study.

Fifthly, tested by PLS-SEM. The results illustrated in Table 2 and Figure3show that 13 hypotheses were supported, and 4 hypotheses were not supported in this study.

Table 2 The Results of Hypotheses Testing

No.	Hypotheses	Results
H1a	Social identity positively impacts college students' temporal psychological.	Supported
H1b	Social identity positively impacts college students' spatial psychological.	Supported
H1c	Social identity positively impacts college students' social psychological.	Supported
H1d	Social identity positively impacts college students' hypothetical psychological.	Supported
H2	Social identity positively impacts college students' decisions to return home for employment.	Supported
H3a	Temporal psychological distance positively affects college students' decisions to return home for employment.	Supported
H3b	Spatial psychological distance positively affects college students' decisions to return home for employment.	Supported
H3c	Social psychological distance positively affects college students' decisions to return home employment.	Supported
H3d	Hypothetical psychological distance positively affects college students' decisions to return home for employment.	Supported
H4a	Temporal psychological distance positively mediates the relationship between social identity and college students' decisions to return home for employment.	Not supported
H4b	Spatial psychological distance positively mediates the relationship between social identity and college students' decisions to return home for employment.	Not supported

Table 2 The Results of Hypotheses Testing (cont)

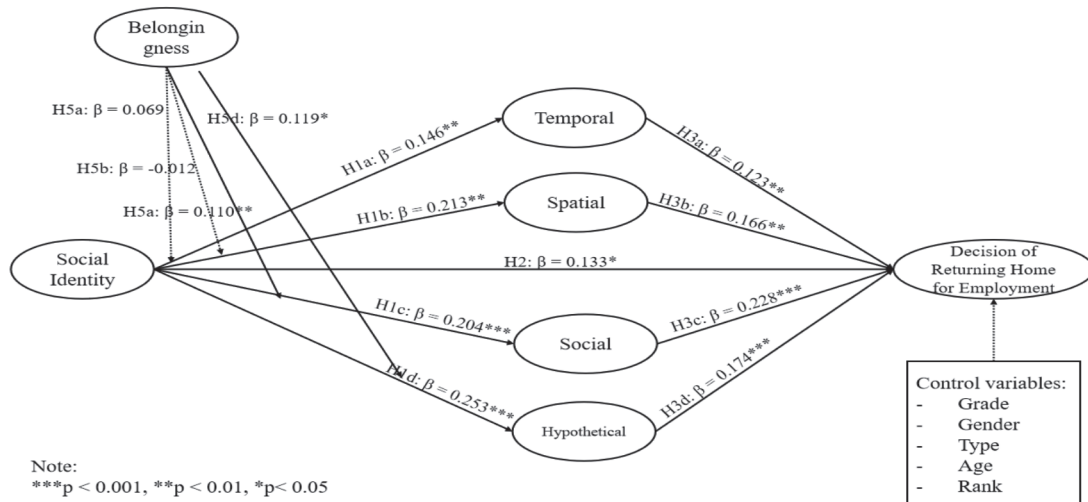| No.	Hypotheses	Results
H4c	Social psychological distance positively mediates the relationship between social identity and college students' decisions to return home for employment.	Supported
H4d	Hypothetical psychological distance positively mediates the relationship between social identity and college students' decisions to return home for employment.	Supported
H5a	Belongingness positively moderates the relationship between social identity and temporal psychological distance.	Not supported
H5b	Belongingness positively moderates the relationship between social identity and spatial psychological distance.	Not supported
H5c	Belongingness positively moderates the relationship between social identity and social psychological distance.	Supported
H5d	Belongingness positively moderates the relationship between social identity and hypothetical psychological distance.	Supported

Figure 3 The Results of Hypotheses Testing

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

This study explores the relationship between social identity and various dimensions of psychological distance, including temporal, spatial, social, and hypothetical closeness. It finds that social identity enhances temporal and spatial psychological closeness, making future events and geographical distances feel more immediate and manageable. This sense of closeness makes individuals more proactive and forward-looking in planning and committing to future affairs, reflecting the important role of social identity in shaping individuals' long-term decisions and commitments.

These findings are consistent with Lieberman and Trope's (2010) theory and recent research by Reed et al. (2022) and Thompson & Hogg (2023). The study also confirms that social identity reduces social psychological distance, supporting Tajfel & Turner's (1979) theory and recent empirical studies by Martinez et al. (2022) and Goldberg et al. (2023). Students who strongly identify with their hometown or region are more likely to return to work in their hometown. In the process of personal career development, the consistency between personal and regional identity can significantly motivate the decision to return home.

Time psychological distance does not significantly moderate the relationship between social identity and college students' decision to return home for employment, indicating that immediate perception of time does not significantly affect the impact of social identity on employment decisions. The spatial psychological distance also did not significantly regulate the relationship between social identity and the decision to return home for employment, indicating that perceived spatial closeness does not significantly affect the decision to return home. The closeness of social psychological distance effectively regulates the relationship between social identity and the decision to return home for employment, emphasizing the importance of social support and community connections in these decisions. Assuming that the intimacy level of psychological distance moderates the relationship between social identity and the decision to return home, it indicates that when individuals have a higher

likelihood of expecting positive outcomes, their decisions are more influenced by social identity and group relationships.

Research has found that a sense of belonging does not significantly alter the impact of social identity on temporal and spatial psychological distance, indicating that an individual's sense of belonging does not significantly adjust their temporal and geographical distance from their hometown. On the contrary, a sense of belonging significantly moderates the relationship between social identity and social psychological distance, indicating that a sense of belonging plays an important role in enhancing social intimacy, thereby influencing individual employment decisions.

5.2 Conclusion

The findings revealed that social identity significantly influences the decision to return home, with social and hypothetical psychological distances mediating this relationship, while temporal and spatial distances did not. Additionally, the role of belongingness as a moderator was partially supported, enhancing the relationship between social identity and social psychological distance but not affecting temporal and spatial distances. These results contribute to the theoretical understanding of social identity and construal level theory, challenging some established assumptions and providing practical insights for policymakers and educators. The study suggests that strengthening local identities and reducing psychological distances through targeted policies and educational initiatives could encourage more graduates to return to their hometowns, thereby supporting regional development and talent retention.

6. Suggestions and Future Work

This study provides valuable insights into how social identity and psychological distance influence Chinese college students' decisions to return home for employment but has several limitations. Firstly, while snowball sampling effectively reached a diverse respondent pool, it may introduce selection bias, potentially limiting

the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data can lead to response bias, with participants possibly providing socially desirable answers rather than their true thoughts, thereby distorting the relationships between variables. The study's focus on students who have left their hometowns excludes those who stayed, limiting comparisons and possibly missing key differences in how social identity and psychological distance affect employment decisions.

To address these limitations, future research should use more representative sampling methods, such as random or stratified sampling, to reduce potential selection bias. Additionally, employing a variety of data collection methods, such as longitudinal surveys, Interviews, or behavioral observations, can help mitigate self-reported data bias and provide a more comprehensive understanding of participants' true intentions and attitudes. Expanding the study to include students who have remained in their hometowns could offer valuable comparative insights, revealing differences in how social identity and psychological distance impact employment decisions. Adopting a longitudinal research design would be beneficial to track students over time, establishing causal relationships and understanding the long-term impacts of these factors. Finally, future research should explore additional variables that may influence the decision to return home for employment, such as economic conditions, family expectations, and local job market dynamics.

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