

The Impact of Professional Identity on Work Engagement Among Counselors in Chinese Private Universities: The Mediating Role of Proactive Personality

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the relationship between professional identity and work-engagement among counselors in private universities in China, with a particular focus on the mediating role of pro-active personality. The research employs a quantitative approach, utilizing surveys to collect data from 439 counselors in private universities in Sichuan Province. Structural equation modeling (SEM) is applied to analyze the relationships among professional identity, proactive personality, and workengagement. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between professional identity and work-engagement, with proactive personality enhancing this relationship. The findings suggest that counselors with a stronger professional identity are more engaged in their work, and those with a proactive personality exhibit even higher level of engagement. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of proactive personality in

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the development of professional identity and its impact on work engagement, providing valuable insights for enhancing the professional development of counselors in private universities.

Keywords: Chinese Private Universities, Professional Identity, Work-Engagement, Pro-active Personality

Introduction

Counselors in Chinese private universities play a pivotal role in student development, yet they face challenges like limited resources, recognition, and professional support. This study examines the relationship between professional identity and work engagement, with a focus on proactive personality as a mediating factor. Grounded in Professional Identity Construction Theory, Work Engagement Theory, and Proactive Personality Theory, the research uses data from 439 counselors in Sichuan Province. By exploring how these factors interact, the study aims to provide insights into improving counselor effectiveness, satisfaction, and ultimately, enhancing student outcomes in private universities.

Literature Review

Professional identity, work engagement, and proactive personality are three key factors in understanding the job performance of counselors in Chinese private universities.

Professional identity

Professional identity refers to the recognition and internalization of one's professional roles, responsibilities, and values, shaped by factors such as education, training, experience, and organizational environment (Brown & Miller, 2016). It encompasses four dimensions: self-identity (personal recognition of the counselor's role), student identity (how students perceive counselors), school identity (counselors' alignment with their institutions), and social identity (societal

recognition and support) (Smith & Jones, 2018; Liu & Wang, 2023). These dimensions collectively influence counselors' work engagement, commitment, and effectiveness, particularly in private universities where resources and recognition may be limited (Huo, 2024; Su & Liu, 2024).

Work engagement

Work engagement refers to the level of involvement and enthusiasm that individuals bring to their work, comprising vitality, dedication, and focus (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2022). Vitality reflects the energy and positive emotions at work, which are crucial for sustaining motivation (Liu & Wang, 2023); dedication denotes commitment and involvement, highlighting perseverance in the face of challenges (Ma & Zhang, 2022); focus involves deep concentration, which leads to higher job satisfaction and performance (Yao & Tao, 2023). Studies have shown that work engagement not only enhances job performance but also promotes overall well-being and career development (Feng & Jiang, 2024). Furthermore, a strong professional identity significantly fosters work engagement, thereby contributing positively to both individual outcomes and organizational success (Zhuang, 2022).

Proactive personality

Proactive personality is the tendency of an individual to take initiative, anticipate future challenges, and actively influence their environment to drive change (Bateman & Crant, 1993). In the context of counseling, a proactive personality manifests in counselors who are proactive in identifying student needs, proposing innovative solutions, and taking action to improve their work environment (Chen, 2022). This trait is particularly valuable in educational settings, where adaptability and forward-thinking are essential for effectively supporting students and enhancing institutional outcomes (Jiang & Wu, 2023). Research has shown that counselors with a strong proactive personality are more likely to be engaged in their work, exhibit higher job satisfaction, and contribute positively to their institution's success (Smith et al., 2018; Yao & Tao, 2023).

Conceptual Framework

This study proposes a mediation model to explore the impact of professional identity on work engagement among counselors in Chinese private universities, with a focus on the mediating role of proactive personality. According to existing literature, professional identity is seen as a multifaceted construct encompassing self-identity, student identity, school identity, and social identity, each contributing to the counselor's sense of purpose and role alignment (Liu & Wang, 2023). Research indicates that a strong professional identity positively influences work engagement, reflected in dimensions such as vitality, dedication, and focus (Zhuang, 2022). Proactive personality, defined as the tendency to take initiative and effect change, is hypothesized to mediate this relationship. Counselors with a proactive personality are more likely to channel their professional identity into active engagement in their work, thereby enhancing overall work engagement (Chen, 2022; Yao & Tao, 2023). The proposed model suggests that proactive personality serves as a critical intermediary linking professional identity to work engagement, offering deeper insights into how counselors in private universities can be supported to maximize their professional potential.

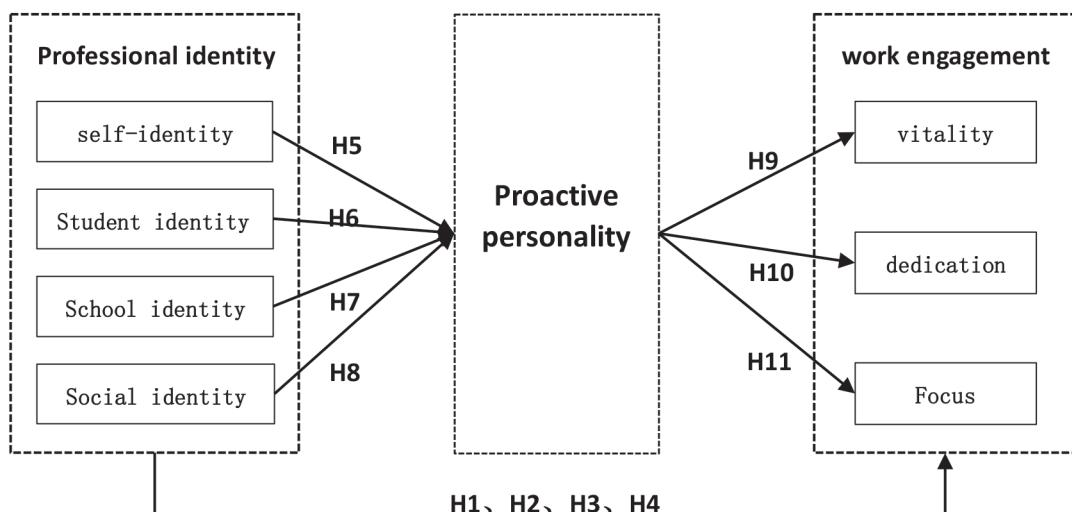


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Hypotheses

- H1: Self identity has a significant impact on counselor work engagement.
- H2: Student identity has a significant impact on counselor work engagement.
- H3: School identity has a significant impact on counselor work engagement.
- H4: Social identity has a significant impact on the work engagement of counselors.
- H5: Self identity has a significant impact on the proactive personality of counselors.
- H6: Student identity has a significant impact on the proactive personality of counselors.
- H7: School identity has a significant impact on the proactive personality of counselors.
- H8: Social identity has a significant impact on the proactive personality of counselors.
- H9: Proactive personality has a significant impact on the work vitality of counselors.
- H10: Proactive personality has a significant impact on the work dedication of counselors.
- H11: Proactive personality has a significant impact on the work focus of counselors.

Research Methodology

This study utilizes quantitative methods to investigate the impact of professional identity on work engagement among counselors in private universities in China, with a specific focus on analyzing the mediating role of proactive personality. The sample is drawn from 55 private universities in Sichuan Province, China, and consists of 460 counselors selected through a combination of cluster sampling and simple random sampling methods, yielding 439 valid responses. Data analysis employs Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to evaluate the direct and indirect pathways through which professional identity affects work engagement.

The study design and sampling strategy are aimed at ensuring the representativeness and generalizability of the research findings, with careful consideration of regional and institutional characteristics.

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

This study examines the impact of professional identity on work engagement among counselors in Sichuan's private universities. A total of 460 surveys were distributed, and 439 valid responses were collected, representing diverse demographics. The sample is predominantly female (73.1%), with over 60% aged under 35 and having less than five years of experience. The majority (80%) hold postgraduate degrees, while fewer than 25% have senior professional titles or management positions. This broad distribution of samples enhances the universality and reliability of the research findings.

Reliability analysis

Table 1 Reliability Analysis Table

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
Self identity	0.885	4
Student identity	0.921	6
School identity	0.915	6
Social identity	0.863	4
Proactive personality	0.931	10
Vitality	0.877	5
Dedication	0.910	6
Focus	0.898	6
Professional identity	0.906	20
Work engagement	0.925	17

The reliability of the constructs was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, as shown in Table 1. All variables demonstrated high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating good internal consistency among the items. Specifically, the reliability coefficients for the dimensions of professional identity ranged from 0.863 to 0.921, while the proactive personality and work engagement scales also showed strong reliability, with alpha values of 0.931 and 0.925, respectively. These results suggest that the measurement instruments used in this study are reliable for capturing the intended constructs.

Validity Analysis

Table 2 KMO and Bartlett's Test Results

KMO		0.954
	Approx. Chi-Square	13768.953
Bartlett	<i>df</i>	1081
	<i>p</i>	0.000

As shown in Table 2, the KMO value for the survey scale is 0.954, well above the minimum threshold of 0.5, indicating a high level of sampling adequacy. Additionally, Bartlett's test produced a chi-square value of 13,768.953 with a significance level of $p < 0.001$, confirming that the correlations between the variables are statistically significant. These results suggest that the variables in this study are strongly interrelated, making factor analysis highly appropriate for further investigation.

Correlation analysis

Table 3 Correlation Analysis Table

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Self identity	0.812							
2 Student identity	0.274	0.814						
3 School identity	0.355	0.297	0.802					
4 Social identity	0.376	0.291	0.404	0.782				
5 Proactive personality	0.430	0.364	0.520	0.497	0.759			
6 Vitality	0.512	0.442	0.513	0.492	0.519	0.767		
7 Dedication	0.424	0.344	0.491	0.473	0.530	0.504	0.793	
8 Focus	0.447	0.438	0.473	0.495	0.567	0.525	0.504	0.772

Note: * refers to $p < 0.05$; ** refers to $p < 0.01$; *** refers to $p < 0.001$

As shown in Table 3, the correlation coefficients are all significant, with p values less than 0.05. This indicates strong correlations between self-identity, student identity, school identity, social identity, proactive personality, and the dimensions of work engagement (vitality, dedication, focus). The results suggest that higher levels of professional identity are positively associated with increased work engagement and proactive behavior among counselors.

Hypotheses Testing

Table 4 Testing the mediating effect of proactive personality on occupational identity and various dimensions of work engagement

Path		β	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Self identity →	Total effect	0.434	0.032	0.371	0.496
proactive personality →	Direct effects	0.271	0.03	0.213	0.329
work engagement	Indirect effects	0.163	0.02	0.125	0.205
Student identity →	Total effect	0.355	0.032	0.292	0.419
proactive personality →	Direct effects	0.217	0.028	0.161	0.272
work engagement	Indirect effects	0.139	0.02	0.101	0.179
School identity →	Total effect	0.497	0.033	0.432	0.562
proactive personality →	Direct effects	0.300	0.034	0.234	0.366
work engagement	Indirect effects	0.197	0.024	0.153	0.246
Social identity →	Total effect	0.475	0.033	0.410	0.539
proactive personality →	Direct effects	0.287	0.032	0.224	0.351
work engagement	Indirect effects	0.188	0.024	0.144	0.238

The results show that professional identity and its dimensions still significantly influence work engagement, even with proactive personality as a mediator. Self-identity has a total effect of 0.434 (direct: 0.271, indirect: 0.163), confirming that proactive personality partially mediates the relationship between professional identity and work engagement, supporting the hypotheses.

Table 5 Testing the mediating effect of proactive personality on occupational identity and various dimensions of vitality engagement

Path		β	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Self identity → proactive	Total effect	0.434	0.036	0.363	0.506
personality → Vitality	Direct effects	0.311	0.037	0.238	0.384
engagement	Indirect effects	0.124	0.020	0.087	0.165
Student identity → proactive	Total effect	0.343	0.037	0.271	0.415
personality → Vitality	Direct effects	0.231	0.036	0.161	0.301
engagement	Indirect effects	0.112	0.019	0.077	0.149
School identity → Proactive	Total effect	0.461	0.039	0.385	0.538
personality → Vitality	Direct effects	0.308	0.043	0.224	0.393
engagement	Indirect effects	0.153	0.024	0.108	0.202
Social identity → proactive	Total effect	0.419	0.039	0.343	0.496
personality → vitality	Direct effects	0.266	0.042	0.184	0.348
engagement	Indirect effects	0.154	0.023	0.111	0.203

The results show that professional identity and its dimensions significantly influence vitality engagement, even with proactive personality as a mediator. Self-identity has a total effect of 0.434 (direct: 0.311, indirect: 0.124), student identity 0.343 (direct: 0.231, indirect: 0.112), school identity 0.461 (direct: 0.308, indirect: 0.153), and social identity 0.419 (direct: 0.266, indirect: 0.154). These findings confirm that proactive personality partially mediates the relationship between professional identity and vitality engagement.

Table 6 A test of the mediating effect of proactive personality on professional identity and various dimensions of dedication engagement

Path		β	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Self identity → proactive personality → dedication engagement	Total effect	0.434	0.047	0.341	0.526
	Direct effects	0.25	0.047	0.158	0.343
	Indirect effects	0.184	0.026	0.136	0.237
Student identity → proactive personality → dedication engagement	Total effect	0.329	0.047	0.237	0.422
	Direct effects	0.172	0.045	0.084	0.260
	Indirect effects	0.157	0.024	0.113	0.206
School identity → proactive personality → dedication engagement	Total effect	0.547	0.049	0.452	0.643
	Direct effects	0.337	0.053	0.233	0.441
	Indirect effects	0.210	0.032	0.151	0.278
Social identity → proactive personality → dedication engagement	Total effect	0.511	0.048	0.417	0.606
	Direct effects	0.308	0.051	0.208	0.408
	Indirect effects	0.204	0.030	0.148	0.266

The results show that professional identity and its dimensions continue to significantly influence dedication engagement, even with proactive personality as a mediator. Self-identity has a total effect of 0.434 (direct: 0.25, indirect: 0.184), student identity 0.329 (direct: 0.172, indirect: 0.157), school identity 0.547 (direct: 0.337, indirect: 0.210), and social identity 0.511 (direct: 0.308, indirect: 0.204). These findings confirm that proactive personality partially mediates the relationship between professional identity and dedication engagement.

Table 7 A test of the mediating effect of proactive personality on professional identity and various dimensions of focused engagement

Path		β	SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Self identity → proactive personality	Total effect	0.432	0.042	0.349	0.516
personality → focused engagement	Direct effects	0.251	0.042	0.169	0.33
	Indirect effects	0.181	0.026	0.133	0.235
Student identity → proactive personality	Total effect	0.394	0.041	0.313	0.475
proactive personality → focused engagement	Direct effects	0.247	0.039	0.171	0.323
	Indirect effects	0.147	0.024	0.104	0.195
School identity → proactive personality	Total effect	0.483	0.045	0.394	0.571
proactive personality → focused engagement	Direct effects	0.254	0.048	0.161	0.348
	Indirect effects	0.228	0.032	0.169	0.294
Social identity → proactive personality	Total effect	0.493	0.044	0.408	0.579
personality → focused engagement	Direct effects	0.288	0.045	0.2	0.377
	Indirect effects	0.205	0.031	0.148	0.269

The results show that professional identity and its dimensions still significantly impact focused engagement, even with proactive personality as a mediator. Self-identity has a total effect of 0.432 (direct: 0.251, indirect: 0.181), student identity 0.394 (direct: 0.247, indirect: 0.147), school identity 0.483 (direct: 0.254, indirect: 0.228), and social identity 0.493 (direct: 0.288, indirect: 0.205). These findings confirm that proactive personality partially mediates the relationship between professional identity and focused engagement.

Discussion

According to the study, professional identity significantly impacts counselors' work engagement, with proactive personality playing a crucial role in this process. Deep identification with self-identity, student identity, school identity, and social identity directly promotes work engagement and performance (Brown & Miller,

2016; Bateman & Crant, 1993). To leverage these findings effectively, universities can implement targeted professional development programs. These programs should focus on strengthening counselors' connection to their professional roles and the broader educational mission. By organizing workshops, mentorship programs, and role-specific training, universities can enhance counselors' self-identity, student identity, school identity, and social identity, thereby fostering increased vitality, dedication, and focus in their work.

Recommendations

The study's findings hold practical significance for private universities seeking to bolster counselor effectiveness and satisfaction. Institutions should implement robust professional development policies that include ongoing training and mentorship to nurture counselors' professional identities effectively. Emphasizing research-driven practices and cultivating a supportive organizational culture are pivotal for sustaining counselor motivation. Regular feedback mechanisms and adaptable program strategies should be in place to ensure continuous improvement. Collaborating with stakeholders and forging partnerships will enrich counselor development efforts, fostering an engaged counseling workforce dedicated to enhancing student success and institutional excellence.

Cultivating Proactive Personality

Institutions should also prioritize the development of counselors' proactive personality traits. This can be achieved through training that encourages initiative, problem-solving, and innovation. By fostering a culture that rewards proactive behaviors, counselors are likely to become more engaged, taking greater ownership of their roles and contributing more actively to student development and institutional goals.

Tailored Support Based on Demographics

Given that demographic factors such as age, gender, and work experience moderate the relationship between professional identity and work engagement, universities should consider these variables when designing support programs. For example, younger or less experienced counselors might benefit from more structured guidance and mentorship, while more experienced counselors could be provided with opportunities for leadership roles or advanced training to keep them engaged.

Creating a Supportive Work Environment

The research underscores the importance of a supportive work environment in enhancing professional identity and work engagement. Universities should ensure that counselors feel recognized and valued by the institution, which can be achieved through recognition programs, career advancement opportunities, and a clear communication of the institution's appreciation for the counselors' work.

Policy and Management Strategies

Administrators and policymakers can use these findings to develop more effective management strategies that align with the needs and motivations of counselors. By integrating professional identity enhancement into institutional policies and offering incentives for proactive behavior, universities can create a more dynamic and engaged counseling workforce, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes and institutional success.

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