

Perceived Overqualification in College Students: A Double-Edged Impact via Knowledge Hiding

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Abstract

Perceived Overqualification (POQ) has been widely studied in organizational settings, yet the exploration of its implications in academic environments remain limited. Using Conservation of resources (COR) Theory as the primary theoretical framework, this study examines the mediating role of knowledge hiding in the relationship between POQ and academic performance. Data were collected through a survey of 307 college students, analyzing the direct and indirect effects of POQ on academic performance. Results reveal that POQ was positively correlated with academic performance and knowledge hiding, while the indirect effect of POQ on academic performance via knowledge hiding was statically significant. These findings highlight the complex impact of POQ, emphasizing the need for targeted strategies to minimize its negative effects and foster a more collaborative academic environment.

Keywords: perceived overqualification, academic performance, knowledge hiding, Conservation of Resources theory

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, global literacy levels have risen dramatically as a result of the advancement of education systems globally. From just over half of the population being literate in the 1970s, an impressive 87% are literate by 2022, reflecting significant educational progress and making the younger generations better educated than ever (M. Roser & E. Ortiz-Ospina, 2024). However, the rapid growth in educational attainment has created an imbalance in the job market as the supply of high-quality talent exceeds the demand, leading to a growing mismatch between individuals'

abilities and their roles in society (B. Erdogan & T. N. Bauer., 2021). For instance, as early as 2020, there were over 60,000 Chinese postgraduates and 170,000 undergraduates among 3 million food delivery riders—a job that requires minimal educational qualifications. Students who recognize the highly competitive job market may feel a misalignment between their academic abilities and the opportunities available to them (G. Montt, 2017), fueling perceptions of overqualification. As such, the competitive pressures in education systems and the oversupply of highly qualified individuals contribute to the increasing prevalence of perceived overqualification (POQ) among

students (B. Erdogan & T. N. Bauer, 2021; C. Ma, D. B. Ganegoda, (George) Zhen Xiong Chen, J. Zhao, X. Jiang, & X. Zhang, 2023).

POQ occurs when individuals feel they possess more knowledge, skills, education, and work experience than what is needed for their current job or academic program (D. C. Maynard, T. A. Joseph, & A. M. Maynard, 2006), causing a mismatch between their abilities and their environment. Past research suggested that a similar mismatch exists between students and colleges (S. Ovink, D. Kalogrides, M. Nanney, & P. Delaney, 2018), as more students enter higher education and acquire advanced academic capabilities (B. Erdogan & T. N. Bauer, 2021), leading to some researchers anticipating POQ among college students (P. Wang et al, 2023). One key area where the effects of POQ manifest is academic performance, which includes measures such as grades, class engagement, and learning attitudes. While students with POQ have the prerequisite skills for being a high academic performer (T. W. H. Ng & D. C. Feldman, 2009), it can also have negative impacts on task performance due to negative motivation (A. Lee, B. Erdogan, A. Tian, S. Willis, & J. Cao, 2021). Previous studies suggest that POQ may negatively affect academic performance by decreasing academic motivation or causing students to lack interest in course content (R. M. Ryan & E. L. Deci, 2000). For instance, students may feel that course content is too easy and unchallenging, which in turn leads to decreased interest in learning and lower academic performance (D. Jiang, L. Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024). Hence, understanding the

relationship between POQ and academic performance is crucial for assessing the broader implications of POQ in an educational context.

Our study examines this relationship based on the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR). Conservation of Resources Theory states that individuals seek to maintain, protect, and expand their social and psychological resources in the face of environmental pressures (S. E. Hobfoll, 1989). When students feel that they are exceeding the demands of their academic environment, they may feel that resources are being wasted and ineffectively used, which in turn affects their academic performance (E. Howard, A. Luksyte, R. K. Amarnani, & C. Spitzmueller, 2022).

Furthermore, research suggests that Knowledge Hiding (KH) may act as a mediating variable in this process (N. Garg, A. Talukdar, A. Ganguly, & C. Kumar, 2021). Students often regard knowledge as a means of competitive advantage (A. S. Chaudhry, n.d.), and when they feel overqualified, they are more likely to engage in KH, particularly regarding graded activities (T. Jer Yuen & M. Shaheen Majid, 2007). By choosing to withhold their knowledge or abilities, students protect their perceived loss of resources and reinforce their resource protection mechanism. Additionally, research has shown that KH can decrease intellectual thinking, innovations, and collaborations (S. Al-Husseini & I. Elbeltagi, 2018; U. Ghani et al., 2020), which in turn, can lead to reduced participation and academic performance (C. E. Connelly, D. Zweig, J. Webster, & J. P. Trougakos, 2012).

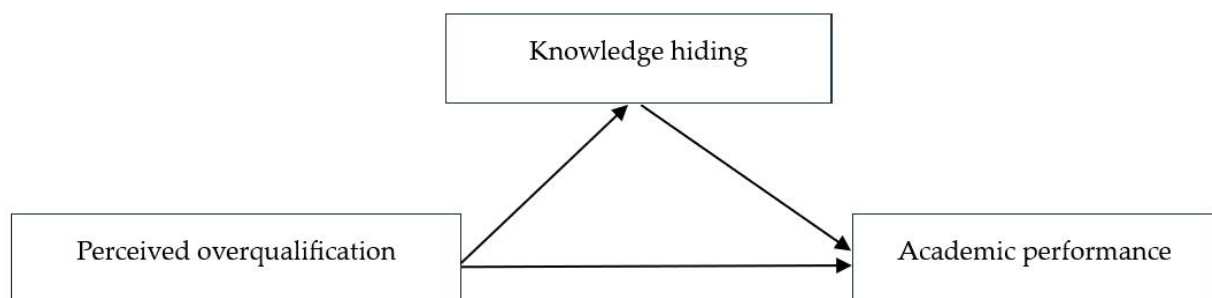


Figure 1. Conceptual model linking perceived stress, subjective well-being and outness

2. Theory and Hypotheses

2.1 *Perceived Overqualification and Academic Performance*

Perceived overqualification (POQ) is defined as an individual's subjective feeling of them

possessing more education, experience, or skills than required by their jobs (D. C. Maynard, T. A. Joseph, & A. M. Maynard, 2006). Academic performance indicates a student's learning across various subjects, and is typically measured by formative and summative

assessments (T. Madden-Dent & D. Oliver, n.d.). Under circumstances where the overqualified employees feel that their skills are being utilized effectively, it can lead to enhanced task performance (Y. Li & S. Wang, 2024). Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that when overqualified students perceive their surplus knowledge and skills are being used effectively, it can improve their academic performance.

The Conservation of Resource theory (COR) states that individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and protect their resources (e.g., time, energy, and skills) (S. E. Hobfoll, 1989). Similar to employees, students who feel overqualified may show less interest in class and become disengaged as they perceive the material as too easy or unchallenging (M. Rafiei & H. Van Dijk, 2024). However, the Conservation of resources theory suggests that “individuals who are abundant in resources have more opportunities to acquire new resources through resource investment” (D. Jiang, L. Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024). When these overqualified students see their surplus resources as an advantage and opportunity, they are motivated to actively seek new resources and engage in resource investment behaviors (D. Jiang, L. Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024) such as self-learning, researching, actively participating in class etc. These resource gaining behaviors, in addition to overqualified students’ superior knowledge and skills, enhances their learning engagement and can lead to an increase in their overall academic performance. Additionally, scholars have shown that employee’s perceived overqualification positively predicts affiliative and proactive performance at work (C. Ma, D. B. Ganegoda, (George) Zhen Xiong Chen, J. Zhao, X. Jiang, & X. Zhang, 2023), which in turn, enhances job performance (K. Alfes, 2013). Moreover, studies have shown that POQ among employees is positively related to career identity when they are being supported by a humble leader, which increases knowledge sharing and career planning behaviors (J. Khan, I. Saeed, M. Zada, H. G. Nisar, A. Ali, & S. Zada, 2023), further enhancing task performance in an organization (S. L. Kim & S. Yun, 2015). Thus, based on the above analysis, we propose the hypothesis:

H1: Perceived overqualification is positively related to academic performance.

2.2 *Perceived Overqualification and Knowledge Hiding*

Knowledge hiding is defined as “an intentional attempt by an individual to withhold or conceal knowledge that has been requested by another person” (C. E. Connelly, D. Zweig, J. Webster, & J. P. Trougakos, 2012). It has been shown that knowledge hiding can have multiple negative effects on organizations as well in educational institutions.

The Conservation of Resources Theory suggests that the loss of resources can induce stress in individuals (S. E. Hobfoll, 2011). For students with POQ, while their surplus abilities may enhance their academic performance, they can also lead to the perception that their resources are being wasted (E. Howard, A. Luksyte, R. K. Amarnani, & C. Spitzmueller, 2022). Overqualified students may experience stress as a result of the perceived underutilization of their surplus resources, further leading to feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration (J. Khan, I. Saeed, & M. Zada, 2022). Such negative emotions can deplete the student’s mental resources and trigger a resource protection mechanism, which aims to conserve remaining resources and prevent further loss (D. Jiang, L. Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024).

As part of this protection mechanism, POQ students, who are experiencing stress due to the perception of their underutilized resources, are likely to engage in knowledge hiding (E. Howard, A. Luksyte, R. K. Amarnani, & C. Spitzmueller, 2022). Unlike refraining from sharing knowledge, which may occur due to a lack of opportunity, knowledge hiding involves students deliberately withholding information, knowledge, or expertise from their peers when requested (B. K. A. Almagharbeh, M. D. Shamout, & S. Hamouche, 2023). This behavior is motivated by a need to preserve perceived limited resources and avoid further emotional and mental depletion. In addition, prior research supports this relationship between POQ and knowledge hiding. Studies indicate that employees with POQ are more likely to engage in knowledge hiding in organizations as a protective strategy (C. S. Li, H. Liao, & Y. Han, 2022). Furthermore, past scholars have found a negative relationship between POQ and helping behaviors toward peers (B. Erdogan, A. Karaeminogullari, T. N. Bauer, & A. M. Ellis, 2020), suggesting a reduced willingness to invest resources in others. This deliberate decision to hide knowledge reflects an effort to protect oneself from the stress caused by resource

depletion stemming from POQ. Hence, this paper proposes the hypothesis:

H2: Perceived overqualification increases knowledge hiding behavior.

2.3 Knowledge Hiding's Mediating Role Between Perceived Overqualification and Academic Performance

Based on COR theory, individuals strive to protect and conserve their valuable resources, including time, energy, and knowledge (S. E. Hobfoll, 2011). Overqualified students are more likely to engage in knowledge hiding behaviors as a strategy to conserve their resources. By withholding their information, these students tend to disengage from collaborative activities (C. E. Connelly, D. Zweig, J. Webster, & J. P. Trougakos, 2012), further limiting group performance and opportunities for intellectual exchange. Additionally, knowledge hiding fosters feelings of distrust among students (C. E. Connelly & D. Zweig, May 2015), reducing collaboration and communication and ultimately negatively impacting academic performance. While POQ can lead to increased performance when students view their resources as opportunities and advantages (D. Jiang, L. Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024), it can also cause emotional and mental strain when they feel their surplus information is being underutilized (B. Erdogan & T. N. Bauer, 2009). This frustration leads to knowledge hiding behaviors as students attempt to protect themselves from further resource loss. In turn, this response to stress may diminish the positive effects of POQ by limiting collaborative learning and intellectual engagement with peers (C. E. Connelly, D. Zweig, J. Webster, & J. P. Trougakos, 2012). Therefore, knowledge hiding mediates the relationship between POQ and academic performance by acting as a mechanism through which overqualified students conserve their resources, leading to reduced academic outcomes despite their initial resource abundance. Thus, our paper proposes that:

H3: Knowledge hiding mediates the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and academic performance.

3. Method

3.1 Sample

Prior to data collection, the study conducted brief interviews with a number of college students from a variety of academic institutions.

The interviews indicated that the respondents perceived the phenomenon of knowledge hiding to be prevalent among their peers in an environment characterized by intense competition. Subsequently, the snowball sampling method was employed in this study. A research questionnaire was disseminated via various social media platforms with the objective of recruiting interested university students who would be willing to complete the questionnaire on a voluntary basis. All participants were informed that the data collected via the questionnaire would be kept strictly confidential. The study was conducted in the form of an online questionnaire. Initially, the questionnaire was disseminated to our university acquaintances, who were asked to assist us in identifying other individuals who might support this study and meet the criteria for completing the questionnaire. Concurrently, the questionnaire was posted on the online platform to recruit a larger group of university students.

A total of 328 questionnaires were distributed for analysis in this study. After the removal of questionnaires deemed invalid, a total of 307 valid questionnaires were returned. The respondents were predominantly male (41.0%), with the remainder being female (59.0%). The mean age was 20 years. A minority of the college students (12.1%) had attended non-double first-class universities, while the majority (87.9%) had attended double first-class universities.

3.2 Measures

The variables in our study were measured using well-established scales published in the research literature. To ensure the quality of translation and avoid language ambiguity, our study strictly followed the "translation-back translation" procedure to translate the scales originally developed in English into Chinese.

Knowledge hiding. The instrument used to assess the knowledge hiding was adapted from a twelve-item scale (C. E. Connelly, D. Zweig, J. Webster, & J. P. Trougakos, 2012). Sample items included the following: "In the event that my fellow students seek clarification on a matter of academic importance, I feign a lack of comprehension." Participants responded on a five-point response scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Internal consistency for this scale was $\alpha = 0.915$ in the

current study.

Academic performance. Academic performance was measured using a seven-item scale (G. Dupaul, M. Rapport, & L. Perriello, 1991). Sample items are, “I can accurately complete more assignments relative to my batch mates.” Participants responded on a five-point response scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Internal consistency for this scale was $\alpha = 0.951$ in the current study.

Perceived overqualification. We measured perceived overqualification using a nine-item scale developed by Maynard et al. (2006). One example item was “I have a lot of knowledge that I do not need for my job.” Subjects responded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The internal consistency of the scale in this study was $\alpha = 0.982$.

Control variables. Prior research has shown some influence of demographic variables on academic performance, i.e., gender, age (C. Fan, Z. Wang, Y. Yang, & X. Liu, 2023), school and grade (M. A. Opoku, S.-W. Kang, & N. Kim, 2023). Gender was measured as a dichotomous variable coded as 0 = Female, 1 = Male. Grade was coded as an ordinal variable 1 = Freshman, 2 = Sophomore, 3 = Junior, 4 = Senior. School is coded as an ordinal variable 0 = Non-Double First-Class Initiative, 1 = Double First-Class Initiative.

4. Results

The data analysis in this study was conducted using two software programs: SPSS 27.0 and Amos 24.0. SPSS 27.0 was employed for three

specific purposes: first, to conduct a reliability test; second, to perform descriptive statistical analysis; and third, to conduct a correlation analysis. Amos 24.0 was used for two distinct purposes: first, to conduct a validation factor analysis; and second, to test hypotheses. Finally, to test for mediating effects, the bias correction method of 2000 resamples with a 95% confidence interval (CI) was utilized.

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the construct validity of the three main variables. The results demonstrated that the proposed three-factor model ($\chi^2 = 315.703$; $df = 291$; $\chi^2 / df = 1.09$; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.02; SRMR = 0.04) exhibited superior fit to the alternative models (see Table 1). The results of the CFA provide evidence supporting the validity of the proposed model.

4.2 Common Method Bias

The results of Harman’s one-way factor analysis indicated that the unrotated exploratory factor analysis identified a total of three factors, which collectively accounted for 70.873% of the total variation. The first principal component factor explained 39.514% of the variation, which was below the 40% threshold (P. M. Podsakoff, S. B. MacKenzie, J.-Y. Lee, & N. P. Podsakoff., 2003). Furthermore, as illustrated in Table 2, the goodness of fit of the one-factor model was markedly inferior to that of the three-factor model. These findings suggest that the potential for common method bias in this study is minimal.

Table 1. Goodness-of-fit information for the alternative factor models

<i>Model</i>	<i>Factors</i>	χ^2	<i>df</i>	χ^2/df	<i>CFI</i>	<i>TLI</i>	<i>RMSEA</i>	<i>SRMR</i>
<i>3-factor model</i>	<i>POQ; KH; AP</i>	<i>315.703</i>	<i>291</i>	<i>1.09</i>	<i>0.99</i>	<i>0.99</i>	<i>0.02</i>	<i>0.04</i>
<i>2-factor model</i>	<i>POQ + KH; AP</i>	<i>3288.094</i>	<i>323</i>	<i>10.18</i>	<i>0.72</i>	<i>0.70</i>	<i>0.17</i>	<i>0.19</i>
<i>1-factor model</i>	<i>POQ + KH + AP</i>	<i>5444.664</i>	<i>324</i>	<i>16.81</i>	<i>0.52</i>	<i>0.48</i>	<i>0.23</i>	<i>0.26</i>

Note: POQ= Perceived overqualification; KH= Knowledge hiding; AP= Academic performance.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 illustrates the mean, standard deviation, and correlation between the study variables, as well as the extracted average variance extracted (AVE) and combined reliability (CR) values. The AVE values for all the study variables exceeded

0.50, and the square root of the AVE exceeded the correlation coefficient with the variables, indicating satisfactory convergent validity. The CR values surpassed 0.70, indicating favourable combinatorial reliability.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender ^a	-	-	-							
2. Age	-	-	-.034	-						
3. Grade ^b	-	-	-.112*	.633**	-					
4. School ^c	-	-	.065	-.231**	-.328**	-				
5. Position ^d	-	-	.085	.088	.148**	.065	-			
6. POQ	0.98	0.88	-.062	.066	.026	-.029	.006	-		
7. KH	0.93	0.51	.074	.054	.042	-.045	.018	.440**	-	
8. AP	0.96	0.75	.010	-.106	-.053	.021	-.050	.325**	-.420**	-
Mean	-	-	0.41	20.00	2.44	0.88	0.41	2.87	2.27	2.94
SD	-	-	0.49	1.25	0.97	0.33	0.49	1.30	0.78	1.01

Note: N=307; ^a Gender coded as (0 = Female, 1 = Male); ^b Grade coded as (1 = Freshman, 2 = Sophomore, 3 = Junior, 4 = Senior); ^c School coded as (0 = Non-Double First-Class Initiative, 1 = Double First-Class Initiative); ^d Position coded as (0 = Non-class monitor, 1 = Class monitor); POQ= Perceived overqualification; KH= Knowledge hiding; AP= Academic performance; Bolding indicates the square root of AVE; *p < .05; **p < .01.

Table 3. Summary of path-analytic results

	Knowledge hiding		Academic performance	
	B	SE	B	SE
Perceived overqualification	.414**	.047	.172**	.054
Knowledge hiding			-.547**	.067
Gender ^a	.246	.127	.102	.129
Age	-.009	.064	-.126	.065
Grade ^b	.033	.085	.050	.086
School ^c	-.124	.201	-.078	.203

Note: B= Path coefficients; SE=Standardized errors; Path coefficients are unstandardized;

Number of bootstrap samples are 2000; Level of confidence is 95%;

^a Gender coded as (0 = Female, 1 = Male);

^b Grade coded as (1 = Freshman, 2 = Sophomore, 3 = Junior, 4 = Senior);

^c School coded as (0 = Non-Double First-Class Initiative, 1 = Double First-Class Initiative);

+p < .1; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

4.4 Hypothesis Tests

In this study, hypothesis testing was conducted using structural equation modelling in Amos 24.0. As anticipated, as illustrated in Table 3, perceived overqualification was found to be positively correlated with academic performance (B = 0.172, p < 0.01), thereby supporting hypothesis 1.

A positive correlation was observed between perceived overqualification and knowledge hiding (B=0.414, p<0.001), thereby supporting hypothesis 2.

In this study, the indirect effect process proposed by Preacher et al. (2010) was employed to ascertain the mediating role of knowledge hiding between perceived overqualification and academic performance. As illustrated in Table 4, the results indicated that the indirect effect of perceived overqualification on academic performance via knowledge hiding was statistically significant (indirect effect = -0.226, 95% CI = [-0.304, -0.164]), thereby supporting hypothesis 3.

Table 4. Bootstrapping results for testing moderation effect

	Perceived overqualification→Knowledge hiding→Academic performance		
	B	SE	95% Boot CI
Indirect effect	-.226**	.036	[-.304, -.164]
Direct effect	.172**	.054	[.063, .278]

Note: B= Path coefficients; SE=Standardized errors; CI that excludes zero indicates that the indirect effects are significant; Path coefficients are unstandardized.

+p < .1; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Theoretical Implication of the Study

This study contributes to the existing literature on POQ by finding a direct positive relationship between POQ and academic performance among college students. Additionally, the study confirms the mediating role of knowledge hiding in this relationship through the framework of COR Theory.

Firstly, our research aimed to address the gap in the literature by exploring how POQ affects performance in educational settings. While much of the prior research on overqualification has focused on workplace contexts (B. Erdogan, A. Karaeminogullari, T. N. Bauer, & A. M. Ellis, 2020), particularly how it affects employees' work attitudes and behaviors (D. Jiang, L. Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024), there is limited exploration of how POQ impacts academic environments. This gap is significant because overqualification may impact students differently than employees, especially in its effect on academic performance.

Secondly, this research extends the application of COR Theory to understand how POQ influences students' academic performance through knowledge hiding (S. E. Hobfoll, 2011). While COR Theory has been widely used to study stress and resource conservation in organizational settings (D. Jiang, L. Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024), this paper introduces a novel application of COR within the educational domain. Our study demonstrates that students with POQ, similar to employees, engage in knowledge hiding as a strategy to protect their perceived loss of resources (C. E. Connelly, D. Zweig, J. Webster, & J. P. Trougakos, 2012), which mediates the relationship between POQ and academic performance. The introduction of knowledge hiding as a mediator enriches the understanding of POQ's dual-edged nature—both enhancing and hindering performance depending on the emotional and cognitive response of individuals (D. Jiang, L.

Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024).

Finally, our findings reveal that the proactive behaviors in organizations associated with POQ, such as employee creativity and job crafting (D. Jiang, L. Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024), do not necessarily translate to higher academic performance. The study indicates that while POQ has a direct positive relationship with academic performance, knowledge hiding, as a mediating factor grounded in COR Theory, mediates this relationship by undermining its positive effects. This might lead to disengagement and knowledge withholding (C. E. Connelly, D. Zweig, J. Webster, & J. P. Trougakos, 2012), which diminishes collaborative learning and intellectual exchange among peers, negatively affecting academic performance.

5.2 Practical Implications of the Study

From a practical perspective, this study emphasizes the importance of designing an academic environment that better matches students' abilities with academic challenges, allowing students with POQ to fully utilize their excess knowledge and demonstrate their potential. The study reveals that POQ alone enhances academic performance by providing students with surplus knowledge and skills. It is the wasted resources that trigger knowledge hiding as a protective mechanism (E. Howard, A. Luksyte, R. K. Amarnani, & C. Spitzmueller, 2022), ultimately hindering academic performance. Hence, educators should adopt appropriate teaching methods that accommodate students with different qualifications, where students with POQ are provided with opportunities to engage in advanced tasks, explore challenging projects, or participate in leadership roles (H. Xu, Y.-M. Li, & P. Huang, 2017). The findings provide valuable insights to educators, academic counselors, and school policymakers looking to manage the problem of overqualification among

students. By developing differentiated instructions in educational institutions, it prevents overqualified students from being disengaged and feeling underutilized, effectively reducing knowledge hiding behavior.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of fostering an optimistic mindset among POQ students and a collaborative learning environment. As students with POQ may withhold knowledge to conserve their perceived advantage (D. Jiang, L. Ning, & Y. Zhang, 2024), promoting a culture of communication and knowledge sharing is essential. Students should be encouraged to view their surplus knowledge and skills not as wasted resources (H. Xu, Y.-M. Li, & P. Huang, 2017), but instead, as valuable resources that can positively contribute to their own academic growth as well as supporting others.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

It would be beneficial to consider several limitations of this study in future research. Firstly, the research model was tested using a questionnaire. In light of these considerations, any inferences regarding causality should be made with caution. Subsequent studies might employ an experimental research design to substantiate the causal relationships between variables. Secondly, although the Harman one-factor method indicated that the CMV in this study was not severe, this issue may not have been entirely resolved. It would be beneficial for future studies to employ more rigorous scientific measures, such as teacher assessment or the design of situational experiments, to enhance the robustness of the data.

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