

## **ARE STUDENTS SATISFIED? THE MEDIATING ROLE OF AFFECT-BASED TRUST IN STUDENT-TEACHER INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

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### *Abstract*

*In this study, we consider affect-based trust as an explanation for why an individual's intercultural sensitivity may predict communication satisfaction. A total of 323 international students (141 males, 182 females) studying Chinese language and culture from three universities located in Shanghai, China participated in this research. Structural equation model (SEM) with confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses of the study. Results indicated that international students' affect-based trust with their Chinese teachers partially mediated the positive association between students' intercultural sensitivity and their communication satisfaction. This finding provides a new insight into the psychological mechanisms by which intercultural sensitivity relates to communication satisfaction. Limitations and future research are discussed as well.*

Keywords: affect-based trust; cognition-based trust; intercultural sensitivity; student communication satisfaction

### **Introduction**

The large influx of international students into different countries shapes the higher educational institutions as a multilingual and multicultural domain. In the multicultural learning environment, international students experience more challenges compared to local students, not only because of language barriers, but

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also due to different cultural backgrounds (Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). Such challenges might ultimately impact international students' communication satisfaction (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005).

International students' communication satisfaction is a positive emotional reaction toward a local teacher (Goodboy, Martin, & Bolkan, 2009). The prestige and credibility of a host university benefit from international students' satisfaction. This is because, when students have had a positive attitude toward a teacher and a university which they choose, they will influence prospective international students (Childers, Williams, & Kemp, 2014).

International students' communication satisfaction has a positive relationship with intercultural communication competence (ICC). Over the past two decades, several researchers have proposed theoretical models to understand the processes through which students' ICC relates positively to their communication satisfaction. In these models, trust has been seriously taken into account (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Williams & Baber, 2007). For example, Goddard and Hoy (2000) found that student with a high level of trust are effectively to deal with cultural differences in intercultural communication. Lee (2007) also pointed out that a trust relationship has been found to function as a motivational resource when students are faced with difficulties in communication because trust relationships help students develop positive psychological and emotional perceptions of themselves. Defined as an individual's willingness to accept vulnerability relying on the benevolence, competence, honesty, and openness, of another person (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000; Zhu & Akhtar, 2014), trust is considered to significantly reduce students' uncertainty, misunderstanding, and disappointing while increase their positive attitudes and desired learning behaviors (van Oord & den Brok, 2004). Indeed, researchers have expanded knowledge on trust regarding ICC and communication satisfaction. However, far too little attention has been given to understanding the different function of cognition-based trust and affect-based trust in the relation between students' ICC and their communication satisfaction.

### **Objectives**

In this study, we focus on the affective dimension of ICC: intercultural sensitivity. We aim to test the mediating roles of cognition-based trust and affect-based trust in the relationships between intercultural sensitivity and student intercultural communication satisfaction. We assume that international

students' with high intercultural sensitivity are more likely to develop affect-based trust rather than cognition-based trust in student-teacher communication, which enables their satisfaction. In other words, the object of this research is twofold: (a) to determine the positive correlation between students' intercultural sensitivity and their communication satisfaction; and (b) to test the extent to which students' trust mediating the positive correlation between students' intercultural sensitivity and communication satisfaction.

The research makes three contributions. First, it presents a fuller understanding of the psychological mechanism, which underlies the correlation between intercultural sensitivity and communication satisfaction: affect-based trust. This finding improves comprehending of factors related to the successful multicultural communication. Second, students' cognition-based trust and affect-based trust are tested as two distinguishable psychological processes in this study. It provides an insightful angle for educators and administrators to appreciate the impact of each type of trust in the context of international education. Third, this study examines the positive relational processes among intercultural sensitivity, affect-based trust, and student communication satisfaction, which contribute to the growing body of research on the student-teacher relationship in a multicultural classroom. The details of these contributions will be elaborated in the discussion section.

### *Hypotheses*

#### *Intercultural sensitivity and student communication satisfaction*

According to Chen and Starosta (1997), ICC has three dimensions, including intercultural awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and intercultural effectiveness. Intercultural awareness represents the cognitive ability to understand diverse cultures where we live (Chen & Starosta, 1997), intercultural sensitivity represents the affective ability to distinguish, appreciate, and accept the different cultures, and intercultural effectiveness represents the behavioral ability to achieve communication goals in intercultural interactions (Hammer, 1987). The three dimensions of ICC separately relates to different aspects in the interaction process (Chen & Starosta, 1996, 2000).

Intercultural sensitivity is a vital trait for individuals to cope with cultural differences in a multicultural communication (Tamam, 2010). Chen (2010) found that intercultural sensitivity helps a personal take into account counterpart's perspectives and demonstrate respect and empathy towards cultural

differences. Awang-Rozaimie et al. (2013) elaborated that international students with intercultural sensitivity are willing to adjust their perceptions and performance during the process of multicultural interactions. Therefore, having the ability of intercultural sensitivity is imperative for individuals to avoid cultural misunderstandings and conflicts such as stereotype, ethnocentrism and prejudice (Awang-Rozaimie et al., 2013).

We assume that intercultural sensitivity, as one dimension of ICC, might be positively associated with international students' communication satisfaction. When international students study abroad, they have already had an image of a teacher in their minds based on their cultural backgrounds. The different communication behavior might impede the closeness of student-teacher relationship and communication satisfaction. Hence, the ability to rethink about the cultural differences, to adopt a positive attitude towards cultural problems, and to promote appropriate and effective behaviors helps international students avoid interacting tensions and conflicts with teachers, and fulfil the communicative objectives during the intercultural interaction. In light of this, we propose the hypothesis as follows:

H1: International students' intercultural sensitivity is positively related to their communication satisfaction with their teachers.

*Mediating effects: cognition-based trust versus affect-based trust*

Given the different psychological process through which it arises, trust has been conceptualized as having two dimensions: cognition- and affect-based trust. Cognition-based trust is built on the judgment of an individual's character, such as competence, integrity, and reliability, whereas affect-based trust is built on the emotional bonds between individuals, such as empathy, rapport, and self-disclosure (McAllister, 1995; Zhu & Akhtar, 2014). These two types of trust have distinct antecedents and outcomes and are linked with different relational content and structure (Chua, Ingram, & Morris, 2008). In this study, we adopt the above classification of trust to explore the role of international students' affect-based trust in intercultural communication. We assume that (a) the level of affect-based trust is an outcome of international students' intercultural sensitivity; (b) affect-based trust predicts international students' communication satisfaction.

Previous studies support our first assumption that intercultural sensitivity might be the seedbed of affect-based trust rather than of cognition-based trust (e.g. Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012; Zhu & Akhtar, 2014). Yang, Dunleavy, and

Phillips (2016) claimed that international students with a high level of intercultural sensitivity tend to have a positive emotional attachment with teachers. Through this emotional attachment tie, international students may find mutual concern and care from teachers, which indicate the presence of affect-based trust (Chua et al., 2012). In other word, when an international student A has high intercultural sensitivity, he or she might be very likely to avoid stereotypical attitudes and adapt efficiently to a teacher B in intercultural communications. Teacher B, who perceives respect, cooperation, and engagement from student A, might lend positive support and express individualized concern to this student. At the same time, student A, who feels his or her relationship with teacher B is genuine, might establish a close and intimate attachment with this teacher. Therefore, during this reciprocal and positive affective process, student A's affect-based trust is developed.

Regarding the second assumption, we contend that affect-based trust may be especially crucial to student communication satisfaction. When international students interact with a teacher from a different culture, their uncertainty about behaviors and values of this teacher could heighten their affective anxiety (Rui & Wang, 2015). The sense of uncertainty and affective anxiety inhibits the level of international students' emotional openness and ultimately influences communication satisfaction. Affect-based trust is a key factor to motivate an individual to engage in a communication (Chua et al., 2012). Lee (2007) pointed out that the student-teacher trust relationship serves as a motivational resource when students are encountered with difficulties in communication. With affect-based trust, international students are motivated to be vulnerable to their teachers, and to believe in the inherent virtue of their student-teacher relationships. Taken together, the larger the scope of affect-based trust is, the higher the satisfaction in international students' communication might be.

Due to the theoretical construct and relational content, we predict cognition-based trust may not be a mechanism as an alternative in the association between intercultural sensitivity and communication satisfaction. Whereas affect-based trust stems from socio-emotional attachments, cognition-based trust stems from rational judgments of individual's characters (McAllister, 1995; Zhu & Akhtar, 2014). Based on the research of Chua and his colleagues (2008), cognition-based trust, which reflects confidence in others' competence, is not a necessary consequence of the development of emotional attachment. In addition, cognition-based trust refers to individual's calculative and instrumental

assessment (McAllister, 1995), which might be less enduring and essential in communication satisfaction. Drawing on these evidences, we propose the hypothesis as follows:

H2: The relationship between international students' intercultural sensitivity and their communication satisfaction is mediated by students' affect-based trust.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 323 full-time international students who study Chinese language and culture from three universities in Shanghai participated in this study. The sample consisted of 141 (43.6%) males and 182 (56.4%) females. Students from Asian countries shared 45.2% of the sample, 32.1% were from European and American, the remaining 22.7% came from other countries all over the world. The participants were between 20 and 58 years old ( $M=28.9$ ,  $SD=5.9$ ).

### *Instrumentation*

*Intercultural Sensitivity.* Participants measured their own intercultural sensitivity using items from Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) developed by Chen and Starosta (2000). The measurement contains five factors: interaction engagement, respect of cultural differences, interaction confidences, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Items include "I am open-minded to people from different cultures" and "I am very observant when interacting with people from different cultures". Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). There were 24 items and the Cronbach's alpha for this study was .92.

*Student's Cognition- and Affect- based Trust.* Student's trust in teacher scale (Lee & Han, 2004) was used to measure student' cognition- and affect-based trust in this study. Cognition-based trust has three factors including ability, reliability, and integrity. 15 items were used to measure cognition-based trust and the Cronbach's alpha for this study was .92. As an example, one item was "I trust my teacher's ability". Affect-based trust also has three categories: openness, intimacy, and caring. It included 15 items and the Cronbach's alpha of affect-based trust in this study was .91. One sample item was "My teacher is friendly

to me”. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Student Communication Satisfaction.* Student communication satisfaction was measured using items from Goodboy et al.’s (2009). As an example, one item is “My communication with my teacher feels satisfying”. International students responded to a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The measurement included 8 items and the Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .91.

#### *Procedures*

In this study, international students responded to survey questions in English version on intercultural sensitivity, cognition-based trust, affect-based trust, and student communication satisfaction. Prior to the investigation, the researcher approached the course instructors about recruiting students to complete the survey. After the recruitment, separated questionnaires, with a cover letter that guaranteed confidentiality, were distributed to each participant during regular class sessions. The participants were told the purpose of this study and all of their answers would be confidential. There was no extra credit involved, and the participation was voluntary. In addition, participants were also informed that there were no correct or incorrect responses. At the end of the survey, all questionnaires were collected and put back in the sealed envelope.

#### *Data analysis*

Two models based on the theoretical studies in this research were compared to test our hypotheses. Model 1 includes the latent factors of students’ intercultural sensitivity, cognition-based trust, and student communication satisfaction, whereas Model 2 includes the latent factors of students’ intercultural sensitivity, affect-based trust, and student communication satisfaction.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) approach using AMOS 17.0 was adopted in this study. In contrast with other approaches to assess a mediation model (*e.g.* Baron and Kenny, 1986), SEM is more suitable because (1) intercultural sensitivity, cognition-based trust, affect-based trust, and student communication satisfaction in this study are best represented by the latent variables, and latency is appropriately assessed by SEM; and (2) Type-I errors and statistical power could be better balanced by a simultaneous test of the significance of both the path from the independent latent variable to the mediating latent variable and the path from the mediating latent variable to the

dependent latent variable (Mackinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002).

Given the two-step modelling procedure (Kline, 2011), we firstly conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to assess construct and validity of the measurement model. After the assessment of the measurement model, the full structural equation model including the measurement model and the structural model were analyzed as a second step.

For measurement model and hypothesized structural model, the items in intercultural sensitivity, cognition-based trust and affect-based trust were parceled in order to specify a more parsimonious model (Kline, 2011; Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002). The items for intercultural sensitivity were classified into five parcels, based on the domain representative approach. The items for student's cognition-based trust and affect-based trust were parceled into three categories, respectively. The 8 items for student communication satisfaction were remained.

## **Results**

The means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations in this study are presented in Table 1.

### *Measurement Models*

The overall measurement model of Model 1 with the three latent variables, 16 indicators, and all possible correlations among the constructs were estimated. According to Kline (2005), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) values greater than 0.90, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) less than 0.08 and  $\chi^2/df$  less than 3 are considered as indicating reasonable fit for a model. The results of Model 1 demonstrated the following fit indices:  $\chi^2(101)=255.231$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\chi^2/df=2.527$ ; CFI=.944; TLI=.933; RMSEA=.069. Although the p-value of chi-square was less than .05, given the large sample size, the model was still acceptable based on the alternative fit indices of CFI, TLI and RMSEA value (Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008). Therefore, the measurement model of Model 1 was well fit. The standardized factor loadings of measurement model of Model 1 ranged from .67 to .86 (Figure 1). The absolute values of the inter-factor correlations ranged from .12 to .44 (Figure 1).



Table 1 Pearson Correlations and Descriptive Statistics for Indicators

Latent variable and indicators	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
<b>IS</b>																			
1. parcel 1																			
2. parcel 2	.611**																		
3. parcel 3	.553**	.566**																	
4. parcel 4	.584**	.491**	.538**																
5. parcel 5	.534**	.492**	.527**	.503**															
<b>CT</b>																			
6. parcel 1	.108	-.001	.152**	.059	.047														
7. parcel 2	.102	.062	.090	.153**	.039	.707**													
8. parcel 3	.046	-.035	.106	.031	.036	.642**	.608**												
<b>AT</b>																			
9. parcel 1	.173**	.194**	.260**	.217**	.239**	.478**	.444**	.352**											
10. parcel 2	.260**	.233**	.285**	.223**	.278**	.454**	.467**	.345**	.691**										
11. parcel 3	.151**	.233**	.282**	.257**	.207**	.396**	.347**	.259**	.636**	.645**									
<b>SCS</b>																			
12.SCS_item 1	.247**	.270**	.305**	.270**	.311**	.249**	.216**	.193**	.407**	.377**	.383**								
13.SCS_item 2	.285**	.253**	.263**	.265**	.317**	.231**	.261**	.347**	.383**	.377**	.249**	.534**							
14.SCS_item 3	.157**	.169**	.231**	.165**	.204**	.299**	.350**	.382**	.389**	.347**	.242**	.568**	.675**						
15.SCS_item 4	.189**	.217**	.265**	.207**	.200**	.260**	.245**	.128*	.365**	.345**	.355**	.578**	.374**	.395**					
16.SCS_item 5	.196**	.227**	.320**	.221**	.266**	.299**	.215**	.212**	.416**	.398**	.384**	.665**	.487**	.508**	.589**				
17.SCS_item 6	.213**	.241**	.271**	.204**	.240**	.227**	.152**	.174**	.347**	.338**	.320**	.616**	.499**	.525**	.537**	.616**			
18.SCS_item 7	.288**	.221**	.321**	.203**	.298**	.233**	.285**	.218**	.399**	.400**	.330**	.638**	.509**	.572**	.574**	.603**	.636**		
19.SCS_item 8	.231**	.279**	.312**	.245**	.248**	.306**	.301**	.214**	.402**	.448**	.389**	.676**	.542**	.606**	.591**	.687**	.639**	.652**	
Mean	3.56	3.34	3.42	3.38	3.52	3.86	3.95	3.66	3.87	3.92	3.86	5.30	5.34	4.99	4.99	5.38	5.35	5.14	
SD	0.58	0.59	0.69	0.64	0.61	0.63	0.59	0.73	0.61	0.60	0.60	1.31	1.52	1.46	1.24	1.28	1.21	1.36	1.25

Note: IS = Intercultural Sensitivity; CT = Cognition-based trust; AT=Affect-based trust; SCS=Student Communication Satisfaction. \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001.

The overall measurement model of Model 2 with the three latent variables, 16 indicators, and all possible correlations among the constructs also appeared good model fit:  $\chi^2(101)=189.403$ ,  $p<.001$ ;  $\chi^2/df=1.875$ ; CFI=.968; TLI=.962; RMSEA=.052. The standardized Factor loadings ranged from .67 to .84 (Figure 2). The absolute values of the inter-factor correlations

ranged from .38 to .60 (Figure 2).

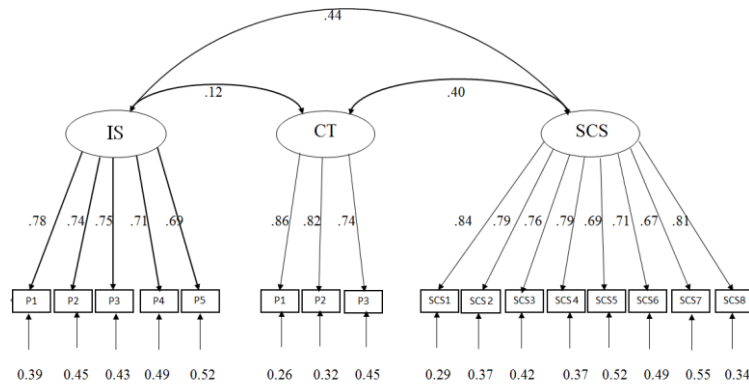


Figure 1. Measurement Model for CT as a mediator  
 Note: IS = Intercultural Sensitivity; CT= Cognition-based trust; SCS=Student Communication Satisfaction. All parameters are standardized and significant at  $p < .01$ , except for the non-significant correlation between IS and CT.

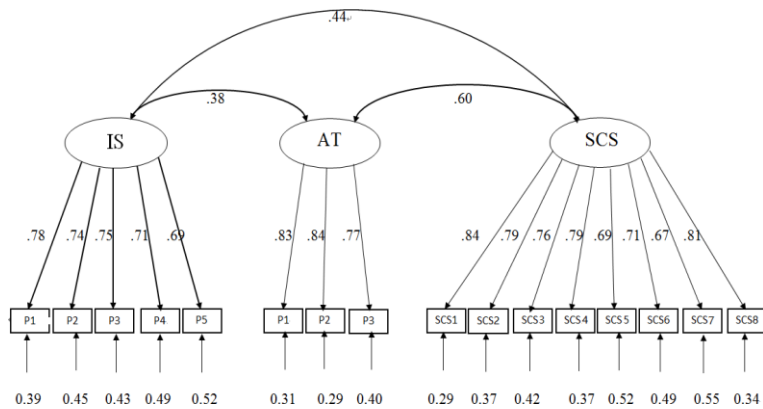


Figure 2. Measurement Model for AT as a mediator  
 Note: IS = Intercultural Sensitivity; AT=Affect-based trust; SCS=Student Communication Satisfaction. All parameters are standardized and significant at  $p < .01$ .

### Structural Models

The result supports Hypothesis 1 that the level of international students' intercultural sensitivity positively predicts their communication satisfaction with Chinese teachers. The indices showed a good fit:  $\chi^2(64)=143.447$ ,  $p < .001$ ;

$\chi^2/df=2.241$ ; CFI=.964; TLI=.956; RMSEA=.062. The coefficient of the path from intercultural sensitivity to student communication satisfaction was significant ( $\beta=.44$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

In Figure 3, the coefficient of the path from intercultural sensitivity to cognition-based trust was not significant ( $\beta=.12$ ,  $p>.05$ ); and the coefficient of the path from cognition-based trust to student communication satisfaction was significant ( $\beta=.35$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Bootstrapping mediation analyses (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) using 2000 bootstrapped samples with 95% confidence interval (CI) showed that the indirect effect through cognition-based trust as mediator was not significant (95% CI=-.064 to .380). Therefore, the mediation effect of cognition-based trust in Model 1 was ruled out.

In Figure 4, the coefficient of the path from intercultural sensitivity to affect-based trust was significant ( $\beta=.38$ ,  $p<.001$ ); and the coefficient of the path from affect-based trust to student communication satisfaction was significant ( $\beta=.50$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Bootstrapping mediation analyses using 2000 bootstrapped samples with 95% confidence interval (CI) showed that the indirect effect through affect-based trust as mediator was significant (95% CI=.156 to .950). Therefore, the mediation effect of affect-based trust of Model 2 supports Hypothesis 2. In addition, when affected-based trust was added into the analyses, the effect of intercultural sensitivity on student communication satisfaction remains significant ( $\beta=0.24$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The results showed that affect-based trust partially mediates the relation between intercultural sensitivity and student communication satisfaction.

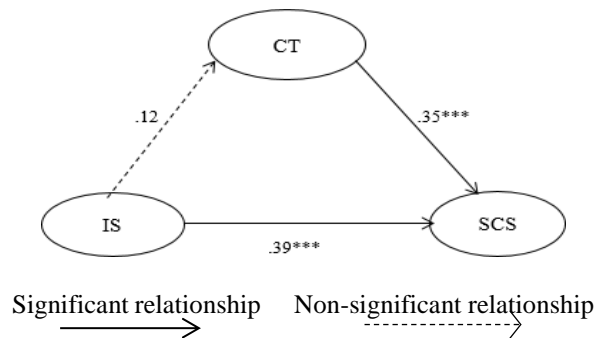


Figure 3. Structural Model for CT as a mediator

Note: IS = Intercultural Sensitivity; CT = Cognition-based trust; SCS = Student Communication;  
 $*p<.05$ ,  $**p<.01$ ,  $***p<.001$ .

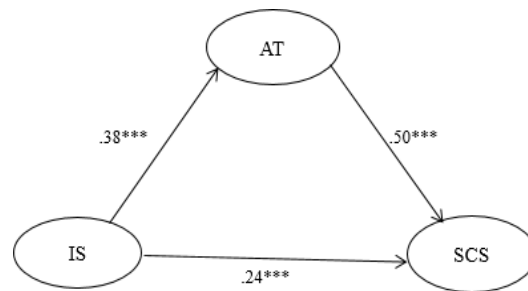


Figure 4. Structural Model for AT as a mediator

Note: IS = Intercultural Sensitivity; AT= Affect-based trust; SCS=Student Communication;  
\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

### Conclusions

The aim of this study was to understand the underlying psychological mechanism between intercultural sensitivity and communication satisfaction. The mediation model shows that international students with intercultural sensitivity are likely to develop affect-based trust rather than cognition-based trust in their intercultural interactions with teachers, enabling their communication satisfaction. The implications of these findings are discussed below.

First, this research bridges the gap between student-teacher trust relationship and student communication satisfaction. Over the past decades, voluminous researches on the students' trust have been conducted (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Williams & Baber 2007), documenting the significant and imperative effect of student-teacher trust relationship on student academic performance and success. For instance, investigation by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) reinforced that a student's trust of a teacher is viewed as an essential antecedent in determining the degree to which that student is willing to be taught. Surprisingly, scholars give little attention to the association between students' trust and their communication satisfaction, especially in a multicultural and instructional context. Given international students' satisfaction predicting attrition rates and efficient utilization of education resources in global education (Andrade, 2006), it is salient for researchers to explore barriers in international student communication satisfaction. Our research intends to make an initial effort in this direction and the data in this study supports our hypothesis that affect-

based trust was significantly related to international students' communication satisfaction.

Second, the present study presents evidence that intercultural sensitivity, as the affective aspect of ICC, is positively related to affect-based trust not cognition-based trust. A possible explanation for this result is that affect-based trust arises out of relationship-based process, whereas cognition-based trust relates to the character-based perspective or objective indicators, such as competence and integrity (Zhu & Akhtar, 2014). Our findings reasoned that international students with low intercultural sensitivity might have as much as cognition-based trust as other students with high intercultural sensitivity, but their affect-based trust is insufficient in their intercultural ties (Chua et al., 2012). On the other hand, international students who have high level of intercultural sensitivity are much likely to avoid stereotype attitudes toward Chinese teachers and establish positive student-teacher relationships by taking account of cultural distinction (Yang, Dunleavy, & Phillips, 2016; Arasaratnam, 2006). Such intimate and close experiences with teachers are the seedbed of affect-based trust of international students. Taking together, our study extends a growing body of research on intercultural sensitivity, and reinforces the belief that each dimension of ICC represents specific effects.

Thirdly, this study unpacks the trust apparatus by measuring both cognition-based trust and affect-based trust and test their mediating impacts in intercultural communication. Our findings are consistent with previous studies in management and organization behavior field in which cognition-based trust and affect-based trust are not only two distinguishable psychological processes, but also indicate two distinct functions (McAllister, 1995; Ng & Chua, 2006). The results in this study demonstrate that affective trust rather than cognitive trust is a mediator through which intercultural sensitivity influence international students' communication satisfaction. Our study contributes to existing research on student-teacher trust relationship by providing an insightful and informative angle for researchers to appreciate the impact of each type of trust in the context of multicultural education.

Like all empirical research, this study has some limitations and suggestions for future investigation. First, the study sample was limited to international students in China. Because the findings in this study might not be generalizable, future investigation should be conducted to test the hypothesis of this research to other cultural context such as developed countries. Second, the

structural model was analyzed without control variables in this study. Future investigation should perhaps incorporate control variables to check model fit analysis of this research. Finally, this study only focused on one outcome-student communication satisfaction. Future research should extend the present research on student behavior, such as the differences of conversations between students with a high-level intercultural sensitivity and students with low level intercultural sensitivity that they might conduct.

Despite the limitations of this study, it is hoped that the findings will help universities adopt effective approaches to improve communication satisfaction for international students. To our best knowledge, the research that examines the relationships among intercultural sensitivity, student's trust, and communication satisfaction is rare. This study may make an initial step in this area.

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