

THE IMPACT OF PERCEIVED DISCIPLINARY MANAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC STRESS AMONG CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the relationship between academic stress and perceptions of discipline management, with the goal of determining whether the perceived school climate mediates this relationship. A questionnaire survey was conducted with 630 Chinese university students in Bangkok, Thailand, and the data were analyzed using a structural equation model. The findings indicate that among Chinese students in Thailand, perceptions of discipline management have a strong negative direct effect on academic stress, as well as an indirect effect through positively influencing perceptions of the school climate. Perceived school climate significantly mediates the link between perceived discipline management and academic stress. This study provides valuable empirical and practical insights to Thai higher education institutions, particularly regarding the enhancement of international student management policies and campus support systems, to improve the quality of cross-cultural education.

Keywords: Academic stress, discipline management, perceived school climate, Chinese international students

INTRODUCTION

Over the past couple of years, the Chinese students studying in other countries have increased significantly. The number of Chinese students studying abroad has exceeded 1.2 million globally according to the UNESCO statistics and their share in the total international students of the world is still increasing (UNESCO, 2023; Zhu & Jiang, 2025). Although Chinese international students have traditionally chosen English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom as their primary study destinations, the globalization of the education market and the improvement in the quality of regional higher education have led an increasing number of them to select Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, as their preferred destination. (Pongsin et al., 2023; Zhu & Jiang, 2025). This change does not only show the great appreciation Chinese families have towards international higher education but also emphasizes the increased interest in the aspects of geographical proximity, cultural affinity, and cost of living when choosing a host country (Bear et al., 2015). Being the close neighbor of China, Thailand has enhanced the quality of higher education in the country substantially and has also low living costs and that is why it is becoming an attractive destination to Chinese students (Pongsin et al., 2023).

Chiu et al. (2016) pointed out that academic stress is among the main problems of international students. Cohen et al. (2009) define academic stress as the tension and pressure that students undergo in the course of study due to all sorts of internal and external factors. The pressure faced by international students in Thailand may stem from busy academic schedules, language issues, cultural adaptation challenges, and family needs (Gregory et al., 2010; Jampaklay et al., 2022). Academic stress does not only affect the academic performance of international students but also can cause negative effects on the mental health of international students resulting in such conditions like anxiety and depression (Gregory et al., 2011). This study aims to analyze the academic stress experienced by Chinese students in Thailand and to identify effective strategies to improve their study abroad experience, thereby offering valuable recommendations to both students and local universities.

Effective discipline management can significantly reduce students' academic stress and improve their academic performance and mental health (Heng, 2016). According to Olasunkanmi et al. (2024) discipline management refers to the process by which educational administrators guide and constrain students' behavior in an educational environment by formulating, implementing, and monitoring a series of behavioral norms and management measures in order to maintain good learning order. Good school discipline can create a positive and harmonious learning environment, promoting students' personal and academic development (Rahmawati & Utomo, 2024). However, lax school discipline, lax management, and a lack of consistency in student norms can cause confusion and stress for international students (Olasunkanmi et al., 2024). Therefore, it is of great reference value to improve the quality of

education and alleviate students' academic stress. It is necessary to explore the relationship between discipline management and academic stress.

As Liu et al. (2024) concluded, exposure to diverse cultures and the perception of school climate is especially relevant to the international students. Misra and Castillo (2004) highlighted that transitioning to a new cultural environment is a very critical and complicated process to the students. When referring to Thailand, the school climate involves not only academic demands and teaching methods but also communication with peers, educators, and school leaders (Qi et al., 2020). Positive school climate can help students to adjust to the new setting, minimize culture shock, and help to grow academically and personally (Rhein & Jones, 2020). Conversely, a poor school climate or a bad school climate can increase the academic and psychological stress of the students and eventually affect the learning performance and the quality of life (Izaguirre et al., 2023).

Lertpusit et al. (2025) noted that despite the continuous increase in the number of Chinese students studying in Thailand over the past several years, little is known about their attitudes toward the school climate. The cultural, linguistic, and learning environment factors affecting this group have not been thoroughly explored. Previous research has primarily focused on the adaptation and academic stress of international students in general; however, the perceptions and coping strategies of Chinese international students in Thailand have not yet been comprehensively examined (Jampaklay et al., 2022). Therefore, this study aims to examine the relationship between perceived disciplinary management and academic stress among Chinese international students in Thailand, with perceived school climate serving as a mediating variable. The findings are expected to provide an empirical basis for reducing academic stress, enhancing the learning experiences of Chinese international students, and informing the formulation and implementation of educational policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) explains how individuals learn through observation, imitation, and self-regulation. According to Bandura (1997) human behavior results from the dynamic interaction between personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioral patterns. This triadic reciprocal causation suggests that individuals' actions and learning outcomes are shaped by the continuous interplay of cognitive processes, contextual conditions, and observable behaviors. SCT emphasizes that learning occurs not only through direct experience but also by observing and modeling others' actions and their consequences. Within this framework, discipline management represents a key component of the institutional environment that directly influences students' behavior and indirectly affects their psychological well-being by shaping their cognitive perceptions of the school environment (Raju, 2024). A well-designed and reasonable disciplinary management system fosters a positive school climate, which can help alleviate students' academic anxiety (Warsi et al., 2025). In cross-cultural educational contexts, international students often experience heightened academic stress due to factors such as cultural differences, language barriers, and adjustment challenges (Mulyadi et al., 2024). However, when these students encounter fair, transparent, and consistent discipline, they are more likely to adapt successfully to their new environment, enhance their sense of belonging, and improve self-efficacy (Sökmen, 2019). Therefore, it is of significant theoretical and practical importance to examine how discipline management influences academic stress, incorporating perceived school climate as a mediating factor within the framework of Social Cognitive Theory.

According to Social Cognitive Theory, individuals' perceptions of their surroundings strongly influence their emotions and behavioral choices (Bandura, 1997). The development of school climate is inherently linked to the institution's disciplinary management system, as the perceived fairness, consistency, and justice of disciplinary practices directly shape students' attitudes toward the overall school environment (Wang et al., 2023). Anchored in Social Cognitive Theory, this study develops a coherent framework to investigate the interconnections between discipline management, perceived school climate, and academic stress among Chinese students studying in Thailand. By integrating environmental and cognitive dimensions, it seeks to elucidate the mechanisms through which these factors jointly shape international students' learning experiences and academic outcomes. The study aims to advance theoretical understanding while providing empirical evidence to inform educational practices in cross-cultural settings.

2.2 Discipline Management and Academic Stress

Discipline management in Thai higher education institutions is deeply influenced by traditional culture and religious values, particularly evident in classroom conduct and daily campus behavior norms. The authority of teachers within the campus aligns closely with the hierarchical principles emphasized by the Buddhist system (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000). Respect and fairness are created among the international students when the disciplinary action is transparently and equally applied which leads to a better understanding and acceptance of school rules and regulations (Thapa et al., 2013). This type of environment does not only assist in reducing the academic stress on international students, but also helps in achieving better academic performance and well-being in general (Gregory et al., 2010). On the other hand, the absence of transparency or perceived inequity in the way discipline is handled may further add

to stress, anxiety and in particular, international students with diverse cultures, may feel discriminated or judged negatively (Skiba et al., 2011).

Gregory et al. (2010) argue that school discipline policies and practices play a major role in ensuring that students experience academic stress and academic success. More specifically, academic stress can significantly be minimized and academic performance enhanced with use of positive discipline techniques like rewards and praises (Gregory et al., 2010). On the other hand, Skiba et al. (2002) discovered that zero-tolerance policies are likely to raise the stress and anxiousness level among students since they are rigid and insensitive and therefore students may feel disenfranchised and unjustly treated. Hence, it can be inferred that the reasonableness and strictness of discipline management of a school is critical in determining the academic stress of a student particularly the Chinese international student who is under tremendous competitive pressures. It is on this basis that we are going to make the following assumption.

H1: Perception of discipline management has a significant negative impact on the academic stress of Chinese international students in Thailand.

2.3 Perception of Discipline Management and School Climate

Chinese students studying in Thailand may feel isolated due to cultural differences and language barriers, but a friendly and supportive atmosphere can effectively alleviate this negative experience (Zhu & Jiang, 2025). Ijaz et al. (2024) stressed the fact that discipline management is a crucial aspect of school management and that it has an enormous impact on the learning environment as well as on the psychological health of students. The school climate matters a lot to international students when they are adjusting to a new environment (Silas & Mwila, 2024). Studies have indicated that effective discipline encompassing clear, fair and consistent punishment helps create a stable and safe school setting which plays a significant role in reducing the culture adjustment stress that international students go through (Gregory et al., 2010). Discipline management helps in not only preventing cases of misbehavior but also helps in enhancing the adherence of students to the rules and regulations of the school thus making them have a positive perception on the school climate as a whole (Thapa et al., 2013). The availability of clear disciplinary policies and equal treatment by them can help the international students with the different cultural backgrounds to adapt faster to the new environment and develop the positive attitude toward the school climate.

School climate has been the subject of many studies on the effect of discipline management. According to Skiba et al. (2011) positive discipline management strategies have the potential to improve the feeling of belonging and safety of the students in the school which would lead to the improvement of the school climate overall. Such approaches bring about peaceful settings by stimulating positive behavior using positive reinforcement and minimizing unwarranted punitive actions. Likewise, Krskova et al. (2020) determined that respectful and supportive disciplinary practices have a stronger positive impact on how students perceive the school climate rather than punitive methods. By educating about the social and emotional needs of students, schools will be able to foster a more positive and inclusive environment, which is especially crucial to international students who are in need of such support during their study and living in a new land (Bear et al., 2015). A review of existing literature indicates a significant positive association between students' perceptions of school discipline management and the overall school climate. This suggests that fair, consistent, and constructive discipline policies play a crucial role in fostering students' positive attitudes toward the school environment. Consequently, a hypothesis is stated below:

H2: Perception of discipline management has a significant positive impact on the perception of school climate among Chinese international students in Thailand.

2.4 Correlation between Perceived School Climate and Academic Stress

According to Wang and Degol (2016) school climate is one of the major determinants of academic stress among students as it is the social, academic, and physical setting of a school. It has been found that, when school climate is positive, it may alleviate academic stress but when it is negative, it can increase it (Kwong & Davis, 2015). Positive aspects of school climate, including teacher support, positive peer interactions, and effective discipline management can make students feel safe and accepted, which relieves school-related stress (Wang & Degol, 2016). On the other hand, academic stress may rise substantially in case students think that the school environment is tense, too competitive, or not supportive (Putwain, 2007). School climate does not only affect the emotion and behaviors of students, but indirectly controls the academic stresses by influencing cognition and academic motivation (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). Thus, the school climate and the ways of improving it are vital to reduce the academic stress of students. Chinese students studying abroad in Thailand are far away from the support of their families and friends, and need to rebuild social relationships in a foreign land, but language and cultural barriers make this process challenging (Chaiyasat, 2020). Loukas and Murphy (2007) established that the positive attitude of students to school climate has a positive correlation with academic performance and psychological well-being and a negative correlation with academic stress. The following factors were found as important predictors of the academic stress in students: teacher support and care, the quality of the relationships with peers, and general school environment (Loukas & Murphy, 2007). This view is supported by Wang and Holcombe (2010) who stated that self-efficacy and academic motivation of students can be improved by good school climate thus curbing academic stress. Conversely, adverse school climate

such as teacher insensitivity or overly severe actions of punishment may increase the level of stress and anxiety among students (Konishi et al., 2010). These studies taken together show that school climate is the key factor that determines the level of academic stress of students, as it can have both direct impact on emotional health and indirect impact via behavior and cognition. Based on this, this research assumes that the perception of the school climate will have a significant impact on academic stress. Thus, the hypothesis is put forward as follows:

H3: The school climate perceived by Chinese international students in Thailand has a significant negative impact on their academic stress.

2.5 The relationship between perceived school climate, perceived discipline management, and academic stress

It has been observed that effective management of discipline not only contributes positively to developing positive student perception of the school climate, but also has an immense benefit of reducing academic stress by students (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). A favorable school environment reduces anxiety and stress thus decreasing the overall stress levels in academics (Thapa et al., 2013). In its turn, a lack of disciplinary regulation may make students not only feel disorganized and unsafe but also experience adverse effects on mental health, as the lack of effective discipline management may affect students with academic stress and other issues (Njoroge & Nyabuto, 2014).

Research surveys among the middle school students have proved that the use of positive discipline management techniques tends to create a more pleasant attitude to the school environment, which further assists in decreasing academic stress (Wang & Holcombe, 2010). To illustrate, fair practices on the part of teachers and open disciplinary policies may provide students with the sense of stability and predictability, decreasing the anxiety level concerning the academic requirements. In a similar way, Gregory et al. (2010) claim that the schools are supposed to utilize constructive and supportive type of discipline, like the positive reinforcement and communication skills training, in order to reinforce the sense of belonging and self-efficacy in students. These practices will not only change the climate of the school but also enhance academic performance since stress will reduce.

It is assumed in this study based on the above research that perceptions of discipline management by Chinese students in Thailand will mediate their academic stress in Thailand through mediating role of their perception of school climate. Thus, the following hypothesis will be put forward:

H4: Perceived school climate plays a mediating role in the relationship between perceived discipline management and academic stress among Chinese students in Thailand

METHODS

3.1 Research Framework

This research is based on Social Cognitive Theory, the independent variable in the study will be perceived discipline management, the dependent variable will be academic stress, and the mediating variable will be perceived school climate.

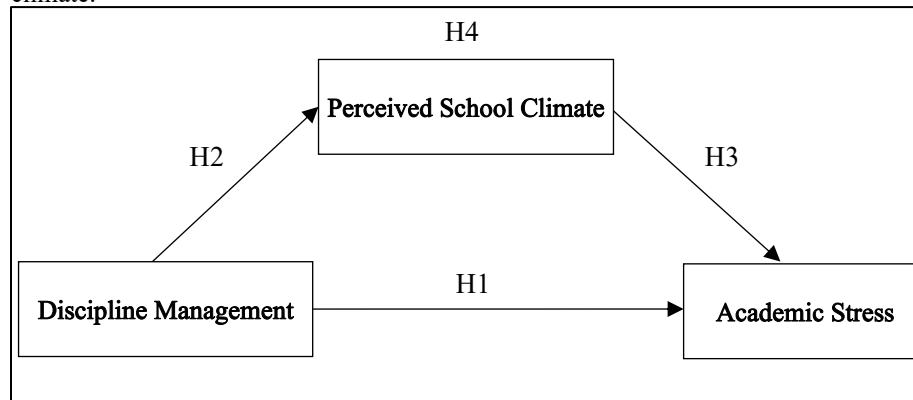


Figure 1: Research Framework.

The proposed framework illustrates how environmental factors (discipline management) influence students' cognitive perceptions (school climate), which in turn affect their emotional and behavioral outcomes (academic stress). In other words, students' perceptions of disciplinary management shape how they interpret the school environment, thereby influencing their experience of academic stress. The conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 1.

3.2 Research participants

The research employs a questionnaire survey and students in Bangkok, Thailand taking degrees in China are the subjects of the study; the subjects in the study are undergraduates, postgraduates and doctoral students. These are students who study and their native language is Chinese. In the research, stratified random sampling is employed. This research will have two stages, which are pre-test questionnaire distribution and formal questionnaire distribution. This research used pre-test questionnaires that were distributed between January and February 2025. 220 pre-test

questionnaires were distributed out of which 207 were valid leading to a validity rate of the questionnaires of 94.1 %. In this research, we issued formal questionnaires between April and May 2025. There was a total of 750 questionnaires distributed, 630 of which proved valid and the questionnaire validity rate is 84%.

3.3 Research instruments

(1) Discipline Management Perception Scale

This study adapted the Discipline Management Structure Scale (Konold et al., 2021) and the School Discipline Scale (Liu, 2023) to develop the first draft of the Discipline Management Perception Questionnaire, based on the characteristics of discipline management in Thai higher education institutions. The scale was restructured, and several items were removed, resulting in 10 items across two dimensions. Based on the validity assessment conducted by seven experts, the questionnaire was finalized as the pre-test version. Item analysis, exploratory factor analysis, and reliability analysis were then performed. After removing low-performing items, the formal scale was developed. The final scale comprised two dimensions—strictness and fairness—each containing five items. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale. The pre-test results indicated that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the total scale was .847, with values of .878 for the strictness dimension and .771 for the fairness dimension. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value was .889, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < .001$). Factor loadings ranged from .752 to .894, each dimension had an eigenvalue greater than 1, and the total variance explained after rotation was 62.01%.

(2) Academic Stress Scale

The Perception of Academic Stress (PAS) scale created by Bedewy and Gabriel (2015) was used to measure the academic stress. It has 18 items that can be grouped into three dimensions: academic expectations, workload and exams and academic self-perception stress. A 5-point Likert scale is taken in the questionnaire. The pre-test analysis findings are as follows: the Cronbach Alpha coefficient of overall Academic Stress Scale was .827, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient of Academic Expectations dimension was .837, Homework and Exams dimension was .726 and Academic Self Perception dimension was .758. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy (KMO) was calculated on the data set and the value turned out to be .873, whereas Bartlett test of sphericity was significant, therefore validating further inquiries. The factor loadings varied between .678 and .869 and the eigenvalue of all the dimensions were above 1.0 and the cumulative explained variance was 52.84%.

(3) Perceived School Climate Scale

Jia et al. (2009) developed the Perceived School Climate Scale (PSCS) consisting of three empirically constructed dimensions such as teacher support, peer support, and autonomy opportunities. It has 25 items, 7 items on teacher support, 13 items on peer support and 5 items on opportunities to be autonomous. The PSCS is a 5-point Likert scale where high scores are related to the positive climate perceived school. The outcomes of the pre-test analysis are as follows: Cronbach alpha value of an overall perceived school climate scale was .864, Cronbach alpha value of the dimension of teacher support was 0.898, Cronbach alpha value of the dimension of peer support was .786 and Cronbach alpha value of the dimension of autonomy opportunity was .873. KMO value was .898 and Bartlett sphericity test was significant. The values of the factor loading of the scale of perceived school climate were between .702 and .904, and the eigenvalues of every dimension were more than 1. There was a total percentage variance explained of 53.02% after rotation.

RESULTS

4.1. Descriptive statistics of the sample

The sample included 328 males (52.1%) and 302 females (47.9%). Regarding education level, there were 144 doctoral students, 152 master's students, and 334 undergraduates, with undergraduates comprising 53% of the sample. In terms of study duration in Thailand, 134 participants had studied for less than 1 year, 103 for 1–2 years, 253 for 2–3 years, and 140 for more than 3 years, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Statistics of sample distribution.

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	328	52.063
	Female	302	47.937
Duration of Study	Less than one year	134	21.270
	One to less than two years	103	16.349

	Two to less than three years	253	40.159
	Three years or more	140	22.222
Degree Level	Undergraduate	334	53.016
	Master	152	24.127
	Doctorate	144	22.857

4.2 Common method bias test

The study employed a questionnaire-based survey, and all data were collected through self-administered questionnaires. To minimize common method bias, anonymity and confidentiality were emphasized, and participants were informed that the data would be used solely for academic purposes (Polas, 2025). This approach helped reduce participants' apprehension and enhance data authenticity. A Harman's single-factor test was conducted using SPSS to assess common method bias. An exploratory factor analysis including perceptions of discipline management, academic stress, and perceived school climate revealed six factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. The first factor accounted for 44.78% of the total variance, which is below the 50% threshold, indicating that common method bias was not a significant concern in this study.

4.3 Descriptive Analysis and Correlation Analysis

The three scales used in this study all adopted the Likert five-point scale, with a median value of 3. The mean value of the disciplinary management perception scale was 3.423 (SD=±0.969), indicating that the degree of disciplinary management perception was at an upper-middle level. The average value of the academic stress scale was 2.992 (SD=±1.009), indicating that the academic stress level of Chinese students in Thailand is moderate. The average value of the perceived school climate scale was 3.111 (SD=±0.964), indicating that the perceived school climate is at a medium level.

A negative relationship between perceptions of disciplinary management and academic stress were significant ($r = -.738$, $p < .001$), and the positive relationship between perceptions of disciplinary management and perceived school climate were significant ($r = .475$, $p < .001$). Also, the academic stress had a significant negative correlation with perceptions of school climate ($r = -.670$, $p < .001$). Correlation coefficients of 0.475-0.738 demonstrate that the strength of association is low to moderate and issues of collinearity do not exist. As shown in Table 2.

Table2. Descriptive analysis and correlation analysis

Variables	Mean	SD	DMP	AS	PSC
DMP	3.423	0.969	1		
AS	2.992	1.009	-.738***	1	
PSC	3.111	0.964	.475***	-.670***	1

Note: * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Note: DMP stands for perceived discipline management, AS stands for academic stress, and PSC stands for perceived school climate.

4.4 Structural Equation Model

AMOS was used to construct a structural equation model (SEM) to examine the relationships among perceived discipline management, perceived school climate, and academic stress. All dimensions of the model were tested. To evaluate the fit of the mediation model, multiple goodness-of-fit indices were applied, and the results indicated that the model demonstrated a satisfactory fit to the data.

The ratio of chi-square to degrees of freedom (χ^2/df) was 2.010, which is well below the recommended threshold of 3.000, indicating that the difference between the model and the observed data was not significant. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was .040, which is substantially lower than the cutoff value of .100, suggesting good approximate fit. The comparative fit index (CFI) was .961, exceeding the recommended value of .900, showing that the model fit improved substantially compared with baseline models. In addition, other goodness-of-fit indices also met acceptable or optimal criteria (GFI = .881, AGFI = .868, NFI = .926, RFI = .921, IFI = .961, TLI = .959, PNFI = .875, PGFI = .694). Overall, these indices indicate that the proposed theoretical model in this study demonstrates strong structural validity and an adequate overall model fit.

Table 3. Path analysis table

Path	β	S.E.	C.R.	Hypothesis
DMP \rightarrow AS	-.739***	.058	-12.728	H1
DMP \rightarrow PSC	.439***	.046	9.569	H2
PSC \rightarrow AS	-.357***	.037	-9.561	H3

Note 1: Data compiled from this study. *** $p < .001$.

Note 2: β : Beta (Regression coefficient); S.E.: Standard error; C.R.: Critical ratio

The results of the path analysis as illustrated in Table 3 indicate that hypothesis H1 was supported and perceived disciplinary management significantly negatively affected academic stress ($\beta = -.739$, $p < 0.001$). In addition, the perceived disciplinary management has a high positive impact on the perceived school climate ($\beta = .439$, $p < 0.001$) and perceived school climate has a high negative influence over academic stress among the Chinese students in Thailand ($\beta = -.357$, $p < 0.001$). These findings also confirm Hypotheses H2 and H3.

Using structural equation modeling, the bootstrap procedure in AMOS 24 was employed to assess the significance of the mediation effect. There is a total of 2,000 Bootstrap samples taken randomly according to the original data, and the path coefficients of each path were recorded after 2,000 iterations. Mediation effect was estimated by determining the average path coefficient of the non-parametric percentile Bootstrap. The outcome showed that the 95 per cent confidence interval of the mediation effect between the perception of discipline management and academic stress was [0.192, - 0.122], which did not contain 0 thus the mediation effect is significant. Hence, perception of discipline management has a direct impact on academic stress and school climate is a mediator of the relationship between perception of discipline management and academic stress. In short, Hypothesis H4 is confirmed.

Table 4. Mediation effect test table

Path	Value	95% CI	
		Upper limit	Lower limit
Direct effect	-.724	-.794	-.647
Indirect effect	-.153	-.192	-.122
Total effect	-.878	-.934	-.821

DISCUSSION

This study examined the relationship between Chinese international students' perceptions of school discipline management and their academic stress in Thailand. The findings indicated that perceived discipline management had a significant negative effect on academic stress, supporting Hypothesis H1. This result aligns with previous research suggesting that an orderly, safe, and predictable learning environment reduces anxiety and uncertainty arising from environmental instability (Gregory et al., 2010). Chinese students in Thailand often encounter multiple challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and limited social support. Clear and fair discipline management enables them to develop stable expectations and effective coping strategies, thereby alleviating stress associated with environmental adaptation (Wang & Degol, 2016). From a psychological perspective, strict but fair discipline can be interpreted by students as a sign of care and respect from the school, which enhances their sense of belonging and security while buffering academic strain (Bear et al., 2015). This finding also corresponds with social cognitive theory, which emphasizes the role of environmental factors in shaping individuals' cognition and emotions (Bandura, 1986). Consequently, the results highlight the need for educational administrators to establish transparent, fair, and culturally sensitive disciplinary systems. Such systems not only serve as management tools but also function as essential mechanisms for promoting mental health, academic adjustment, and the holistic development of international students. The study also explored the relationship between Chinese students' perceptions of discipline management and their perceived school climate in Thailand. The results revealed that perceived discipline management had a significant positive impact on perceived school climate, confirming Hypothesis H2. This finding is consistent with prior research showing that students' interactions with school systems and their social experiences form the foundation of school

climate perception (Thapa et al., 2013). Fair and transparent disciplinary management provides stability and a sense of security in students' daily experiences, serving as a crucial external factor in shaping a positive school climate. Previous studies indicate that fairness and respect in disciplinary practices are key mechanisms influencing these perceptions (Gregory et al., 2011). When students believe that disciplinary systems are unbiased and applied consistently, they are more likely to develop trust and a sense of belonging to the school community. This process is particularly significant for international students in cross-cultural contexts, as it helps mitigate the psychological impact of cultural differences. In line with social cognitive theory, the disciplinary environment conveys social cues of support and respect, which shape students' cognitive evaluations of their surroundings (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, disciplinary systems in higher education should not be viewed merely as tools for behavioral control but also as critical components in fostering psychological safety and campus cohesion.

This study further examined the relationship between perceived school climate and academic stress among Chinese international students in Thailand. The results demonstrated that perceived school climate negatively predicted academic stress, thereby supporting Hypothesis H3. This finding corresponds with prior research suggesting that school climate, as a broad psychosocial environment encompassing teacher–student relationships, peer interactions, and fairness, is a key determinant of students' academic experiences (Cohen et al., 2009). Given that Chinese students in Thailand often face financial pressures and cultural adaptation challenges, a supportive school climate provides essential psychological safety, which effectively reduces academic stress (Misra & Castillo, 2004). When students experience teacher and peer support within an inclusive environment, they internalize these experiences as psychological safety and belonging. This enables them to approach academic tasks proactively and manage stress more effectively in demanding contexts (Turner & Simmons, 2020). According to social cognitive theory, a supportive school climate functions as an external resource that is cognitively transformed into internal psychological capital, thereby enhancing emotional regulation and coping abilities in the face of academic challenges (Bandura, 1986). Accordingly, higher education institutions should foster healthy school environments by strengthening support systems, improving teacher–student relationships, and promoting cultural inclusion to safeguard international students' mental well-being.

Finally, this study tested the mediating role of perceived school climate in the relationship between perceived discipline management and academic stress. The results confirmed that perceived school climate mediated this relationship, supporting Hypothesis H4. When disciplinary management is fair, transparent, and humane, international students are more likely to perceive the school as a safe and supportive environment. This positive perception serves as a psychological buffer against the multiple stressors associated with cross-cultural adaptation (Bear et al., 2015; Chiu et al., 2016). Strict yet fair disciplinary practices encourage students to view the campus as secure and orderly, thereby enhancing their sense of belonging, safety, and control (Bear et al., 2015). These positive perceptions subsequently transform into psychological resources that alleviate academic stress, particularly in intercultural learning settings (Chiu et al., 2016; Lai et al., 2025). Therefore, the effectiveness of disciplinary management should be assessed not only by behavioral compliance but also by its ability to cultivate students' positive perceptions of the overall school climate.

CONCLUSION

This study, grounded in social cognitive theory, examined the relationships among Chinese international students' perceptions of discipline management, perceived school climate, and academic stress in Thailand. Perceived discipline management served as the independent variable, academic stress as the dependent variable, and perceived school climate as the mediating variable. Data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS. The findings revealed that Chinese students' perceptions of school discipline management had both direct and indirect effects on academic stress. Specifically, fair and clear disciplinary management was associated with lower academic stress and also indirectly reduced stress through its positive influence on perceived school climate. These results confirm that school climate plays a significant mediating role between perceived discipline management and academic stress.

Based on these findings, this study suggests that the design and implementation of disciplinary systems in Thai higher education institutions should consider the cultural backgrounds and adjustment processes of Chinese international students. Rules and constraints should not be overemphasized; instead, discipline should be administered in a respectful, inclusive, and supportive manner. Such an approach can strengthen students' sense of belonging and security, thereby reducing their academic stress. Furthermore, universities are encouraged to promote cultural exchange activities, create platforms for interaction between Chinese and local students, and enhance communication between teachers and students. These initiatives can foster a positive and supportive school climate, helping Chinese international students develop favorable attitudes toward their academic environment and alleviate academic stress.

Limitation and suggestions

This study is primarily based on the information of Chinese students attending some universities in Thailand. The sample is regional in nature and has its own limitations. Thus, the findings of the study might not fully apply to Chinese

students outside of China or who study at other kinds of universities, and the external validity needs to be confirmed. It might be possible in future studies to use a broader range of countries in terms of Chinese students and different kinds of universities, or to compare the results with those of other countries, so as to increase the universality of the results and further analyze cultural adaptability.

The research model did not incorporate individual difference variables such as gender, grade, language proficiency, and cultural adaptability as moderating factors, nor did it control for other potential variables that may influence academic stress. This omission may affect the explanatory power and accuracy of the model. Future research could introduce variables such as cultural adaptability, psychological resilience, and teacher support as moderating or mediating factors, thereby constructing a more complex structural model to comprehensively examine the psychological mechanisms underlying the formation and alleviation of academic stress among international students.

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