

Understanding Engagement in Context: The Role of Cultural Orientation and Trait Emotional Intelligence among Pre-Service Teachers in Kuwait

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Received: 2/7/2025

Revised: 30/8/2025

Accepted: 18/9/2025

Published: 15/3/2026

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Citation: Alardhi, Y. T. (2025). Understanding Engagement in Context: The Role of Cultural Orientation and Trait Emotional Intelligence among Pre-Service Teachers in Kuwait. *Dirasat: Educational Sciences*, 53(1), 12327. <https://doi.org/10.35516/Edu.2025.12327>



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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to explore the relationship between cultural orientations (individualism and collectivism), the trait of emotional intelligence, and active participation among pre-service teachers in Kuwait. It seeks to address the scarcity of previous studies on active participation within collectivist cultural contexts by analyzing the impact of different cultural orientations on students' active engagement in learning environments and examining the mediating role of emotional intelligence in these relationships.

Methods: The study involved 416 pre-service teachers from the College of Education at Kuwait University. A questionnaire was used as the main data collection tool, comprising three validated scales: the Cultural Orientation Scale, the Trait Emotional Intelligence Scale, and the Active Participation Scale. To test the research hypotheses, the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and mediation analysis.

Results: The findings revealed that both individualism and collectivism positively predicted active participation, contradicting traditional assumptions that collectivist values restrict initiative-taking and independent behavior. The results also showed that emotional intelligence partially mediated the relationship between all dimensions of cultural orientation and active participation, highlighting the importance of emotional competencies in navigating cultural expectations.

Conclusion: The results suggest that cultural values do not necessarily hinder active learning behaviors but may shape how they are expressed. The study emphasizes the importance of considering both cultural and emotional contexts when designing educational activities, especially in collectivist settings like Kuwait. It also highlights the value of culturally responsive learning activities and the need for training programs that foster emotional intelligence in teacher preparation programs.

Keywords: Cultural Orientation, Individualism/Collectivism, Agentic Engagement, Emotional Intelligence, Teacher Education

فهم المشاركة في السياق: دور التوجهات الثقافية وسمة الذكاء الانفعالي بين معلمي ما قبل الخدمة في الكويت

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ملخص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف العلاقة بين التوجهات الثقافية (الفردية والجماعية)، وسمة الذكاء العاطفي، والمشاركة الفاعلة لدى معلمي ما قبل الخدمة في الكويت، لمعالجة محدودية الدراسات السابقة التي تناولت المشاركة الفاعلة في السياقات الثقافية الجماعية. من خلال تحليل أثر التوجهات الثقافية المختلفة على مشاركة الطلبة في بيئات التعلم بطريقة فاعلة، ودراسة الدور الوسيط لسمة الذكاء الانفعالي في هذه العلاقات.

المنهجية: شارك في الدراسة 416 من معلمي ما قبل الخدمة في كلية التربية بجامعة الكويت، واستخدمت الاستبانة كأداة رئيسية، واشتملت على ثلاثة مقاييس معتمدة: مقياس التوجه الثقافي، ومقياس سمة الذكاء الانفعالي، ومقياس المشاركة الفاعلة. ولاختبار الفرضيات البحثية تم تحليل البيانات باستخدام الإحصاء الوصفي وتحليل الوساطة.

النتائج: أظهرت النتائج أن كلا من الفردية والجماعية تنبأتا إيجابياً بالمشاركة الفاعلة، بما يتعارض مع الافتراضات التقليدية التي تفترض أن القيم الجماعية تقيد من سلوكيات المبادرة والتصرف بشكل مستقل. كما أظهرت النتائج أن سمة الذكاء الانفعالي تتوسط جزئياً العلاقة بين جميع أبعاد التوجه الثقافي والمشاركة الفاعلة، مما يبرز أهمية الكفاءات الانفعالية في التفاعل مع التوقعات الثقافية.

الخلاصة: تشير النتائج إلى أن القيم الثقافية لا تعيق بالضرورة سلوكيات التعلم الفاعلة، بل قد تُشكل طريقة التعبير عنها. وتؤكد الدراسة أهمية مراعاة السياقين الثقافي والانفعالي عند تصميم الأنشطة التعليمية، خصوصاً في البيئات الجماعية مثل الكويت. كما تؤكد الدراسة على قيمة الأنشطة التعليمية المنسجمة مع السياق الثقافي، وعلى ضرورة التدريب على تحفيز الذكاء الانفعالي في برامج إعداد المعلمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التوجه الثقافي، الفردية/الجماعية، المشاركة الفاعلة، سمة الذكاء الانفعالي، إعداد المعلمين.

Introduction

While engagement has often been described through behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004), more recent scholarship emphasizes students' active roles in shaping learning. Reeve and Tseng (2011) advanced this view by introducing *agentic engagement*, which captures how learners proactively contribute to the instructional process. Through behaviors such as questioning, suggesting alternatives, or seeking resources, students exercise agency in ways that make learning more personally meaningful and responsive to their needs.

The benefits of agentic engagement are well documented. Students who engage agentially help cultivate motivationally supportive environments, as their proactive behaviors encourage teachers to adapt and respond agentially over time (Jang et al., 2024; Reeve et al., 2020a). Furthermore, agentic engagement enhances students' experiences of need satisfaction, such as feeling competent, autonomous, and connected to others (Patall et al., 2019). These experiences align the learning environment with students' psychological needs, contributing to broader outcomes such as increased emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement, as well as improved academic achievement (Patall et al., 2019; Reeve et al., 2020a).

Individual traits and contextual factors significantly influence the likelihood of agentic engagement (Patall, 2024). For instance, students with collaborative and self-expressive tendencies are particularly likely to engage agentially (Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021; Datu et al., 2018). However, cultural and social contexts can act as barriers. Patall (2024), drawing on Oyserman et al. (2002) and Sczesny et al. (2019), suggested that agentic engagement might be less congruent with the interdependent values and communal orientations often socialized among women and people of color. Similarly, restrictive environments that limit autonomy can suppress agentic engagement over time, even among students who initially exhibit agentic tendencies (Reeve et al., 2020b).

Cultural context significantly influences how agentic engagement manifests. In individualistic societies, where autonomy and self-expression are highly valued, agentic engagement aligns with norms that encourage active participation and open feedback. Students in these contexts often voice opinions and suggest changes without fear of disrupting social harmony (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2003). In contrast, collectivistic cultures emphasize group harmony, respect for authority, and adherence to social hierarchies, which may suppress overt displays of agentic behaviors (Triandis, 2018). Here, students may engage more subtly, through collaboration or quiet persistence, rather than by reshaping the learning environment directly.

Despite its growing importance, agentic engagement remains underexplored in certain contexts. Research on its expression in collectivistic cultures is particularly limited, where cultural norms emphasizing group harmony and respect for authority may discourage overt agency. Although prior studies have examined cultural orientation in relation to engagement and trait EI in relation to engagement, no research has directly tested the relationship between cultural orientation and agentic engagement, nor has any study integrated these constructs within a single model. Additionally, the role of trait EI as a mediator in the relationship between cultural orientation and agentic engagement has yet to be fully investigated. Addressing these gaps will provide a deeper understanding of how cultural and emotional factors shape students' agentic engagement within their learning environments. In the context of Kuwait, where teacher education plays a central role in preparing future educators, these insights are practically significant. They can inform the design of pre-service training programs that integrate emotional intelligence development and culturally responsive teaching practices, equipping teachers to recognize and support diverse forms of student agency.

The concept of individualism emphasizes personal achievement and self-reliance, fostering behaviors in which students actively shape their learning experiences and express individual preferences (Hofstede et al., 2010). Markus and Kitayama (1991) proposed that individuals vary in their tendencies toward independence, which may involve emphasizing uniqueness, self-expression, and personal goals.

In contrast, collectivism values group harmony, cohesion, and shared success, leading students to prioritize collaboration and adherence to group norms (Triandis, 2018). Interdependent orientations emphasize maintaining group harmony, social connectedness, and self-restraint (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Subsequent research clarified that independence and interdependence are better understood as characteristics of cultural contexts rather than individuals (Kitayama et al., 2009; Kitayama & Uskul, 2011; Markus & Kitayama, 2010). While

cultural systems may encourage particular ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving, individuals within the same system can vary widely in how they express these tendencies. From this revised perspective, individual self-construals are not mutually exclusive; rather, individualism and collectivism can coexist at the cultural level, allowing individuals to draw on both orientations depending on context.

Recent research by Vignoles et al. (2016) highlights that cultural identity is dynamic rather than fixed, with individuals often endorsing both autonomy and obligation depending on situational demands. In societies like Kuwait, where traditional collectivist norms intersect with globalizing influences, students may simultaneously internalize autonomy-seeking and harmony-preserving values. With a score of 28 on Hofstede's individualism–collectivism index, Kuwait is generally considered a collectivistic society, reflecting a strong emphasis on in-group loyalty, long-term commitment to family and extended relationships, and prioritization of group harmony over individual autonomy (Hofstede Insights, 2025). Nevertheless, it is expected that pre-service teachers in Kuwait will endorse both individualistic and collectivistic values, reflecting the influence of globalization and their evolving professional contexts. This cultural dynamic is particularly salient in Kuwait, where harmony and respect for authority remain paramount.

These orientations help explain differences in students' educational behaviors, such as academic help-seeking. For instance, Jeng (2024) found that in collectivistic cultures, students may avoid seeking help to prevent burdening others, reflecting an emphasis on harmony. However, they are more inclined to seek help from culturally similar peers. In individualistic settings, independence may discourage help-seeking, but mastery-oriented values can also encourage it as a means of achieving competence.

Cultural orientation also influences communication style. Individualistic cultures tend to favor direct expression, whereas collectivistic ones emphasize indirectness and deference. These tendencies are reflected in practices such as the use of formal titles, avoidance of dissent, and preference for high-context communication to preserve social harmony (Merkin, 2017; Adair et al., 2024).

Because help-seeking, self-expression, and communication are core components of agentic engagement, culturally shaped behaviors may influence how students choose to participate in learning. Collectivist norms, particularly those emphasizing harmony and hierarchy, may lead students to engage in quieter, more compliant ways, whereas individualist norms may align more closely with proactive and expressive forms of engagement. However, collectivist values may also support agentic engagement when mediated by other psychological traits, especially trait EI.

Trait EI, defined as individuals' self-perceptions of their emotional abilities, is conceptualized as a personality-based construct, in contrast to ability EI, which assesses actual abilities through maximum-performance tests and aligns more closely with psychometric intelligence (Petrides & Furnham, 2001). Core dimensions of trait EI include self-motivation, emotion regulation, adaptability, assertiveness, and empathy, which collectively support emotional functioning and social engagement (Petrides & Mavroveli, 2020). Stress management is also a key component, enabling individuals to navigate challenges, build relationships, and maintain resilience (Ramesar et al., 2009; Bhullar et al., 2012).

Extensive research demonstrates that trait EI contributes to academic adjustment, engagement, persistence, and interpersonal sensitivity (Parker et al., 2004; Zhoc et al., 2020; Qualter et al., 2009; Lopes et al., 2005). A meta-analysis by MacCann et al. (2020) identified three mechanisms underlying this relationship: (a) regulation of academic emotions, (b) ability to build social relationships, and (c) overlap between academic content and emotional competencies. Intervention studies further support these benefits, showing that students who enhanced their EI were more likely to persist in education (Qualter et al., 2009). During periods of heightened uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, trait EI also promoted self-regulated learning by reducing stress and intolerance of uncertainty (Albani et al., 2023).

Beyond academics, Lopes et al. (2005) found that students with stronger emotional regulation were perceived as more interpersonally sensitive and prosocial by their peers. Collectively, these findings suggest that trait EI equips students with the emotional competencies needed to balance individual initiative with the relational demands emphasized in collectivistic contexts (Petrides & Mavroveli, 2020). In collectivistic cultures, trait EI plays an especially important role by helping students navigate the tension between autonomy and group-oriented values. Emotional competencies such as

flexibility, interpersonal understanding, and emotional attunement support this balance (Petrides & Mavroveli, 2020). Indeed, Bhullar et al. (2012) found that individuals with collectivist orientations often report higher levels of emotional intelligence, which contribute to interpersonal awareness and self-regulation. Similarly, Kang et al. (2003) highlighted that emotional differentiation fosters adaptability within collectivist settings.

Previous studies have connected parts of this pathway. Collectivistic orientations have been linked to interpersonal emotional competencies such as empathy and emotion regulation, which support harmony-preserving behavior (Bhullar et al., 2012; Kang et al., 2003). Trait EI has also been shown to predict engagement and related outcomes such as persistence and social connectedness (Zhoc et al., 2020; Qualter et al., 2009). Moreover, cultural orientation shapes proactive engagement behaviors, with distinct expressions across individualistic and collectivistic settings (Datu et al., 2018; Jeng, 2024).

This gap is particularly salient in collectivistic contexts such as Kuwait, where harmony and respect for authority may discourage overt expressions of agency. The present study addresses this limitation by testing a model in which trait EI mediates the relationship between cultural orientation and agentic engagement. Specifically, this study hypothesizes that trait EI mediates the relationship between collectivism and agentic engagement, providing a culturally compatible pathway for students to assert agency. In contrast, the relationship between individualism and agentic engagement may operate more directly, requiring less mediation through emotional competencies. By testing this model, the current study seeks to clarify how cultural and emotional factors jointly shape students' engagement strategies in collectivistic educational settings.

Research Hypotheses

Direct Effects

H1: Cultural orientation (individualism vs. collectivism) is associated with agentic engagement.

H1a: Individualism positively predicts agentic engagement.

H1b: Collectivism negatively predicts agentic engagement.

Mediating Effects

H2: Trait emotional intelligence does not mediate the relationship between individualism and agentic engagement.

H3: Trait emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between collectivism and agentic engagement.

Methodology

Sample

The sample comprised 416 pre-service teachers from Kuwait University, recruited through convenience sampling. Ethical compliance was ensured by requiring participants to complete a consent form prior to participation. Of the total sample, 20.2% ($n = 84$) were male and 79.8% ($n = 331$) were female, reflecting the demographic composition of pre-service teachers at the university. Most participants were Kuwaiti nationals (86.3%) and ranged in age from 19 to 23 years. Students represented six academic specializations within the College of Education. A detailed demographic breakdown is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample (N = 416)

Variable	Category	n	%
Sex	Male	84	20.2
	Female	331	79.8
	Missing	1	0.2
Age (years)	18	1	0.2
	19	24	5.8
	20	82	19.7
	21	98	23.6
	22	77	18.6
	23+	131	31.6
	Missing	3	0.7
Nationality	Kuwaiti	359	86.3

Variable	Category	n	%
	Non-Kuwaiti	47	11.3
	Missing	10	2.4
Major	Social Sciences	97	23.3
	Sciences	103	24.8
	Arabic Language	106	25.5
	English Language	68	16.3
	Islamic Studies	33	7.9
	Kindergarten	8	1.9
	Missing	1	0.2

Ethical Statement

Ethical approval was obtained from the department head at [Kuwait University] University, given the absence of an institutional review board (IRB). The study complied with APA ethical standards, with informed consent obtained from all participants to ensure anonymity and secure data handling. Data were stored on password-protected servers to maintain confidentiality. The survey was professionally translated into Arabic and back-translated to ensure linguistic accuracy. As the first author is Kuwaiti with U.S. doctoral training, cultural adaptations were incorporated to enhance local relevance. Participation was voluntary, with no compensation provided.

Procedures

Data were collected through an online survey administered during the Fall semester after obtaining the necessary ethical approvals. The survey instruments were translated into Arabic and subsequently back-translated into English to ensure both linguistic and conceptual equivalence. A professional translator reviewed the final versions to enhance accuracy and clarity. The survey included Likert-scale items measuring cultural orientation, trait EI, and agentic engagement. It was distributed electronically via Google Forms and administered in a single session.

Measures

All instruments were administered in Arabic. They were translated and back-translated to ensure accuracy, with professional review and cultural adaptations made for local relevance.

Cultural Orientation Scale

The Individualism and Collectivism Scale (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998) was used to measure participants' cultural orientation across four dimensions: Vertical Collectivism (VC), Horizontal Collectivism (HC), Vertical Individualism (VI), and Horizontal Individualism (HI). Each subscale contained four items rated on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *never/definitely no* to 9 = *always/definitely yes*). Sample items include "Parents and children must stay together as much as possible" (VC), "I feel good when I cooperate with others" (HC), "It is important that I do my job better than others" (VI), and "My personal identity, independent of others, is very important to me" (HI). These items capture attitudes toward individualism and collectivism in both horizontal (equality-focused) and vertical (hierarchy-focused) contexts.

Reliability analysis indicated acceptable to excellent internal consistency: VC ($\alpha = .897$), HC ($\alpha = .786$), VI ($\alpha = .702$), and HI ($\alpha = .909$). Although reliability for the VI subscale was lower than for the others, it remained within the acceptable range. Future research may consider using longer or adapted versions of this subscale to improve internal consistency. Overall, these results suggest that the scale reliably measured the four dimensions of cultural orientation in this sample.

Kuwaiti-Arabic Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire - Short Form (TEIQue-SF)

The Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (TEIQue-SF) is a widely used instrument for assessing trait EI in adults. This 30-item questionnaire employs a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *completely disagree* to *completely agree* and provides a comprehensive evaluation of trait EI facets. In the present study, the Kuwaiti-Arabic version of the TEIQue-SF, adapted and validated by Hasan et al. (2022), was used. This version has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, supporting its reliability and validity in Kuwaiti populations. In the current sample, the scale showed good internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .828.

Agentic Engagement Scale

The Agentic Engagement Scale (AES; Reeve, 2013) was used to assess students' proactive involvement in shaping their educational experiences. This 7-item scale employs a Likert-type format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A sample item is, "I let my teacher know what I need and want." In the current study, the AES demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .885, consistent with previous research reporting similar reliability estimates (e.g., Reeve, 2013; Jang et al., 2024).

Analysis

To test the hypothesized relationships, regression models were estimated using PROCESS Model 4 while controlling for sex as a covariate, given the large proportion of female participants in the sample (Hayes, 2018). Model 4 was selected because the study focused on a single mediator (trait EI), making this specification both parsimonious and theoretically appropriate. This approach enabled the examination of both the direct effects of each cultural orientation subscale on agentic engagement and the indirect effects mediated by trait EI.

The analyses were conducted using PROCESS for SPSS, with indirect effects estimated via bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) to assess statistical significance. Both direct and indirect pathways were evaluated using regression coefficients and confidence intervals, providing a comprehensive assessment of the mediation process. This method ensured a robust analysis of how cultural orientation subscales influence agentic engagement through trait EI.

Results

Descriptive Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among the main study variables are presented in Table 1. The sample included 416 pre-service teachers from Kuwait University. Among the cultural orientation subscales, horizontal individualism ($M = 6.65$, $SD = 2.28$) and vertical collectivism ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 2.16$) received the highest mean ratings on a 9-point scale, indicating strong endorsement of both personal autonomy and duty to hierarchical group structures. Horizontal collectivism ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.98$) was also moderately high, reflecting value placed on equality and cooperation within the group. Vertical individualism ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.86$) scored moderately, suggesting some support for competitive or hierarchy-oriented autonomy. These findings indicate that students do not rigidly adhere to a single cultural orientation but instead exhibit a hybrid configuration, aligning with Vignoles et al.'s (2016) concept of multidimensional cultural identities.

Trait EI ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 0.76$), measured on a 7-point scale, was moderately high, suggesting that students generally perceived themselves as emotionally competent, capable of understanding, regulating, and utilizing emotions effectively. Agentic engagement averaged 4.14 ($SD = 1.62$), also on a 7-point scale, indicating a moderate level of proactive involvement in shaping one's educational experiences. The relatively high standard deviation, however, points to substantial variability across the sample. While some students actively voiced preferences and took initiative, others remained more passive or deferential, likely reflecting differences in cultural values or emotional traits.

Overall, these descriptive findings underscore the importance of testing the proposed mediation model. The coexistence of hybrid cultural orientations and moderately high levels of trait EI provides a meaningful context for examining whether emotional competencies mediate the relationship between collectivist values and proactive engagement behaviors.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Vertical Individualism	4.66	1.86	-					
2. Horizontal Individualism	6.65	2.28	.658**	-				
3. Vertical Collectivism	6.03	2.16	.742**	.780**	-			
4. Horizontal Collectivism	5.64	1.98	.600**	.757**	.794**	-		
5. Trait EI	4.77	0.76	.164**	.378**	.317**	.383**	-	
6. Agentic Engagement	4.14	1.62	.364**	.485**	.468**	.575**	.412**	-

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. $p < .01$ (2-tailed). All correlations are significant.

Direct Effects

H1: Cultural orientation (individualism vs. collectivism) is associated with agentic engagement.

H1a: Individualism positively predicts agentic engagement.

To test the direct relationship between individualism and agentic engagement, mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 4 was conducted for horizontal and vertical individualism. All analyses controlled for sex, which was nonsignificant, and reported R^2 values reflect the full model including this covariate. Consistent with H1a, the results revealed that both subscales of individualism significantly predicted agentic engagement. Horizontal individualism demonstrated a positive association with agentic engagement ($b = 0.276$, $SE = 0.032$, $t = 8.652$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.213, 0.338]). This model accounted for 30.1% of the variance in agentic engagement ($R^2 = .301$), reflecting a moderate-to-large effect size. Similarly, vertical individualism positively predicted agentic engagement ($b = 0.258$, $SE = 0.038$, $t = 6.792$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.183, 0.332]). This model explained 25.7% of the variance in agentic engagement ($R^2 = .257$), indicating a moderate effect size. These findings support H1a, showing that both equality-focused (horizontal) and hierarchy-oriented (vertical) forms of individualism are linked to stronger proactive engagement in learning contexts.

H1b: Collectivism negatively predicts agentic engagement.

The relationship between collectivism and agentic engagement was examined for horizontal and vertical collectivism. All analyses controlled for sex, which was nonsignificant, and reported R^2 values reflect the full model including this covariate. Contrary to H1b, the results did not support a negative association. Instead, both forms of collectivism positively predicted agentic engagement. Vertical collectivism was significantly and positively associated with agentic engagement ($b = 0.278$, $SE = 0.033$, $t = 8.437$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.214, 0.343]). This model accounted for 29.6% of the variance in agentic engagement ($R^2 = .296$), indicating a moderate-to-large effect size.

Similarly, horizontal collectivism demonstrated a positive association ($b = 0.401$, $SE = 0.035$, $t = 11.437$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.332, 0.470]). This model accounted for 37.3% of the variance in agentic engagement ($R^2 = .373$), also reflecting a large effect size.

While all four cultural orientations predicted greater agentic engagement, the effect of horizontal collectivism was notably stronger than the others. This suggests that when students emphasize equality and group belonging, they are especially likely to take an active, proactive role in their learning.

Mediating Effects

H2: Trait emotional intelligence does not mediate the relationship between individualism and agentic engagement.

Mediation analyses using PROCESS Model 4 were conducted to evaluate whether trait EI mediates the relationship between individualism (horizontal and vertical) and agentic engagement. All mediation models controlled for sex, which was nonsignificant. For horizontal individualism, the indirect effect of horizontal individualism on agentic engagement through trait EI was significant (indirect effect = 0.073, $BootSE = 0.015$, 95% CI [0.046, 0.104]), indicating partial mediation. This model accounted for 30.1% of the variance in agentic engagement ($R^2 = .301$), reflecting a moderate-to-large effect size.

Similarly, for vertical individualism, the indirect effect of vertical individualism on agentic engagement through trait EI was significant (indirect effect = 0.057, $BootSE = 0.016$, 95% CI [0.024, 0.089]), again indicating partial mediation. This model explained 25.7% of the variance in agentic engagement ($R^2 = .257$), again indicating a moderate-to-large effect size.

These findings do not support H2, as trait EI partially mediates the relationships between both individualism forms (horizontal and vertical) and agentic engagement. Individualist orientations are associated with agentic engagement directly and indirectly through trait EI.

H3: Trait emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between collectivism and agentic engagement.

Mediation analyses using PROCESS Model 4 were also conducted to evaluate whether trait EI mediates the relationship between collectivism (horizontal and vertical) and agentic engagement. All mediation models controlled for sex, which was nonsignificant. For vertical collectivism, the results demonstrated a significant indirect effect of vertical

collectivism on agentic engagement through trait EI (indirect effect = 0.073, *BootSE* = 0.014, 95% CI [0.047, 0.102]), indicating partial mediation. The overall model accounted for 29.6% of the variance in agentic engagement ($R^2 = .296$). This suggests that students who endorsed hierarchical group duty were more likely to engage proactively in learning, and this was explained in part by their higher emotional intelligence.

For horizontal collectivism, the indirect effect on agentic engagement through trait EI was also significant (indirect effect = 0.073, *BootSE* = 0.016, 95% CI [0.043, 0.107]), , again indicating partial mediation. The overall model accounted for 37.3% of the variance in agentic engagement ($R^2 = .373$). This suggests that students who valued equality and cooperation also engaged more agenticly, and this link was partly explained by their emotional competencies.

These findings support H3, demonstrating that trait EI partially mediates the relationships between collectivism (both horizontal and vertical) and agentic engagement. Collectivist orientations are associated with agentic engagement both directly and indirectly through trait EI.

Discussion

This study examined how cultural orientation (individualism vs. collectivism) and trait EI influence agentic engagement among pre-service teachers in Kuwait. The descriptive results, showing high mean scores on both horizontal individualism and vertical collectivism, provide empirical support for Vignoles et al.'s (2016) multidimensional model of cultural orientation. Rather than adhering strictly to one pole of the individualism–collectivism spectrum, participants appeared to draw on both, reinforcing the view that cultural identity is complex and non-binary, particularly in culturally transitional societies such as Kuwait.

Contrary to H1b, both collectivist and individualist orientations positively predicted agentic engagement, with trait EI partially mediating these relationships. The finding that collectivism fosters agentic engagement challenges dominant assumptions in the literature, which often associate collectivist orientations with compliance, deference, or reduced assertiveness in the classroom. These results suggest that collectivist values do not inherently inhibit students from engaging agenticly; rather, they may shape the manner in which agency is expressed.

One possible explanation is that students in collectivist cultures may enact agency in ways that align with group norms and social harmony. While the present study did not directly assess specific forms of agentic behavior, prior research (e.g., Triandis, 2018; Adair et al., 2024) suggests that collectivist students may prefer indirect or relational pathways, such as supporting peers, contributing to group discussions, or selecting participation moments that respect hierarchical boundaries. Future research should investigate these culturally congruent pathways to better capture the nuanced ways students assert themselves in collectivist educational contexts.

Consistent with theoretical expectations, both horizontal and vertical individualism positively predicted agentic engagement. In cultural contexts emphasizing personal autonomy, independence, and self-expression, students are more likely to exhibit agentic behaviors such as asking questions, providing feedback, and shaping their learning experiences (Reeve, 2013; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These findings echo previous research indicating that individualist values promote proactive involvement in educational settings (Datu et al., 2018; Almusharraf & Bailey, 2021). Importantly, both vertical individualism (driven by status and achievement) and horizontal individualism (focused on equality and personal autonomy) were associated with greater agentic engagement, suggesting that motivations to influence one's learning environment can stem from both competitive and egalitarian individualist values.

However, the finding that collectivism also predicted agentic engagement underscores that agency is not exclusive to individualist cultures. Instead, it suggests that multiple cultural pathways may facilitate proactive learning behaviors, shaped by distinct underlying motivations and expressions.

Beyond these direct effects, trait EI partially mediated the relationships between cultural orientation and agentic engagement. This finding indicates that while cultural values directly shape students' proactive engagement, emotional competencies also play a significant role. Individuals high in trait EI are better equipped to navigate social norms, regulate emotions, and maintain positive relationships across both individualistic and collectivistic contexts (Bhullar et al., 2012; Petrides & Mavroveli, 2020). By enhancing emotional regulation, interpersonal sensitivity, and stress management, trait EI

enables students to engage assertively yet thoughtfully, facilitating proactive learning behaviors within culturally defined boundaries (Kang et al., 2003; Lopes et al., 2005). In this sense, trait EI operates as a cross-cultural facilitator of agentic engagement, strengthening students' capacity to act proactively while maintaining cultural congruence and social harmony.

Implications

The findings of this study have important theoretical implications for understanding the culturally nuanced nature of agentic engagement. Rather than supporting the assumption that collectivist values suppress proactive behaviors, the results demonstrate that both collectivist and individualist orientations can positively predict agentic engagement. This challenges conventional theories by showing that agency may manifest in culturally congruent forms within collectivist contexts. Moreover, the study extends existing engagement frameworks (Reeve & Tseng, 2011) by emphasizing that cultural values influence *how* agency is expressed, rather than determining its presence or absence.

The partial mediating role of trait EI further suggests that emotional competencies help bridge cultural expectations and proactive learning behaviors. This finding underscores the importance of incorporating emotional intelligence development into teacher education, particularly in collectivist settings. For instance, educators should be trained to recognize subtle expressions of agency, such as respectful participation, collaborative problem-solving, or peer support, rather than interpreting quietness or deference as disengagement.

Practically, these findings call for culturally responsive teaching strategies that align with students' values while promoting agency. Examples include structured group activities, relational feedback, and student-led discussions designed to respect social norms while fostering active engagement. In the Kuwaiti context, pre-service teacher education programs should integrate emotional intelligence training modules to equip future teachers with skills for managing emotions and encouraging diverse forms of student agency across both individualist and collectivist orientations.

At the institutional level, embedding emotional intelligence training into professional development programs can further enhance educators' capacity to recognize, support, and cultivate culturally responsive forms of student agency. By balancing opportunities for individual reflection with collaborative learning activities, teacher education programs can foster inclusive environments that respect cultural values while promoting proactive engagement.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design limits causal inferences, as the observed associations may be influenced by unmeasured variables. Second, reliance on self-report measures introduces the risk of common method bias, particularly in collectivist contexts where social desirability effects may be pronounced. Future research could address this limitation by employing multi-method approaches, such as teacher reports or classroom observations, to enhance validity. Third, the use of a convenience sample from a single Kuwaiti university, predominantly female, restricts generalizability and reduces the external validity of the findings. Fourth, cultural orientation and trait EI were assessed as relatively stable traits, even though both may vary depending on situational or developmental factors. Finally, the study did not directly examine culturally congruent forms of agentic engagement, highlighting the need for qualitative or mixed-method approaches in future research to capture these nuanced behaviors more effectively.

Future Research

This study points to several promising avenues for future research. First, qualitative investigations could explore how students with collectivist orientations interpret and enact agentic behaviors, offering insights into how they balance personal initiative with social expectations. Second, longitudinal studies could examine how the development of trait EI, particularly through targeted interventions, shapes agentic engagement over time, clarifying potential causal pathways. Third, cross-cultural research is needed to determine whether the patterns observed among Kuwaiti pre-service teachers hold in other collectivist contexts, such as East Asia. Fourth, examining teacher expectations, classroom dynamics, and institutional culture as potential moderators could deepen understanding of how cultural orientation and trait EI interact to influence engagement. Finally, addressing sampling limitations by employing multi-institutional or stratified designs would enhance external validity and allow for more generalizable conclusions. Collectively, these directions would enrich theoretical models of engagement and inform more culturally responsive educational practices.

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