

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The role of cultural contexts in designing video-based mental health intervention for Chinese college students

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ABSTRACT

The growing prevalence of mental health challenges among Chinese college students has prompted increased interest in digital intervention strategies, particularly those utilizing video-based formats. However, the effectiveness of such interventions largely depends on their cultural relevance and sensitivity. This study investigates the critical role of cultural contexts in designing video-based mental health interventions for Chinese college students through a systematic review of existing literature. By analyzing findings from studies on mental health, cultural psychology, and digital intervention design, the research identifies key cultural factors — including stigma surrounding mental illness, collectivist values, academic pressure, and norms of emotional expression — that influence engagement and efficacy. The study proposes a culturally grounded design framework that integrates traditional and contemporary cultural elements to enhance relatability, reduce stigma, and promote help-seeking behaviors. Findings suggest that culturally responsive content significantly improves user acceptance and therapeutic outcomes, offering valuable insights for the development of more effective, scalable mental health solutions in China and other collectivist societies.

Keywords: cultural contexts; video-based mental health intervention; Chinese college students

1. Introduction

Poor mental health among further and higher education students is a growing public health and policy concern. A 2020 survey of students from 10 universities by the Insight Network revealed that “one in five students currently have a diagnosed mental health problem” and that “nearly half have experienced a psychological problem severe enough that they feel they need professional help” – an increase from a third in the same survey conducted in 2018^[1]. Depression and anxiety are common among students; all colleges report students suffering from depression and 99% report students suffering from severe anxiety. A UK cohort study found that levels of psychological distress increase after entering university, and recent evidence suggests that the prevalence of mental health problems among university students, including self-harm and suicide, is increasing, with demand for services to support student mental health increasing, with some universities reporting a doubling of the number of students seeking support. These common mental health problems clearly

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pose a considerable threat to students' mental health and wellbeing, but their impact can also have educational, social and economic consequences, such as poor academic performance and an increased risk of dropout.

Cultural context profoundly influences how mental health is perceived and managed, especially in societies with deeply ingrained traditions like China. To understand this more specifically, we need to look at how core elements of traditional Chinese culture, such as Confucianism and Taoism, shape the mental health experiences of Chinese college students and affect the design and reception of mental health interventions. Confucianism emphasizes values such as filial piety (respect and duty towards one's parents and elders), social harmony, and the importance of fulfilling societal roles^[2]. For Chinese college students, this cultural framework can create significant pressure to achieve academic and personal success in order to honor family expectations. This often leads to stress, anxiety, and even feelings of inadequacy if these expectations are not met. In Confucian societies, there's also a cultural norm to suppress emotions or personal difficulties to avoid disrupting social harmony, making it less likely for students to openly discuss their mental health issues or seek help^[3].

Taoism, on the other hand, focuses on balance, harmony with nature, and the acceptance of life's changes. While this philosophy encourages a peaceful mindset, it can also lead students to adopt a passive approach towards mental health, believing they should endure challenges silently or wait for problems to resolve on their own, rather than actively seeking help or intervention^[4]. These cultural frameworks shape how students view mental health, making them more likely to internalize stress and less likely to seek professional mental health services. For instance, a student struggling with anxiety might attribute it to personal failure in meeting familial or societal obligations (influenced by Confucian values) and may avoid discussing their issues for fear of bringing shame to their family.

When developing video-based mental health interventions for this population, it is crucial to adapt the content to resonate with these cultural values. For example, video interventions designed for Chinese college students might need to emphasize the importance of maintaining family and social harmony but balance it with messages that encourage students to seek help when overwhelmed, positioning it not as a failure but as a responsible act of self-care that ultimately supports their family and community^[5]. The content should use culturally familiar symbols, stories, and communication styles. In a Taoist-influenced culture, videos that use metaphors related to nature, balance, and acceptance may feel more approachable and relevant to students.

Moreover, cultural background influences the presentation and structure of the videos. In Chinese society, where direct discussions of mental health can be stigmatized, videos might need to adopt an indirect approach, focusing on themes like stress management, balance, and emotional wellness without explicitly labelling them as "mental health interventions." By framing these interventions within a familiar and culturally sensitive context, they are more likely to be accepted and engage students who might otherwise avoid openly discussing mental health due to stigma. Ultimately, for video interventions to be effective in this cultural context, they need to carefully consider how traditional Chinese beliefs shape not only the mental health challenges of students but also how these students engage with and accept mental health support^[6]. Designing culturally attuned interventions ensures better reception and greater impact in helping students navigate the complexities of their mental health within their cultural framework. Cultural context plays a critical role in shaping how mental health interventions are perceived, accepted, and engaged with by different populations. In the case of Chinese college students, the influence of traditional cultural values such as those from Confucianism and Taoism must be considered to design effective interventions. Understanding how these cultural frameworks affect students' mental health experiences and their attitudes towards help-seeking is crucial in developing interventions that are not only effective but also culturally resonant. Studying these dynamics will lead to

better-designed interventions that are more likely to be embraced by the target population, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Traditional Chinese culture

Traditional Chinese culture, rooted in the philosophies of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, has shaped Chinese society for over two millennia, influencing attitudes, behaviors, and worldviews. Each of these philosophical systems has distinct teachings, but collectively, they have had a profound effect on social norms, interpersonal relationships, and individual well-being. Understanding these cultural frameworks is essential for examining their influence on various aspects of life, including mental health and the design of culturally appropriate interventions.

2.2. Confucianism

Confucianism, founded by Confucius in 551–479 BCE, has long shaped Chinese society's views on personal conduct, family relations, and social harmony. At its core, Confucianism emphasizes hierarchical relationships, where respect for authority, particularly elders, is paramount, and individuals are expected to fulfill their societal roles with integrity and discipline. Filial piety ("xiao"), one of Confucianism's key values, places a heavy emphasis on loyalty and duty to one's family. This deeply ingrained cultural norm positions family harmony and collective well-being above personal desires or emotional needs. As a result, personal challenges or distress are often suppressed in favor of maintaining outward harmony. The implications of this cultural model for mental health, especially among younger generations, are profound. Confucianism's emphasis on emotional restraint and self-control can discourage individuals from openly discussing or seeking help for mental health issues. Expressing emotional distress may be viewed as selfish or disruptive to familial and social harmony. For instance, a Chinese college student struggling with academic stress may feel that sharing these concerns could burden their parents, leading them to internalize feelings of anxiety and fear. Studies have shown that this emotional suppression can lead to high levels of internalized stress, anxiety, and depression. The cultural expectation to uphold family honor also means that failure—whether in academics, career, or personal life—can lead to intense feelings of shame, adding another layer of psychological strain.

Additionally, Confucian values can create a conflict between individual aspirations and collective family expectations. For instance, young adults may feel torn between pursuing personal goals and fulfilling the wishes of their family, especially in career or marriage decisions. This tension often leads to significant psychological conflict and stress. Younger generations, particularly college students, face pressure to succeed academically and meet their families' high expectations, which exacerbates feelings of inadequacy or failure when those expectations are not met^[7]. The inability to reconcile personal goals with family duties can contribute to feelings of alienation, depression, or anxiety. The strong emphasis on family in Confucianism can also affect how individuals approach mental health services. For many, seeking professional help for psychological distress may be seen as admitting personal or familial failure. Instead of turning to counseling or therapy, individuals may rely more on family networks or traditional methods of managing stress, even if these are not effective in addressing serious mental health concerns. This hesitancy to seek outside help can delay or prevent individuals from accessing necessary mental health care, increasing the likelihood of severe psychological issues over time. In summary, Confucianism fosters a cultural environment where emotional restraint, the prioritization of family honor, and the suppression of personal struggles can hinder individuals from addressing mental health issues openly. These cultural dynamics, while promoting social harmony, can exacerbate mental health challenges in modern contexts, particularly among younger generations navigating the demands of education, career, and familial obligations. Understanding the impact of Confucianism is

essential for designing culturally sensitive mental health interventions that address the unique psychological needs of Chinese individuals while respecting traditional values.

2.3. Taoism

Taoism, founded by Laozi in the 6th century BCE, presents a philosophical worldview that prioritizes harmony with the natural world and encourages simplicity, spontaneity, and the acceptance of life's unfolding events. One of its central concepts, "wu wei" (non-action or effortless action), advocates for minimal interference with the natural order of things, suggesting that people should let go of rigid control and allow life to follow its natural course. In essence, Taoism teaches that individuals should flow with the universe rather than against it, embracing flexibility and inner peace rather than actively trying to force outcomes. This Taoist perspective greatly influences how individuals cope with mental health issues. By promoting balance, moderation, and acceptance of life's inevitable changes, Taoism encourages people to cultivate emotional resilience and mental clarity. For example, when facing stress or emotional turmoil, Taoism suggests adopting a patient and calm attitude, believing that distress will resolve on its own with time. Instead of directly confronting or trying to control their emotions, Taoist philosophy encourages individuals to step back, breathe, and allow their feelings to flow naturally without resistance.

However, this passive approach to mental health can have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, Taoist teachings offer valuable coping mechanisms for stress and anxiety, particularly by promoting practices like meditation, mindfulness, and a deep connection to nature. These practices can help individuals cultivate a sense of detachment from daily worries, enabling them to face life's difficulties with a more tranquil mindset. Research by Zhongyun^[8] highlights that individuals influenced by Taoism often prefer quiet, introspective methods for managing emotional struggles, such as meditation and breathing exercises, over more active problem-solving approaches. This can foster a calm acceptance of life's challenges, reducing the immediate emotional burden.

On the other hand, Taoism's emphasis on non-intervention and passive acceptance may also discourage individuals from taking active steps to resolve mental health problems. While Taoism encourages individuals to trust the natural course of events, this philosophy may prevent people from seeking professional help or engaging in therapeutic interventions when faced with serious mental health challenges. For instance, someone experiencing persistent anxiety or depression might delay or avoid seeking psychological counseling, believing that their condition will improve on its own with time^[9]. This passive attitude could hinder timely intervention, potentially allowing emotional issues to worsen. Moreover, Taoism's approach to mental health often relies on the belief that emotional disturbances are temporary and will naturally dissipate. While this can help people manage everyday stress, it may be less effective for addressing deeper psychological problems that require more direct intervention. Taoist-influenced individuals may be less inclined to explore therapeutic strategies that involve confronting their emotions or talking through their struggles, as this contrasts with the Taoist ideal of non-attachment and effortless action. As a result, people influenced by Taoism might resist therapies that require introspection and confrontation of emotional difficulties, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or talk therapy^[10]. In conclusion, Taoism offers a philosophy of balance, simplicity, and acceptance that can positively impact mental health by encouraging emotional calm and inner peace. However, the passive nature of its teachings may lead some individuals to delay seeking help for more severe mental health conditions. The Taoist belief in allowing life to unfold naturally can foster resilience in many situations, but it may also limit active engagement with therapeutic interventions, particularly when mental health challenges require more direct problem-solving or confrontation. Understanding this cultural framework is essential for developing mental health interventions that respect Taoist values while also providing effective support for individuals who need it.

2.4. Mental health

Mental health is a critical component of overall well-being, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how individuals think, feel, and behave, influencing how they handle stress, relate to others, and make decisions. In recent years, there has been increasing awareness and recognition of mental health as a global public health issue, with mental health disorders like depression, anxiety, and stress-related conditions becoming more prevalent^[10]. This literature review explores the key themes in the study of mental health, including the biopsychosocial model, cultural influences, stigma, interventions, and mental health in specific populations such as college students.

2.5. Cultural Influences on mental health

Culture plays a critical role in shaping individuals' perceptions of mental health and their willingness to seek help. Cultural norms, values, and beliefs influence how mental health issues are understood and addressed in different societies. For instance, in Western cultures, mental health is often conceptualized as an individual concern, with a focus on self-expression and personal well-being^[11]. In contrast, many non-Western cultures, such as those influenced by Confucianism, emphasize collective harmony, family roles, and emotional restraint. This can lead to a reluctance to discuss mental health issues openly, as expressing emotional distress may be seen as a disruption of social harmony or a failure to fulfill one's role in the family.

Taoism, another major influence in Chinese culture, promotes acceptance of life's natural flow and emotional balance through non-intervention^[12]. While this can foster resilience, it may also discourage active problem-solving and professional help-seeking, as individuals may believe that emotional struggles will resolve naturally over time^[13]. These cultural frameworks can significantly influence how mental health interventions are designed and delivered, particularly when addressing culturally specific beliefs about well-being and coping mechanisms. Cultural differences also extend to how mental health disorders are diagnosed and treated. Research has shown that Western diagnostic criteria, such as those outlined in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), may not fully capture culturally specific presentations of mental health disorders^[14]. For example, somatization, or the expression of psychological distress through physical symptoms, is more common in non-Western cultures but may be underdiagnosed or misinterpreted by Western-trained clinicians. Therefore, culturally sensitive approaches are essential in both the diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders.

2.6. Mental health in college students

College students are a particularly vulnerable population when it comes to mental health. The transition to college is often marked by significant academic, social, and emotional challenges, which can increase the risk of developing mental health disorders like depression and anxiety. Studies have shown that college students experience high levels of stress related to academic pressures, financial concerns, and social relationships, which can negatively impact their mental well-being^[15]. Moreover, many college students are reluctant to seek help due to stigma, lack of awareness, or limited access to mental health services.

Research suggests that targeted mental health interventions for college students, such as peer support programs, mindfulness training, and mental health education, can be effective in improving mental health outcomes. These interventions aim to reduce stress, improve coping skills, and increase awareness of mental health resources. However, more research is needed to understand the specific needs of diverse student populations, including international students and students from different cultural backgrounds^[16]. Mental health is influenced by a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors, making it a multifaceted area of study. Cultural influences, stigma, and the availability of appropriate interventions all play a significant role in shaping mental health outcomes. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing

effective mental health interventions that are both evidence-based and culturally sensitive. As mental health continues to gain recognition as a global public health priority, there is a growing need for inclusive, accessible, and tailored interventions that address the unique challenges faced by diverse populations, including college students and individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

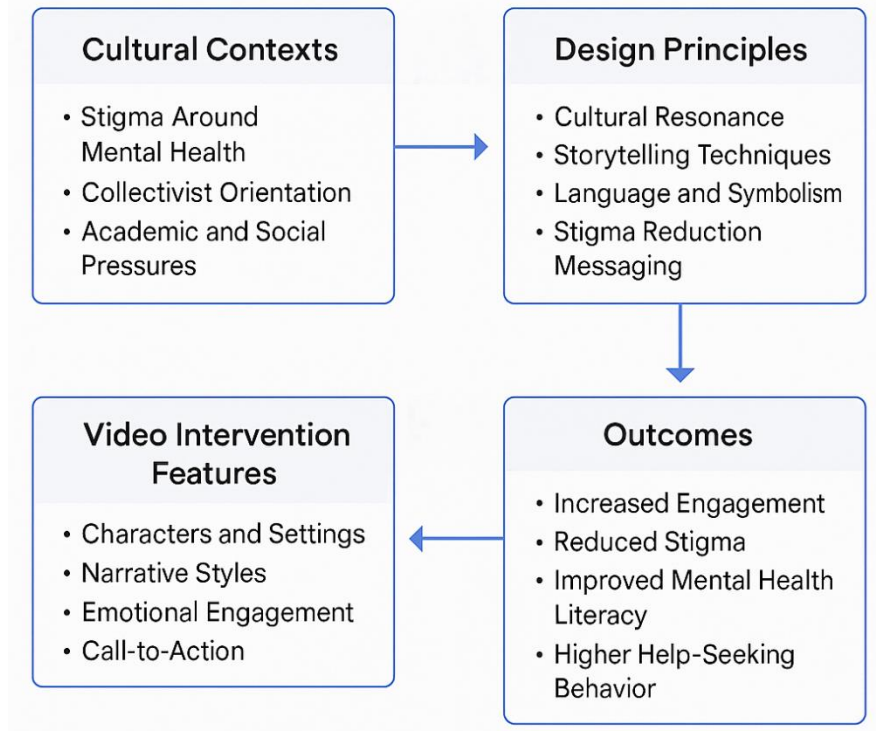


Figure 1. Shows the conceptual model.

3. Method

The format of the methods and results was based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (**Figure 1**).

3.1. Search strategy and selection criteria

A systematic search was conducted by researchers on Embase, Ovid MEDLINE (R), Global Health, Web of Science, and APA PsycINFO from inception until the 1st of April 2021. As this is an emerging topic, we looked at medRxiv, psyArXiv, and bioRxiv pre-print databases to identify further relevant studies. A manual search of the references of the included studies and reviews related to this topic was conducted using Google Scholar. Articles identified were screened as abstracts. After excluding those that did not meet our inclusion criteria, the full texts of the remaining articles were assessed for eligibility and decisions were made regarding their final inclusion in the review.

3.2. Search results

A systematic electronic search identified a total of 156 publications and 21 additional articles were found via backward searching of key papers. Of those, 114 publications underwent full-text screening. A total of 24 publications were excluded at the full-text screening stage and 18 articles finally met the criteria for inclusion. Results of the search follow in the PRISMA flow diagram (**Figure 2**).

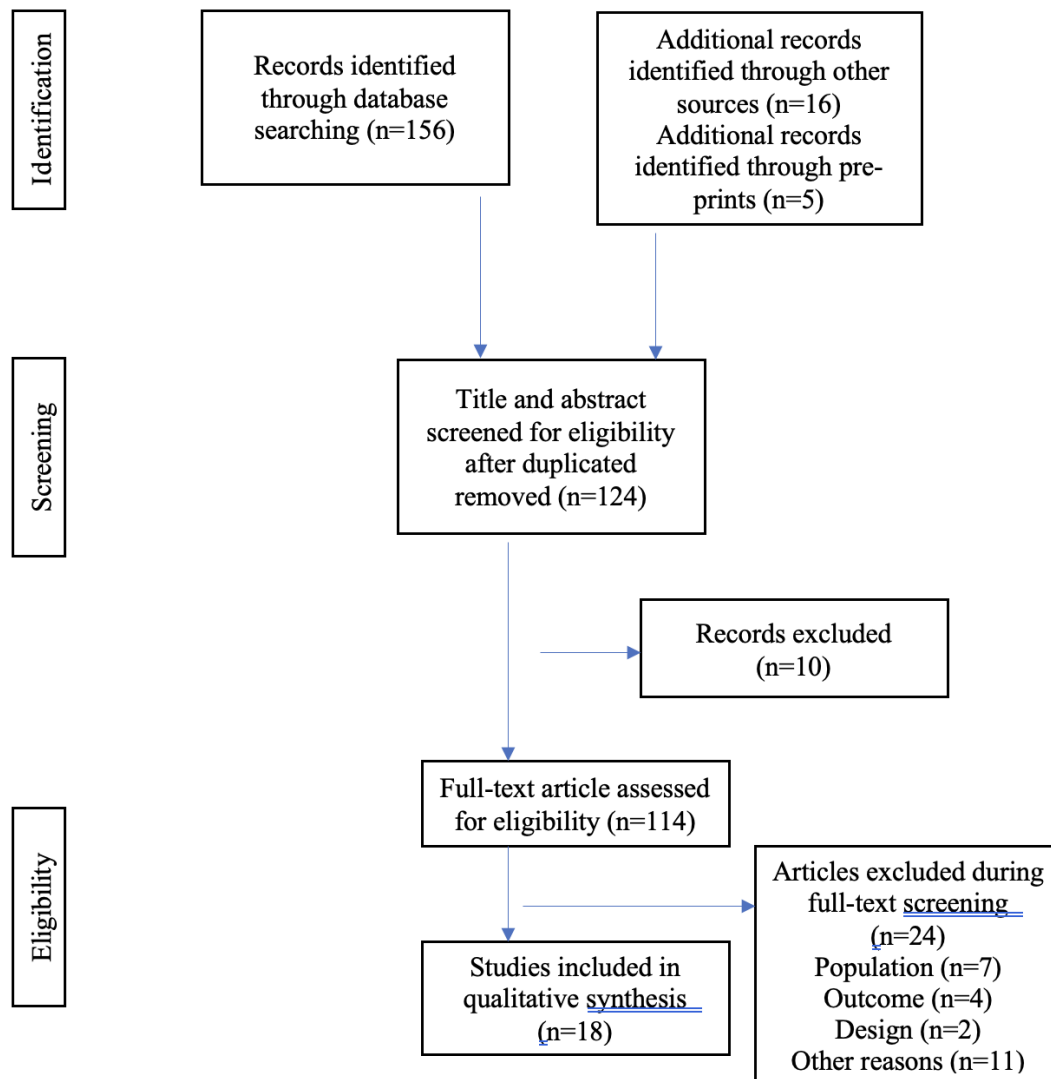


Figure 2. PRISMA flowchart.

4. Discussion

In discussing the role of cultural contexts in designing video-based mental health interventions for Chinese college students, it is essential to delve deeper into the specific aspects of cultural beliefs, norms, and values that directly influence their mental health perceptions and behaviors. For Chinese students, Confucianism and Taoism significantly shape their emotional regulation, help-seeking behavior, and the way they engage with mental health resources.

4.1. Confucianism and mental health

Confucianism emphasizes values like filial piety, social harmony, and emotional restraint, which directly impact how Chinese college students perceive mental health issues. Filial piety, or the duty to honor and care for one's parents, creates pressure for students to prioritize their family's well-being over their own emotional needs. In this context, expressing personal struggles may be seen as selfish or as a sign of weakness. As a result, many Chinese students may suppress their feelings of anxiety or depression rather than seeking help, as they fear it might burden their family or disrupt familial harmony^[17].

When designing video-based mental health interventions for Chinese students, it is crucial to address these cultural barriers. Interventions could be framed in a way that emphasizes the importance of maintaining emotional health as a means of fulfilling family obligations, rather than presenting mental health care as solely an individual concern. By aligning the messaging with Confucian values—suggesting that taking care of one’s mental health allows students to better support their family in the long run—students may feel more comfortable engaging with the intervention^[17]. Videos could include testimonials or narratives that connect mental health with broader family responsibilities, demonstrating that emotional well-being contributes to both personal success and familial harmony.

Furthermore, the Confucian emphasis on emotional restraint suggests that students may prefer more subtle approaches to managing emotions. Rather than directly confronting difficult feelings or openly discussing mental health, video-based interventions could focus on strategies like self-reflection, journaling, or mindfulness, which align with the cultural preference for privacy and self-control^[18]. These techniques can help students process their emotions internally while still acknowledging their struggles in a culturally sensitive manner.

4.2. Taoism and mental health

Taoism, with its focus on harmony with nature and the concept of “wu wei” (non-action or effortless action), offers another layer of cultural influence on mental health management. Taoism encourages acceptance of life’s natural ebb and flow, promoting inner peace and balance rather than direct intervention or control^[18]. This philosophy often leads to a more passive approach to emotional challenges, where individuals may believe that stress or anxiety will naturally resolve with time rather than requiring immediate action.

For video-based mental health interventions targeting Chinese college students, incorporating Taoist principles can make the content more culturally relevant and appealing. Interventions could integrate mindfulness practices, meditation, and breathing exercises, which align with Taoist teachings of inner calm and balance^[19]. Such activities encourage students to achieve mental clarity and emotional balance in a non-intrusive way. Additionally, videos can include visual and auditory elements inspired by nature—such as serene landscapes or calming sounds—that evoke the Taoist ideal of living in harmony with the natural world^[20].

However, while Taoist philosophies of non-action can foster resilience, they may also discourage students from actively seeking help for more severe mental health issues. Therefore, it is important that video interventions gently introduce the idea that while acceptance and balance are valuable, it is equally important to seek support when emotional challenges become overwhelming^[21]. Interventions could incorporate Taoist metaphors, such as the concept of “balance in all things,” to convey that achieving harmony sometimes requires taking steps to address mental health proactively.

4.3. Presentation and content of video interventions

The content and presentation style of the video interventions must be carefully designed to resonate with Chinese students’ cultural background. For example, the use of culturally familiar symbols, such as references to Confucian or Taoist teachings, can help students relate to the material on a deeper level. Videos could include traditional Chinese proverbs or stories that highlight mental health concepts in a culturally relevant context. By using familiar cultural narratives, the intervention can increase students’ comfort and engagement. Moreover, in a collectivist culture like China, mental health interventions should emphasize the collective aspect of well-being^[22]. Rather than focusing solely on individual mental health, videos could explore how emotional well-being contributes to one’s role in the community and family. This aligns with the cultural importance of relationships and social roles. For instance, interventions could show how managing stress and

anxiety can lead to improved academic performance, stronger social relationships, and a more harmonious family dynamic.

4.4. Barriers and stigma

Cultural stigma around mental health is another critical factor that must be addressed. In China, mental health issues are often stigmatized, and individuals who seek help may be perceived as weak or failing in their duties to their family or society. Video interventions should aim to reduce this stigma by normalizing conversations around mental health. Including role models, such as respected figures in Chinese society or successful students who openly discuss their mental health journeys, can help reduce stigma and make help-seeking more acceptable. Additionally, video interventions should consider the preferred method of access. Given the stigma, many students may prefer private, on-demand interventions that allow them to engage discreetly^[23]. Mobile-friendly video platforms or apps can ensure that students can access mental health resources in private, without fear of judgment from peers or family members.

In summary, the role of cultural contexts in designing video-based mental health interventions for Chinese college students is profound. By incorporating Confucian and Taoist values, addressing cultural stigma, and ensuring that content is relatable and respectful of cultural norms, interventions can be more effective in reaching and supporting Chinese students. These interventions must strike a balance between respecting cultural traditions of emotional restraint and passivity while gently encouraging proactive mental health care. Through culturally informed design, video-based interventions can create a meaningful impact on the mental health of Chinese college students.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, studying how cultural context influences the design of mental health interventions is essential for creating effective, inclusive, and culturally relevant approaches to mental health care. Cultural values, beliefs, and practices shape how individuals understand mental health, express emotional distress, and seek help. For instance, traditional Chinese philosophies like Confucianism and Taoism influence the ways individuals manage stress, cope with challenges, and engage with mental health services. Confucianism emphasizes emotional restraint and family harmony, which can lead to suppressed emotions and a reluctance to seek help, while Taoism promotes a passive acceptance of life's challenges, potentially discouraging active intervention. By understanding these cultural influences, mental health interventions can be better tailored to address the unique needs of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This may involve adapting therapeutic approaches to align with cultural norms, using culturally appropriate language and symbols, and incorporating traditional practices like meditation or mindfulness into treatment plans. Moreover, the design and delivery of mental health interventions, including video-based and digital therapies, must account for cultural preferences in content, presentation, and communication style. Ultimately, integrating cultural context into the design of mental health interventions enhances their accessibility, acceptance, and effectiveness, ensuring that diverse populations receive the support they need in ways that respect their cultural identities and values.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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