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The performative role of soft skills education: Reshaping business realities through cross-cultural learning in Chinese organizations

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The Performative Role of Soft Skills Education: Reshaping Business Realities through Cross-Cultural Learning in Chinese Organizations

Abstract

This study examines how soft skills education performatively shapes business realities across cultural boundaries. While prior research has treated soft skills as static capabilities, we demonstrate their role as performative forces actively reshaping organizational practices. Through in-depth interviews with Chinese graduates of UK universities working in China, our findings reveal an inverted U-shaped relationship between structural performativity and organizational transformation, moderated by collective orientation (weakening effect) and absorptive capacity (strengthening effect) and pinpoint six key domains through which soft skills education acts as a performative mechanism. Our findings suggest that successful organizational transformation through soft skills education requires balancing international connections, cultural values, and knowledge integration capabilities. The study advances performativity theory in management education by demonstrating how educational practices actively construct organizational realities rather than merely describing them and provides insights for business schools on effectively harnessing performativity to create desirable organizational outcomes in cross-cultural contexts.

Keywords: Performativity, Management Education, Soft Skills, Cross-Cultural Learning, Chinese Business, Business Schools

Introduction

Business schools have been receiving significant attention recently given the challenging times the University sector is facing in the UK. UK universities have relied on international students as funding model for circa 20 years as widely reported in the popular press. In addition, changes in important markets such as China (Altbach & de Wit, 2018), which is currently undergoing an economic downturn due to real estate uncertainty, affect university recruitment in the UK. Underpinning, these recruitment issues are Chinese households either postponing or suspending potential students enrolling in UK schools. Collectively this behavior poses significant financial challenges for most of the UK universities. One possible reaction for UK universities would be to review their service offering capacity to add value. One example of a value adding characteristic are soft skills, such as communication and teamwork. Previous studies discuss the importance of these skills, but their focus was not on how these can make a real difference in how businesses operate (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015; Montiel et al., 2020). Determining the value of these skills is especially important for Chinese graduates from foreign universities who must balance what they learned in the West with local practices upon their return. The present study looks at how soft skills training can effect business contexts. To carry out this study, we talked to the Chinese graduates from UK universities to gather their insights. We believe that when taught effectively, soft skills can spark positive changes in organisations (Gond et al., 2016; MacKenzie, 2006). In turn, soft skills will give an advantage to graduates because their education will substantiate such positive changes in organisations.

This study makes three major contributions to the literature. First, our study shows that business education can shape future business practices, especially in challenging economic situations. Unlike earlier studies that considered soft skills as fixed characteristics, we argue they can actively build new business environments. Second, we discovered six essential soft skills that are useful in China, proving that international education can be worth the investment.

Finally, we propose a model for performative soft skills education that helps blend Western and Chinese styles of business, leading to better outcomes, even when money is tight.

Theoretical Background

Performativity in Management Education

Recent studies show that business education not only describes how businesses work but also shapes how they function (Gond et al., 2016; D'Adderio et al., 2019). This means that what's learned in business schools can potentially help create new ways of doing business, not just to prepare students for what already exists (Cabantous & Gond, 2011; Marti & Gond, 2018) and soft skills will help develop such potential. Organisations' ability to benefit from soft skills education can be understood as contributing organizational learning (Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011). Using the lens of organisational learning helps understand how educational practices can have significant implications for how business schools' curricula development (Alvesson & Spicer, 2013; Thomas et al., 2014). This link from education to practice describes how companies incorporate new skills from graduates to become more competitive over time. When Chinese companies feed from Western education, they build up experience accumulation mechanisms. This helps them bring in new practices more effectively. This learning process is particularly critical in cross-cultural contexts where organizations must develop capabilities to bridge different knowledge domains.

The transfer of soft skills practices across cultural contexts involves the process of developing common meaning that enables knowledge to be shared across different cultural and practice domains (Carlile, 2004). Such change isn't just about sharing knowledge, but about amalgamate Chinese and Western novel approaches and practices. Carlile's framework helps explain why some organizations are more successful than others in integrating Western educational practices into their existing operations. Mixing Western teaching styles into

Chinese organisations is about making smart changes that fit in with what already works (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). This is important to understand, especially when Chinese organisations try to bring in Western methods but still want to stay true to their culture.

This performative perspective challenges traditional views of management education as neutral knowledge transfer. As Ghoshal (2005) argues, management theories and educational practices have often perpetuated problematic organisational paradigms that exacerbate social and environmental issues. For example, traditional management education has often pushed for endless growth, which isn't good for the planet (Bobulescu, 2022). It has also treated humans as resource capable of revenue (Lawrence & Pirson, 2015). Also, management theories and educational practices have supported business models that focus on extracting resources to manufacture products that are eventually discarded in a vicious cycle (Stål & Corvellec, 2018).

Recent work has highlighted the role of power dynamics and institutional logics in shaping how performative practices operate in educational settings (Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Lawrence et al., 2011). This perspective suggests that successful performative transformation requires attention to both micro-level practices and macro-level institutional structures. There's a growing belief that management education can actually lead to positive changes instead. One possible way to do this is to start thinking about how we can shape better futures for organizations (Spicer et al., 2009; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015). Management education can be a way to push for better practices that are sustainable and caring (Contu, 2020), while moving away from the harmful ones.

Cross-Cultural Dynamics in Educational Performativity

The performative potential of management education becomes particularly complex in cross-cultural contexts. When educational practices cross cultural boundaries, they encounter different institutional logics and value systems that influence their transformative effects (Cabantous et al., 2016). This is especially relevant for soft skills education, where cultural

norms and social interactions play crucial roles in shaping how practices are interpreted and implemented. The interaction between Western educational practices and Chinese organizational contexts creates an institutional translation zone where different institutional logics meet and potentially transform each other (Zilber, 2016). Understanding these zones is important for theorizing how soft skills education can catalyze organizational change.

Scholars from business schools have begun exploring how educational performativity operates across cultural contexts (Gond & Cabantous, 2015). This work reveals that successful cross-cultural transformation requires careful attention to both structural connections between educational and organizational environments (D'Adderio, 2008) and cultural dynamics that shape practice adoption (Butler, 2010). The intersection between performativity and management education deserves particular attention as business schools face increasing pressure to demonstrate their transformative impact. Scholars have identified three distinct but interrelated dimensions through which educational performativity operates: theoretical performativity, practical performativity, and institutional performativity (Gond et al., 2016; MacKenzie, 2006).

Theoretical performativity concerns how management theories and concepts taught in business schools shape organizational realities. As Ghoshal (2005: 75) argues that “bad management theories are destroying good management practices.” This critique has sparked renewed interest in how management education can actively construct more desirable theoretical foundations. Recent work demonstrates how management theories can become self-fulfilling prophecies, actively creating the realities they purport to describe (Marti & Gond, 2018; Cabantous & Gond, 2011).

Practical performativity focuses on how educational practices and pedagogical approaches transform organizational behaviors. Research shows that management education practices do not merely transfer knowledge but actively shape how managers understand and

enact their roles (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015). This practical dimension is particularly evident in soft skills education, where learning processes directly influence how managers approach communication, leadership, and relationship building (Montiel et al., 2020).

Institutional performativity examines how educational institutions, and their networks influence broader organizational fields. Business schools, through their educational programs and international connections, serve as institutional actors that can either reinforce existing management paradigms or catalyze transformative change (Moosmayer et al., 2019). The institutional dimension becomes particularly salient in cross-cultural contexts, where business schools must navigate global practices and local institutional arrangements.

Theoretical Development

We begin our theorizing by conceptualizing soft skills education not merely as a transfer of capabilities, but as a process of performative practices that enables transformative organizational outcomes (Stam, 2015). Early studies of soft skills education focused primarily on identifying which internal characteristics (Brush et al., 2019; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015) and which configurations of them (Montiel et al., 2020) influenced individual-level outputs such as leadership effectiveness and communication competence. Although this literature has provided much insight into the intra-individual factors that support professional development, inadequate efforts have been made to understanding the performative links between educational practices and organizational realities (Wurth et al., 2022), despite evidence that the transformative potential of soft skills flows across cultural and organizational boundaries. The performative potential of soft skills education is particularly significant given recent critiques of traditional management education. As Laasch et al. (2020) argue, business schools have often perpetuated problematic business theories that contribute to social and environmental challenges. This suggests that soft skills education, properly conceived, could serve as a

mechanism for transforming management practice in more sustainable and socially responsible directions.

To address this incompleteness in the literature, we leverage insights from performativity theory by mapping the concept of performativity onto the extant soft skills education literature. Although performativity has been defined in various ways over the years, we leverage Baker and Faulkner's (2009) insight that educational, organizational, and social actions are embedded in educational structure and culture to propose a theoretical framework of double performativity that involve our two key theoretical constructs – structural performativity vs. cultural performativity. We define structural performativity as the inter-cultural network of relationships connecting educational and organizational environments, and cultural performativity as the intra-cultural norms, values, and ideologies characterizing each environment. This dual model of the performative effect of business education operates through a sensegiving process where educational practices provide frameworks that shape how organizational members interpret and enact new practices (Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010) and the sensegiving role becomes particularly critical in cross-cultural contexts, where different interpretive schemes must be reconciled.

Temporal Dynamics in Performative Transformation

The transformation of organizational practices through soft skills education unfolds through complex temporal dynamics. Drawing on recent work in performativity theory (D'Adderio et al., 2019; Marti & Gond, 2018), we identify three distinct temporal phases in the performative process: initiation, adaptation, and institutionalization.

The initiation phase involves a performative process that new practices begin to reshape organizational realities (Callon, 2007). During this phase, the degree of structural performativity critically influences how Western educational practices are initially received and interpreted. Organizations must navigate the tension between ostensive understanding

(how practices are conceptualized) and performative realization (how practices are enacted) (Feldman, 2000). The second phase is an adaptation process that organizations actively work to align new practices with existing cultural values and capabilities (Schoeneborn et al., 2020). This phase is particularly critical in cross-cultural contexts, where organizations must develop a mindful organizational communication to facilitate practice integration. The third phase is an institutionalization process that transformed practices become embedded in organizational routines (Gond and Cabantous, 2015). This phase requires careful attention to what Boedker et al. (2020) identify as counter-performative dynamics that might otherwise undermine sustained transformation.

Drawing on institutional complexity theory (Greenwood et al., 2011), we argue that the effectiveness of structural performativity depends on organizations' ability to manage multiple, competing institutional demands. This perspective helps explain why moderate levels of structural connectivity may be optimal i.e., they provide sufficient exposure to new practices while allowing organizations to maintain coherence among different institutional pressures.

Data and Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to examine how soft skills education performatively shapes organizational practices in Chinese businesses. Following Yin's (2018) case study methodology, we employed a multiple-case embedded design that enables rich theoretical insights through systematic comparison across cases while maintaining sensitivity to context. This approach is particularly appropriate for understanding complex social phenomena where the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident (Yin, 2018), as is the case with educational practices transforming organizational realities across cultural boundaries.

The case study design followed Yin's (2018) principles for ensuring research quality through construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. We developed a case study protocol detailing data collection procedures, maintained a case study database for organizing evidence, and established a clear chain of evidence linking our data to theoretical propositions. Multiple sources of evidence were used to enable triangulation and strengthen construct validity.

Case Selection and Sampling Strategy

Our case selection followed theoretical sampling principles (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2018) to identify cases that would be particularly suitable for illuminating the relationships proposed in our theoretical framework. We identified appropriate Chinese professionals who completed their education at UK universities and subsequently returned to work in Chinese organizations. These individuals represented different organizational contexts, allowing for theoretical replication logic where similar results are predicted for theoretically similar situations and contrasting results for theoretically different situations (Yin, 2018).

The sampling process involved multiple stages. First, we established selection criteria requiring participants to have: (1) completed either an MBA or MSc in Accounting and Finance at a UK university within the past five years, (2) accumulated at least two years of post-return work experience in Chinese organizations, and (3) held positions enabling them to influence organizational practices. Through theoretical sampling, we continued selecting cases until reaching theoretical saturation (Eisenhardt, 1989), ultimately arriving at 139 cases that provided rich variation across organizational contexts while enabling detailed cross-case analysis.

Data Collection

Following Yin's (2018) recommendations for case study evidence, we collected data from multiple sources. The primary data source consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews

lasting between 60 and 90 minutes with each participant. All interviews were conducted in Chinese by a bilingual researcher with extensive experience in both UK and Chinese business environments, addressing potential language and cultural barriers that could affect data quality (Welch & Piekkari, 2006).

The interview protocol was developed based on Yin's (2018) principles for case study interviews and refined through pilot testing. Questions focused on understanding how participants' UK educational experiences influenced organizational practices, how cultural values affected the implementation of new practices, and how organizations processed and integrated new knowledge. The protocol maintained flexibility to allow pursuit of emerging themes while ensuring consistent coverage of key theoretical constructs across cases.

Supplementary data sources included organizational documents, participant observation notes, and follow-up communications with participants. This multi-source approach enabled data triangulation and provided richer contextual understanding of each case (Yin, 2018). All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim in Chinese, and subsequently translated following a rigorous back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970).

Data Analysis

Our analytical approach combined Yin's (2018) case study analysis techniques with systematic coding procedures developed by Gioia et al. (2013). The analysis proceeded through several distinct phases. We began with within-case analysis, developing detailed case write-ups for each participant to become intimately familiar with each case as a standalone entity (Eisenhardt, 1989). This process involved chronological ordering of events and identification of key themes related to our theoretical constructs.

The coding process then proceeded through three levels of increasing theoretical abstraction. In the first level, we conducted detailed coding of interview transcripts and supplementary materials, staying close to informant terms and maintaining theoretical

openness. Two researchers independently coded the data, regularly meeting to compare interpretations and resolve discrepancies through discussion. This process generated numerous first-order codes capturing participants' experiences with implementing new practices, navigating cultural values, and managing knowledge integration.

The second level of analysis involved identifying relationships among first-order codes and grouping them into theoretically distinct categories. This process followed pattern-matching logic (Yin, 2018), where empirical patterns were compared with theoretically predicted ones. Consequently, the first-order codes (e.g., maintaining international networks, accessing Western knowledge, sharing educational experiences, etc.) are clustered into more abstract second-order themes (structural performativity mechanisms). This analytical process continued iteratively until reaching theoretical saturation, where additional analysis yielded no new theoretical insights (Eisenhardt, 1989).

In the third level of analysis, we aggregated second-order themes into overarching theoretical dimensions aligned with our conceptual framework. This process involved cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018) to identify patterns across cases while remaining sensitive to unique contextual factors. We developed case-ordered displays and conceptually-ordered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to facilitate systematic comparison across cases and identify how different combinations of conditions influenced organizational transformation outcomes.

To further enhance analytical rigor, we employed several additional validation techniques. First, following Langley's (1999) temporal bracketing strategy, we analyzed how performative processes unfolded across different time periods. Second, we used Pratt's (2008) method of power quotes and proof quotes to systematically present our evidence. Third, we conducted negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to actively search for and explain instances that appeared to contradict our emerging theoretical insights.

Throughout the analysis, we employed several techniques to ensure analytical rigor and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We maintained detailed analytical memos documenting our coding decisions and theoretical insights. Regular research team meetings enabled discussion of emerging interpretations and resolution of any analytical disagreements. We also conducted member checks with participants to verify our interpretations of key events and processes (Yin, 2018).

Our analytical approach was informed by recent developments in process theorizing (Gioia et al., 2013; Langley & Abdallah, 2011; Langley et al., 2013). We specifically focused on identifying ‘critical events’ in the performative process where new practices were either successfully integrated or encountered significant resistance.

Translation and Cultural Considerations

Given the cross-cultural nature of our study, we paid particular attention to translation issues following best practices in cross-cultural qualitative research (Welch & Piekkari, 2006). Our translation procedure involved multiple steps to ensure conceptual equivalence across languages. First, all Chinese interviews were transcribed verbatim by native Chinese speakers. A bilingual researcher then translated these transcripts into English, focusing on maintaining conceptual rather than literal equivalence. A second bilingual researcher independently translated the English versions back to Chinese. The research team, including both Chinese and Western scholars, met regularly to discuss and resolve any discrepancies identified through this back-translation process.

Following recent advances in qualitative methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), we paid particular attention to ‘revelatory’ cases that illuminated the mechanisms through which performative effects operate. As Gehman et al. (2018) suggest, such cases are particularly valuable for theory building about complex organizational processes.

Quality Criteria and Analytical Trustworthiness

Following Yin's (2018) recommendations for ensuring case study quality, we employed several strategies throughout the research process. To enhance construct validity, we collected data from multiple sources and established clear operational measures for theoretical constructs. Internal validity was strengthened through pattern matching and explanation building during data analysis. External validity was addressed through theoretical sampling and analytical generalization to theory rather than populations. Reliability was enhanced through our case study protocol and maintained case study database.

Additionally, we followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants, persistent observation, and triangulation of data sources. Transferability was addressed through thick description of research contexts and findings. Dependability was established through our audit trail of analytical decisions. Confirmability was strengthened through researcher reflexivity and maintaining a chain of evidence linking data to theoretical conclusions.

This rigorous methodological approach enabled systematic investigation of how soft skills education performatively shapes organizational practices while remaining sensitive to the complex cultural and organizational contexts in which these processes occur. The multiple-case design, combined with systematic analytical procedures, provided a strong foundation for developing theoretical insights about the relationships proposed in our conceptual framework (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Findings

Our analysis reveals how soft skills education performatively shapes organizational practices through complex interactions between structural connections, cultural values, and organizational capabilities. Following Yin's (2018) approach to presenting case study findings, we organize our results around the three main theoretical dimensions that emerged from our analysis, providing rich empirical evidence for each hypothesized relationship.

Structural Performativity and Organizational Transformation

The data reveal that maintaining moderate levels of connection with UK educational networks enables effective practice transfer while avoiding the drawbacks of excessive external influence. One participant, a senior manager at a large technology firm in Shenzhen, explained: "Having ongoing connections with my UK university network helps me introduce new management practices. For example, I adapted the problem-based learning approach from my MBA to develop our internal training programs. However, we need to be selective, as a single-minded reliance on Western approaches can create resistance and confusion."

This pattern was consistently observed across cases. Organizations that maintained moderate structural connections demonstrated greater success in implementing transformative practices. A finance director in Shanghai described how selective engagement with international networks supported organizational change: "We maintain regular contact with UK partners through alumni networks and professional associations, but we're careful to focus on practices that align with our strategic needs. This selective approach helps us identify valuable practices while avoiding information overload."

However, cases of high structural performativity revealed diminishing returns. Organizations with extensive international connections often struggled with practice redundancy and implementation fatigue. As one participant noted: "Initially, more international exposure seemed better. But we discovered that too many external influences

created confusion. Team members started questioning which practices to prioritise, and some valuable local Chinese approaches were being overlooked in favour of Western methods.”

Cultural Values as Moderating Force

The influence of cultural values, particularly collective orientation, emerged as a significant moderating factor. Our analysis reveals how organizational culture shapes the relationship between structural performativity and transformation outcomes. In organizations with strong collective orientation, the implementation of Western practices followed a more deliberate, consensus-driven process. A department head in Beijing explained: “When introducing new practices from my UK experience, I learned to engage the entire team in the adaptation process. This collective approach takes longer, but it results in more sustainable change because everyone feels ownership of the new practices.”

Absorptive Capacity’s Moderating Effect

Our data shed light for the moderating role of absorptive capacity. Organizations with higher absorptive capacity demonstrated enhanced ability to integrate Western educational practices, but this relationship became more complex at very high levels. A regional director at a multinational firm in Guangzhou described their systematic approach: “Our organization has developed robust knowledge management systems that help us evaluate and integrate new practices. When I introduced the stakeholder engagement techniques from my UK education, we had clear processes for assessing their fit with existing systems and adapting them appropriately. This systematic approach accelerated implementation while maintaining quality.”

However, organizations with very high absorptive capacity sometimes exhibited an over-processing syndrome - excessive analysis and modification of Western practices diminished their transformative potential. The HR director of a large state-owned enterprise explained: “We have sophisticated systems for analyzing and implementing new practices,

but sometimes this becomes a barrier. Recently, we spent six months analyzing a new feedback system I learned in the UK. By the time we finished modifying it to fit all our existing processes, much of the original innovative spirit was lost.”

Interplay of Theoretical Constructs

The interaction among our three theoretical constructs revealed complex patterns of influence on organizational transformation. Our cross-case analysis identified four distinct transformation patterns based on different combinations of structural performativity, cultural values, and absorptive capacity. First, organizations combining moderate structural performativity with balanced cultural values and strong (but not excessive) absorptive capacity achieved the most successful transformations. A department head in Shanghai’s financial district illustrated this optimal configuration: “We maintain strategic connections with international networks while respecting our cultural foundations. Our ability to process and adapt new knowledge helps us strike the right balance. For example, we successfully integrated Western project management techniques with our traditional relationship-based approach, creating a hybrid model that works better than either system alone.” Second, organizations with high structural performativity but weak absorptive capacity struggled to effectively utilize their international connections. As one participant noted: “Despite our extensive international network, we lack the internal capabilities to properly evaluate and implement new practices. We often end up with superficial adoptions that don’t create real change.” Third, organizations with strong collective orientation and high absorptive capacity demonstrated a distinct pattern of selective adaptation. A senior manager described their approach: “Our strong group culture means we carefully evaluate Western practices through collective discussion. Our well-developed learning systems help us modify these practices to align with our values while maintaining their core benefits. This process takes longer but produces more sustainable results.” Fourth, organizations with moderate structural

performativity but misaligned cultural values and absorptive capacity experienced implementation challenges. One participant reflected: “Although we have valuable international connections, the mismatch between our cultural preferences and our ability to process new knowledge creates barriers. We either resist potentially valuable changes or implement them in ways that don’t stick.”

Temporal Dynamics and Implementation Patterns

Our longitudinal analysis revealed important temporal patterns in how organizations manage these relationships over time. Successful organizations demonstrated an ability to dynamically adjust their structural connections based on their cultural context and absorptive capacity. A CEO of a technology firm explained: “We’ve learned to pulse our international engagement - intensifying connections when we need new insights and reducing them when we need to focus on integration. This rhythm helps us maintain the benefits of Western practices while preserving our organizational identity.” These findings provide rich empirical support for our theoretical framework while revealing nuanced patterns in how organizations navigate the complex interplay between structural performativity, cultural values, and absorptive capacity in achieving successful organizational transformation through soft skills education.

Theoretical Elaboration

Understanding these temporal dynamics helps explain why the relationship between structural performativity and organizational transformation is likely to be nonlinear, as organizations must balance the benefits of external knowledge access with the time and resources required for effective integration across different phases. Next, we develop three testable propositions by integrating our findings presented above with existing theory. The conjectured relationships between these proposition is presented in figure 1.

The Benefits and Costs of Structural Performativity

Applied to the present context, a soft skills education environment can be understood as being structurally performative within the larger organizational network to the extent that it maintains ongoing relationships and engages in knowledge exchanges with organizations that are themselves connected. As an educational environment's structural performativity increases from low to moderate, its perceived trustworthiness as a credible knowledge exchange partner will increase, as will the value of the practices flowing in from adjacent organizations (Davis & Greve, 1997; Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1999). To the extent that these practices are tacit, such as approaches to cross-cultural communication (Pahnke et al., 2015), innovative problem-solving methods (Sorenson & Stuart, 2001), adaptive leadership models (Saxenian, 2006), and transformative management practices (Davis & Greve, 1997), the perceived value of opportunities available for exploitation by organizational members should improve (Hayek, 1945; Huggins & Thompson, 2014), thereby increasing the likelihood of organizational transformation.

However, access to more educational practices may not always benefit organizational transformation. As an educational environment's structural performativity increases from moderate to high, the value of inflowing practices is likely to decline. Given that each additional practice that flows into the organization by way of its exchange relationships with other actors in the network is increasingly likely to be redundant with those it has already received (Burt, 1992; Uzzi, 1997), organizational members will be faced with fewer new opportunities for transformation and more competition over those opportunities that do exist (Hayek, 1945; Newbert, 2007). Because highly structurally performative educational environments are characterized by an increasingly homogenous set of practices, knowledge, and information (Burt, 1992), which is inconsistent with the diversity of resources necessary

to stimulate organizational transformation (Hayek, 1945), we expect transformative outcomes to fall after an educational environment exceeds some optimal level of structural performativity.

This nonlinear relationship aligns with prior research examining the effects of network embeddedness on organizational innovation (Ahuja, 2000; Uzzi & Spiro, 2005) and knowledge transfer (Hansen, 1999; Reagans & McEvily, 2003). These studies suggest that while network connections initially facilitate resource flows and learning, excessive connectivity can lead to knowledge redundancy and reduced novelty. In the context of soft skills education, moderate levels of structural performativity enable organizations to access valuable Western educational practices while maintaining sufficient autonomy to adapt and recombine these practices in novel ways. However, as structural performativity increases further, the homogenizing effects of dense network connections begin to constrain rather than enable transformation. This perspective is further supported by research on knowledge networks (Hansen & Løvås, 2004; Reagans & McEvily, 2003), which suggests that intermediate levels of network connectivity optimize knowledge transfer while minimizing redundancy.

Drawing on institutional complexity theory (Greenwood et al., 2011), we argue that the effectiveness of structural performativity depends on organizations' ability to manage multiple, sometimes competing institutional demands. This perspective helps explain why moderate levels of structural connectivity may be optimal - they provide sufficient exposure to new practices while allowing organizations to maintain coherence among different institutional pressures.

The relationship between structural performativity and organizational transformation aligns with recent work on the boundary conditions of performative effects. As Marti and Gond (2018) demonstrate, the effectiveness of performative practices depends on maintaining an optimal balance between connection and autonomy. This helps explain why moderate levels of

structural performativity yield the most beneficial outcomes - they provide sufficient access to transformative practices while avoiding the constraints of excessive external influence.

The case study data showed that maintaining moderate levels of connection with UK educational networks enables effective practice transfer while avoiding the drawbacks of excessive external influence. Considering benefits and costs together, we propose that it is only when structural performativity remains at a moderate (i.e., optimal) level that the benefits of inflowing educational practices to organizational members seeking transformation will be maximized. Therefore:

Proposition 1. An inverted U-shaped relationship exists between structural performativity in soft skills education and organizational transformation.

The Moderating Role of Cultural Values

Though the above arguments highlight the importance of structural performativity, organization-specific cultural values may shape the impacts of educational practices, as they indicate the nature and contents of prevailing norms that dictate behavior (Baker & Faulkner, 2009; Zaheer & Bell, 2005). In Chinese organizations, collective orientation—defined as the degree to which organizational members prioritize group interests and maintain strong in-group bonds—plays a fundamental role in knowledge integration and practice adoption.

The role of cultural values in mediating practice adoption can be better understood through the lens of institutional translation (Sahlin & Wedlin, 2008). This perspective suggests that practices are not simply transferred but are actively translated as they move across cultural contexts, with cultural values serving as key translation mechanisms.

When collective orientation is strong, organizational members are more likely to rely on internal group resources and established ways of working rather than external influences

(Ralston et al., 1999). This creates unique dynamics in how Western educational practices are received and integrated. Strong collective values often lead to the development of dense internal knowledge-sharing networks and established routines for group learning (Tsui et al., 2006). These internal mechanisms can substitute for and potentially compete with external educational influences, affecting how readily organizations adopt and implement new practices from Western educational contexts.

The process of adapting Western soft skills practices within collectively-oriented Chinese organizations involves complex legitimation mechanisms. Group members often act as informal gatekeepers, collectively determining which new practices align with existing organizational values and group dynamics (Ma & Tsui, 2015). Through their collective influence, organizational members can either facilitate or inhibit the adoption of novel practices. When new educational practices receive collective support, their implementation tends to be more comprehensive, as group buy-in provides both legitimacy and momentum for change initiatives.

However, strong collective orientation can also create rigidities that constrain the transformative potential of new practices. Research has shown that highly collective organizations often struggle to integrate novel approaches that challenge existing group norms or traditional ways of working (Chen & Miller, 2011; Luo & Rui, 2009). The emphasis on maintaining group harmony and established patterns can lead to selective adoption of Western practices, where elements that threaten collective stability are filtered out or modified to fit existing frameworks.

This suggests that collective orientation will moderate the curvilinear relationship between structural performativity and transformation by reducing both the benefits and costs of network connections. In organizations with strong collective values, the positive effects of moderate structural performativity will be dampened as members rely more heavily on internal

group resources. Similarly, the negative effects of high structural performativity will be less pronounced as collective filtering mechanisms naturally limit the adoption of redundant external practices.

Our data showed that the influence of cultural values, particularly collective orientation, emerged as a significant moderating factor. Cultural values' moderating role can be better understood through the performative care perspective that suggests that successful transformation requires attention not just to the technical aspects of practice adoption but also to the cultural and relational dynamics that shape how practices are received and integrated (de La Bellacasa, 2017). This is particularly relevant in Chinese organizations, where collective orientation serves as a form of cultural care that influences how Western practices are adapted and implemented. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Proposition 2. The level of collective orientation will moderate the relationship between structural performativity and organizational transformation such that the inverted U-shaped curve will flatten out as collective orientation increases.

The Moderating Role of Absorptive Capacity

While structural performativity and cultural values shape the potential for transformation, an organization's absorptive capacity—defined as its ability to identify, assimilate, and utilize new knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002)—plays a critical role in realizing this potential. In the context of cross-cultural soft skills education, absorptive capacity determines how effectively organizations can integrate Western educational practices into their existing operational frameworks. When organizations possess strong absorptive capacity, they are better equipped to understand and internalize novel practices from Western educational environments (Lane et al., 2006; Todorova & Durisin, 2007; Volberda et al., 2010).

The influence of absorptive capacity on knowledge integration operates through multiple mechanisms. First, organizations with strong absorptive capacity typically maintain diverse knowledge bases that enable them to better evaluate and appreciate the value of new educational practices (Jansen et al., 2005; Flatten et al., 2011; Van den Bosch et al., 1999). These organizations often establish systematic learning mechanisms, including cross-departmental knowledge-sharing platforms, regular training programs, and incentive systems that encourage innovation and experimentation with new practices (Lewin et al., 2011; Zahra & George, 2002). This institutional infrastructure enables more effective identification and initial processing of valuable Western soft skills practices.

Furthermore, strong absorptive capacity enhances an organization's ability to combine new soft skills practices with existing organizational routines. Research has shown that organizations with higher absorptive capacity are more adept at transforming external knowledge into concrete organizational practices (Lichtenthaler, 2009; Szulanski, 1996). These organizations can not only identify valuable new practices but also experiment with and adjust these practices to fit local conditions while maintaining their essential transformative elements (Lewin et al., 2011; Todorova & Durisin, 2007). The presence of strong absorptive capacity thus amplifies the positive effects of moderate structural performativity by enabling more effective utilization of incoming educational practices.

However, the benefits of absorptive capacity may have limitations. When organizations possess very high levels of absorptive capacity, they risk falling into a competency trap where they over-rely on existing knowledge integration patterns and overlook new possibilities (Ahuja & Lampert, 2001; Leonard-Barton, 1992). In such cases, organizations might excessively modify Western educational practices to fit existing frameworks, potentially diminishing their innovative potential. Additionally, very high absorptive capacity can lead to

over-processing of incoming knowledge, creating unnecessary complexity in the integration process (Laursen & Salter, 2006; Wales et al., 2013).

This suggests that absorptive capacity will moderate the curvilinear relationship between structural performativity and transformation by amplifying both the benefits and costs of network connections. In organizations with strong absorptive capacity, the positive effects of moderate structural performativity will be enhanced as they more effectively integrate Western educational practices. Similarly, the negative effects of high structural performativity will be more pronounced as greater absorptive capacity leads to more rapid accumulation of redundant knowledge. Therefore:

Proposition 3. The level of absorptive capacity will moderate the relationship between structural performativity and organizational transformation such that the inverted U-shaped curve will steepen as absorptive capacity increases.

The Institutional Dimension of Performativity

The institutional dimension of performativity extends beyond individual organizations to encompass broader systemic change. Business schools, as institutional actors, possess unique capabilities to shape management practice a performative praxis that involves the systematic combination of theories, practices, and institutional arrangements that collectively transform organizational realities (Cabantous and Gond, 2011). Recent research demonstrates how business schools' institutional position enables them to influence not just individual managers but entire fields of practice (Contu, 2020).

Business education institutions operate as the engines of performativity actively constructing the realities they theorize (MacKenzie, 2006). This institutional role becomes particularly significant in cross-cultural contexts, where business schools serve as bridges

between different institutional logics. As Gond et al. (2016) argue, the institutional dimension of performativity involves complex interactions between educational practices, organizational structures, and societal norms that collectively shape management practice.

The institutional perspective also highlights the political dimension of performative care that suggests that business schools must consciously navigate their role in either maintaining or transforming existing power relations (Butler, 1997; de La Bellacasa, 2017). This involves a progressive performativity where institutions actively work to realize more socially and environmentally desirable management realities (Wickert and Schaefer, 2015).

Discussion

Our study advances theory and practice by revealing how soft skills education can performatively shape organizational realities through the interplay of structural connections, cultural values, and organizational capabilities. The findings offer several important theoretical contributions while providing practical insights for management education and organizational transformation.

Theoretical Implications

First, our study extends performativity theory by demonstrating how educational practices actively construct, rather than merely describe, organizational realities. While previous research has treated soft skills education primarily as a transfer of static capabilities (Montiel et al., 2020; Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015), our findings reveal the dynamic performative mechanisms through which educational practices reshape organizational contexts. The inverted U-shaped relationship between structural performativity and organizational transformation suggests that the performative potential of education operates through more complex pathways than previously recognized in the literature.

Second, our findings contribute to cross-cultural management theory by illuminating how cultural values moderate the performative effects of education. Prior research has often treated cultural differences as barriers to be overcome (Chen & Miller, 2011). In contrast, our study reveals how collective orientation can serve as a productive filter that helps organizations selectively adapt Western practices while maintaining cultural coherence. This nuanced understanding of cultural moderation advances theoretical perspectives on how organizations navigate the tension between global practices and local values.

Third, we extend absorptive capacity theory by revealing its dual role in educational performativity. Previous research has generally portrayed absorptive capacity as uniformly beneficial for knowledge integration (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002). Our findings reveal both enabling and constraining effects, particularly how very high levels of absorptive capacity can lead to over-processing that diminishes the transformative potential of new practices. This insight contributes to a more sophisticated theoretical understanding of how organizational capabilities influence the adoption of educational practices.

Fourth, our study advances methodological approaches to studying performativity by demonstrating the value of longitudinal case study research in revealing temporal patterns. The identification of different transformation patterns based on varying combinations of our theoretical constructs provides a template for future research examining how performative processes unfold over time in complex organizational settings.

Connecting to Broader Debates in Management Education Reform

Our findings contribute to ongoing debates about reforming management education to address contemporary challenges. The performative perspective we develop aligns with the responsible management education that aims to develop managers capable of addressing complex social and environmental issues (Moosmayer et al., 2019). Our study's findings about the role of absorptive capacity in practice transformation particularly support Amann et

al.'s (2011) argument that humanistic management education requires both structural capabilities and cultural readiness for change.

The model we develop supports recent arguments about the need to transform business school education in response to global challenges (Laasch et al., 2022). Our findings about the moderating role of cultural values highlight the importance of the cultural embeddedness of performativity (Cabantous et al., 2016), as our empirical evidence show clearly that organizations with strong collective orientation demonstrated distinct patterns of practice adaptation, suggesting that cultural values don't simply constrain change but actively shape how new practices are integrated.

The temporal patterns we identified in successful transformations support the idea of performative cycles where theoretical ideas gradually become reality through iterative processes of experimentation and adaptation (Gond and Cabantous, 2015). This was particularly apparent in our finding that organizations learned to "pulse" their international engagement, intensifying or reducing connections based on their absorption capacity and cultural context. This dynamic approach to practice transformation extends recent work on the temporal dimensions of management research impact (MacIntosh et al., 2017).

Moreover, our findings align with the recent shift from impact measurement to impact realization in management education (Anderson et al., 2017). The four distinct transformation patterns we identified suggest that educational impact operates through complex combinations of structural, cultural, and capability-based mechanisms. This supports Wickert et al.'s (2021) argument for broadening how we conceptualize and evaluate management research impact.

Our study also contributes to emerging discussions about the role of business schools in creating more sustainable and socially responsible management practices. The cases where organizations successfully integrated Western practices while maintaining cultural integrity

demonstrate performative practices for other worlds (Gibson-Graham, 2008). This suggests that soft skills education can serve as what Contu (2020) terms “intellectual activism”, helping to realize more desirable organizational realities while preserving valuable cultural traditions.

Practical Implications

Our findings offer several important implications for management education and organizational practice. First, they suggest that educational institutions should focus not only on transferring knowledge but also on helping students develop the capability to serve as performative agents of change. This might involve explicit training in how to navigate the cultural and organizational dynamics that influence practice adoption. Second, our results provide guidance for organizations seeking to benefit from employees’ international education. The identified patterns of successful transformation suggest that organizations should carefully calibrate their structural connections while developing appropriate cultural and capability configurations. This might involve creating formal mechanisms for evaluating and adapting Western practices while maintaining cultural integrity. Third, our findings offer insights for policy makers and educational administrators managing international education programs. The complex interplay among our theoretical constructs suggests the need for more sophisticated approaches to measuring educational outcomes that account for performative effects rather than focusing solely on knowledge transfer.

Future Research Directions

Our study opens several promising avenues for future research. First, scholars could examine whether similar patterns of performativity exist in other educational contexts or with different types of organizational practices. Second, research could investigate how digital technologies might alter the dynamics of structural performativity and knowledge integration.

Third, longitudinal studies could further explore the temporal dynamics of educational performativity, particularly how organizations learn to balance different influences over time.

Limitations

While our study provides valuable insights, we acknowledge several limitations. First, our focus on Chinese organizations may limit the generalizability of our findings to other cultural contexts. Second, our reliance on retrospective interviews, though supplemented with other data sources, may not capture all aspects of the performative processes we studied. Third, our theoretical framework, while comprehensive, may not account for all factors influencing educational performativity in organizational settings.

Conclusion

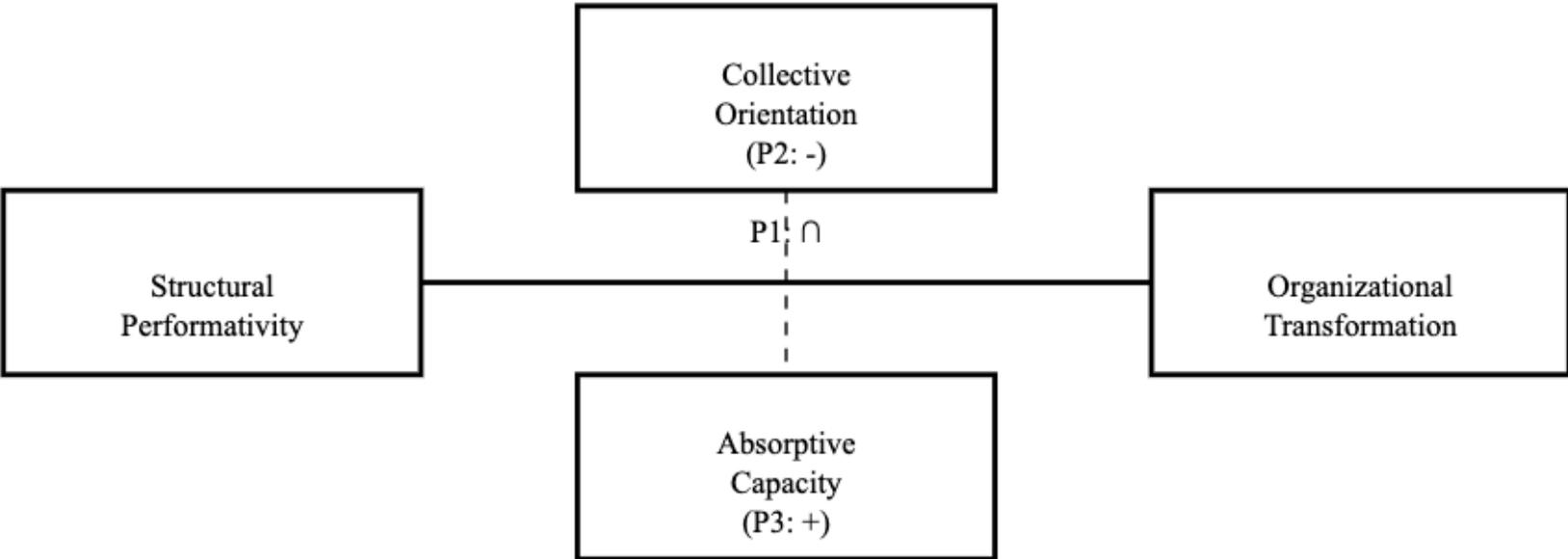
Our study advances understanding of how soft skills education performatively shapes organizational realities in cross-cultural contexts. By examining the complex interplay between structural performativity, cultural values, and absorptive capacity, we reveal how educational practices can transform organizations while navigating cultural and capability-based boundaries. These insights contribute to both theory and practice in management education and organizational transformation.

The findings demonstrate that successful organizational transformation through soft skills education requires careful attention to three key elements: maintaining optimal levels of international connection, aligning new practices with cultural values, and developing appropriate knowledge integration capabilities. Organizations that effectively balance these elements can achieve sustainable transformation that enhances their competitive position while maintaining cultural integrity.

Looking forward, the increasing importance of cross-cultural management education, particularly in emerging economies, suggests that understanding these performative dynamics

will become even more critical. Future research should continue to explore how educational practices shape organizational realities across different cultural and institutional contexts.

Figure 1. The Theoretical Framework



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