A STUDY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-LEADERSHIP AND CAREER ADAPTABILITY OF H UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BEIJING CITY, CHINA

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Abstract: This study aimed to understand the current status level of self-leadership and career adaptability, analyze the differences in different demographic backgrounds, and explore the correlation between self-leadership and career adaptability among H University students. Convenience sampling was used for the questionnaire survey. There were 384 valid questionnaires for this study. Descriptive statistics, independent sample t-tests, one-way ANOVA analysis, and Pearson correlation analysis were used for data statistics. The current status level of self-leadership among students was high. The current status level of career adaptability was moderate. There were significant differences in self-leadership in terms of gender, grade, place of origin, and class cadres. Male students had higher levels of self-leadership than female students. Freshmen had lower levels of self-leadership than other grades. Urban students had higher levels of self-leadership than rural students. Class cadres had a higher level of self-leadership than non-class cadres. There were significant differences in career adaptability in terms of place of origin and class cadres. Urban students had a higher level of career adaptability than rural students. Class cadres had a higher level of career adaptability than non-class cadres. There was a significant positive correlation between self-leadership and career adaptability among H University students. Finally, put forward suggestions, such as focusing on weak dimensions, conducting specialized ability improvement training, giving full play to the leading role of advantageous groups to promote overall ability improvement, and strengthening interdisciplinary cooperation to build an integrated training system.

Keywords: University Students, Self-leadership, Career Adaptability, H University in Beijing

Introduction

In the globalized academic development of education, higher education was increasingly

focusing on cultivating students' overall qualities and global competitiveness. Self-leadership, a concept that has been explored and developed by Western developed countries for more than three decades, has been widely applied in education, business, government, and other fields and has become a model of global learning (Christopher & Charles, 2013). It was not only regarded as a key element of individual growth, promoting personal progress, but also enhancing the overall effectiveness of organizations and societies (Jeffery, Houghton & Trudy, 2012). International leading companies have incorporated self-leadership into their employee training systems to enhance employees' self-management and motivation capabilities. The education sector was not lagging either. It was committed to improving the quality of education and the level of talent cultivation by strengthening research and application of self-leadership (Gregory et al., 1997). In China, with the vigorous development of higher education and the deepening of educational reform, the cultivation of self-leadership among university students has gradually gained attention. However, compared with the West, China still lags in self-leadership education, lacking systematic development of students' leadership and career adaptability (Chen et al., 2014; Liu, 2017).

Meanwhile, with the complex and changeable employment environment and the increasing employment pressure in China, it was particularly important to cultivate the career adaptability of university students and help them smoothly transition to the workplace. Self-leadership is an important component of university students' overall qualities, was an important yardstick for measuring how individuals manage themselves, stimulate their potential, lead their teams, and respond to challenges (Sun, 2021). An individual's internal ability plays a positive role in promoting positive emotions among university students, enhancing self-efficacy, and improving professional commitment and career development (Zhang & Li, 2020). Career adaptability, as a key indicator of an individual's ability to cope in a complex and changing career environment, was closely linked to self-leadership. They were not only the basis of an individual's cognition and behavior, but also the key to responding to social challenges (Liu & Zhang, 2022).

In conclusion, by developing self-leadership, university students could better plan their development paths, set clear goals, integrate resources, stand out in the competition, and face the complex and changeable future of society. Self-leadership will become the key for university students to adapt to changes, flexibly adjust strategies, and deal with uncertainties with innovative thinking (Park & Han, 2015). It was crucial for enhancing the employability and career adaptability of university students (Zhao & Fu, 2020).

Research Objectives

(1) To understand the current self-leadership and career adaptability among H University students in Beijing.

(2) To analyze the differences in self-leadership and career adaptability among H University

students in Beijing under different demographic backgrounds (gender, grade, place of origin, and class cadres).

(3) To explore the correlation between self-leadership and career adaptability among H University students in Beijing.

Literature Review

Research on the Self-leadership

Self-leadership was first proposed by Manz (1986), a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. It was an extension of the theory of self-management, which involves self-positioning, self-motivation, and self-control of an individual to achieve their goals. The concept of self-leadership originated from the theory of intrinsic motivation and the theory of social cognition. In intrinsic motivation theory, an individual's ability to observe intrinsic motivation through the perception of successful experiences and potential experiences. Leadership is the act of a leader imposing leadership on a subordinate. Houghton et al. (2004) proposed that self-leadership refers to leadership ability as well as leadership behavior. Sampl et al. (2017) argued that self-leadership refers to an individual's ability to influence themselves through self-direction and self-motivation to achieve results. Jeffery et al. (2012) pointed out that the nine ways to improve self-leadership, namely natural rewards, self-rewards, success anticipation, self-observation, belief and assumption evaluation, self-goal setting, self-conversation, self-reminder, and self-punishment. The premise for an individual to accept the influence of a leader's leadership behavior was that the individual believed the leadership behavior imposed on them by the leader was legitimate, reasonable, necessary and beneficial (Huang et al., 2016). The three classic strategies form the theoretical basis of self-leadership, while the nine methods serve as the basis for evaluating and measuring self-leadership. Therefore, based on the self-regulation theory, this study elaborated on the concepts of the following dimensions with three classic strategies and nine measurement methods.

The measurement of students' self-leadership, Anderson & Prussia (1997), which broke down self-leadership into 10 dimensions. It included "self-goal setting ", "self-reward", "self-punishment", "self-observation", "self-reminder", "self-concealment", "self-conversation", "natural reward", "success anticipation " and "belief assessment". This study developed the Self-leadership revised Questionnaire by Houghton & Neck (2002) based on Anderson's Self-leadership Questionnaire (RSLQ), establishing nine dimensions: Belief assessment, self-punishment, self-observation, natural rewards, self-goal setting, self-conversation, self-reward, success anticipation, self-reminder, nine dimensions. This study agrees with the definition of this concept and will also be investigated as the core of the study.

Young et al. (2016) indicated that students' self-leadership levels were not affected by gender. It could also be said that with the progress of society and the popularization of gender equality concepts. Age was also an important factor influencing self-leadership. As students grow older, their self-

awareness, self-motivation, and self-management abilities gradually improve. Ma & Sun (2014) showed that students had stronger self-leadership at higher grades, and the level of self-leadership was positively correlated with grade level. Zhao & Zhou (2017) suggested that socioeconomic status was another important factor influencing students' self-leadership. Students from families of different socioeconomic status had differences in educational resources, growth environment and opportunities, and these differences may affect the development of their self-leadership.

Research on the Career Adaptability

The concept of "career adaptability" originated from Super's theory of career development and was formerly known as "career maturity". The "career adaptability" as the ability of an individual to actively adapt to the changing and evolving career environment and career tasks at different stages of life and to maintain a balance and harmony between the person and the career environment. Later, Savickas & Porfeli (2012) revised the concept of career adaptation to the state of readiness and mental resources an individual needs to deal with current or future career development tasks. Based on the theory of career construction, Gregor et al. (2021) believed that an individual's career development was an adaptation process in terms of resources for preparation and responses to the environment. Thus an individual's career adaptation was based on interpersonal and social processes as well as personal factors. Bai (2023) believed that career adaptability was the ability of an individual to actively adjust themselves to adapt to the unpredictable changes in career roles, tasks, and circumstances in the future and to maintain harmony and balance with the external environment in the process. According to the theory of career development, Savickas & Porfeli (2012) divided the Career Adaptability Questionnaire into four dimensions for university students: career focus, career control, career curiosity, and career confidence. Savickas (1997) argued that career adaptability was an individual's ability to combine their various career roles, including career focus, career control, career curiosity, and career confidence. The researchers of Creed et al. (2009) divided career adaptability into five dimensions based on Savickas' theoretical model: career planning, career exploration, self-exploration, career decision-making, and self-adjustment. Savickas & Porfeli (2012) divided the Career Adaptability Questionnaire (CAAS) into four dimensions for university students: career focus, career control, career curiosity, and career confidence. This study provided an important theoretical basis and practical guidance for evaluating and improving the career adaptability of university students.

In the context of Chinese culture, the career adaptability of university students was studied in depth. Zhao et al. (2015) found that the career adaptability of Chinese university students, in addition to the four dimensions proposed by Savickas, also included two dimensions with Chinese characteristics: career adaptation and career interpersonal. That is, the career adaptability of Chinese university students was a multi-dimensional and multi-level structural system composed of six dimensions: career focus, career control, career curiosity, career confidence, career adjustment and career interpersonal. Jiang & Song (2021) divided career adaptability into four dimensions: career

preparation, career exploration, career decision-making, and career adaptation. This scale provided an effective tool for assessing and enhancing the career adaptability of university students and has high application value. In addition, Jiang et al. (2025) divided career adaptability into six dimensions: career focus, career control, career curiosity, career confidence, career optimism, and understanding of the working world. Based on these dimensions, the researchers developed corresponding career adaptation scales and verified the reliability and validity of the scales through empirical studies.

Xu (2019) revealed the significant differences in gender variables during university students' career development, providing empirical evidence for further understanding the gender differences in university students' career adaptability. Jiang et al. (2025) also found that factors such as gender, grade, family background, school factors and the number of social practices participated in had a significant impact on the career adaptability of university students. Liu et al. (2025) found that the career adaptability of university students decreased with grades, improved slightly in Junior, and dropped again in Senior, which may be related to factors such as study pressure and career planning awareness among students of different grades. This study revealed the influence of gender and grade on career adaptability.

Research on the Relationship between Students' Self-leadership and Career Adaptability

Chang & Zang (2019) showed that self-leadership not only directly promoted the improvement of students' career adaptability but also enhanced their resilience in career development through a series of mediating mechanisms, such as professional commitment. Specifically, students with strong self-leadership tended to be better able to plan their studies and careers, demonstrating a higher level of professional commitment. This commitment was not only reflected in the love and dedication to the major but also the positive attitude and adaptability when facing career challenges. In addition, Xu (2019) found that social support plays an important moderating role between self-leadership and career adaptability. In particular, in a low social support environment, the role of self-leadership was more prominent, becoming a key factor for students to improve their career adaptability. The results of Bao et al. (2024) showed that social support played a moderating role between self-leadership and career adaptability. That self-leadership had a stronger positive predictive effect on career adaptability in the low social support group, providing a strong reference for this study.

Methodology

The research subjects of this study were students of H University in Beijing, China. A questionnaire survey was conducted using convenient sampling, with Krejcie & Morgan (1970) as the standard. A total of 29,566 students of the university, 379 questionnaires should be distributed as research samples. To ensure that the final number of questionnaires obtained was no less than 379, a total of 387 questionnaires were distributed in this study. And 384 valid questionnaires were retained in the end, with an effective recovery rate of the effective return rate reached 99.22%.

The questionnaire on the self-leadership of university students originated from the Chinese version of the Self-leadership Assessment Questionnaire translated by Chinese scholar Wang (2014) by Houghton & Neck (2002), which applied to the assessment of self-leadership. The Chinese version consists of 35 items in nine dimensions (belief assessment, self-punishment, self-observation, natural rewards, self-goal setting, self-conversation, self-reward, success anticipation, self-reminder). The overall Cronbach's α value of the university students' self-leadership questionnaire was 0.970, and the Cronbach's α values of each dimension ranged from 0.751 to 0.880, all above 0.7. The KMO was 0.952, and the significance of the Bartlett test was 0.000, indicating suitability for factor analysis. The principal component analysis method was used for the factor analysis, and the cumulative variance explanation rate of the common factors was 66.737%. It indicated that the questionnaire on self-leadership among university students had good reliability and validity. The career adaptability survey scale for university students in this study was derived from the Career Adaptability Questionnaire of Savickas & Porfeli (2012). It was divided into four dimensions: career focus (1-6), career control (7-12), career curiosity (13-18), and career confidence (19-24). overall Cronbach's α value for career adaptability of university students was 0.912, and the Cronbach's α values for each dimension ranged from 0.764 to 0.813, all above 0.7. The KMO was 0.837, and the significance of the Bartlett test was 0.000, indicating suitability for factor analysis. The principal component analysis method was used for the factor analysis, and the cumulative variance explanation rate of the common factors was 72.585%. It indicated that the questionnaire on career adaptability among university students had good reliability and validity.

Results

Demographic Analysis of Questionnaire Participants

In this questionnaire survey, the demographic backgrounds of the 384 questionnaires retrieved in this study, in terms of gender, 135 were male, accounting for 35.2%, and 249 were female, accounting for 64.8%. In terms of grade, there were 88 freshmen, accounting for 22.9%; 107 sophomores, accounting for 27.9%; 90 juniors, accounting for 23.4%; 99 seniors, accounting for 25.8%. In terms of place of origin, 227 students were from urban areas, accounting for 59.1% and 157 were from rural areas students, accounting for 40.9%. In terms of class cadres, 78 students were class cadres, accounting for 20.3%, and 306 students were non-class cadres, accounting for 79.7%.

Descriptive Statistics on the Levels of Self-leadership and Career Adaptability among H University Students

1) Using descriptive statistical analysis, examine the overall level of self-leadership among H University students. According to the analysis results in Table 1, it could be seen that self-leadership was generally at a high level (M=3.87), indicating that the current status level of self-leadership among H University students was good. Scores in all dimensions were also at a high level. According to the scores from high to low sequence for self-observation (M = 3.95) > belief assessment (M = 3.91) > self-

rewards (M = 3.91) > self-goal setting (M = 3.90) > natural reward (M = 3.88) > self-punishment (M = 3.86) > self-conversation (M = 3.85) > successfully anticipation (M = 3.83) > self-reminder (M=3.73).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistical of Self-leadership of H University Students

Dimensions	N	M	SD	Interpretation
Belief assessment	384	3.91	0.662	High
Self-punishment	384	3.86	0.695	High
Self-observation	384	3.95	0.737	High
Natural rewards	384	3.88	0.708	High
Self-goal setting	384	3.90	0.745	High
Self-conversation	384	3.85	0.771	High
Self-reward	384	3.91	0.778	High
Success anticipation	384	3.83	0.860	High
Self-reminder	384	3.73	0.892	High

2) Using descriptive statistical analysis, examine the overall level of career adaptability of students at H University. According to Table 2, the overall level of career adaptability was at a medium level (M=3.25), indicating that the current status level of career adaptability of H University students was moderate. Scores in all dimensions were also at a medium level, ranked from high to low as career curiosity (M=3.44)> career confidence (M=3.28)> career control (M=3.18)> career focus (M=3.10).

Table 2: Descriptive Statistical of Career Adaptability of H University Students

Dimensions	N	M	SD	Interpretation
Career focus	384	3.10	0.686	Moderate
Career control	384	3.18	0.635	Moderate
Career curiosity	384	3.44	0.690	Moderate
Career confidence	384	3.28	0.684	Moderate
Overall career adaptability	384	3.25	0.557	Moderate

Differences in Self-leadership and Career Adaptability among H University Students under Different Demographic Backgrounds

The independent sample t-test was used to measure the differences in self-leadership and career adaptability among H University students in terms of gender, place of origin, and whether they were class cadres. One-way analysis of variance was used to measure the differences in self-leadership and career adaptability among H University students by grade.

According to Table 3, the overall t-value of self-leadership was 2.822, and P<0.01, reaching a

significant level, indicating that there were significant differences in self-leadership among H University students from different places of origin, and the self-leadership level of urban students was higher than that of rural students. Among the various dimensions of self-leadership, belief assessment (T=2.812, P=0.005), self-observation (T=2.229, P=0.027), natural rewards (T=2.948, P=0.003), self-goal setting (T=2.681, P=0.008), and self-conversation (T=2.846, P=0.005), self-reward (T=2.782, P=0.006) was significantly different from success anticipation (T=2.251, P=0.025) and self-reminder (T=2.336, P=0.020) in terms of place of origin. At the same time, self-punishment did not reach a significant level.

Table 3: Differences in Self-leadership among H University Students in Terms of Places of Origin

Dimensions	Place of origin	N	M	SD	T	P
Belief assessment	Urban	227	4.00	0.554	2.812	.005**
	Rural	157	3.79	0.785		
Self-punishment	Urban	227	3.91	0.622	1.604	.109
	Rural	157	3.79	0.797		
Self-observation	Urban	227	4.02	0.645	2.229	.027*
	Rural	157	3.84	0.850		
Natural rewards	Urban	227	3.97	0.604	2.948	.003**
	Rural	157	3.75	0.809		
Self-goal setting	Urban	227	3.99	0.639	2.681	.008**
	Rural	157	3.77	0.855		
Self-conversation	Urban	227	3.95	0.696	2.846	.005**
	Rural	157	3.71	0.867		
Self-reward	Urban	227	4.01	0.632	2.782	.006**
	Rural	157	3.77	0.921		
Success anticipation	Urban	227	3.92	0.755	2.251	.025*
	Rural	157	3.71	0.983		
Self-reminder	Urban	227	3.82	0.816	2.336	.020*
	Rural	157	3.60	0.987		
Overall self-leadership	Urban	227	3.95	0.541	2.822	.005**
	Rural	157	3.75	0.787		

Note: *p< .05, **p< .01

According to Table 4, the overall of career adaptability was T=3.198, and P<0.01, reaching a significant level. It indicated that there were significant differences in career adaptability among H University students from different places of origin, and the level of career adaptability of urban students

was higher than that of students from rural. Among the various dimensions of career adaptability, there were significant differences in the places of origin for career focus (T=1.988, P=0.047), career control (T=2.991, P=0.003), career curiosity (T=2.884, P=0.004), and career confidence (T=2.728, P=0.007).

Table 4: Differences in Career Adaptability among H University Students in Terms of Places of Origin

Dimensions	Place of origin	N	M	SD	T	P
Career focus	Urban	227	3.15	0.653	1.988	.047*
	Rural	157	3.01	0.733		
Career control	Urban	227	3.26	0.607	2.991	.003**
	Rural	157	3.06	0.658		
Career curiosity	Urban	227	3.52	0.655	2.884	.004**
	Rural	157	3.31	0.734		
Career confidence	Urban	227	3.36	0.666	2.728	.007**
	Rural	157	3.17	0.708		
Overall career adaptability	Urban	227	3.32	0.527	3.198	.002**
	Rural	157	3.14	0.589		

Note: *p< .05, **p< .01

Relationship between Self-leadership and Career Adaptability of H University Students

Table 5: Matrix Analysis of Correlation between Self-leadership and Career Adaptability of H University Students

Dimensions	Career Focus	Career Control	Career Curiosity	Career Confidence	Overall Career Adaptability
Belief assessment	.628**	.631**	.592**	.582**	.740**
Self-punishment	.487**	.536**	.454**	.389**	.566**
Self-observation	.571**	.582**	.516**	.509**	.662**
Natural rewards	.602**	.626**	.598**	.566**	.727**
Self-goal setting	.593**	.586**	.562**	.518**	.687**
Self-conversation	.549**	.599**	.562**	.504**	.673**
Self-reward	.491**	.579**	.445**	.447**	.595**
Success anticipation	.532**	.552**	.500**	.490**	.630**
Self-reminder	.583**	.623**	.566**	.523**	.697**
Overall self-leadership	.641**	.678**	.611**	.577**	.761**

Note: * p< .05, **p< .01

The relationship between self-leadership and career adaptability among H University students was investigated through Pearson correlation analysis. According to Table 5, the correlation coefficient between the overall self-leadership and overall career adaptability was 0.761, and P<0.01, reaching a significant level, indicating that there was a significant positive correlation between self-leadership and career adaptability of H University students. The correlation coefficients between each dimension of self-leadership and the overall career adaptability reached a significant level, that is, a significant positive correlation. There was a significant positive correlation between each dimension of career adaptability and self-leadership as a whole.

Discussion

To Discuss Current Status Level of Self-leadership and Career Adaptability among H University Students

The research results showed that the differential leadership style of teachers in private colleges was at a moderate level, which was basically consistent with previous research results. In private colleges, differential leadership styles might be more common (Lin, 2020). The level of deviant behavior was low. In private colleges, teachers might have less such behavior, which might be related to higher moral standards, professional responsibility and team spirit. The level of psychological capital was high. In private colleges, teachers might have this kind of psychological state, which might be related to factors such as their love for the profession, their investment in education and their concern for students.

To Discuss the Differences in Self-leadership and Career Adaptability among H University Students in Different Demographic Backgrounds

The results showed that there were multiple influencing factors behind the significant differences in self-leadership among H University students in terms of gender, grade, place of origin, and whether they were class cadres. From a gender perspective, male students had higher levels of self-leadership than female students, and the results of this study were consistent with those of Young et al. (2016) and Lin (2020).

Males were often encouraged to show traits such as independence and decisiveness, and this social culture subtly prompts males to develop the ability of self-decision-making and self-management at an earlier age. Grade differences were also shown in the study by Ma & Sun (2014). Among them, freshmen had just entered university from high school and faced a huge change in learning mode and living environment. They had not yet fully adapted to the relatively autonomous learning and living rhythm of the university. During high school, students study under the strict supervision of teachers and parents and rely on external urging. In terms of place of origin, urban students had a higher level of self-leadership than rural students. Zhao & Zhou (2017) also reached a similar conclusion, indicating that urban educational resources were relatively abundant. Students were exposed to diverse forms of

education and social activities from an early age and had more opportunities to participate in club organizations, social practice, etc. He et al. (2023) also reached a similar conclusion, indicating that being a class cadre means taking on more responsibilities and tasks, such as organizing class activities and coordinating relationships among classmates.

The research results showed that there were significant differences in career adaptability among H University students in terms of their place of origin and whether they were class cadres, and the causes could be analyzed from different perspectives. In terms of place of origin, urban students had a higher level of career adaptability than rural students. Fang & Ji (2024) also found consistent results, indicating that cities had a higher level of economic development and a more diverse industrial structure, providing students with more opportunities to learn about different occupations. Urban students could broaden their career horizons and keep abreast of industry trends by visiting enterprises, attending career lectures, etc., and thus better plan their careers. Liu et al. (2025) found that students who served as class cadres developed interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills in the process of communicating and collaborating with teachers and classmates, which were crucial for career adaptation.

To Discuss the Relationship between Self-leadership and Career Adaptability among H University Students

The results showed that self-leadership was significantly positively correlated with career adaptability among H University students, and there were also varying degrees of positive correlation in each dimension. Other previous studies supported this conclusion, including Chang & Zang (2019) and Bao et al. (2024). This study suggested that the conclusion was mainly based on the synergy of multiple aspects. On the one hand, the core competencies of self-leadership, such as self-observation and goal setting, were the foundation of students' self-management and growth, which could encourage students to actively focus on career development and explore career fields, thereby enhancing their sense of career control and confidence and promoting the improvement of career adaptability. The development of these two competencies promoted each other. On the other hand, the school's abundant educational resources and positive campus culture provide students with multiple practical platforms. Through participating in club activities, practical projects, etc., students use self-leadership to plan tasks, coordinate resources, and, at the same time, expand their career horizons and understand industry needs, enabling the two abilities to develop in a common growth environment. In addition, in the face of intense social competition and employment pressure, students, in order to gain an advantage in the job market, not only focus on enhancing their self-leadership to manage their studies and life efficiently but also strive to develop career adaptability to cope with career changes. The two work together in response to social demands, showing a significant positive correlation.

Conclusion

Conclusion 1: The current status level of self-leadership among students at H University in Beijing was good, with the highest score of self-observations and the lowest score of self-reminders among all dimensions.

The current status of career adaptability among H University students in Beijing was moderate, with the highest score for career curiosity and the lowest score for career focus among all dimensions.

Conclusion 2: There were significant differences in self-leadership among students of H University in terms of gender, grade, place of origin, and whether they were class cadres or not. Male students had higher levels of self-leadership than female students; Freshmen had lower levels of self-leadership than other grades; Urban students had higher levels of self-leadership than rural students; Class cadres had a higher level of self-leadership than non-class cadres.

There were significant differences in career adaptability among H University students in terms of their place of origin and whether they were class cadres or not. Urban students had a higher level of career adaptability than rural students; Class cadres had a higher level of career adaptability than non-class cadres.

Conclusion 3: There was a significant positive correlation between self-leadership and career adaptability among H University students, and the two variables also show varying degrees of positive correlation in each dimension.

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