

# History Teaching and National Identity among High School Students: The Mediating Role of Flow and the Moderating Role of Traditional Festival Ritual Sense

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**Abstract:** National identity among adolescents is a critical factor in a country's development. Grounded in Social Identity Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory, this investigation examines the impact of history teaching on high school students' national identity, incorporating flow as a mediator and traditional festival ritual sense as a moderator. A survey was conducted among 827 Chinese high school students using the History Teaching Scale, National Identity Scale, Flow Scale, and Traditional Festival Ritual Sense Scale. The results showed that: (1) Participants demonstrated elevated levels of history teaching and national identity, with moderately high scores in traditional festival ritual sense and flow; (2) Significant positive intercorrelations emerged among all four variables - history teaching, national identity, traditional festival ritual sense, and flow; (3) History teaching not only directly and positively predicted national identity but also exerted an indirect effect through flow mediation. Traditional festival ritual sense functioned as a significant moderator, with the positive influence of flow on national identity being particularly pronounced when traditional festival ritual sense was at lower levels. These findings underscore the pedagogical importance of enhancing history instruction while cultivating traditional festival ritual sense and flow in secondary education.

**Keywords:** national identity; history teaching; flow; traditional festival ritual sense; high school students

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The *Patriotism Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (2024) has reinforced the legal foundation and educational guidance for national identity. As a form of collective identity, national identity refers to an individual's subjective sense of belonging to a nation, encompassing their cognitive recognition of the country's political structure and spiritual values, as well as the resulting subjective feelings such as national concern and pride (Li Chunling & Liu Senlin, 2018). In the current era of unprecedented global changes, the wave of economic globalization and multiculturalism has challenged citizens' sense of identity. High school is a sensitive period for identity formation. Amid complex international dynamics and the infiltration of diverse values, historical nihilism, negative media narratives, and the decline of ritual sense in modern society are subtly eroding adolescents' national identity. Exploring high school students' national identity is thus crucial for shaping and fostering national identity in contemporary China.

The *Implementation Outline for Patriotic Education in the New Era* and the *Guidelines on Strengthening National Security Education across All Levels of Education in the New Era*, issued by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee, the State Council, and the Ministry of Education, emphasize enhancing students' national identity and social responsibility through history teaching and cultural education. International studies have demonstrated that history teaching is not merely knowledge transmission but a vital tool for shaping national identity and cultural belonging (Brito Román & Gámez Ceruelo, 2019; Santiago, 2013). Chinese scholars argue that understanding a nation's origins and historical experiences is key to forming a healthy national identity (Li Weiyan, 2017). The effectiveness of history teaching is influenced by factors such as teachers, students, and school environments (Cao Xia et al., 2012). Building on prior research, this study proposes **Hypothesis 1:** History teaching positively predicts national identity.

Social identity theory posits that individuals identify with their social groups cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally through social comparison. Swann et al. (2010) introduced the concept of identity fusion, suggesting that when social identity provides excessive self-verification resources, individual and social identities merge. This implies that while history teaching influences national identity, mediating variables must exist. Thus, this study introduces flow—a psychological state of complete immersion in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi & Lefevre, 1989)—experienced when students engage with current affairs. Flow arises under three conditions: clear goals, immediate feedback, and a balance between skill and challenge (Chen Xin, 2014). Research indicates that appropriate teaching strategies can stimulate intrinsic motivation, fostering flow (Qimuge & Lin Haihe, 2010). Flow has been categorized into three stages: antecedents, experience, and consequences (Chen, 2006). History teaching equips students with historical knowledge, fostering patriotism and creating the antecedents of flow. When students read news, deeper understanding and a sense of control enhance their flow experience. While prior studies have explored flow's impact on identity in various contexts, few examine its direct effect on national identity. Relevant research shows that flow in red tourism cities strengthens identity alignment, fostering patriotic responsibility and behavioral identification (Liu Yunyao et al., 2025). Similarly, flow in restorative urban environments (e.g., green spaces) enhances city identity (Xie et al., 2022). Bonaiuto et al. (2016) found that flow in high-skill, high-challenge activities strengthens identity and place attachment. Thus, this study proposes **Hypothesis 2**: Flow mediates the relationship between history teaching and national identity, i.e., history teaching indirectly influences national identity through flow.

Constructivist learning theory emphasizes the constructed, active, social, and situational nature of learning, highlighting the role of social interaction and cultural context in higher psychological development. Beyond flow's mediation, traditional festival ritual sense—a perception evoking strong resonance through traditional rituals (Tang Junqing, 2022)—may moderate flow's effect on national identity. Ruffini et al. (2016) found that interactive collective rituals (e.g., Catholic Mass) enhance flow and high-arousal emotions. Collective rituals also strengthen belonging, group identity, and internalization of cultural values (Hobson et al., 2018). Traditional festival rituals construct cultural national identity by awakening collective memory, performing cultural symbols, and consolidating family ties, while reinforcing political national identity through citizenship, national image, and ethnic identity (Zhao Xianghong & Liang Jun, 2022). Hence, **Hypothesis 3**: Traditional festival ritual sense moderates the effect of flow on national identity.

Prior research has largely examined national identity formation from macro-level economic, political, and cultural perspectives, neglecting individual-level mechanisms like history classrooms. Quantitative studies on history teaching and national identity are also scarce. This study systematically investigates how history teaching, flow, and traditional festival ritual sense interact to shape national identity.

## **2. PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS**

### **2.1. Participants**

This study adopted the cluster sampling method, selecting senior high school students from a middle school in Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, China as the research sample. The sampling was conducted by class, covering students from Grade 1, Grade 2, and Grade 3 of senior high school. Before the survey, consent was obtained from the school leaders, teachers, and the subjects themselves. The survey was conducted collectively, and the questionnaires were collected immediately after the students completed their answers. A total of 827 questionnaires were collected, and after excluding invalid ones, 780 valid questionnaires remained, with an effective rate of 94.3%. Among them, there were 426 boys (54.6%) and 354 girls (45.4%); 381 students from Grade 1 (48.8%), 353 from Grade 2 (45.3%), and 46 from Grade 3 (5.9%); 382 students who chose physics as their major subject (49%), 320 who chose history (10%), and 320 who had not chosen their major subjects (41%); 482 were the masses (61.8%) and 298 were league members (38.2%).

### **2.2. Measures**

#### *2.2.1. History Teaching Scale*

A self-developed History Teaching Scale was used, consisting of 3 items, which respectively examine the impact of high school history classes on students' patriotic attitudes, including patriotic feelings,

national pride, and the determination to strive for China's rise. A 5-point Likert scale was adopted, with the 5 answer options from "completely inconsistent" to "completely consistent" assigned 1 to 5 points respectively. A higher score indicates that high school history classes have a greater impact on students' patriotic attitudes. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the scale was 0.95. In addition, the content validity of the scale was confirmed through expert review and logical analysis, and the three items can effectively reflect the target construct. Item analysis showed that the CR values of all items were greater than 3.0 (CR values were 31.24, 29.52, and 38.05 respectively,  $p < 0.001$ ), indicating good discrimination. Although the number of items was small, the results of exploratory factor analysis (EFA) showed that the KMO value was 0.761, and the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). All items loaded on a single factor, with factor loadings all above 0.60 (0.97, 0.96, 0.94 respectively), explaining 91.24% of the total variance, indicating that the scale has a good unidimensional structure.

### *2.2.2. National Identity Scale*

The attitude measurement scale constructed by Li Chunling and Liu Senlin (2018) with reference to the public attitude survey methods commonly used by political scientists was adopted. The scale includes contents such as an individual's national identity, national sense of honor and responsibility, with a total of 5 items. A 5-point Likert scale was used, with the 5 answer options from "completely inconsistent" to "completely consistent" assigned 1 to 5 points respectively. A higher score indicates a stronger level of national identity. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient was 0.78.

### *2.2.3. Flow Scale*

Adapted from the study by Liz C. Wang et al. (2007), 1 item was selected from each of the four dimensions of attention, interest, curiosity, and control to measure the flow when reading current political news. A 5-point Likert scale was adopted, with the 5 answer options from "completely inconsistent" to "completely consistent" assigned 1 to 5 points respectively. A higher score indicates a stronger immersive experience of senior high school students when reading current political news. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient was 0.87.

### *2.2.4. Traditional Festival Ritual Sense Scale*

Adapted from Tang Junqing's (2022) research on college students' sense of ritual in traditional festivals. The understanding of college students' perception of the sense of ritual in traditional festivals is mainly obtained by understanding their cognition, knowledge, feelings, and attitudes towards traditional festivals, that is, it is necessary to know whether college students like to celebrate traditional festivals, what their attitudes towards the ritual procedures of traditional festivals are, and whether they think the ritual norms of festivals are necessary. A scale was made through such questions to separately measure college students' perception of the sense of ritual in traditional festivals. The scale consists of 5 items, using a 5-point Likert scale, with the 5 answer options from "completely inconsistent" to "completely consistent" assigned 1 to 5 points respectively. A higher score indicates a stronger sense of ritual in traditional festivals. In this study, its Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient was 0.92.

## **2.3. Statistical Analysis**

In this study, SPSS 27.0 software was used for descriptive analysis, correlation analysis, reliability and validity test, and mediating and moderating effect test of the data, and AMOS 26.0 software was used for common method bias test. In addition, to further explore the mediating and moderating effects between variables, this study used the PROCESS macro program in SPSS for analysis, and adopted the 95% confidence interval (95% CI) of the bias-corrected Bootstrap method (5000 repeated samplings) for significance test.  $p < 0.05$  indicates that the difference is statistically significant.

## **3. RESULTS**

### **3.1. Common Method Bias Test**

We employed the unmeasured latent method factor approach to examine common method bias (Xiong Hongxing et al., 2012). First, we constructed a first-order baseline model (M1) containing the four research variables using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), followed by a bifactor model incorporating a method factor (M2). Comparative analysis of model fit indices between the two models (M2-M1) revealed  $\Delta\chi^2/df = 0.024$ ,  $\Delta GFI = 0.002$ ,  $\Delta IFI = 0.001$ ,  $\Delta NFI = 0.001$ , and  $\Delta RMSEA = 0$ . All changes in

fit indices were below the threshold of 0.02, indicating that the inclusion of the common method factor did not significantly improve model fit. This suggests the absence of substantial common method bias in our measurements (Liu Siman et al., 2015).

**3.2. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Variables**

The descriptive statistical analysis of the selected variables in this study is presented in Table 1. The results indicate that high school students' average score for history teaching was 4.19, national identity averaged 4.03, traditional festival ritual sense had a mean score of 3.65, and the flow averaged 3.23. Pearson correlation analysis conducted among history teaching, national identity, traditional festival ritual sense, and flow revealed statistically significant positive correlations between all four variables, as shown in Table 1. These significant intercorrelations suggest that the relationships between these variables warrant further investigation.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Analysis of Variables

Variables	M	SD	r			
			1	2	3	4
1 History Teaching	4.19	1.04	1			
2 National Identity	4.03	0.82	0.74***	1		
3 Traditional Festival Ritual Sense	3.65	0.79	0.57***	0.59***	1	
4 Flow	3.23	1.01	0.40***	0.38***	0.51***	1

**Note:** \*  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . The same applies to subsequent tables.

**3.3. Mediation Analysis of Flow**

The mediation effect of flow between history teaching and national identity among high school students was examined using Model 4 in the SPSS PROCESS macro. Gender, grade level, subject selection, and political affiliation were included as control variables in the analysis. The results presented in Table 2 demonstrate that history teaching significantly predicted national identity ( $\beta=0.58, t=30.42, p<0.001$ ). When the mediator variable (flow) was introduced, history teaching remained a significant predictor of national identity ( $\beta=0.55, t=26.51, p<0.001$ ). Simultaneously, history teaching significantly and positively predicted flow ( $\beta=0.39, t=12.35, p<0.001$ ), and flow significantly and positively predicted national identity ( $\beta=0.08, t=3.68, p<0.001$ ).

**Table 2.** Mediation Effect Test of Flow

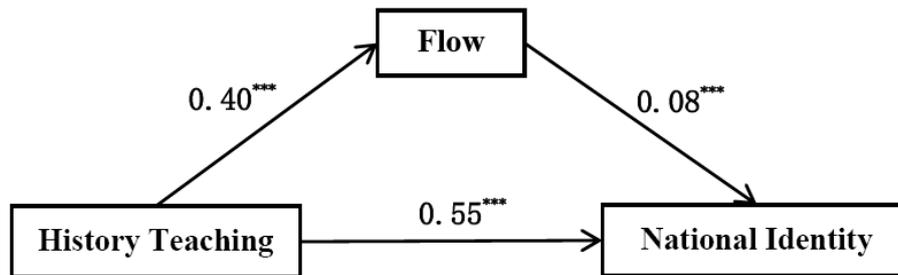
Regression Equations		Overall Fit Indices			Significance of Regression Coefficients	
Dependent Variable	Predictor Variables	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	$\beta$	t
National Identity		0.74	0.55	186.83***		
	Gender				0.08	1.92
	Grade Level				-0.05	-1.08
	Subject Selection				0.00	0.13
	Political Affiliation				0.03	0.77
Flow	History Teaching				0.58	30.40***
		0.41	0.17	31.49***		
	Gender				0.15	2.17
	Grade Level				-0.03	-0.33
	Subject Selection				-0.01	-0.24
National Identity	Political Affiliation				0.05	0.69
	History Teaching				0.40	12.35***
		0.74	0.56	160.46***		
	Gender				0.07	1.65
	Grade Level				-0.05	-1.05
National Identity	Subject Selection				0.01	0.17
	Political Affiliation				0.03	0.69
	History Teaching				0.55	26.51***
	Flow				0.08	3.68***

The direct effect of history teaching on national identity was significant, and the bootstrap 95% confidence interval for the mediation effect of flow did not include zero (see Table 3), indicating a

statistically significant indirect effect. These findings suggest that history teaching can directly predict students' national identity while also influencing national identity through the mediating role of flow, demonstrating that flow serves as a partial mediator in this relationship.

**Table 3.** *Decomposition of Total, Direct, and Mediation Effects*

Item	Effect Size	Standard Error	95%CI		Relative Mediation Effect
			Lower	Upper	
Total Effect	0.58	0.02	0.55	0.62	
Direct Effect	0.55	0.02	0.51	0.59	94.67%
Mediation Effect	0.03	0.01	0. 01	0.05	5.33%



**Figure 1.** *Mediation Effect Path Diagram*

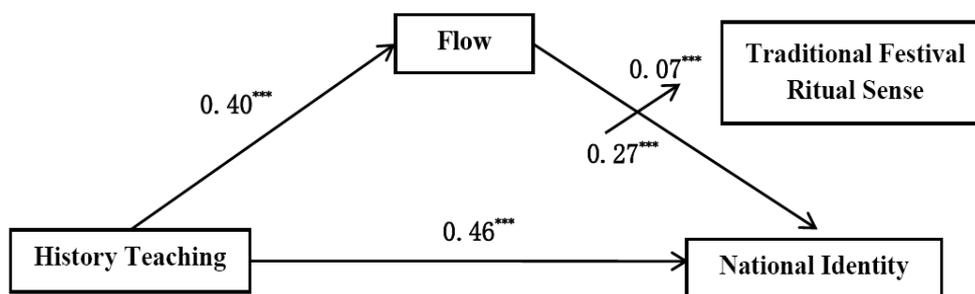
**3.4. Moderated Mediation Effect Analysis**

To examine the moderating effect of traditional festival ritual sense on the indirect effect, this study employed Model 14 in SPSS PROCESS macro v4.1 (which assumes the second stage of the mediation model is moderated). Using 5,000 bootstrap samples to estimate 95% confidence intervals, we tested the moderated mediation model (see Table 4 and Figure 2). The results demonstrated that after controlling for gender, grade level, subject selection, and political affiliation, both flow and traditional festival ritual sense significantly and positively predicted national identity. Moreover, the interaction effect between flow and traditional festival ritual sense on national identity was statistically significant.

**Table 4.** *Moderated Mediation Effect Test (n=780)*

Variables	Model 1			Model 2		
	(Dependent Variable: Flow)			(Dependent Variable: National Identity)		
	$\beta$	SE	t	$\beta$	SE	t
History Teaching	0.40	0.03	12.35***	0.46	0.02	20.46***
TFRS				0.47	0.07	6.86***
Flow				0.27	0.08	3.48***
Flow*TFRS				-0.07	0.02	-3.48***
Gender	0.15	0.07	2.17*	0.09	0.04	2.28*
Grade Level	-0.03	0.08	-0.33	-0.04	0.05	-0.87
Subject Selection	-0.01	0.05	-0.24	0.01	0.03	0.36
Political Affiliation	0.05	0.07	0.69	0.03	0.04	0.79
	$R^2=0.17, F=31.49^{***}$			$R^2=0.60, F=142.14^{***}$		

**Note:** TFRS = Traditional Festival Ritual Sense. The same applies to subsequent tables and figures.



**Figure 2.** *Diagram of the Moderated Mediation Effect*

This study conducted further simple slope analyses, with results showing that at low levels of traditional festival ritual sense (TFRS), flow significantly predicted national identity ( $\beta=0.07, p<.05$ ), whereas at high TFRS levels this predictive effect became non-significant ( $\beta=-0.04, p>.05$ ). These findings indicate that flow exerts a significant positive influence on national identity only when TFRS is low; this effect disappears when TFRS reaches average or high levels. The conditional indirect effects revealed significant mediation by flow between history teaching and national identity at low TFRS levels ( $ab=0.07, 95\%CI=[0.00, 0.06]$ ), but non-significant mediation at high TFRS levels ( $ab=-0.02, 95\%CI=[-0.04, 0.01]$ ).

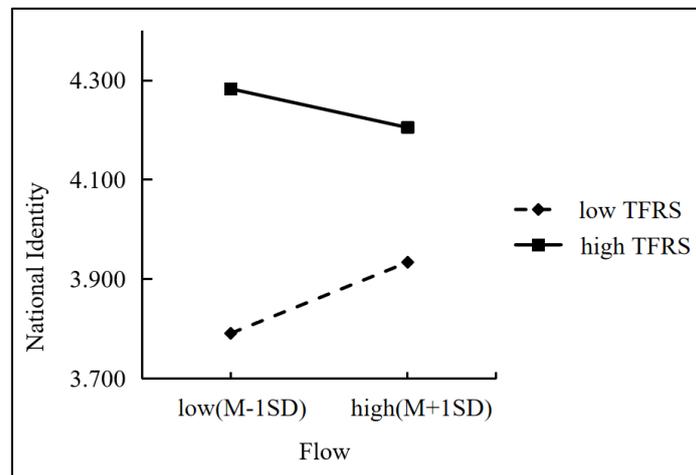


Figure 3. Moderating Effect Diagram of Traditional Festival Ritual Sense (TFRS)

#### 4. DISCUSSION

##### 4.1. Analysis of Current Status of National Identity, History Teaching, Flow, and Traditional Festival Ritual Sense Among High School Students

Regarding the overall level of national identity, descriptive statistics revealed that high school students' national identity averaged 4.03, significantly higher than the midpoint of 3 ( $p < 0.001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.25$ ), indicating a generally high level of national identity among participants. This finding aligns with previous research (Zhang Hong & Tang Hanwei, 2024). Items such as "If I were to be reborn, I would still choose to be Chinese" and "I often feel proud of my country's achievements" received the highest scores ( $M = 4.44$ ), reflecting students' strong emotional attachment and pride toward their nation.

Additionally, the average score for history teaching was 4.19, suggesting students held positive evaluations of their history curriculum and affirming its effectiveness in patriotic education. However, traditional festival ritual sense ( $M = 3.65$ ) scored moderately, indicating room for improvement in students' engagement with traditional Chinese culture. Flow scored the lowest ( $M = 3.23$ ), implying that while students exhibited moderate immersion when reading current affairs news, the presentation or content design of such materials may not sufficiently sustain their interest or deep engagement. Future research could explore ways to enhance immersion through content adaptation or innovative delivery methods.

##### 4.2. The Impact of History Teaching on National Identity

History teaching significantly and positively predicted national identity ( $\beta = 0.58, p < 0.001$ ), directly enhancing students' sense of national belonging. Drawing on Piaget's cognitive development theory, high school students are at a critical stage of cognitive and emotional growth, making history courses a pivotal avenue for fostering national identity. Cognitively, history teaching cultivates comprehensive understanding of national events, cultural traditions, and collective achievements, enabling students to categorize themselves as "members of the nation." Emotionally, exposure to their country's illustrious history and cultural superiority facilitates positive social comparison, evoking pride and identification. Behaviorally, it bridges personal and collective identities, transforming students from passive recipients of knowledge into active participants and inheritors of national history, thereby extending identity from internalization to action. In essence, history teaching shapes national identity by reinforcing group belonging and promoting active construction, achieving the unity of knowledge and practice.

As the primary platform for nurturing national identity, history classrooms should: (1) adopt scientifically compiled textbooks integrating narratives, facts, and critical reflection (Wu Yujun & Gu Haomai, 2018); (2) enhance teacher expertise by aligning content with national identity objectives and employing innovative methods like case-based or situated learning, supplemented by field trips to museums and historical sites (Yang Jinli, 2020); and (3) emphasize humanistic education through rich historical stories and cultural traditions to bolster pride, while incorporating global perspectives to avoid narrow nationalism (Chen Deyun, 2021).

#### **4.3. The Mediating Role of Flow**

Flow partially mediated the relationship between history teaching and national identity, supporting Hypothesis 2. Enriched historical knowledge enabled students to better comprehend current affairs, facilitating flow during news consumption. This immersive experience heightened their interest, focus, and ability to integrate news content with personal experiences, thereby fostering emotional resonance and internalized values that strengthened national identity.

These findings offer practical insights: (1) History teaching should incorporate current affairs analysis to bridge historical knowledge and real-world issues, enhancing critical thinking and civic awareness; (2) Media exposure positively contributes to national identity construction (Lü Shangbin & Huang Zewen, 2024), underscoring the need to optimize news content and encourage habitual engagement with current events to cultivate social responsibility.

#### **4.4. The Moderating Role of Traditional Festival Ritual Sense**

Traditional festival ritual sense positively predicted national identity, affirming its dual role as cultural heritage and identity reinforcement. It also moderated the flow–identity relationship (Hypothesis 3): At high ritual sense levels, flow’s impact became non-significant, as cultural identity was already robust; at low levels, flow significantly enhanced national identity, serving as a compensatory pathway. This highlights how ritual sense scaffolds identity formation by evoking collective memory and providing cultural context.

Policies like the Guidelines for Integrating Traditional Culture into School Curricula (2021) emphasize synergizing history education with cultural heritage. Schools should leverage festivals (e.g., Mid-Autumn moon gatherings, Dragon Boat races) to bolster cultural confidence. History teachers can integrate festival lore into lessons, while families should prioritize ritual practices at home.

In summary, this study enriches the theoretical framework of national identity research through multidisciplinary perspectives integrating psychology, pedagogy, and cultural studies. It makes innovative contributions by introducing flow as a mediating variable and being the first to examine the moderating role of traditional festival ritual sense, thereby pioneering new applications of psychological research in educational practice. Focusing on high school students through quantitative methods, the study provides an empirical foundation for understanding the psychological developmental trajectory of adolescents' national identity while offering theoretical references for formulating national identity education strategies in history instruction. However, this research has certain limitations. The sample exhibited relatively high homogeneity, failing to adequately represent diverse regional, cultural, and educational contexts. Additionally, while the cross-sectional design effectively revealed correlations among variables, it precludes definitive causal inferences. Future studies should expand sampling to include broader geographical and cultural diversity, while employing longitudinal designs with multiple time points to dynamically track the formation of national identity among high school students, thereby enabling more precise analysis of the long-term mechanisms through which history education shapes national identity.

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