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Beyond satisfaction: a dual-process psychological model of public service reuse

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Background: Understanding why individuals repeatedly engage with public services is essential for promoting sustained service utilization. Although satisfaction has long been considered the primary psychological determinant of service reuse, behavioral decisions often unfold within broader social environments, suggesting the presence of additional explanatory mechanisms.

Objective: This study investigates how individuals' service experiences give rise to reuse behavior by integrating affective responses and socially shared evaluations into a unified psychological model.

Method: Using a mixed-methods design, this study first conducted grounded theory analysis of in-depth interviews to inductively identify key psychological and contextual constructs underlying public service reuse and to develop a theoretical model. This study then validated the model using structural equation modeling (SEM) with survey data from 433 public legal aid service users in China.

Results: The results reveal two distinct yet complementary mediating pathways: an affective pathway, in which perceived service quality enhances public satisfaction and subsequently increases service reuse; and an attitudinal pathway, in which perceived service quality shapes public opinion, a socially constructed evaluation that independently predicts reuse behavior. Both mediators jointly transmit the effects of service capacity and perceived service quality on service reuse, supporting a dual-process model that incorporates emotional reactions and social-normative judgments.

Contributions: This study advances psychological research on service behavior by (a) identifying public opinion as a distinct attitudinal mediator alongside satisfaction, (b) demonstrating how individual experiences and socially shared perceptions operate in parallel to shape behavioral persistence, and (c) clarifying the formation pathway linking service capacity, perceived quality, psychological mediators, and behavioral outcomes. The mixed-methods design further enhances construct validity and provides a more comprehensive understanding of how public service experiences translate into repeated engagement.

KEYWORDS

affective and attitudinal pathways, mixed-methods, perceived service quality, public legal aid services, public opinion, satisfaction, service capacity, service reuse behavior

1 Introduction

Public services are designed not merely to provide one-time assistance, but to foster sustained engagement over time. Yet in many public systems, repeated engagement remains inconsistent—even when users report satisfactory experiences. For policymakers and service providers, this creates a practical and theoretical puzzle: if

users are satisfied, why do they not consistently return? Understanding the psychological mechanisms that shape public service reuse behavior is therefore essential for enhancing service sustainability, strengthening institutional legitimacy, and improving long-term policy effectiveness.

Existing research has predominantly explained service reuse through satisfaction-based models. Drawing on expectation–confirmation theory and related frameworks, prior studies consistently identify satisfaction as the primary psychological driver of continued use (Wang et al., 2020; Shin, 2021; Alkrajji and Ameen, 2022; Chan et al., 2022; Lin et al., 2023; So et al., 2024; Wu et al., 2024). Within these models, positive emotional responses following service encounters are assumed to translate directly into behavioral persistence. While this perspective has generated robust empirical support, it rests on an implicit assumption that individual affective evaluation alone is sufficient to explain reuse decisions.

However, satisfaction is fundamentally a post-consumption emotional appraisal. It reflects how individuals feel about their personal experience, but it does not necessarily capture the broader social and normative environment in which public service decisions unfold. Prior research has shown that high satisfaction does not always guarantee continued engagement (Kettinger and Smith, 2009). Public services differ from market-based services in that decisions to reuse are often influenced not only by personal emotions but also by perceptions of how others evaluate the service and whether continued engagement is socially endorsed. Emerging evidence indicates that behavioral decisions in public or collective settings are shaped not only by individual evaluations but also by socially constructed judgments and normative expectations (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Bandura, 1986; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004; Bicchieri, 2005; Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2017). Accordingly, decisions to reuse a public service may depend not only on personal satisfaction but also on how individuals perceive the general public evaluates the service. Despite its theoretical relevance, this social-evaluative dimension has received limited systematic attention in models of public service reuse.

Against this backdrop, the central question of this study is whether public service reuse behavior is driven solely by individual satisfaction, or whether parallel social-cognitive mechanisms independently shape behavioral persistence. To address this question, we develop a dual-process psychological pathway model of public service reuse. In this framework, the affective pathway refers to emotional responses derived from direct service experiences, primarily reflected in satisfaction. The attitudinal pathway refers to socially constructed evaluations—operationalized as public opinion—that represent shared judgments about service quality and institutional credibility. We propose that service capacity—defined as an organization’s ability to deploy and effectively utilize its resources and capabilities to deliver services—shapes perceived service quality, which in turn triggers two parallel mechanisms: (a) an affective pathway in which perceived service quality enhances satisfaction, and (b) an attitudinal pathway in which perceived service quality shapes public opinion. Satisfaction and public opinion then independently contribute to service reuse behavior.

This issue is particularly salient in the context of public legal aid services in China. Legal aid users often make repeated decisions

under conditions of vulnerability, information asymmetry, and reliance on institutional credibility. In such contexts, decisions may be shaped not only by personal experience but also by collective discourse regarding fairness, effectiveness, and trustworthiness. Examining this setting therefore provides a meaningful opportunity to explore how emotional and socially derived evaluations jointly influence behavioral persistence in public services.

Methodologically, this study adopts a sequential mixed-methods design to enhance theoretical grounding and empirical rigor. First, grounded theory analysis of in-depth interviews with legal aid arrangers, providers, and users was conducted to inductively identify key psychological and contextual constructs and to develop the proposed pathway model. Second, the model was empirically tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) based on survey data from 433 legal aid service users in county-level governments in China. It should be noted that while this study focuses on one type of public service and one national context, it offers a theoretically integrated framework for understanding how personal satisfaction and perceived public opinion jointly shape repeated engagement with public services. By distinguishing between individual emotional evaluation and perceived collective evaluation, this research extends existing satisfaction-based models in a conceptually precise manner.

2 Theoretical model and hypotheses

2.1 Theoretical model construction based on grounded theory

This study adopts a grounded theory qualitative analysis approach to analyze interview data concerning the legal aid service reuse behavior at the county-level governments in Shaanxi Province, China, to develop a theoretical model.

2.1.1 Context: service reuse of public legal aid services in China

Public legal aid services provide a particularly relevant context for studying the psychological mechanisms of public service reuse. These services refer to free or subsidized legal assistance provided by government-established or authorized institutions to protect the fundamental rights of economically disadvantaged individuals and other vulnerable groups, such as minors and persons with disabilities (Brooke, 2017). In recent decades, countries including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Japan, and China have institutionalized legal aid by embedding government responsibility into national legislation and integrating legal aid into broader public service frameworks (Brooke, 2017; Kuong, 2018; Yang et al., 2021). Ensuring repeated use of legal aid services has become an emerging challenge for local governments worldwide. In this context, service reuse is critical: sustained engagement improves system efficiency, ensures equitable access, and supports social justice. Despite its importance, the psychological processes that drive repeated engagement with legal aid remain underexplored.

In China, legal aid services are recognized as a government responsibility and constitute a vital part of the basic public service system, with their formal provision beginning with the enactment of the Legal Aid Regulations in 2003. According to these regulations, local governments at the county level and above are required to establish legal aid institutions that provide free or subsidized legal assistance—such as consultation, document drafting, and representation—to eligible applicants, including economically disadvantaged individuals and those involved in special cases such as minors. In terms of service delivery, the system has evolved through three main modes: direct government provision, subsidization, and contracting out. Currently, subsidization and contracting out have gradually supplanted direct government provision and now serve as the primary methods by which local governments in China deliver legal aid services.

This study focuses on county-level local governments in Shaanxi Province, China, for the following reasons. First, Shaanxi represents a province with a median level of economic development and population size in China, and it employs both subsidization and contracting out—two prevalent privatization modes—for legal aid services delivery. Therefore, it can effectively reflect the average provision level under the dominant provision modes in the country. Second, county-level governments constitute the most fundamental tier of legal aid services provision in China, serving the largest number of beneficiaries and handling the greatest volume and diversity of cases. Moreover, these local governments primarily serve parties involved in grassroots people's court cases, often at the trial stage, positioning them at the frontline for the realization of legal fairness and justice. Consequently, examining the service reuse behavior at this level carries significant practical and theoretical importance.

This study employs a stratified random sampling method to select typical cases from county-level governments across northern, central, and southern Shaanxi Province. Specifically, two county-level governments were randomly chosen from each region: Zhidan County in Yan'an City and Fugu County in Yulin City from northern Shaanxi; Yanta District in Xi'an City and Jintai District in Baoji City from central Shaanxi; and Liuba County in Hanzhong City and Luonan County in Shangluo City from southern Shaanxi. The participants included 32 individuals, comprising managers of legal aid institutions, lawyers, and legal aid service recipients. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted covering three main areas: basic information about the legal aid institutions, their service delivery modes, and the service reuse behavior. Each interview involved a team of 3 to 7 researchers interviewing one participant, lasting between 1 and 2 h. The interview data were transcribed and documented by the researchers on the same day.

2.1.2 Theoretical model: an affective–attitudinal dual-process model

This study adopted the grounded theory qualitative analysis method to identify key determinants of service reuse and develop the theoretical model. Grounded theory as a methodology for

theory generation, involves extensive data sampling and constant comparative analysis to identify core concepts that capture the essence of the phenomenon and to elucidate the relationships between these concepts, ultimately leading to the construction of a substantive theory (Strauss and Corbin, 2008). This approach is especially suitable for exploring new or under-researched domains, making it an ideal choice for the present study. This study applied the three-stage coding procedure of grounded theory—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (2008) to analyze the collected data (Strauss and Corbin, 2008).

The results of the open coding are summarized in Table 1, where five categories emerged from the data: service capacity, service quality, public opinion, public satisfaction, and service reuse.

Axial coding results (see Figure 1) reveal a relational framework among these five categories following the sequence of “service input → service output → Mediators → service outcome.” Specifically, local government legal aid agencies invest in service capacity, which produces service quality, and through the mediating effects of public satisfaction and public opinion, influences service reuse.

Through selective coding, the core category was identified as “service reuse,” with the storyline illustrating that the service reuse is achieved via input in service capacity, output of service quality, and is mediated by public satisfaction and public opinion. Based on these integrated analyses, a conceptual model was developed, as shown in Figure 2. The connotations of categories and detailed structural relationships among those categories will be elaborated in the following section.

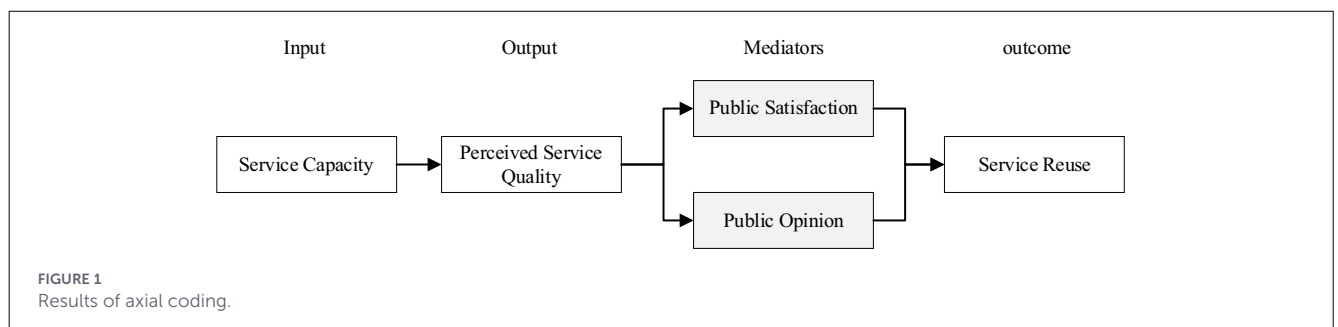
Robustness test. This study employed two methods to test the robustness of the results. Drawing on the approach used by Liu et al. (2021), we first invited other researchers to conduct qualitative analyses on randomly selected case data independently. Then we compared their findings with those of the present study to identify any discrepancies. Although some differences were observed in the specific conceptualizations, no differences emerged in the categories in terms of their conceptual meaning or quantity. Second, we conducted additional fieldwork to examine whether new concepts or categories would emerge. Using Xi'an City as an example, we randomly selected two county-level governments—Xincheng District and Gaoling District—that had not been included in the initial investigation. The analysis of the interview data collected in these areas did not reveal any new concepts or categories, indicating that data saturation had been achieved. Taken together, these findings suggest that the analytical results obtained in this study are robust and provide a reliable reflection of the legal aid service reuse behavior at county-level local governments in China.

2.2 Hypotheses development

Based on the results of the grounded theory qualitative analysis, this study proposes that service capacity shapes perceived service quality, which in turn triggers two parallel psychological mechanisms: (a) an affective pathway in which perceived quality

TABLE 1 Results of open coding.

Defining phenomena	Conceptualizing	Categorizing
a1-1 years of practice; a1-2 areas of expertise; a1-3 professional knowledge; a1-4 professional certifications; a1-5 educational background	A1 Professional background	A Service capacity
a2-1 case analysis; a2-2 application of legal provisions; a2-3 adoption of legal advice	A2 Professional competence	
b1-1 compliance with legal requirements; b1-2 adherence to professional ethics and discipline; b1-3 pre-trial preparation; b1-4 participation in court hearings; b1-5 completion of legal procedures	B1 Normativity	B Perceived service quality
b2-1 timely engagement; b2-2 timely scheduling coordination; b2-3 timely adjustment of legal strategy; b2-4 timely case updates; b2-5 timely case resolution	B2 Responsiveness	
c1-1 thoroughness and attention to detail; c1-2 diligence and responsibility; c1-3 professional reliability; c1-4 patience and enthusiasm; c1-5 kindness and sincerity	C1 Process satisfaction	C Public satisfaction
c2-1 reasonableness of legal solutions; c2-2 protection of legal rights and interests; c2-3 fulfillment of expectations; c2-4 balance of efficiency and quality; c2-5 fairness and justice	C2 Output satisfaction	
c3-1 overall service satisfaction; c3-2 satisfaction with lawyers; c3-3 satisfaction with government; c3-4 satisfaction with legal systems	C3 Outcome satisfaction	
d1-1 television coverage; d1-2 newspaper reports; d1-3 government documents and internal publications	D1 Traditional media opinion	D Public opinion
d2-1 social media coverage	D2 New media opinion	
e1-1 recognition; e1-2 trust; e1-3 dependence; e1-4 intention to reuse services	E1 Service reuse intention	E Service reuse
e2-1 reuse of services; e2-2 recommendation of services	E2 Service reuse behavior	



enhances satisfaction and (b) an attitudinal pathway in which perceived quality shapes public opinion.

2.2.1 Public satisfaction and service reuse

Public satisfaction is a dominant predictor of service reuse behavior across both commercial and public settings. Satisfaction is widely recognized as an affective reaction to service encounters, reflecting individuals’ emotional responses to their perceived experiences. Within behavioral psychology and decision-making research, satisfaction influences behavior primarily through emotional reinforcement and positive evaluation of prior experiences (Ajzen, 1991; Oliver, 2014). Numerous studies show that satisfaction strengthens trust, perceived value, and willingness to continue using services (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Jiang and Rosenbloom, 2005; Aburayya et al., 2020; Alkrajji and Ameen, 2022; Ochoa Rico et al., 2022).

Kotler and Keller (2015) define satisfaction as “a person’s feeling of pleasure or disappointment resulting from comparing a product’s perceived performance or outcome against his or

her expectations (Kotler and Keller, 2015)”. In public services, satisfaction refers to the subjective extent to which citizens feel their needs have been met while experiencing government-provided public services (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Public satisfaction has been shown to predict intention to re-engage, compliance, and continued participation (Dowding and John, 2007; Chodzaza and Gombachika, 2013; Aburayya et al., 2020; Ochoa Rico et al., 2022). When individuals perceive that a service meets or exceeds expectations, positive emotions emerge, increasing the likelihood of continued engagement. Accordingly, in public service contexts, satisfaction remains a robust predictor of reuse, representing an emotion-driven pathway by which perceived quality influences behavior.

Regarding the relationship between satisfaction and service reuse, two main perspectives exist. One posits a simple, direct positive relationship, where greater satisfaction leads to a higher possibility of service reuse (Fornell, 1992; Oliver, 1993; Anderson et al., 1994; Caruana and Fenech, 2005; Alkrajji and Ameen, 2022; Kim and Kim, 2024). The other suggests a potential non-linear relationship, with a “zone of indifference” where changes in satisfaction have minimal impact on service reuse (Heskett

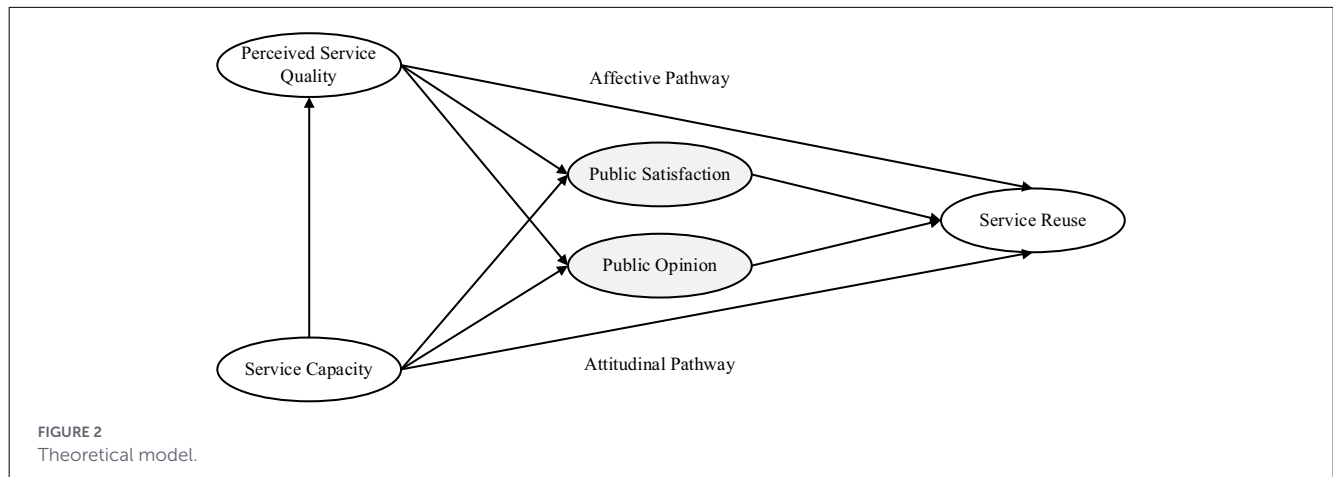


FIGURE 2
Theoretical model.

and Schlesinger, 1994), indicating variability in the strength of this effect. Nonetheless, both perspectives recognize a positive link between the two constructs.

Based on the above discussion, this study proposes that public satisfaction enhances service reuse by increasing individuals' intention and behavior to seek services again.

H1. Public satisfaction has a positive effect on public service reuse.

2.2.2 Public opinion and service reuse

Lippmann (2017) conceptualizes public opinion as the collective response of citizens to a “pseudo-environment”—an internalized, simplified version of reality shaped largely by media, stereotypes, and indirect experiences. As a specific manifestation of social ideology, public opinion generally refers to the shared attitudes or opinions held by a substantial number of citizens on a particular issue, often reflecting the interests, aspirations, and demands of specific classes, social strata, or groups.

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), individual behavioral intentions are directly shaped by behavioral attitudes and subjective norms, which represent perceived social pressure to engage or not engage in a particular behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Subjective norms capture perceived social pressure to act. Public opinion, however, reflects collective evaluation of the service rather than expectations of individual behavior. It can influence behavioral intention indirectly by shaping attitudes or reinforcing norms, operating through reputational and informational mechanisms.

As an antecedent of subjective norms, public opinion—by reflecting prevailing social ideologies—can significantly influence individual behavior. Theories of social influence also highlight the strong role that perceived collective sentiment plays in shaping individual judgment and behavior (Fazio, 1995; Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). Thus, public opinion surrounding public services is likely to affect recipients' willingness and behavior to seek services again. Research in public administration demonstrates that citizens rely on social cues and collective narratives when

forming perceptions of public agencies, particularly when facing information asymmetry or uncertainty (Moy and Scheufele, 2000). Public opinion acts as a social-cognitive mechanism: individuals integrate their personal experiences with socially shared interpretations to form behavioral decisions. Hence, public opinion may complement satisfaction by capturing the socially constructed dimension of evaluations that extend beyond personal affective reactions.

Based on these insights, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2. Public opinion has a positive effect on public service reuse.

2.2.3 Perceived service quality and service reuse

Perceived service quality, a concept first introduced by Grönroos, is regarded as subjective and is determined by customers' comparison between expected service quality and their actual service experience (Gronroos, 1983). This definition has been supported by numerous scholars (Garvin, 1984; Parasuraman et al., 1985; Vogels et al., 1989). Perceived service quality generally encompasses two dimensions: perceived outcome quality and perceived process quality (Gronroos, 1983). It is often reflected in aspects such as tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

Perceived service quality is a critical determinant of service reuse. There are two dominant views regarding this relationship: one suggests that perceived service quality has a direct and significant positive effect on service reuse (Parasuraman et al., 1985); the other posits that service quality influences service reuse indirectly through mediating variables such as satisfaction (Gronroos, 1983; Bolton and Drew, 1991; Cronin and Taylor, 1992; Fornell, 1992; Li and Shang, 2020; Zaato et al., 2023; Kim and Kim, 2024). Drawing from marketing and public service logic, service quality represents users' judgments of service attributes—such as reliability, professionalism, and responsiveness—which directly shape satisfaction (Anderson and Sullivan, 1993; Chodzaza and Gombachika, 2013; Oliver, 2014). In the public sector, multiple studies confirm that service quality

consistently predicts public satisfaction across governmental and administrative contexts (Chodzaza and Gombachika, 2013; Li and Shang, 2020; Alkrajji and Ameen, 2022; Ochoa Rico et al., 2022). Therefore, perceived service quality serves as the cognitive basis upon which affective judgments such as satisfaction are formed.

Additionally, qualitative analysis findings from this study indicate that perceived service quality can shape public opinion. Generally, higher levels of service capacity lead to better perceived service quality, which fosters positive public opinion and ultimately improves the possibility of service reuse.

Based on this discussion, this study argues that the perceived service quality may influence service reuse behavior both directly and indirectly through satisfaction and public opinion.

- H3. Perceived service quality has a positive effect on public service reuse.
- H4. Perceived service quality has a positive effect on satisfaction.
- H5. Satisfaction mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and public service reuse.
- H6. Perceived service quality has a positive effect on public opinion.
- H7. Public opinion mediates the relationship between perceived service quality and public service reuse.

2.2.4 Service capacity and service reuse

According to the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm, the uniqueness of an organization's resources and capabilities determines its ability to sustain competitive advantage and achieve superior performance (Barney and Clark, 2007). Resources encompass assets, information, technology, equipment, organizational processes, and characteristics, while capabilities refer to the effective utilization of these resources (Barney, 1991; Barney and Clark, 2007). This theory underscores the significance of differences in organizational service capacity for service reuse.

Prior studies in public administration and service management demonstrate that higher capacity enables organizations to reduce uncertainty, ensure responsiveness, and enhance perceived reliability—all of which translate into improved evaluations of service quality and satisfaction (Shin and Jhee, 2021; Khan and Han, 2023). Thus, service capacity is expected to exert its influence primarily through shaping perceived service quality, impacting satisfaction and public opinion, and ultimately determining whether recipients will seek public services again.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H8. Service capacity has a positive effect on public service reuse.
- H9. Service capacity has a positive effect on perceived service quality.
- H10. Service capacity has a positive effect on satisfaction.
- H11. Service capacity has a positive effect on public opinion.
- H12. Perceived service quality, satisfaction, and public opinion sequentially mediate the relationship between service capacity and public service reuse.

3 Methodology

3.1 Data collection

The data for this study were collected using a stratified sampling combined with random cluster sampling approach. To ensure procedural randomness, we first compiled a complete list of eligible city-level units. Using the RAND() function in Microsoft Excel, a random number was generated for each city. The list was then sorted in ascending order according to these random values, and the first six cities were selected as the city-level sample. No subjective filtering criteria were applied beyond basic eligibility requirements.

The six randomly selected cities in Shaanxi Province represent its three major regions: Northern Shaanxi (Yan'an and Yulin), Central Shaanxi (Xi'an and Baoji), and Southern Shaanxi (Hanzhong and Shangluo). All county-level governments (including counties, county-level cities, and districts) under these six cities constituted the county-level sample for this study. Within each selected city, 100 service users were randomly drawn from the county-level service user lists using the same Excel-based randomization procedure.

Prior to the formal survey, a pilot study was conducted using convenience sampling at the Yanta District Legal Aid Service Center in Xi'an. Thirty questionnaires were randomly distributed on-site. Based on respondents' feedback, item wording was revised to avoid ambiguity and unnecessary complexity. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed, with 100 questionnaires allocated to each of the six cities. In total, 457 responses were collected, yielding a response rate of 76.17%. Missing data were handled using Yang's (2005) method. After screening for missing values, 433 responses (94.75% of returned questionnaires) were deemed valid.

3.2 Measurement

The variables measured in this study were developed based on the results of the grounded theory qualitative analysis of legal aid services. All variables were measured through the perceptions of the respondents through the five-level Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). It should be noted that our study may suffer from common method variance (CMV) since both independent variables and dependent variables were measured through the survey of the perceptions of the same group of respondents (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We thus adopted the procedural approach proposed by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to eliminate the impact of CMV to the least extent. Specifically, we first did a psychological separation of measurement by adding a cover story to tell the respondents that the measurement of the independent variables is not related to that of the dependent variable. Then, respondents were also informed that anonymity was guaranteed and that there were no right or wrong answers. Besides, we also improved the items to avoid ambiguity and complexity, and to remove the social desirability and demand characteristics. Additionally, we applied the statistical procedure to test if our data was affected by CMV, which will be discussed later in the next section. Table 2 shows the measurements.

TABLE 2 Summary of measurements.

Variable	Dimension	Items
Service capacity	Professional background	A1. The legal aid practitioner possesses solid professional knowledge. A2. The legal aid practitioner has several years of professional experience. A3. The legal aid practitioner has passed the judicial examination or holds relevant qualifications. A4. The legal aid practitioner holds an associate degree or higher. A5. The cases handled by the legal aid practitioner (civil, criminal, and administrative) fall within their areas of expertise.
	Professional competence	A6. The legal aid practitioner's litigation claims or defense opinions are adopted. A7. The outcomes of legal aid cases meet the expectations of the aid recipients. A8. The legal aid practitioner conducts an accurate case analysis. A9. The legal aid practitioner accurately applies legal provisions.
Service quality	Normativity	B1. The legal aid practitioner's professional conduct complies with legal standards. B2. The legal aid practitioner adheres to professional ethics and disciplinary codes. B3. The legal aid practitioner conducts thorough pre-trial preparation. B4. The legal aid practitioner participates in court hearings. B5. The legal aid practitioner's service actions conform to legal procedures.
	Responsiveness	B6. The legal aid practitioner intervenes promptly after being assigned a case. B7. The legal aid practitioner adjusts or extends working hours as required by the case. B8. The legal aid practitioner promptly closes cases and submits case materials. B9. The legal aid practitioner flexibly adjusts handling methods and strategies during service provision. B10. The legal aid practitioner promptly informs the aid recipient about case progress and responds to inquiries during service provision.
Public satisfaction	Process satisfaction	C1. The legal aid practitioner handles cases with diligence and attention to detail. C2. The legal aid practitioner demonstrates a strong sense of responsibility and diligently completes tasks. C3. The legal aid practitioner's handling of cases is professionally reliable. C4. The legal aid practitioner handles cases with patience. C5. The legal aid practitioner's attitude is kind and sincere.
	Output satisfaction	C6. The legal aid practitioner proposes reasonable solutions. C7. The legal aid practitioner consistently safeguards the legitimate rights and interests of the aid recipient. C8. The legal aid practitioner goes above and beyond to meet the aid recipient's expectations. C9. The legal aid practitioner maximizes the recipient's interests through appropriate choices such as mediation, arbitration, or litigation. C10. The legal aid practitioner does not engage in collusion with third parties to harm the aid recipient's interests.
Public opinion	Outcome satisfaction	C11. Overall, I am satisfied with the legal aid services. C12. Overall, I am satisfied with the legal aid practitioner and their services. C13. Overall, I am satisfied with the government and its services. C14. Overall, I am satisfied with the laws.
	Traditional media opinion	D1. Overall, television media coverage and evaluations of government legal aid services are positive. D2. Overall, radio media coverage and evaluations of government legal aid services are positive. D3. Overall, newspaper media coverage and evaluations of government legal aid services are positive. D4. Overall, magazine media coverage and evaluations of government legal aid services are positive. D5. Overall, other traditional media (e.g., government documents, internal publications) coverage and evaluations of government legal aid services are positive.
Service reuse	New media opinion	D6. Overall, video platforms (e.g., long videos, short videos, live streaming platforms) report positively on legal aid services. D7. Overall, social media platforms report positively on legal aid services. D8. Overall, QandA platforms report positively on legal aid services. D9. Overall, self-media platforms report positively on legal aid services. D10. Overall, forum platforms report positively on legal aid services.
	-	E1. I recognize the legal aid services provided by the government. E2. I trust the legal aid services provided by the government. E3. I intend to choose government-provided legal aid services again. E4. I have repeatedly used legal aid services provided by the government. E5. I am willing to recommend the government's legal aid services to others.

3.3 Data analysis procedures

First, we computed Cronbach's alpha to assess internal consistency. All constructs demonstrated acceptable reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.6, meeting commonly accepted standards for exploratory research (Nunnally, 1978; Hair et al., 2006) (Professional Background: 0.637; Professional Competence: 0.668; Normativity: 0.799; Responsiveness: 0.782; Process Satisfaction: 0.724; Output Satisfaction: 0.621; Outcome Satisfaction: 0.663; Traditional Media Opinion: 0.796; New Media Opinion: 0.770; Service Reuse: 0.749). Two items (A4 and C10) were deleted based on the CITC (Corrected Item Total Correlation) value. Second, the results of Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) showed that the variance accounted for by the first factor is less than the informal rule-of-thumb criteria of 50%, indicating that our data was not affected by CMV. Third, we conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using SPSS 20.0. The results showed that all constructs had KMO values above 0.7, factor loadings above 0.5, and total variance explained (TVE) greater than 50%, indicating that the constructs possess satisfactory validity (Comrey and Lee, 1992; Hair et al., 2006; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). Fourth, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA, measurement modeling) enabled by AMOS 24.0 was performed to test convergent validity and discriminant validity. Fifth, a normality assessment showed the data had a normal distribution; Correlation estimates suggested no multicollinearity among variables; Outliers were identified and deleted based on the Mahalanobis distance analysis. Finally, structural equation modeling was performed following the procedures recommended by Byrne (2016).

4 Results

4.1 Measurement model

Measurement modeling was used to identify a set of questionnaire items that provided the best measurement reliability and data fit. For the measurement model, the χ^2/df was 2.476, which met the informal rule-of-thumb criteria that the ratio should be below 5 (Carmines and McIver, 1981; Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). Values for CFI (0.884) and TLI/NNFI (0.873) were greater than 0.8 and very close to 0.9 (Browne and Cudeck, 1993; Cangur and Ercan, 2015); values for SRMR (0.036) and RMSEA (0.076) were less than 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016); AIC(854.329) and ECVI (3.473) values were lower than that of both the saturated model (AIC = 1190, ECVI = 4.837) and the independence model (AIC = 5,400.411, ECVI = 21.953) (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2016), overall indicating an acceptable fit. Although the fit indices do not meet ideal thresholds, the model demonstrates acceptable fit given its exploratory nature, inclusion of multiple latent constructs, and moderate sample size, consistent with methodological recommendations to adopt more flexible standards (Marsh et al., 2004; Fan and Sivo, 2005; Mulaik, 2007; Peugh and Feldon, 2024; Nguyen, 2025).

Table 3 summarizes the properties of the measurement model. Indicators demonstrated convergent validity, as most of the

standardized factor loadings were higher than 0.5; all t values for their loadings were significant.

Discriminant validity reflects the distinctiveness of different constructs. In this study, we adopted the criterion proposed by Segars (1997), which suggests that discriminant validity is established when the average variance extracted (AVE) for each construct is greater than the squared correlation between constructs. Specifically, the test was conducted in three steps: (a) building models in which two factors were allowed to freely correlate; (b) fixing the correlation between the same pair of factors at 1; and (c) comparing the chi-square values between the unconstrained and constrained models. A significant chi-square difference ($p < 0.05$) indicates that the unconstrained model fits better, demonstrating discriminant validity between the two constructs.

Given that this study includes ten latent constructs, a total of 45 pairwise comparisons were conducted. All chi-square differences reached a statistically significant level (see Table 4), confirming that the constructs exhibit strong discriminant validity.

4.2 Structural model

Structural modeling can determine the causal relationships among variables. The χ^2/df was 3.142, which met the informal rule-of-thumb criteria that the ratio should be below 5 (Carmines and McIver, 1981; Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). Values for CFI (0.843) and TLI/NNFI (0.834) were greater than 0.8 and slightly below 0.9 (Browne and Cudeck, 1993; Cangur and Ercan, 2015); SRMR (0.075) was less than 0.08, RMSEA (0.083) was slightly above 0.08 (Hu and Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016); AIC (368.001) and ECVI (1.496) values were lower than that of both the saturated model (AIC = 380, ECVI = 1.545) and the independence model (AIC = 3055.820, ECVI = 12.422), overall indicating an acceptable fit (Byrne, 2016; Kline, 2016). No MIs associated with structural paths were present in the output. Thus, no further consideration was given to the inclusion of additional parameters. Figure 3 shows the standardized coefficients of the structural equation model. A Bias-Corrected Bootstrap test was then conducted to verify the mediating role of service quality, citizen satisfaction, and public opinion. Table 5 shows the results of the mediating effect test. In summary, the structural equation model shows that service capacity, service quality, citizen satisfaction, and public opinion are predictors of legal aid service reuse; service quality, citizen satisfaction, and public opinion play a chain mediating role between service capacity and service reuse.

5 Discussion

This study finds that service capacity enhances perceived service quality, which in turn activates two parallel psychological processes—satisfaction and public opinion—both of which independently influence service reuse behavior. These findings support a dual-process framework in which affective and attitudinal mechanisms operate simultaneously.

TABLE 3 Properties of the measurement model.

Variable	Dimension	Item	Standardized loading	T
Services capacity	Professional background	A01	0.70	–
		A02	0.54	6.64***
		A03	0.60	7.11***
		A05	0.49	6.16***
		A06	0.50	–
	Professional competence	A07	0.56	5.71***
		A08	0.65	6.23***
		A09	0.62	6.11***
		Service quality	Normativity	B01
B02	0.72			9.32***
B03	0.75			9.64***
B04	0.60			8.02***
B05	0.60			7.78***
Responsiveness	B06		0.65	–
	B07		0.60	7.69***
	B08		0.63	8.01***
	B09		0.74	9.07***
	B10		0.60	7.06***
Public satisfaction	Process satisfaction	C01	0.66	–
		C02	0.67	8.49***
		C03	0.59	7.98***
		C04	0.62	8.07***
		C05	0.63	8.19***
	Output satisfaction	C06	0.56	–
		C07	0.60	7.16***
		C08	0.59	7.11***
		C09	0.57	6.99***
	Outcome satisfaction	C11	0.59	–
		C12	0.63	6.81***
		C13	0.53	6.14***
		C14	0.67	7.16***
		Public opinion	Traditional media opinion	D01
D02	0.70			8.16***
D03	0.65			7.87***
D04	0.73			8.38***
D05	0.63			7.63***
New media opinion	D06		0.69	–
	D07		0.66	8.63***
	D08		0.68	8.79***
	D09		0.62	8.01***
	D10		0.56	7.45***

(Continued)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Variable	Dimension	Item	Standardized loading	T
Service reuse	–	E01	0.69	–
		E02	0.62	8.12***
		E03	0.70	8.79***
		E04	0.47	6.30***
		E05	0.63	8.01***

****p* < 0.001.

Consistent with expectation–confirmation theory, perceived service quality was positively associated with public satisfaction, which in turn was related to reuse behavior. This finding reinforces the well-established role of affective appraisal in repeated engagement decisions (Shin, 2021; Lin et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2023; Zaato et al., 2023; Kim and Kim, 2024; Wu et al., 2024). Although satisfaction emerged as a significant predictor of reuse behavior, its effect may not operate exclusively through affective reinforcement. In public service contexts, repeated engagement may also stem from structural dependence, habitual reliance, or institutional trust. Users may return not because they feel satisfied, but because they perceive limited alternatives, procedural necessity, or administrative continuity. In such cases, satisfaction may coexist with—or partially mask—structural or institutional drivers. Thus, while our results confirm the importance of satisfaction, they do not preclude the possibility that reuse behavior reflects a combination of emotional evaluation and contextual constraint.

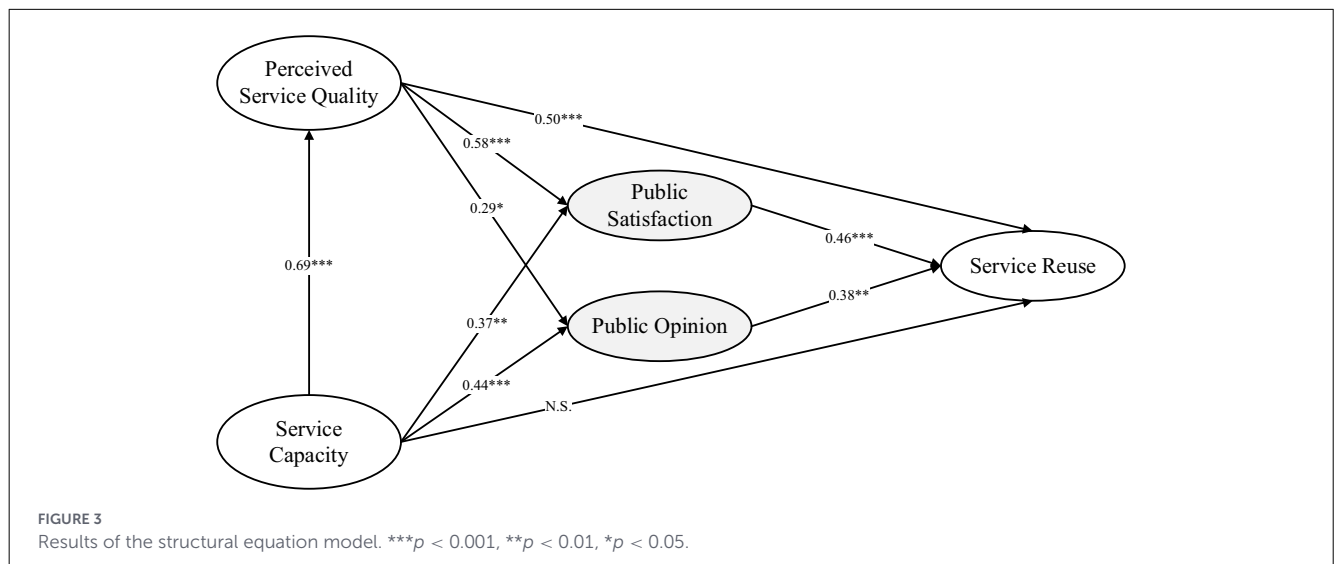
The analysis also suggests that public opinion—conceptualized as perceived collective evaluation—was independently associated with reuse behavior. This highlights that individuals rely not only on their personal emotional experiences but also on socially shared evaluations when determining whether to return to a public service. The significance of public opinion underscores the broader social embeddedness of service decisions and aligns with theories of social influence and subjective norms. However, its effect may also reflect alternative mechanisms. One possibility is informational dependence: under conditions of uncertainty or information asymmetry, individuals may rely on perceived collective evaluations as heuristic cues for assessing service credibility. Rather than internalizing public opinion as a shared attitude, individuals may treat it as a shortcut for decision-making. Another possibility is legitimacy signaling. Positive public opinion may serve as an indicator of institutional endorsement or collective approval, thereby influencing reuse behavior indirectly through perceived legitimacy rather than through attitudinal alignment *per se*.

Importantly, the presence of these alternative interpretations does not invalidate the dual-process framework. Instead, it suggests that satisfaction and public opinion may represent broader clusters of affective and social-cognitive mechanisms. Satisfaction captures the emotional dimension of personal experience, whereas public opinion captures the socially mediated dimension of evaluation. The empirical independence of the two pathways indicates that individual and collective evaluative processes coexist in shaping service reuse behavior, even if the precise psychological sub-mechanisms warrant further refinement.

TABLE 4 Results of the discriminant validity test.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Professional background	-									
2. Professional competence	84.46	-								
3. Normativity	77.81	60.02	-							
4. Responsiveness	80.81	67.69	79.11	-						
5. Process satisfaction	88.56	73.21	82.43	86.73	-					
6. Output satisfaction	87.93	77.08	84.45	81.78	76.74	-				
7. Outcome satisfaction	93.62	122.83	117.50	99.59	127.49	124.66	-			
8. Traditional media opinion	85.14	121.00	133.73	133.03	117.42	137.70	125.29	-		
9. New media opinion	93.83	108.16	116.73	128.52	137.44	126.23	121.52	98.76	-	
10. Service reuse	87.64	78.41	81.68	83.43	90.54	78.03	84.75	90.38	73.22	-

All Chi-square differences were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$ ($df = 1$).



The results further show that perceived service quality serves as the central cognitive appraisal that activates both pathways and is fundamentally shaped by service capacity. Specifically, when local governments demonstrate strong service capacity, citizens tend to perceive higher service quality. This heightened perception increases public satisfaction and strengthens positive public opinion, ultimately leading to a greater likelihood of service reuse. While prior studies have extensively validated the role of perceived quality in enhancing public satisfaction (Fornell, 1992; Zaato et al., 2023; Kim and Kim, 2024) and the mediating function of satisfaction between perceived quality and reuse behavior (Kettinger and Smith, 2009; Wang et al., 2020; Shin, 2021; Lin et al., 2023; Susanto et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2024), the present study advances this literature by identifying a distinct attitudinal mediator—public opinion—linking perceived quality to service reuse. Moreover, the findings highlight service capacity as a critical antecedent of perceived quality, enriching our understanding of how structural features of public services translate into behavioral outcomes through underlying psychological mechanisms.

It should be noted that the empirical context may constrain generalizability. The data were collected in China and primarily at the county-level local government tier. County governments often operate under distinct administrative hierarchies, resource constraints, and centralized governance structures that may shape both service capacity and citizens’ evaluative processes. In such settings, public opinion may be more closely intertwined with institutional credibility and governmental authority than in more decentralized or pluralistic governance systems. Moreover, county-level service provision may exhibit different capacity configurations compared to higher-level governments.

This study advances the literature in four key ways. First, it introduces public opinion as a conceptually distinct attitudinal mediator of service reuse, expanding psychological theories of service engagement beyond the traditional focus on satisfaction. By conceptualizing public opinion as a socially constructed evaluation grounded in social influence and norm-based processes, the study integrates social-cognitive mechanisms into the understanding of reuse behavior. Second, it advances a dual-process psychological

TABLE 5 Results of bias-corrected bootstrap testing.

Endogenous variables	Exogenous variables	Total effects	Direct effects	Indirect effects
Service reuse	public opinion	0.38**	0.38**	0
	Public satisfaction	0.46***	0.46***	0
	Perceived service quality	0.89***	0.50***	0.39**
	Service capacity	0.92***	0.07	0.85***
Public opinion	Perceived service quality	0.29*	0.29*	0
	Service capacity	0.67***	0.44***	0.23*
Public satisfaction	Perceived service quality	0.58***	0.58***	0
	Service capacity	0.77***	0.37**	0.40***
Perceived service quality	Service capacity	0.69***	0.69***	0

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

model that distinguishes between affective (satisfaction) and attitudinal (public opinion) pathways. This approach aligns with dual-process theories and provides a more nuanced explanation of how individuals form behavioral intentions and actual behaviors in socially embedded contexts. Third, the study clarifies the formation pathway of service reuse, demonstrating how structural capacity shapes perceived quality, which in turn generates both emotional and social-normative assessments. This multi-layered pathway contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of how public service experiences are internalized and transformed into behavioral outcomes. Finally, the use of a mixed-methods approach enhances construct validity and theory development. Grounded theory enabled the identification of context-relevant psychological mechanisms, while the subsequent SEM analysis provided rigorous validation. This methodological integration offers a model for future psychological research on public service behavior.

This study has several limitations. Although satisfaction and public opinion are modeled as distinct mediators, alternative explanations remain plausible. Satisfaction may partly reflect institutional trust, structural dependence, or habitual reliance rather than purely affective evaluation. Likewise, public opinion may function as an informational heuristic, a legitimacy signal, or overlap with perceived subjective norms. Future research should more precisely disentangle these psychological and institutional mechanisms. Methodologically, all constructs were measured via self-reported Likert scales derived from grounded theory analysis. While this enhances contextual validity, it may introduce measurement limitations and partially explain model fit constraints. Future studies should refine measurement instruments through larger pilot tests and incorporate objective behavioral data. The cross-sectional, self-reported design also limits causal inference and may introduce CMV, despite appropriate controls. Longitudinal, experimental, or multi-source designs would provide stronger evidence for the temporal dynamics and independence of the proposed dual pathways. In addition, the empirical context may constrain generalizability. The data were collected in China and primarily at the county-level local government tier. Future research should test the dual-process framework across different national contexts, governance systems, and administrative levels to assess its boundary conditions and cross-institutional robustness.

This study offers the following practical recommendations to improve public service reuse:(a) Institutionalize public opinion

monitoring. Governments can complement satisfaction surveys with structured measures of perceived public opinion, such as periodic citizen panels, sentiment analysis of local media coverage, and community-level feedback forums. These tools can help detect discrepancies between personal satisfaction and broader perceived evaluations. (b) Strengthen measurable aspects of service capacity. Local governments may focus on specific indicators—such as professional certification levels and response time standards—that are likely to influence perceived service quality. (c) Integrate satisfaction and public opinion dashboards. Administrative monitoring systems can track both satisfaction scores and perceived public opinion indicators simultaneously, enabling targeted interventions when divergence occurs. (d) Enhance transparency to shape collective evaluation. Publishing service performance reports may help align perceived public opinion with actual service improvements.

6 Conclusion

Understanding why individuals repeatedly engage with public services is essential for promoting sustained service utilization. Although satisfaction has long been considered the primary psychological determinant of service reuse, behavioral decisions often unfold within broader social environments, suggesting the presence of additional explanatory mechanisms. Building on prior satisfaction research and employing grounded theory qualitative analysis of interview data from arrangers, providers, and users, this study systematically identifies the key psychological and contextual factors shaping public service reuse behavior and develops a comprehensive theoretical model. This model is empirically tested using SEM based on survey data collected from the public legal aid service at the county level in China.

This study contributes to the understanding of public service reuse by distinguishing between two psychological processes associated with repeated engagement: affective evaluation (public satisfaction) and perceived collective evaluation (public opinion). The findings suggest that perceived service quality—linked to underlying service capacity—is associated with both forms of evaluation, which in turn relate to reuse behavior. Rather than viewing service reuse as driven solely by emotional responses, the results indicate that behavioral intentions may

reflect a combination of personal appraisal and perceived social consensus. By integrating these two dimensions into a dual-process framework, the study offers a more differentiated account of how service experiences are internalized and translated into continued engagement.

While the findings are context-specific and associative in nature, they highlight the importance of considering socially embedded evaluative mechanisms in models of public service behavior. To enhance public service reuse, governments should monitor public opinion alongside satisfaction, strengthen measurable service capacity, integrate these indicators into administrative dashboards, and increase transparency to align public perceptions with actual service performance.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the datasets are part of an ongoing study. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to rui.yang@chd.edu.cn.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the School of Humanities, Chang'an University (No. CHU-2025-002). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was obtained online from each participant during the period of February 17 to 21, 2025, prior to the initiation of the questionnaire survey.

Author contributions

RY: Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Methodology. BL: Methodology, Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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