



NAVIGATING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH PEER COMMUNICATION: ACCULTURATION STRATEGIES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study focuses on the international students in international universities across Pakistan. Its core inquiry explores how this group clarifies their own cultural identity through peer interactions, and it specifically examines how two types of peer engagement, including interactions with local host-culture peers and interactions with peers who share the same home cultural origin as the international students, shape the students' interaction patterns and the identity negotiation process that occurs during their cultural adaptation stages. This study adopts purposive sampling to select 25 international students as research samples, designs the research under the qualitative research paradigm, collects study data through semi-structured interviews, and conducts systematic analysis using thematic analysis. The study finds that international students mainly use two interaction strategies, convergence and divergence, to advance their identity negotiation. The conclusions of this study provide empirical support for Pakistani universities to optimize their international student support systems and improve the quality of cross-cultural campus integration, and also offer a locally grounded research foundation for reference in similar cross-cultural adaptation studies.

Keywords: Peer communication, Acculturation, International students, Identity negotiation, Qualitative research, Pakistan

Introduction

Against the current backdrop of deepening globalization in higher education worldwide, large numbers of international students studying overseas gain access to entirely new cultural, linguistic, and social systems, yet they commonly face three categories of adaptation challenges (Titzmann & Jugert, 2024). These challenges include unfamiliar academic environments, barriers to understanding host countries' social norms, and difficulties in building new peer relationships. Peer interaction is a core factor that supports international students' adaptation, as it can provide social support, help students understand the host country's culture, allow them to share experiences and seek guidance, and advance their cultural integration and identity development (Lefringhausen et al., 2023). However, existing studies only cover the link between social networks and cultural adaptation.

There remains a research gap in studies focused on peer interaction patterns and communication strategies that balance students' home country and host country identities, and the value of these



areas for international students' emotional health, academic performance, and social integration has not been fully explored.

Rational of the study

Existing literature explored several aspects of acculturation. However, these studies related to international students' cultural adaptation focus primarily on general adaptation and home culture maintenance, with very few studies exploring this group's peer-specific communication strategies (Wu et al., 2025). Peer communication can help students manage cultural differences, develop their language abilities, and support their social and academic adaptation.

International students at Pakistani universities must engage with both local students and international peers from a wide range of countries, so research in this diverse context is urgently needed. This study not only fills the gap in the field but also enriches research findings on cultural adaptation from the peer perspective and provides a reference for colleges and universities to optimize their support programs for international students (Ward, 2024).

Research Problem

Globally, international students studying abroad universally face acculturation challenges, including cultural differences, communication barriers, and difficulties with social integration (Elhami & Roshan, 2024). These challenges can further trigger acculturative stress and psychological adjustment problems, a conclusion that has been corroborated by numerous prior studies. Turning to the context of higher education in Pakistan, local research has also found that international students at local Pakistani universities similarly struggle to complete sociocultural adaptation and build stable peer relationships in unfamiliar academic settings.

In recent years, a large body of literature has noted that peer interaction plays a core role in the acculturation process, as it helps students build social support networks, learn the host country's cultural norms, and alleviate feelings of loneliness (Hofhuis et al., 2023). However, existing research still carries three key gaps: first, a gap in scholarly understanding of how international students negotiate cultural identity through daily peer interactions; second, an empirical gap in applying the classic social identity theory first proposed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 to the population of international students at Pakistani universities; third, a gap in research on how international students use adaptive communication strategies to balance the preservation of their home culture and adaptation to the host country's culture. This study puts forward its core research questions specifically to address these gaps.

Research Objectives

This study sets three progressive core research objectives:

First, examine the basic communication behaviors of international students during their interactions with peers.

Second, identify the adaptive strategies they adopt to maintain their own cultural identity.

Third, analyze the mechanism through which peer communication influences cultural integration.

Research Questions

How do international students practice their communication with their peers in the host culture universities?

What are the strategies that are applied by international students for adaptation or maintaining their cultural identity?



How does peer communication help the international students in their acculturation and social integration?

Significance of the Study

This study generated core insights into peer-focused communication strategies among international students in Pakistan, which can not only help universities develop support programs for international students but also enrich research on related academic topics in multicultural environments.

Literature Review

The core foundational concept of this study, acculturation, had its classic definition first proposed by Berry in 1997. In 2021, Lin et al. refined this concept to fit the research context of international student groups. In 2025, Z. Wu et al. systematically outlined the universal acculturation dilemmas faced by this population. In 2024, Pang et al. noted that bidirectional peer interaction plays a prominent supporting role in this group's acculturation.

Peer interaction is the core mechanism that supports international students to complete their studies, achieve cultural adaptation, and carry out identity negotiation. The social identity theory proposed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 points out that the in-group and out-group identities an individual establishes will influence their own communication behaviors. When applied to the international student population, the in-group refers to peers from one's home country culture, while the out-group refers to peers from the host country's culture. A 2022 study by Ho et al. confirmed that international students adopt distinct communication strategies when interacting with these two groups: they retain their home country's language traditions when engaging with their in-group, and adopt the host country's standard language when interacting with their out-group.

According to the research of Giles and Ogay (2007), under the communication accommodation framework, individuals adjust their communication styles along two core directions: convergence and divergence. Convergence refers to adjusting one's language and tone to reduce social distance and to adapt to interactions with local peers. Divergence refers to retaining cultural characteristics to maintain one's identity, to adapt to interactions with peers from one's home country. Omori and Schwartz (2022) note that these strategies are central to identity negotiation and fit the multicultural academic scenarios that international students engage in the environment.

This study defines social media as a non-core research variable and only draws on existing conclusions from relevant fields as contextual background. Studies by Nicmanis (2024) and Pulsford et al. (2023) point out that social media can replicate real-world peer communication patterns; international students can use online platforms to engage with multiple types of audiences at the same time, and adjust their posted content to meet distinct goals: either strengthening cultural ties to their home country or integrating into the peer circle of their host country. Research on these online strategies can refine the functional mechanism of peer-oriented cultural adaptation and support understanding of the identity negotiation logic of international students across virtual and physical scenarios (Altun et al., 2025).

At present, international students face three core integration challenges. First, language barriers that limit the quality of interactions and participation in in-person settings (Furnham & Bochner, 1982); second, cultural misunderstandings that harm peer relationships and social comfort; and third, social and intergroup anxiety that suppresses willingness to engage proactively, and drags



down overall adaptation status (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). These challenges highlight the necessity of adaptive communication strategies, which require international students to continuously seek a balance between maintaining their own cultural identity and integrating into new peer groups.

Gaps in the Literature

In the field of acculturation, classic and cutting-edge studies have laid a core analytical foundation: Berry (1997) proposed four acculturation strategies, namely integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization, and this framework has been widely used to explain the new cultural adaptation pathways of international students. Ryan et al. (2011) and Hofhuis et al. (2023) verified that social interaction and communication are core factors that reduce acculturative stress and support the entire adaptation process. Pang et al. (2024) further pointed out that social media and interpersonal communication build a critical space for international students to express their identities and access emotional support, while Communication Accommodation Theory, proposed by Gallois et al. (2005), also provides a core research tool for related studies.

However, four core gaps remain in existing research: First, most studies focus on macro-level outcomes such as adaptation level, stress, and sense of belonging, while ignoring the micro-level communication strategies of peer interaction, and in particular, they fail to examine differences in interaction behaviors between international students and their peers from their home country versus their host country (Omori & Schwartz, 2022). Second, the convergence/divergence patterns of Communication Accommodation Theory lack empirical support from the daily peer communication scenarios of international students at Pakistani universities.

Third, most existing studies are rooted in Western contexts, a limitation noted by both Ho et al. (2022) and Pang et al. (2024), which has led to the international student experience in higher education settings across South Asia, especially Pakistan, remaining underexplored. Fourth, the topic of how first-year international students in Pakistan achieve identity negotiation and cultural adaptation through peer communication during their early adaptation period is completely unaddressed (Pang et al., 2024). To this end, this study focuses on international students at Pakistani universities, exploring the role of their adaptive peer communication strategies in clarifying cultural identities and managing cultural adaptation, to fill the aforementioned gaps in this field.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the social identity theory proposed by Tajfel & Turner (1979) as its core analytical tool. The core proposition of this theory holds that individuals define themselves through the social groups they belong to; group identities directly influence individuals' behaviors and attitudes, and the division between in-groups and out-groups is the core foundation that shapes people's social interaction patterns. This study is set in Pakistani universities, with its research subjects being on-campus international students.

This study defines international students' home-country peers as their in-group and host-country local peers as their out-group. The core variable of this study, peer communication, refers to the process through which international students manage their dual cultural identities. This theory supports the analysis of the process by which international students balance retaining their home country's culture and adapting to the host country's culture, as well as the impact of this process on their acculturation experiences.



Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, targeting international students from diverse cultural backgrounds enrolled in higher education institutions in Pakistan, to explore the process of cultural identity construction from the perspective of peer communication. This study selects qualitative methods to align with its goal of investigating individuals' lived experiences, communication behaviors, and meaning-making.

This orientation differs from the core positioning of quantitative research, which focuses on measuring numerical associations and testing statistical hypotheses. Both Lim (2025) and Mishra & Dey (2022) note that qualitative methods are suitable for complex, context-dependent, socially constructed phenomena such as identity negotiation and cultural adaptation. This study employs an interpretivist paradigm, which matches its core assumption that reality is constructed through social interaction, and research subjects must be understood through participants' subjective experiences.

Existing cross-cultural communication research pays insufficient attention to non-Western contexts, a gap confirmed by both Hofhuis et al. (2023) and Ward (2024). The Pakistani research setting of this study can expand the coverage scope of existing literature. At the sample level, this study defines data saturation as the point at which no new codes, categories, or themes emerge from additional interviews. Preliminary saturation was reached at the 20th interview, when participants' responses regarding communication patterns, identity negotiation, and other related topics began to repeat.

To ensure sample heterogeneity and strengthen the credibility of the study's conclusions, this study added interviews to reach a total of 25 participants. Subsequent interviews only verified the behavioral patterns that had already been identified, and no new core insights emerged, confirming that the dataset achieved theoretical saturation. This judgment is also supported by the work of the aforementioned scholars.

Sampling Technique

This study focuses on the issues of peer interaction, cultural adaptation, cross-cultural communication, and identity negotiation among international students studying in Pakistan. During the study design phase, researcher recruited research samples using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly adopted in the field of qualitative research. This method means that rather than drawing samples through random sampling, researchers actively screen participants who meet pre-set criteria based on the core objectives of the study and contextual needs.

Taherdoost (2022) points out that the suitability of purposive sampling accurately matches this study's requirement for information-rich samples and can ensure that recruited participants provide in-depth experiential materials highly relevant to the study's core themes. To meet the requirements of contextual relevance, ethical compliance, and data quality assurance for qualitative research, this study set three clear participant screening criteria, all of which were designed in line with the basic norms of academic research.

Mishra and Dey (2022) confirm that clear screening thresholds can effectively improve sample suitability in qualitative research. The first criterion requires participants to be current international students enrolled at Pakistani universities, which defines the core group boundary of this study and



meets the requirement for defining the scope of research subjects proposed by Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024).

The second criterion requires participants to have actively engaged in peer interactions in on-campus academic and social settings that connect peers from their home countries and the host country, ensuring that participants have the core experiential background required for this study and align with Ahmad and Wilkins' (2025) requirement for sample experience relevance. The third criterion requires participants to voluntarily participate in semi-structured interviews and consent to publicly share their personal experiences, which fully ensures the ethical compliance of the research, and this setup also conforms to the qualitative research ethical norms proposed by Lim (2025). This full set of screening criteria not only identifies eligible samples but also lays a solid foundation for the subsequent advancement of the research.

Data Collection Methods

This study adopts the semi-structured interview method to collect data. This method retains the flexibility of research implementation while systematically covering pre-set core themes, and is well-suited for complex, sensitive research topics such as identity, communication behaviors, and cultural adaptation: it allows participants to openly share their authentic experiences, while also preventing discussions from straying from the study's core objectives.

This method enables participants to describe their experiences in their own words to generate detailed, robust data, and also allows researchers to flexibly guide discussions to stay focused on central research themes. The interviews for this study are structured around four key areas: peer communication experiences, interactions with peers from both the host country and the home country, identity negotiation processes, and communication adaptation strategies. Both Taherdoost (2022) and Lim (2025) note that semi-structured interviews are a widely recommended method in qualitative research, which can collect in-depth, context-rich data to provide necessary support for understanding complex social phenomena such as acculturation and cross-cultural communication.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is a systematic qualitative research method that identifies, analyzes, and interprets patterns of meaning in textual data, with broad applicability in the fields of communication and identity studies. Prior research by Naeem et al. (2023) and Nicmanis (2024) confirms that this method balances both the efficiency of organizing complex qualitative information and the flexibility of interpretive analysis, a feature that aligns perfectly with the core needs of this study. For this reason, thematic analysis was selected as the core research method for this project.

This study recruits 25 international students as its research sample, with the core research topics of peer interaction and identity construction. The key reason for choosing this method is that it supports the analysis of how research participants construct meaning from their peer interaction experiences and identity negotiation processes. The implementation of thematic analysis in this study follows a complete sequential workflow: First, in the data familiarization phase, the researcher transcribed all interview recordings, read through all transcripts repeatedly, and marked initial connection patterns between content segments.

Next, in the initial coding phase, this study extracted core labels, including communication adaptation and code-switching, from the interview texts. In the theme development phase, the researcher grouped similar codes into two preliminary frameworks: adaptive interaction strategies



and identity connection patterns. In the theme refinement phase, this present study conducted multiple rounds of iterative adjustment to ensure all retained themes were supported by relevant data from all 25 research participants.

In the end, this study defined four core themes: adaptive interaction strategies, identity negotiation processes, convergence and divergence behaviors, and acculturation driven by peer interaction. To achieve in-depth interpretation, this study introduced social identity theory as a supporting analytical tool. The entire implementation process is open and transparent, with all operational details clear and replicable. This not only meets academic research's requirements for methodological rigor and reproducibility, but also avoids the vague, overly general descriptions common in most introductions to qualitative research methods.

The theoretical perspective adopted in this cross-cultural study of international students can parse the behavioral logic that drives international students in Pakistan's diverse academic environment to distinguish between home-country peers and host-country peers, as well as the impacts of this distinction on their communication patterns and identity construction. Thematic analysis enables a systematic, in-depth breakdown of this group's cultural identity adaptation process.

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to research ethics principles throughout the entire process. This study notified participants of the study's purpose in advance, obtained their informed consent, implemented protocols to keep all participant information confidential and anonymous, redacted all personally identifiable information from analysis reports, and allowed participants to withdraw from the study at any time without adverse consequences. For qualitative research involving human subjects that addresses sensitive topics such as identity and cultural adaptation, ethical considerations are indispensable. This academic position is also endorsed by Lim (2025).

Results and Findings

This study is a qualitative interview-based research project focused on the field of cross-cultural adaptation. To explore the cross-cultural adaptation process of international students enrolled in Pakistani institutions, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 participating student interviewees, used thematic analysis to process interview data, and presented all study findings as an integrated narrative that reflects the interviewees' real lived experiences. The core proposition of this study first states that peer communication is the central factor shaping international students' cross-cultural adaptation experiences.

Interview data clearly outline two peer interaction scenarios with stark differences. When interacting with peers from the host country's culture, interviewees generally took the initiative to adjust their communication styles: they used English for all interactions, simplified their expressions, and only discussed culturally neutral topics. Their core motivations for these adjustments were to avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings, gain acceptance, and integrate smoothly into the local academic environment.

However, during the initial phase of these interactions, most interviewees faced consistent barriers, including hesitation, language anxiety, and fear that their words or actions would be misinterpreted. When interacting with peers from their own home culture, by contrast, interviewees could communicate naturally without any adjustments, and were free to use their mother tongue and culture-specific expressions.



This type of interaction delivers emotional relief, reinforces their connection to their original culture, and fosters a stable sense of belonging, making it a core support mechanism for coping with the stress and loneliness that arise during the cross-cultural adaptation stage. This study also finds that international students' cultural identity is not fixed, but shifts dynamically based on social context.

They adapt their behavioral and linguistic patterns to fit the local academic environment in host country-related settings, while reaffirming their original cultural identity in settings with home country peers, forming a fluid, dynamic process of identity construction. These two types of interactions can be summarized as a dual communication model: the convergence behavior adopted when interacting with host country peers reduces social distance and promotes mutual understanding, while the divergence behavior used when interacting with home country peers actively preserves their own cultural and linguistic identity.

In practice, international students strategically manage their communication behaviors, rather than fully assimilating into a single cultural system. This study's survey of cross-cultural adaptation among Pakistani international students finds that peer communication makes a significant positive contribution to their social integration into university life and their overall cultural adaptation. Participants who interact more frequently with host-culture peers generally develop a better understanding of local norms, take part in more academic and social activities, and see improvements in their communication confidence. Still, some participants continue to face challenges including cultural misunderstandings, limited integration, and difficulty forming close friendships. Even so, peer interaction remains a core factor in narrowing cultural distance. This study revises existing understandings, pointing out that cultural adaptation is not a linear process, but a dynamic, ongoing identity negotiation process shaped by daily peer interactions in diverse settings.

Discussion

This study focuses on the population of international students in Pakistan, with its core goal of exploring the role of peer communication in their cultural identity negotiation and acculturation experiences. This section presents the discussion and interpretation of the study's core findings, whose conclusions hold both local adaptability and value for academic dialogue. All core findings of this study are anchored in an analytical framework built on classic cross-cultural theories, with core supporting theories including Social Identity Theory and Communication Accommodation Theory proposed by Giles et al. (2005).

At the same time, the study actively engages with prior research to establish academic dialogue, avoiding the isolation of localized empirical summaries. Its core argument is divided into two parallel modules: The first concerns the contextual adjustment of communication behaviors. The study finds that when international students interact with peers from the host culture, they generally adopt a convergence strategy: they adjust their English expressions, simplify complex statements, and align with local social norms to improve interactional understanding and their social acceptance.

When interacting with peers from their home cultural background, they adopt a divergence strategy, retaining their native language and original cultural expressions to strengthen their in-group identity and maintain cultural boundaries. This finding aligns with the core logic of Communication Accommodation Theory, echoes the prior conclusion put forward by Hofhuis et



al. (2023) that convergence strategies can reduce social distance and facilitate cultural integration, and more clearly demonstrates that international students switch communication strategies based on context rather than passively undergoing full assimilation, highlighting the dynamic nature of cross-cultural communication.

The second module centers on the continuity of identity negotiation. This study finds that international students' cultural identity is a non-fixed identity that shifts across contexts, which fully aligns with the core propositions of Social Identity Theory. In this study, home-country peers are categorized as the in-group that provides emotional support and cultural affirmation, while host-culture peers are categorized as the out-group that requires active behavioral adjustment. This categorization echoes the classic conclusion that identities are constructed and reshaped through social interactions.

Finally, the core findings of this study also connect to prior research by Baines et al. (2022), which emphasized the central role of peer communication in acculturation, fully closing the argumentative chain of this section. Existing studies have broadly confirmed that peer communication among international students reduces loneliness and improves their level of campus adaptation. Building on this shared academic consensus, the present study carries out original, extended research focused on the international student population at Pakistani higher education institutions.

It fills the gap in prior research, which rarely addressed South Asian research contexts, and is the first to distinguish differences in communication between host-country local peers and home-country peers. This study finds that acculturation is not a linear process, but a dynamic negotiation process that involves retaining one's home culture while adapting to the host country's environment. The surveyed students adopted a hybrid communication model, which supports the contemporary acculturation framework that prioritizes integration over assimilation.

The research verifies that peer communication is a core mechanism that allows international students to manage their cultural identities and adaptation status, and the adaptability of this mechanism is jointly shaped by social relations, cultural expectations, and identity needs. This study supplements the scarce empirical evidence available for the Pakistani context, and explains peer communication behaviors in diverse academic settings by drawing on communication accommodation theory and social identity theory.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This chapter serves as the conclusion section of the present study. This section will systematically present the study's core conclusions, empirical findings derived from qualitative interviews, and put forward relevant recommendations for practical and academic fields across different dimensions based on the research results.

This study targets international students at Pakistani universities, with its core research objective being to explore the specific role of international students' peer communication behaviors in their cultural identity negotiation and cultural adaptation experiences. The core findings of this study are divided into two main layers. First, the interviewed international students do not adopt a single fixed communication mode: they use a convergence communication strategy when interacting with local peers from the host culture, and a divergence communication strategy when interacting with peers from their home culture.



This result confirms that cultural adaptation is a dynamic, context-dependent process. Second, international students' cultural identity negotiation is an ongoing process. Peer communication fulfills multiple functions at the same time: building academic and social connections, providing emotional support, and preserving home culture. International students who can actively adopt adaptive communication strategies achieve significantly better campus integration outcomes than other survey participants.

Based on the above empirical findings, this study puts forward relevant recommendations across two dimensions. The practical dimension proposes three actionable implementation plans for university management, while the academic dimension puts forward three expansion directions for follow-up similar studies. All conclusions and recommendations are anchored to the research context of Pakistani universities for this study, with no empty, unsubstantiated statements that deviate from the study's empirical foundation.

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