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Effects of Cultural Novelty on the Interplay Between Language and Cultural Adjustment in International Students

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# The Effects of Cultural Novelty on the Interplay Between Language and Cultural Adjustment Among International Students

## Abstract

Recent research has revealed the significant role of perceived cultural differences, or cultural novelty, in shaping the intercultural experiences of diverse individuals. Yet, our understanding of how cultural novelty influences the relationship between language and cultural adjustment remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining the moderating effect of cultural novelty on the relationship between foreign-language proficiency and cultural adjustment. Survey data from 1,092 international students in five countries were analyzed using mediation and moderated mediation analyses. The moderating effect of cultural novelty was confirmed, specifically in the host-language context, where higher cultural novelty significantly weakened the relationship between host-language proficiency and socializing with domestic students. Moreover, this research illuminates the influence of the lingocultural context on cultural adjustment. This study has important implications for higher education institutions. It demonstrates how cultural novelty can impact the ability of foreign-language proficiency to enhance student adjustment and the overall educational experience.

**Keywords:** international students, language, cultural novelty, cultural adjustment theory, intergroup contact theory, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland, USA

## Introduction

Language and cultural barriers significantly impact the experiences of international students (e.g., Ammigan et al., 2023). While the influence of language on the adjustment process to new living and educational environments has been extensively explored (for a review, see Wilczewski & Alon, 2023), our understanding of the effects of perceived cultural differences on this process is limited.

A growing body of literature has noted the significant role played by perceived cultural differences between one's home and host culture, referred to as 'cultural novelty' (Triandis, 1998), in shaping the experiences of international students (Finn et al., 2022;

Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Wilczewski et al., 2023), expatriates (Stoermer et al., 2020; Takeuchi et al., 2021) and immigrants (Kashima & Abu-Rayya, 2014). Nonetheless, recent cross-cultural research has reported mixed direct effects of cultural novelty on student adjustment (Wilczewski et al., 2023), calling for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between perceived cultural differences and intercultural experiences.

To address this gap, the present study poses the following question: *What are the effects of perceived cultural differences on the interaction between international students' foreign-language proficiency and their cultural adjustment?* We seek to answer this question based on survey data from international students representing 106 countries enrolled in higher education institutions in Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland, and the USA.

Our primary objectives are twofold. Firstly, we aim to expand the existing literature on the language-cultural adjustment relationship, focusing on the role of socializing as a pertinent mediating factor. Secondly, we seek to advance theories of intercultural communication, adjustment, and intergroup contact by investigating how cultural novelty functions as a boundary condition that influences the interplay between language proficiency and socializing, ultimately affecting students' adjustment.

In the subsequent sections, we present a theoretical framework, followed by an explanation of our methodology and the testing of the conceptual model. We then discuss the results and conclude by providing research and practical implications.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Cultural Adjustment and Cultural Novelty***

The literature underscores the relationship between students' foreign-language skills, communication, and cultural adjustment/adaptation. *Cultural adjustment* refers to responding to a new environment by engaging with host beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors, and

developing the ability to function in it (Kim, 2005). Searle and Ward (1990) identify two major dimensions of adjustment: *psychological adjustment*, reflecting individuals' psychological well-being and satisfaction in relationships and functioning within the new environment, and *sociocultural adjustment* – the ability to navigate the interactive aspects of the host culture. In higher education, *academic adjustment*, defined as adapting to the academic environment (Anderson, 1994), is viewed as a psychological adjustment domain and measured through life and academic satisfaction scales (Kennett et al., 2021).

The extent of cultural adjustment is linked to the perceived differences between home and host cultures (Triandis, 1998), a concept known as *cultural novelty* or *perceived cultural difference*. Greater disparities in beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors between the two contexts heighten the demands for adjustment. Empirical studies have shown that cultural novelty negatively impacts students' sociocultural and psychological adjustment (Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017; Wilczewski et al., 2023). This study examines cultural novelty as a moderating factor in the relationship between students' foreign-language proficiency and their cultural adjustment.

### ***Foreign-Language Proficiency and Cultural Adjustment***

Cultural adjustment and communication theories emphasize the important role of foreign-language skills and communication in the host country in facilitating cultural adjustment (Berry, 2005; Gudykunst, 2005; Kim, 2005; Ward et al., 2001). Host language proficiency fosters supportive relationships with locals, reducing sociocultural difficulties and psychological distress while enhancing sociocultural and psychological adjustment (Ammigan et al., 2023; Ward et al., 2001). This positive effect has been well-documented across various national contexts (for a review, see Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).

Foreign-language skills, including both the host language and English as a lingua franca (ELF), equip international students to navigate intercultural interactions and develop

intercultural communication competence (Kim, 2005). According to anxiety/uncertainty management theory (Gudykunst, 2005), these skills help manage anxiety, uncertainty, and sociocultural challenges (Furnham, 2010). This phenomenon has been observed in international students' experiences across different countries, including Australia (Yu, 2013), China (Yu, 2010), the USA (Hirai et al., 2015), as well as in European Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries (Swami et al., 2010; Wilczewski et al., 2023).

For example, Swami et al. (2010) identified the mediating effect of socializing with locals on the relationship between English skills and sociocultural adjustment of Asian students in Britain. Similarly, Wilson et al. (2020) found that Chinese students with higher English proficiency demonstrated greater psychosocial adjustment, mainly due to their tendency to seek advice from local friends. **Research conducted in non-Anglophone countries (e.g., Cao et al., 2016; Wilczewski et al., 2023) shows that international students in English-taught programs predominantly rely on English for communication with locals and international peers. Such interactions are particularly significant during the initial stages of cultural adjustment, as they provide access to cultural knowledge from both locals and more culturally experienced international peers (Wilczewski & Alon, 2023).**

The integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2005) posits that individuals internalize the host culture's meanings and communication symbols through interactions with locals. This process fosters the development of cultural identity, functional fitness, and overall adjustment, as substantiated by empirical evidence from international students in China (Tian and Lowe, 2014), the USA (Hirai *et al.*, 2015), and US students studying abroad (Pitts, 2009).

Building on these theoretical and empirical foundations, we propose that students' proficiency in the host language and English will significantly contribute to their sociocultural

and psychological adjustment. Part of this effect is likely mediated by opportunities for socializing with domestic students, who provide cultural knowledge and social support.

*Hypotheses 1a-b:* Host-language proficiency is positively associated with sociocultural (1a) and psychological adjustment (1b).

*Hypotheses 2a-b:* English proficiency is positively associated with sociocultural (2a) and psychological adjustment (2b).

*Hypotheses 3a-b:* Socializing with domestic students mediates the relationship between host-language proficiency and sociocultural (3a) and psychological adjustment (3b).

*Hypotheses 4a-b:* Socializing with domestic students mediates the relationship between English proficiency and sociocultural (4a) and psychological adjustment (4b).

### ***Cultural Novelty and Social Interactions***

We draw on intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) to explain the role of cultural novelty in shaping students' interactions in the host country. The theory suggests that meaningful, institutionally supported collaborative interactions between members from different social groups can foster positive group relations and reduce prejudice. Intergroup contact can cultivate positive attitudes toward outgroup members through mechanisms such as self-disclosure, enabling students to develop deep relationships and acquire detailed information about others (Harwood, 2015). Meta-analytical research indicates that cross-group friendships, particularly those involving substantial time spent and self-disclosure with outgroup friends, constitute powerful forms of intergroup contact (Davies et al., 2011).

Numerous studies demonstrate that intergroup contact promotes social integration and reduces negative attitudes toward outgroups (Álvarez-Rivadulla et al., 2022; Pettigrew, 2008). Intercultural friendships further mitigate prejudice, reduce intergroup anxiety, increase

trust (Blaylock et al., 2018; Turner & Feddes, 2011), foster cultural learning, and support a universalized identity orientation (Kim, 2005; Zhang & Goodson, 2011).

Direct contact with locals is crucial in building social capital among international students, enhancing their adjustment and satisfaction (Cao & Meng, 2020). However, in new cultural contexts, reduced socializing with outgroup members may limit their experiences. The propensity towards homophily – forming friendships with those who share similar attributes (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954) – often constrains intergroup interactions (Zhao, 2023), fostering feelings of isolation and exclusion, particularly among ethnic minoritized groups (Gao & Liu, 2021).

A minimal awareness of group differences, such as identifying as an international or domestic student, is necessary for intergroup contact. However, perceiving or being perceived as different is often linked to negative contact experiences (Harwood, 2015). This aligns with the anxiety/uncertainty management theory (Gudykunst, 2005), which posits that new intercultural encounters involving high cognitive uncertainty can increase anxiety and reduce intercultural effectiveness. Greater perceived cultural differences heighten group distinctions and reinforce outgroup perceptions, potentially discouraging students from engaging in intercultural contacts, even with strong foreign language proficiency. Research (e.g., McKeown et al., 2016) indicates that highlighting group differences, such as religious segregation, impedes intergroup interaction. Conversely, lower perceived cultural differences diminish group distinctions, fostering intercultural contact and helping international students recognize commonalities with locals (Tian & Lowe, 2014). Thus, we hypothesize that cultural novelty moderates the relationship between language proficiency and socializing with domestic students, with greater perceived cultural differences reducing students' inclination to socialize with domestic peers.

*Hypotheses 5a-b:* Cultural novelty moderates the interaction between students' proficiency in the host language (5a) and in English (5b) and socializing with domestic students.

Specifically, the greater the perception of cultural differences, the weaker the interaction.

### **Proposed Conceptual Model**

This study contributes to the literature by integrating intercultural adjustment and communication theory with intergroup contact theory to investigate how perceived cultural differences, language, and social interactions, and cultural adjustment interrelate across various cultural contexts. We construct our theoretical framework with two pivotal propositions. Firstly, drawing on extensive empirical research (for a review, see Wilczewski & Alon, 2023), we posit that host language and English proficiency facilitate cultural adjustment by enabling social interactions with domestic students, which provide cultural knowledge and social support. Secondly, we propose that socializing with domestic students reduces intergroup anxiety, builds trust, and fosters friendships, addressing the psychological need for intercultural contact in the host cultural and educational context. However, students are more inclined to interact with groups they perceive as culturally similar rather than different (Nolan et al., 2022; Tian & Lowe, 2014). Consequently, we expect students to use their foreign-language skills to interact with domestic peers in contexts perceived as culturally closer to their own, which diminishes intergroup differences. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model for this study.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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### **Method**

#### ***Participants and Procedures***

This research received ethical approval from the participating universities' committees. The hypotheses were tested using self-report data obtained through an online survey administered to international students at universities/business schools in Denmark ( $n = 174$ ), Italy ( $n = 191$ ), Germany ( $n = 169$ ), Poland ( $n = 283$ ), and two universities in the USA ( $n = 275$ ), between November 2019 and May 2020. Participation was voluntary, and no compensation was provided. The sample was relatively gender-balanced (53.8% females), with most students aged between 18-20 (88.3%).

Participants with self-declared English proficiency of at least B1 level completed an anonymous online questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes. A total of 106 home countries were represented, with the largest representations from China (14.3%), India (14.1%), Germany (4.8%), Italy (4.7%), Ukraine (4.1%), Turkey (2.8%), Belarus (2.6%), Pakistan (2.5%), Nigeria, and France (2.2% each), and others (below 2%). The majority of participants were pursuing a master's degree (58%), followed by a bachelor's degree (25%), a doctoral degree (14%), and others (3%). **Most students were majoring in social sciences (41%), followed by engineering and technology (19%), natural sciences (9%), humanities (5%), interdisciplinary studies (5%), medical and health sciences (2%), and agricultural sciences (1%). The remaining students reported other fields of study (21%).**

Further descriptive details of the sample and constructs are summarized in Table I.

## **Measures**

### ***Cultural Adjustment***

#### ***Sociocultural Adjustment***

Sociocultural adjustment was measured using Black and Stephens' (1989) scale. Students were asked to assess, on a 7-point scale (1 = *very unadjusted*, 7 = *very adjusted*), their adjustment to the *interactional* (4 items, e.g., 'Interacting with local people on a day-to-

day basis’) and *general* (7 items, e.g., ‘General living conditions’) aspects of the host culture. The scale showed good reliability ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

### *Psychological Adjustment*

Psychological adjustment was operationalized by students’ satisfaction, following prior studies (Kennett et al., 2021). A nine-item scale adapted from Wilczewski et al. (2023), based on Rienties et al. (2012), was used to assess *satisfaction* with general and social life, study experience, and interactions with students and professors (e.g., ‘I am satisfied with my interactions with the local community’). Students rated items on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), with good reliability ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

### *Foreign-Language Proficiency*

A four-item scale (Clément & Kruidenier, 2016) was used to assess students’ proficiency in the host language and English in reading, writing, listening, and speaking—using a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*not at all fluent*) to 5 (*completely fluent*). The scale showed very good reliability ( $\alpha_{\text{Host language}} = 0.92$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{English}} = 0.97$ ).

### *Socializing with Domestic Students*

Social interactions with domestic students were assessed with the question: ‘Since your arrival in the host country, how frequently have you participated in activities such as sports, music/theater/arts groups, multicultural associations, festivals, or social outings (e.g., coffee, lunch, cinema, pubs), etc.?’ They responded using a 7-point scale (1 = *never*, 7 = *at least once a week*).

### *Cultural Novelty*

A scale from Black and Stephens (1989) was used to assess students' perception of various aspects of the host culture compared to their home culture (8 items, e.g., 'Everyday customs that must be followed';  $\alpha = 0.81$ ), using a 5-point scale (1 = *extremely different*, 5 = *extremely similar*). Answers were reverse-coded for straightforward interpretation.

### *Control Variables*

Several control variables were included. Participants' *age* was controlled for, given prior research indicating its negative influence on adjustment (Wilczewski et al., 2023). We also controlled for *gender*, using female as a dummy variable. Acknowledging that cultural learning and adjustment happen over time (Bennett, 2017), we controlled for the *duration of stay* in the host country, with students selecting from eight time ranges: 0-4 weeks, 1-3 months, 4-6 months, 7-12 months, 13-18 months, 19-24 months, 2-4 years, and over 4 years. Although we did not theorize or anticipate the impact of the country of study on socializing and cultural adjustment, we controlled for the *linguocultural context*, coding the USA as '0' and Denmark, Germany, Italy, and Poland as '1' to account for the confounding effect of studying in an Anglophone country. Moreover, we controlled for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in Italy where data was collected during the third wave of the pandemic when participants were studying in the hybrid mode. We introduced an *in-lockdown country* dummy variable with Denmark, Germany, Poland, and the USA coded as '0' and Italy as '1.'

### *Data Analysis*

SPSS 29.0 and Process v4.2 were used to analyze the data. Harman's single-factor test indicated that common method bias was insignificant since the variance explained by a single factor ranged from 19.56% to 24.08% across all models tested, which lies below the

threshold of 50% (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Moreover, the variance inflation factor (VIF) of all variables ranged between 1.009 and 1.514, which is below 2.5, suggesting no distortion of our analyses through multicollinearity (Johnston et al., 2018). In addition, the HC3 estimator was used in all analyses to correct for possible **heteroscedasticity, meaning unequal variance in the error terms across levels of the independent variables** (Hayes, 2022).

After descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis, three steps were performed to test our hypotheses (as shown in Figure 1). First, we conducted linear regression analysis to assess the model fit, including control variables as covariates, and examine the relationship between language and adjustment (H1-2). Second, we used Model 4 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) to investigate whether socializing with domestic students mediated the impact of language on adjustment (H3-4). Third, we used Model 7 of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) to examine the moderation effect of cultural novelty on the interaction between language and socializing (H5). Control variables were included as covariates in all mediation and moderated mediation models.

In mediation analysis (Model 4), a bootstrapping estimation technique with 5000 samples was used **by repeatedly sampling from the original data with replacement**. This approach enhances the precision of parameter estimates and inferences compared to classical methods. For mediated moderation analysis (Model 7), mean-centering was applied to the predictors and the moderator. Unstandardized coefficients were reported in these models, as they are the relevant metric for moderation analyses (Hayes 2022).

## **Results**

### ***Preliminary Analysis***

The descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations among the variables are shown in Table I. The results indicated that sociocultural adjustment was significantly positively

correlated with host-language proficiency ( $r = 0.163, p < .01$ ), English proficiency ( $r = 0.262, p < .01$ ), socializing ( $r = 0.321, p < .01$ ), and negatively correlated with cultural novelty ( $r = -0.205, p < .01$ ). Similarly, psychological adjustment was significantly positively correlated with host-language proficiency ( $r = 0.088, p < .01$ ), English proficiency ( $r = 0.111, p < .01$ ), socializing ( $r = 0.326, p < .01$ ), and negatively with cultural novelty ( $r = -0.116, p < .01$ ).

Moreover, sociocultural adjustment was also significantly correlated with time in the host country ( $r = 0.196, p < .01$ ) and with gender ( $r = -0.060, p < .05$ ), suggesting slightly higher adjustment among females. Furthermore, studying in a non-Anglophone country was negatively correlated with, among others, English proficiency ( $r = -0.485, p < .01$ ), cultural novelty ( $r = -0.160, p < .01$ ), and sociocultural adjustment ( $r = -0.147, p < .05$ ). In turn, studying in a country during a lockdown correlated negatively with, among others, socializing ( $r = -0.076, p < .05$ ) and sociocultural adjustment ( $r = -0.069, p < .05$ ). These significant correlations justify the inclusion of demographic variables as covariates in the analysis.

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Insert Table I about here  
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### ***The Mediation Effects of Socializing with Domestic Students***

To assess the fit of the models, separate linear regression analyses were conducted for models with host-language and English proficiency as independent variables, socializing as the mediator, cultural novelty as the moderator, sociocultural and psychological adjustment as dependent variables, and control variables included as covariates. The results showed that the overall model fit was adequate for models with host-language proficiency and sociocultural adjustment ( $F[7, 1085] = 24.325, p < .001, R^2 = 0.136$ ) and psychological adjustment ( $F[7, 1085] = 4.808, p < .001, R^2 = 0.030$ ), as well as for models with English

proficiency and sociocultural adjustment ( $F[7, 1085] = 26.083, p < .001, R^2 = 0.144$ ) and psychological adjustment ( $F[7, 1085] = 5.010, p < .001, R^2 = 0.031$ ). The coefficient of host-language proficiency was significant in models with sociocultural adjustment ( $\beta = 0.143, t = 4.996, p < .001$ ) and psychological adjustment ( $\beta = 0.085, t = 2.803, p = .005$ ), supporting H1a and H1b. The coefficient of English proficiency was significant in models with sociocultural adjustment ( $\beta = 0.199, t = 5.986, p < .001$ ) and psychological adjustment ( $\beta = 0.108, t = 3.040, p = .002$ ), thus supporting H2a and H2b.

Next, the results in Table II revealed significant mediation effects of socializing with domestic students on the association between host-language proficiency and sociocultural adjustment (95% BootCI = [0.0150.053]) and psychological adjustment (95% BootCI = [0.017, 0.058]), as well as between English proficiency and sociocultural adjustment (95% BootCI = [0.021, 0.062]) and psychological adjustment (95% BootCI = [0.023, 0.068]). Meanwhile, the association between language and psychological adjustment was fully mediated via socializing, given the nonsignificant direct effects of the host language ( $\beta = 0.085, SE[HC3] = 0.050, p = .089$ ) and English ( $\beta = 0.053, SE[HC3] = 0.028, p = .054$ ) on psychological adjustment. Importantly, the total mediation effect was statistically significant for all models with host language and sociocultural ( $p = .000$ ) and psychological adjustment ( $p = .005$ ), and with English and sociocultural ( $p = 0.000$ ) and psychological adjustment ( $p = .002$ ). Overall, these results confirm H3a-b and H4a-b.

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Insert Table II about here  
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### ***The Moderation Effect of Cultural Novelty***

The moderated mediation analysis results in Table III reveal a significant relationship between the interaction term of cultural novelty and host-language proficiency concerning

socializing with domestic students in models with sociocultural and psychological adjustment ( $b = -0.389$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.072$ ,  $p = .005$ ). Meanwhile, the interaction term of cultural novelty and English proficiency was marginal and nonsignificant in both models related to sociocultural and psychological adjustment ( $b = -0.011$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.052$ ,  $p = .840$ ).

Moreover, the association between host-language proficiency and socializing in both models with sociocultural and psychological adjustment was consistently stronger and significant at low cultural novelty (-1 **standard deviation** [SD]:  $b = 0.562$ , standard error [SE][HC3] = 0.120,  $p = .000$ ), while the effect decreased and became nonsignificant at a high level of cultural novelty (+1SD:  $b = 0.101$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.111$ ,  $p = .365$ ). Analogously, the indirect effect of host-language proficiency on sociocultural adjustment via socializing was higher and significant at a low level of cultural novelty (-1SD:  $b = 0.082$ , 95%BootCI = [0.043, 0.125]), but it decreased and became nonsignificant at a high level of cultural novelty (+1SD:  $b = 0.015$ , 95%BootCI = [-0.017, 0.045]). A similar pattern was observed in the model examining psychological adjustment, where the indirect effect of host-language proficiency via socializing proved higher and significant under conditions of low cultural novelty (-1SD:  $b = 0.101$ , 95%BootCI = [0.057, 0.154]), but lower and nonsignificant in the presence of high cultural novelty (+1SD:  $b = 0.019$ , 95%CI = [-0.021, 0.059]). In summary, the results support H5a while rejecting H5b.

To understand the dynamics of the host language–cultural novelty interaction, we visually represented the effects in Figure 2 (Part A). This diagram illustrates that the positive interplay between host-language proficiency and socializing is notably pronounced at low levels (-1SD) and attenuated at high levels of cultural novelty (+1SD). Further insight into this interaction was obtained through the Johnson–Neyman technique (Hayes, 2022), as illustrated in Figure 2 (Part B). Our analysis revealed that the conditional effect of host language on socializing gradually diminishes and becomes nonsignificant when the perceived

cultural novelty level reaches 4.01 on a 5-point scale, where CI includes 0 ( $b = 0.174$ ,  $SE = 0.089$ ,  $95\%CI = [0.000, 0.347]$ ),

For control variables, the results (Table III) revealed an adverse effect of age on socializing in the model with the host language ( $b = -0.103$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.044$ ,  $p = .019$ ) and English ( $b = -0.111$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.042$ ,  $p = .008$ ) as independent variables. Time spent in the host country had a positive effect on students' sociocultural adjustment in both models with the host language ( $b = 0.063$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.011$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and English ( $b = 0.052$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.011$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Additionally, negative effects were observed for studying in a non-Anglophone country on sociocultural adjustment in the model with the host language ( $b = -0.309$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.069$ ,  $p = .000$ ), as well as for studying in an in-lockdown country on socializing in both models with the host language ( $b = -0.434$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.164$ ,  $p = .008$ ) and English ( $b = -0.398$ ,  $SE[HC3] = 0.169$ ,  $p = .014$ ).

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Insert Table III about here

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Insert Figure 2 about here  
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**Discussion**

This study highlights the effects of cultural novelty on the relationship between international students' foreign-language proficiency and cultural adjustment. The results confirm that proficiency in the host language and English is positively associated with cultural adjustment. Consistent with intercultural communication, adjustment, and intergroup contact theories, our findings reveal that this positive relationship is mediated by socializing

with domestic students. Importantly, this mediation is partial for sociocultural adjustment and full for psychological adjustment in both host-language and English models.

Contrary to the literature that reports a nonsignificant direct language-adjustment relationship (e.g., Swami et al., 2010; for a review, see Wilczewski & Alon, 2023), our results underscore the importance of social interactions in mediating this relationship, especially for students' satisfaction. Additionally, our results contribute to existing research (Ammigan et al., 2023; Wilson et al., 2020) by illuminating the effects of host-language and English proficiency in both Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries.

The results also establish the moderating effect of cultural novelty on the interplay between host-language proficiency and socializing, although this effect does not extend to English proficiency. Specifically, the positive impact of host-language proficiency on socializing diminishes and loses significance when students perceive the host culture as markedly different (scoring 4 on a 5-point scale). By delineating the boundary conditions of cultural novelty for enhancing socializing with locals, these results offer a nuanced perspective on the role of foreign-language skills in adjustment (Finn et al., 2022; Wilczewski et al., 2023). Moreover, these findings contribute to the intergroup contact literature (e.g., Blaylock et al., 2018; McKeown et al., 2016), highlighting that low perceived cultural novelty is a prerequisite for intercultural interactions, even with proficiency in the host language. Our findings suggest that students who engage in social contact with domestic students exhibit higher levels of sociocultural adjustment, but only when experiencing low perceived cultural novelty.

Another key finding is that studying in a non-Anglophone country negatively predicts sociocultural adjustment when communicating in the host language. However, the significance of the country context diminishes when students use ELF. This observation is supported by the nonsignificant effect of cultural novelty on communication in English. A

plausible explanation, based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2019), is that the host language accentuates perceived cultural differences between international and domestic students. Conversely, English mitigates these perceptions, fostering positive effects on social interactions and cultural adjustment. This finding contributes to the higher education literature (Finn et al., 2022; Wilczewski et al., 2023) by highlighting the interaction between language and cultural novelty as a mechanism regulating students' cultural identification in the host country.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The current study builds on prior research linking foreign-language skills with cultural adjustment by emphasizing the role of social interactions. The findings reveal the effects of foreign-language proficiency and cultural novelty, offering implications for both research and practical applications aimed at enhancing international students' adjustment.

Firstly, given the important role of institutional support in optimizing intergroup contact (McKeown et al., 2016), institutions should prioritize developing foreign-language skills to foster social engagement with domestic students and the local community.

Developing host-language proficiency alongside English is particularly important as it attenuates the negative impact of cultural novelty on socializing with domestic students.

However, our findings underscore the importance of optimal conditions, including institutional support, for fostering positive relationships.

The study also highlights the positive effects of English proficiency on adjustment by mitigating the adverse effects of cultural novelty on socializing with domestic students, irrespective of the linguocultural context. Improved English language skills among domestic students in environments with significant cultural differences could reduce intercultural communication apprehension and promote more robust social networks involving both

domestic and international students. Additionally, involving domestic students in intercultural interactions exposes them to cultural differences, addressing their limited opportunities to experience cultural diversity (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2019).

Secondly, to maximize the benefits of foreign-language skills, institutions should address perceived cultural differences through cultural learning initiatives, spanning pre-departure cultural programs, orientation sessions, and ongoing support throughout the study experience. Such learning contributes to enhancing sociocultural adjustment (Ammigan et al., 2023). Cultural mentorship programs involving culturally experienced domestic students and international peers could provide crucial support in coping with perceived cultural differences. Furthermore, integrating domestic and international students in group activities and endorsing translanguaging practices can create multicultural classrooms. This approach fosters a supportive environment, increasing inclusion and psychological safety (De Leersnyder et al., 2022), and promoting intercultural interactions.

Our study's cross-sectional design limits its capacity to capture the dynamic nature of cultural novelty and establish causal relationships. Additionally, we did not examine the role of students' native languages in cultural adaptation, despite the possibility that students might rely on them to gain cultural knowledge about the host country from more experienced co-nationals. Future research could address this gap, offering deeper insights into the complexities of language practices and their impact on cultural adaptation.

While we examined the effects of socializing with domestic students, future studies could explore interactions with other locals, peer international students, and co-nationals. It is also important to recognize the variability in students' adjustment across cultural contexts and the influence of cultural background and cultural intelligence on adjustment (Wang et al., 2017; Wilczewski et al., 2023). To deepen understanding of how language, socializing, and

cultural novelty shape cultural adjustment, future research should explore additional cultural and individual factors, particularly across diverse national and cultural settings.

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**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations among the variables ( $N = 1,092$ ).

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Host-Language Proficiency	–									
2. English Proficiency	-0.026	–								
3. Cultural Novelty	-0.071*	0.054	–							
4. Socializing	0.119**	0.125**	-0.175**	–						
5. Sociocultural Adjustment	0.163**	0.262**	-0.205**	0.321**	–					
6. Psychological Adjustment	0.088**	0.111**	-0.116**	0.326**	0.634**	–				
7. Age	-0.053	0.141**	0.066*	-0.058	0.019	-0.011	–			
8. Gender <sup>1</sup>	-0.114**	0.020	0.091**	-0.043	-0.060*	-0.020	0.013	–		
9. Time in Host Country	0.057	0.247**	0.014	0.057	0.196**	0.014	0.124**	-0.146	–	
10. Non-Anglophone Country <sup>2</sup>	0.042	-0.485***	-0.160**	-0.022	-0.147**	-0.039	-0.275**	-0.075*	-0.050	–
11. In-Lockdown Country <sup>3</sup>	0.095**	-0.112**	0.000	-0.076*	-0.069*	-0.068*	-0.121**	-0.089**	0.016	-0.267**
<i>Scale</i>	1-5	1-5	1-5	1-7	1-7	1-7	1-3	–	–	–
<i>Mean</i>	4.43	3.25	3.44	3.46	5.03	5.21	1.38	–	–	–
<i>SD</i>	0.73	1.43	0.80	1.94	0.97	1.13	1.31	–	–	–

<sup>1</sup> 0 = female, 1 = male.

<sup>2</sup> 0 = USA, 1 = Denmark, Germany, Italy, Poland.

<sup>3</sup> 0 = Denmark, Germany, Poland, USA, 1 = Italy.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  for two-tailed tests.

**Table 2.** Results of mediation models ( $N = 1,092$ ).

Model	Effect of IV on M	Effect of M on DV	Direct effect of IV on DV	Indirect effect via M (95% BootCI)	Total effect of IV on DV
IV: Host Language, M: Socializing, DV: Sociocultural Adjustment	0.118***	0.289***	0.163***	0.034 [0.016, 0.053]	0.208***
IV: English, M: Socializing, DV: Sociocultural Adjustment	0.142***	0.286***	0.113***	0.041 [0.021, 0.062]	0.141***
IV: Host Language, M: Socializing, DV: Psychological Adjustment	0.118***	0.315***	0.085	0.037 [0.017, 0.058]	0.143**
IV: English, M: Socializing, DV: Psychological Adjustment	0.142***	0.315***	0.053	0.045 [0.023, 0.068]	0.088**

*Note:* Standardized coefficients. Bootstrapping based on 5000 subsamples. Age, gender, time in the host country, a non-Anglophone country, and an in-lockdown country as covariates. IV = Independent Variable; DV = Dependent Variable; M = Mediator; CI = Confidence Intervals. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 3.** Results of moderated mediation models ( $N = 1,092$ ).

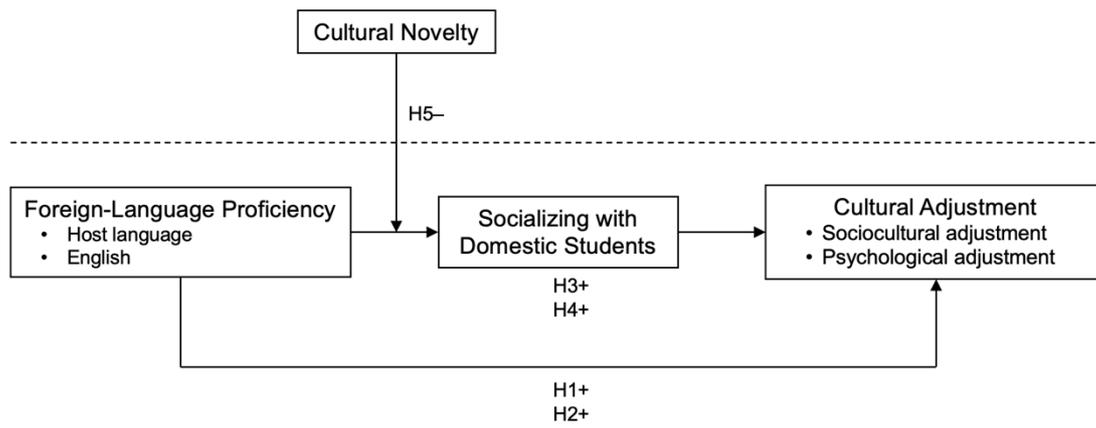
<i>Models for host-language proficiency</i>										
	Socializing (Models 1 & 2)			Sociocult Adjust (Model 1)			Psych Adjust (Model 2)			
	Coeff.	95%CI		Coeff.	95%CI		Coeff.	95%CI		
		LLCI	ULCI		LLCI	ULCI		LLCI	ULCI	
Constant	3.516***	3.065	3.967	4.613***	4.330	4.896	4.613***	4.330	4.896	
Host Lang	0.331***	0.169	0.493	0.163***	0.081	0.245	0.085	-0.013	0.184	
Socializing				0.145***	0.117	0.174	0.184***	0.151	0.218	
Cult Novel (Models 1 & 2)	-0.389***	-0.530	-0.248							
Host Lang×Cult Novel (Models 1 & 2)	-0.288**	-0.486	-0.089							
Conditional Effect of Host Lang (Models 1 & 2)										
High Cult Novel	0.101	-0.117	0.318							
Low Cult Novel	0.562***	0.326	0.798							
Age	-0.103*	-0.188	-0.017	-0.015	-0.057	0.029	-0.005	-0.064	0.054	
Gender	-0.103	-0.331	0.126	-0.075	-0.184	0.033	-0.017	-0.147	0.113	
Time in Host Country	0.045	-0.001	0.091	0.063***	0.042	0.084	-0.004	-0.029	0.022	
Non-Anglo Country	-0.259	-0.036	0.554	-0.309***	-0.446	-0.172	-0.120	-0.288	0.045	
In-Lockdown Country	-0.434**	-0.755	-0.112	-0.079	-0.224	0.067	-0.113	-0.298	0.082	
$R^2$	0.066			0.170			0.113			
$F(HC3)$	10.214***			34.569***			21.035***			
95% BootCI										
Index of moderated mediation				-0.042	-0.075	-0.013	-0.053	-0.094	-0.017	
Indirect effect										
Host Lang → Socializing → Sociocult Adjust			High Cult Novel	0.015	-0.017	0.045				
			Low Cult Novel	0.082***	0.043	0.125				
Host Lang → Socializing → Psych Adjust			High Cult Novel				0.019	-0.021	0.059	
			Low Cult Novel				0.104***	0.057	0.154	
<i>Models for English proficiency</i>										
	Socializ (Models 3 & 4)			Sociocult Adjust (Model 3)			Psych Adjust (Model 4)			
	Coeff.	95%CI		Coeff.	95%CI		Coeff.	95%CI		
		LLCI	ULCI		LLCI	ULCI		LLCI	ULCI	
Constant	3.751***	3.286	4.216	4.409***	4.159	4.658	4.681***	4.391	4.971	
English	0.181***	0.092	0.273	0.113***	0.068	0.157	0.053	-0.001	0.107	
Socializing				0.144***	0.115	0.172	0.184***	0.151	0.217	
Cult Novel (Models 3 & 4)	-0.417***	-0.561	-0.274							
English×Cult Novel (Models 3 & 4)	-0.011	-0.113	0.092							
Age	-0.111**	-0.192	-0.029	-0.017	-0.061	0.027	-0.006	-0.065	0.053	
Gender	-0.129	-0.357	0.100	-0.099	-0.207	0.009	-0.030	-0.159	0.099	
Time in Host Country	0.027	-0.020	0.073	0.052***	0.030	0.077	-0.010	-0.035	0.017	
Non-Anglo Country	0.064	-0.267	0.395	-0.128	-0.085	0.204	-0.035	-0.366	-0.221	
In-Lockdown Country	-0.398*	-0.267	0.395	-0.056	-0.204	0.085	-0.101	-1.185	-0.288	
$R^2$	0.061			0.177			0.113			

<i>F</i> (HC3)	9.6126***	34.686***	20.574***
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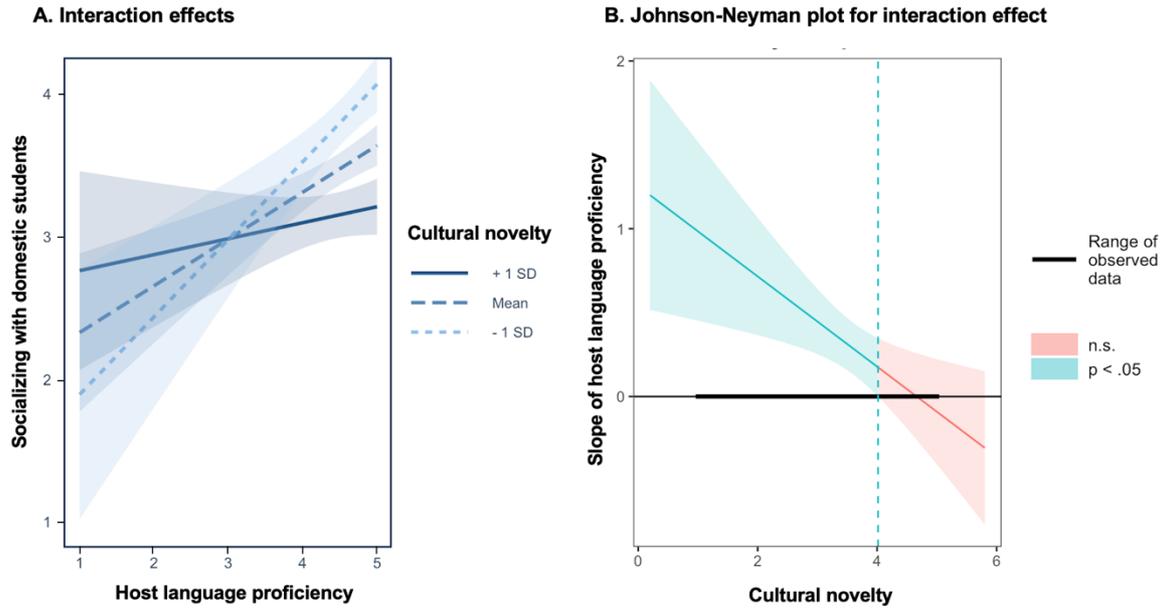
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*Note:* Unstandardized coefficients. Bootstrapping based on 5000 subsamples. Age, gender, time in the host country, a non-Anglophone country, and an in-lockdown country as covariates.

Models 1 and 3: Host-Language Proficiency as the independent variable, Socializing as the mediator, Sociocultural Adjustment as the dependent variable; Models 2 and 4: Host-Language Proficiency as the independent variable, Socializing as the mediator, Psychological Adjustment as the dependent variable. Host Lang = Host-Language Proficiency; Socializing = Socializing with Domestic Students; Cult Novel = Cultural Novelty; Sociocult Adjust = Sociocultural Adjustment; Psych Adjust = Psychological Adjustment. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Figure 1.** The conceptual model.



**Figure 2.** Interaction effects of host-language proficiency and cultural novelty on socializing with domestic students. *Note:* Part A depicts conditional main effects of host-language proficiency at +1SD, mean, and -1SD of cultural novelty. Part B depicts Johnson-Neyman regions of interaction statistical significance.