



Cultural Identity Negotiation among International Students: Experiences of Belonging, Adaptation and Social Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

International student mobility offers tremendous academic and intercultural opportunities but is associated with significant challenges in negotiating identity, feeling at home, adapting and integrating socially. This study took a quantitative cross-sectional design with data from 48 international students at the University of Idaho to examine the relationships among these constructs. The questionnaire items about cultural adjustment, friendships, campus engagement, perceived support, social connectedness, and academic experiences were used to create exploratory composite indices. Various descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, Spearman correlation, multiple regression and mediation analysis were used. Cultural identity negotiation recorded the highest mean score ($M = 69.68$, $SD = 25.29$), followed by belonging ($M = 57.75$, $SD = 18.15$), social inclusion ($M = 55.44$, $SD = 25.99$), and cultural adaptation ($M = 50.58$, $SD = 19.29$). In the case of cultural identity negotiation, there was a significant and positive association with belonging ($\rho = 0.459$; $p = 0.001$), and with cultural adaptation, there was a positive association with social inclusion ($\rho = 0.299$; $p = 0.039$). The regression model showed that no significant predictors of social inclusion emerged, also cultural adaptation did not significantly mediate the relationship between identity negotiation and social inclusion. The findings illuminate the complex and interrelated nature of the intercultural experiences of international students and provide support for the creation of inclusive campus environment, peer networks and culturally responsive student services.

Keywords:

cultural identity negotiation; international students; sense of belonging; cultural adaptation; social inclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent 20 years, the mobility of students from abroad has seen a significant increase due to globalization, internationalization of higher education and cooperation between universities and institutions across the globe. Culturally diverse learning spaces, which benefit knowledge sharing, creativity, and global understanding, are encouraged at universities. While there are opportunities for studying abroad, it also involve the student having to deal with new cultural norms, academic expectations, language barriers, and new social settings. Students who are able to negotiate their cultural identity and form meaningful connections and relationships with the host society are successful in making the transition (Heng, 2019; Yang & MacCallum, 2022). As a result, cultural identity negotiation has gained significance in study as it influences the way international students understand their experiences, sustain their ties to their home culture as well as to multicultural university communities (Metro-Roland, 2018).

Cultural identity negotiation involves a dynamic and ongoing negotiation of one's cultural identity, in which one's cultural identity is continually created, articulated, and balanced in relation to others with differing cultural backgrounds. International students are not usually given up on their original identities but are often formed into hybrid identities which combine aspects of the identities of their home and host cultures. Elements of communication experiences, cultural openness, institutional environment, peer interaction, and

opportunities for intercultural engagement all impact this process (Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024; McAllester, 2024). It was found that students' positive intercultural experiences tend to increase their confidence in asserting themselves and adapting to multicultural societies, while cultural isolation and cultural discrimination can negatively affect this negotiation process (Ertürk, 2022).

Another crucial result of sustaining the process of identity negotiation is the emergence of belonging to the university community. Belonging encompasses students experiences of being accepted, included, recognised and involved in learning and life at school. A positive school climate fosters connections between students and their peers, as well as students and staff, which help students feel more comfortable, make friends, and experience positive psychological outcomes that facilitate greater academic success (Ahn & Davis, 2020). The results of previous studies indicated that students sense of belonging on campus significantly influences their satisfaction with the educational experience and academic persistence of international students (Rivas et al., 2019). Similarly, culturally inclusive campus climates foster inclusive experiences that recognize students' diversity and encourage fair access to campus opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds (Glass et al., 2022).

The process of cultural adaptation which includes academic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptation to the host country is closely related to belonging. Adaptation

consists of the learning process of new cultural practices, effective communication skills and handling the emotional aspect of living in a foreign country. Successful adaptation is associated with better mental health, better interpersonal relations, and increased confidence in coping with everyday activities of school life, while difficulties in adapting to school life can lead to feelings of loneliness, stress and lower educational satisfaction (X. Li, 2024; Xie, 2019). The students context of learning also helps shape their reconstruction of identity as they cope with the context of higher education systems that are widely different from the ones they have in their home countries (Doutor & Alves, 2024).

Social inclusion is what happens when the negotiation, belonging and adaptation processes are successful. Inclusive universities offer equal opportunities for participation, policies that facilitate the participation of international students, intercultural interaction and accessible student services, all of which help international students to be active participants in the academic community. Participating in campus institutions, group learning, and various types of friendship helps students develop a sense of inclusion and promote academic achievement in the long run (Andriansyah, 2026). Moreover, the global competitive market has made university campuses more than ever, inclusive and culturally responsive, aiming at enhancing student experiences and building institutions' reputation and visibility in the international arena (Visibility, 2026). While there are ongoing discussions and study on

diversity and identity in educational and cultural settings (Gates Jr, 2023), there has not been much empirical research that has explored identity negotiation, belonging, cultural adaptation, and social inclusion within a single analytical framework.

The present study fills this void by exploring how these four constructs are related to each other, by examining the influence of cultural identity negotiation on belonging and adaptation, and by testing whether cultural adaptation is a mediating construct between cultural identity negotiation and social inclusion, by studying the contribution of belonging to social inclusion. In this holistic lens, the study aims to offer supporting evidence that help higher education institutions create more supportive policies and support services for international students.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The current research is a quantitative cross-sectional research design that aims to explore the correlation between cultural identity negotiation, sense of belonging, cultural adaptation, and social inclusion for international students. A cross-sectional method was found to be appropriate, as it allowed for obtaining the experiences of the subjects at one time and place to investigate associations between the psychosocial and educational factors. The study used secondary survey data gathered through an institutional questionnaire targeted at international students, and empirical assessment of students adaption experience in a multicultural university environment

was carried out.

2.2 Study Setting

The study was carried out by analyzing the data collected from international students studying at the University of Idaho (USA), a public research university with students from various geographical and cultural regions (Mahdy, 2024). The university offers an intercultural academic context that presents opportunities and challenges for academic adjustment, social interaction, cultural adaptation and community engagement. A multicultural environment offers an appropriate context for addressing the issue of international students cultural negotiation and sense of belonging and social inclusion within the host institution.

2.3 Study Population

The population of the study included international undergraduate and graduate students currently enrolled at the University of Idaho at the time of the study. Students came from a variety of countries and were of different educational levels, years in study, financial assistance and educational experiences. The specific nature of the questionnaire in terms of international students provided a suitable population for the study to investigate the issues of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation in higher education.

2.4 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The analytical data were obtained from 48 responses from an institutional questionnaire completed online. The participants were selected by voluntary convenience sampling, where eligible international students were invited to fill out

this survey. While no specific sampling methods were used, the sample was sufficiently diverse across academic year, geographic location, and time in university to allow for analysis of patterns of cultural adaptation and social integration. Consistency of the data was maintained by only keeping fully completed responses for statistical analysis.

2.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The participants included international undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at the University of Idaho at the time of data collection who had completed the questionnaire. Students from all nations, fields of study and financial sources were invited, regardless of country or academic background. Responses that were not classified as international student responses because there was significant missing information were not included in the final analysis. Consequently, all the observations made in the study were valid full responses from the target population.

2.6 Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was used in the study to evaluate several international student's academic and social experiences. Demographic data were gathered such as level of study, geographical area, length of study, grade point average, and funding source. Other items assessed activity involvement on campus, friendship formation, preferred social networks, perceived academic/financial stress, feelings of loneliness, mental health, awareness/usage of campus support services, cultural adjustment challenges,

financial concerns, intention to transfer, factors that encouraged students to stay on campus, and overall academic experience. While there was no inventory of scales for cultural identity negotiation, sense of belonging or cultural adaptation, or social inclusion in the questionnaire, these constructs were empirically analyzed through conceptually related items in the survey.

2.7 Variables and Measurement

Cultural identity negotiation was the main independent variable and was measured with questionnaire items that tapped into cultural adjustment difficulties, friendship preferences, friendship composition and the desire to form new intercultural friendships. The sense of belonging was assessed by indicators related to the ease of making friends, involvement in campus activities, social support and the impact of social relationships on mental health. Cultural adaptation was evaluated using the level of difficulty perceived by participants in adapting to the new cultural environment, as well as the social interaction and adaptation experience in the university. The dependent variable was social inclusion, which was measured in the four areas of university life, social connectedness, academic experience and decisions regarding staying on at the university. To allow for variation in the groups, the demographic variables (level of study, length of study, region of origin, cumulative grade point average, funding source, and financial concerns) were included as control variables.

2.8 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected from an available online questionnaire, using the institutional survey procedures, which were administered to international students in Japan. The answers were exported to a comma-separated value file and pre-screened for analysis. Data cleaning procedures included: verifying that responses were complete, eliminating duplicate data points when appropriate, standardising categorical variables, and creating composite measures of the main theoretical constructs assessed in the study. Data after completion of the cleaning process were then entered into the statistical software package for descriptive and inferential analyses.

2.9 Statistical Analysis

Data were summarised using descriptive statistics. To measure the reliability of the measures, Cronbach's alpha was used, and correlation and multiple regression analyses were used to explore the relationships between cultural identity negotiation, belonging, adaptation and social inclusion. The indirect effect was tested via mediation analysis. The level of significance was defined as $p < 0.05$.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Participant Characteristics

The analysis included a total of 48 International students. Most of the sample (52.1%) consisted of undergraduate students, with 45.8% of the sample being graduate students. The primary region of their origin was South Asia (58.3%), with the second largest group coming from East Asia (14.6%) and the third from Southeast Asia (8.3%). As indicated in Table 1, many of the

respondents were undergraduate students, mostly from South Asia, and had been studying at the university for 1–2 years. The

overall experience for most participants was good in terms of their academic career.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics of International Students (N = 48)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Level of study	Undergraduate	25	52.1
	Graduate	22	45.8
	Graduated	1	2.1
Study duration	< 6 months	10	20.8
	6 months–1 year	7	14.6
	1–2 years	19	39.6
	2–3 years	5	10.4
	>3 years	3	6.2
Home region	Transfer	3	6.2
	Graduated	1	2.1
	South Asia	28	58.3
	East Asia	7	14.6
	Southeast Asia	4	8.3
	Europe	3	6.2
	Sub-Saharan Africa	3	6.2
Academic experience	MENA	2	4.2
	Central Asia	1	2.1
	Excellent	6	12.5
	Good	21	43.8
	Average	13	27.1
	Poor	8	16.7

Almost 40% of the respondents (39.6%) had attended the University of Idaho for one to two years. As it comes to academic experience, 43.8% saw their overall experience as good while 12.5% said their

overall experience was excellent. Figure 1 demonstrates that many respondents were from South Asia, indicating substantial regional representation within the international student sample.

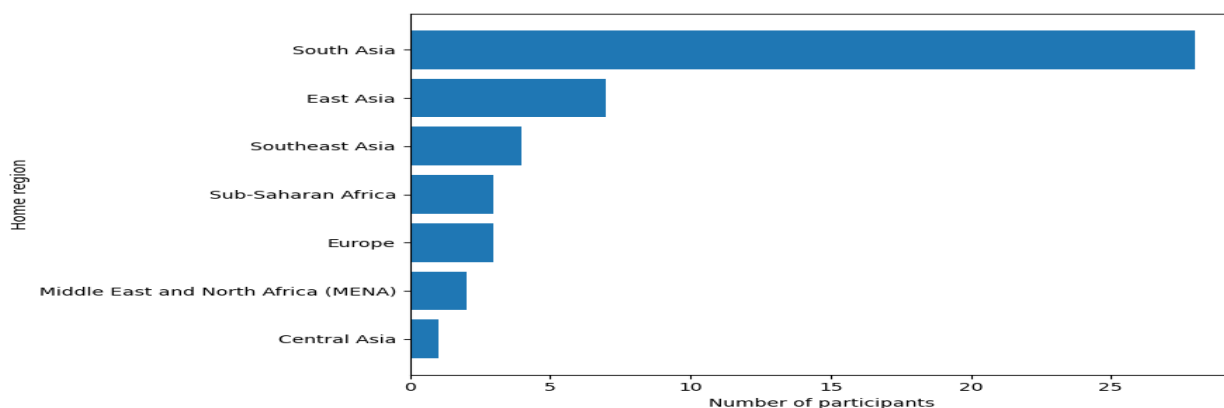


Figure 1. Distribution of Participants by Home Region

3.2 Campus Engagement and Cultural Adjustment

Moderate campus engagement and social integration were shown in responses. 50.0% of the respondents said they participated in campus activities sometimes; 27.1%

participated often. As seen in Table 2, the participation of international students in campus, friendship building and cultural adjustment is at a moderate level. Most respondents also said they had enough support from friends, family or the services of the university.

Table 2. Distribution of Responses for Major Study Indicators

Indicator	Category	n	%
Campus participation	Never	6	12.5
	Sometimes	24	50.0
	Often	13	27.1
	Always	5	10.4
Ease of making friends	Difficult	7	14.6
	Moderate	33	68.8
	Easy	8	16.7
Cultural adjustment challenge	Extremely challenging	4	8.3
	Moderately challenging	21	43.8
	Slightly challenging	18	37.5
	Not challenging	5	10.4
Adequate support	Disagree	3	6.2
	Neutral	16	33.3
	Agree	29	60.4
Academic experience	Poor	8	16.7
	Average	13	27.1
	Good	21	43.8
	Excellent	6	12.5

Most students (68.8%) thought it was moderately easy to make friends. In terms of cultural adjustment, 43.8% said they had moderate difficulties and 37.5% said they had slight difficulties. Additionally, 60.4%

stated that their friends, family or university services provided them with support that was adequate. As shown in Figure 2, cultural identity negotiation had the highest mean score out of the four exploratory constructs, while cultural adaptation had the lowest mean score.

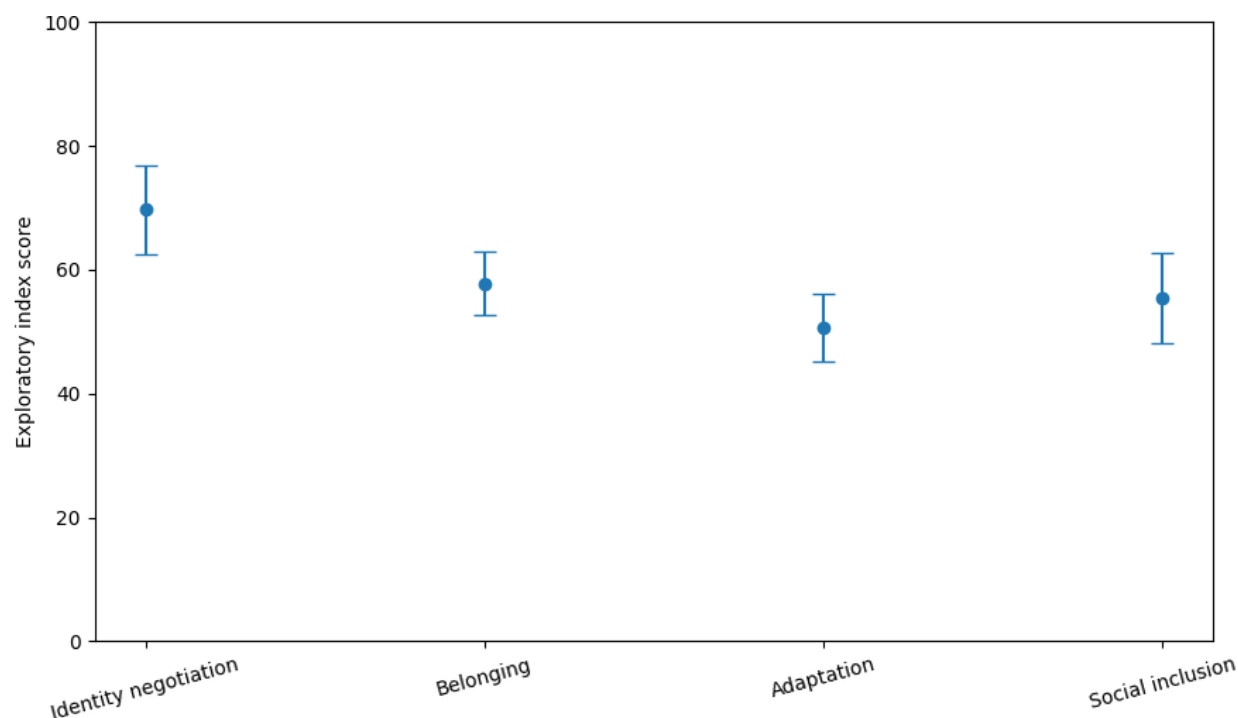


Figure 2. Mean Scores of the Exploratory Study Constructs with 95% Confidence Intervals

3.3 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Descriptive analysis revealed that cultural identity negotiation had the highest average score ($M = 69.68$, $SD = 25.29$), followed by belonging ($M = 57.75$, $SD = 18.15$), social inclusion ($M = 55.44$, $SD = 25.99$), and cultural adaptation ($M = 50.58$, $SD = 19.29$).

Table 3 shows that cultural identity negotiation had the highest mean score while cultural adaptation had the lowest mean score. Cronbach's alpha values for the exploratory composite measures are relatively low, suggesting that they have poor internal consistency.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of the Exploratory Constructs

Construct	Items	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Cronbach's α
Cultural identity negotiation	3	69.68	25.29	0.00	100.00	0.525
Sense of belonging	3	57.75	18.15	0.00	100.00	0.228
Cultural adaptation	3	50.58	19.29	11.11	88.89	0.401
Social inclusion	3	55.44	25.99	0.00	100.00	0.410

Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.228 to 0.525, indicating low internal consistency because the indices were made up of exploratory answers to the questions on the questionnaire, not established

psychometric scales. As shown in Figure 3, the highest positive correlation was found between identity negotiation and belonging to culture, and adaptation made a moderate positive correlation with social inclusion.

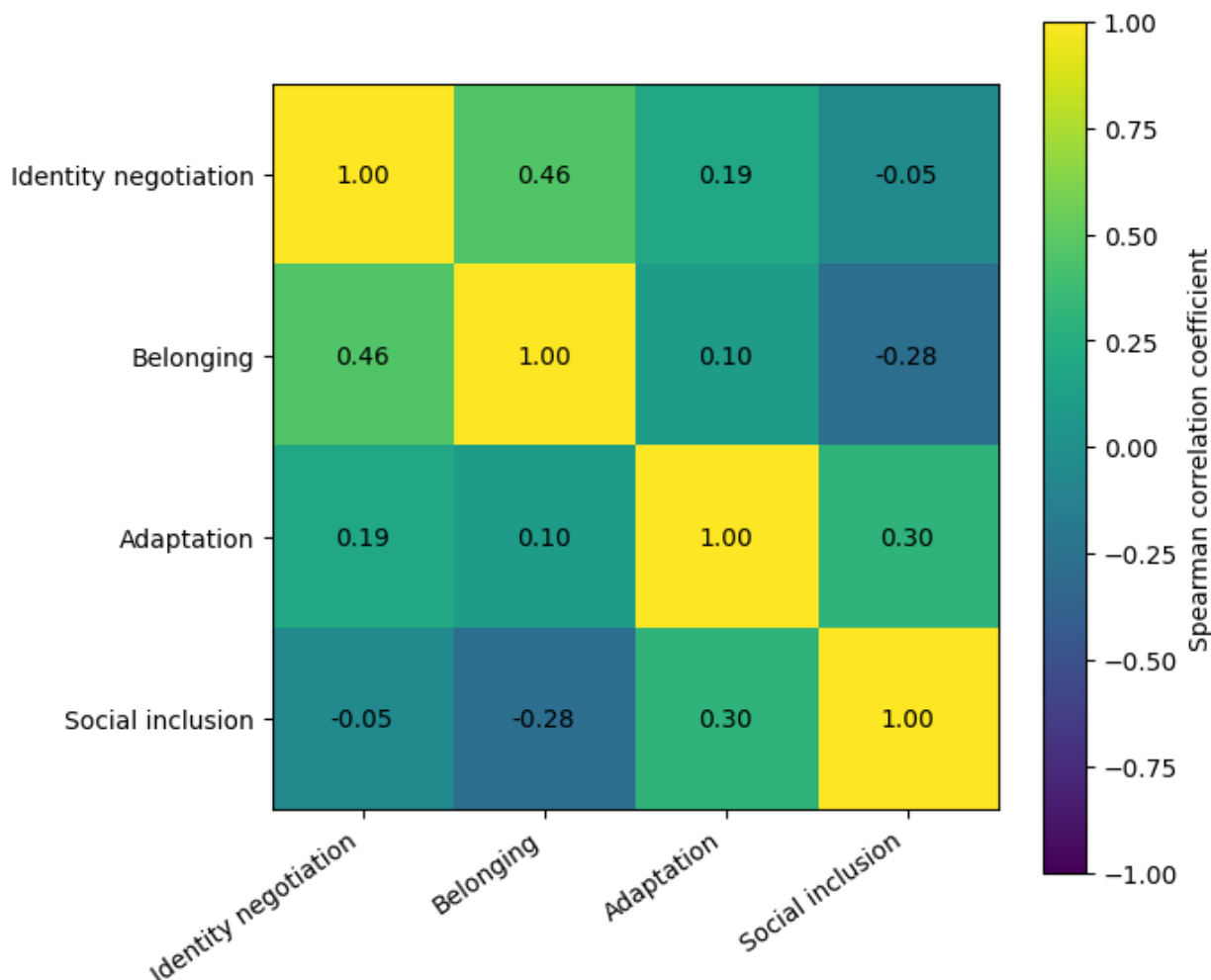


Figure 3. Spearman Correlation Matrix among the Exploratory Constructs

3.4 Correlation, Regression, and Mediation Analysis

The results of the Spearman correlation analysis showed that cultural identity negotiation had a significant positive correlation with belonging ($\rho = 0.459$, $p = 0.001$). The social inclusion showed also a significant positive correlation with cultural adaptation ($\rho = 0.299$, $p = 0.039$). There was no statistically significant correlation between identity negotiation, adaptation and social inclusion.

Multiple regression analysis revealed an overall model R^2 of 0.107 and Adjusted R^2 of -0.011, which accounts for 10.7% of the

variance in social inclusion. Thus, cultural adaptation was the highest positive regression coefficient ($B = 0.285$) but the effect was not statistically significant ($p = 0.143$). Other factors, such as identity negotiation, belonging, level of study and length of study also did not prove to be important predictors.

Cultural adaptation was also found not to mediate the relationship between identity negotiation and social inclusion (indirect effect = 0.055; 95% bootstrap CI = -0.042, 0.220), and the confidence interval contained zero. As shown in Table 4, there are positive and significant relationships between

cultural identity negotiation and belonging, and between adaptation and social inclusion.

But results of regression and mediation did not support the significance.

Table 4. Correlation, Regression, and Mediation Analysis

Analysis	Estimate	p-value
Identity negotiation → Belonging	$\rho = 0.459$	0.001
Identity negotiation → Adaptation	$\rho = 0.188$	0.200
Identity negotiation → Social inclusion	$\rho = -0.047$	0.749
Belonging → Adaptation	$\rho = 0.098$	0.509
Belonging → Social inclusion	$\rho = -0.277$	0.057
Adaptation → Social inclusion	$\rho = 0.299$	0.039
Regression ($R^2 = 0.107$)	Best predictor: Adaptation ($B = 0.285$)	0.143
Mediation	Indirect effect = 0.055 (95% CI: -0.042, 0.220)	Not significant

The results suggest that international students had relatively high cultural identity negotiation, while showing high belonging, moderate adaptation, and low social inclusion overall. Cultural identity negotiation was found to be significantly related to belonging and cultural adaptation positively related to social inclusion. No significant predictive or indirect effects, however, were found in the regression and mediation analyses. These findings indicate that identity negotiation can help strengthen students' sense of belonging, while a successful adaptation can help facilitate social inclusion, though caution should be used to interpret the results as the sample size is small and the exploratory indices have low reliability.

4. DISCUSSION

The current study explored the interconnections between cultural identity negotiation, sense of belonging, cultural adaptation and social inclusion of international students in the multicultural context of the university. The results showed

that the participants indicated high level of cultural identity negotiation, while they indicated moderate level of belonging, adaptation and social inclusion. Using correlation analysis, it was found that cultural identity negotiation had a positive correlation with sense of belonging and cultural adaptation had a positive correlation with social inclusion. The results of the regression analysis and the mediation analysis, however, did not reveal statistically significant predictive or indirect effects, indicating that other contextual and/or personal factors influence these relationships, and not measured in this study. Overall, the results confirmed the multifaceted nature of the adjustment of international students and the multidimensionality of identity development and social integration (Schartner, 2019; Ward & Szabó, 2019).

This positive relationship between cultural identity negotiation and sense of belonging is consistent with earlier research that posited that students who are able to negotiate

cultural identities between these two cultures are more likely to make meaningful connections in the university community. Having the opportunity to negotiate identity fosters confidence in intercultural encounters, moving toward a deeper participation with peers and campus life, ultimately leading to stronger feelings of acceptance and inclusion (Strayhorn, 2018; Tran & Gomes, 2017). In the same way, the positive correlation between cultural adaptation and social inclusion suggests that students with better adaptation in both academic and sociocultural contexts are better able to build positive social networks and engage in university life. These findings align with the current trend of thinking about adaptation as a change process that can be behavioural, emotional and/or cognitive and not just cultural assimilation (Candel, 2021; Van der Zee & van Oudenhoven, 2022).

While mediation analysis did not support the contribution of cultural adaptation as a significant mediator, the positive indirect effects indicate that adaptation can still play a role in the entire chain of identity negotiation as it leads to social inclusion. The lack of statistical significance probably reflects the relatively small sample size, and the indices created are exploratory in nature and therefore not necessarily meaningful in terms of theoretical relationships. Recent research also highlights how belonging, adaptation, and identity are complex, dynamic, and multifaceted phenomena that unfold over time in relation to various institutional contexts, interpersonal interactions, and individual experiences

(Feyissa & Ali, 2026; Zhao, 2026). Similarly, the moderate relationships found in the current study fit with the idea that integration is a multifaceted process that requires a variety of social, psychological, and institutional factors (Z. Li & Bohndick, 2026).

The results from the institutional perspective emphasize how relevant it is to establish intercultural spaces at the university level, which foster intercultural interaction and peer engagement as well as the accessibility of student support services. In universities, the orientation programmes, intercultural mentoring programmes, counselling services and student organisations that can foster meaningful contact between domestic and international students should be strengthened. These programs help foster a sense of belonging, minimize adjustment challenges, and promote successful integration into campus life (Casas Trujillo & Dabney-Fekete, 2026; De Coninck et al., 2026). Besides, universities need to be aware of the impact digital communication has on the well-being of international students and make sure that technology is not a barrier to social engagement in a healthy manner (He & Zeng, 2024).

The study has a theoretical contribution as it combines four variables into an empirical study: Cultural Identity Negotiation, belonging, cultural adaptation and social inclusion. However, the results highlight the interconnectedness of these constructs and offer further evidence of the validity of the current models of intercultural adjustment and identity development for language learners (Guan et al., 2026). However, some

caveats must be noted. Exploratory composite indices showed modest reliability and hence should be interpreted with care and the relatively small sample gathered from one university restricts the generalisability of the findings. Additional studies should include larger, multi-institutional samples and validated research instruments for a more in-depth understanding of the changes in identities, feelings of belonging, adaptation and social inclusion of international students over time and between different higher education settings.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the links between cultural identity negotiation, sense of belonging, cultural adaptation, and social inclusion of international students in a multicultural university environment. It was found that students negotiated their cultural identity relatively well, however, not as well as they developed a sense of belonging, adaptation and social inclusion. Cultural identity negotiation was found to have a significant positive association with sense of belonging and cultural adaptation with social inclusion. But neither the regression nor the mediation analyses showed significant predictive or indirect effects; therefore, the relationships were suggested to be the results of other personal, social and institutional factors that were not measured in this study. The exploratory indices demonstrated moderate reliability, and while the sample may be somewhat limited, the results add to the existing literature by combining these four interrelated constructs in one analysis. It is important to create

culturally inclusive learning environments that encourage meaningful intercultural interaction, supportive peer networks, and readily available student support services to enhance international students educational experiences. Future studies should use larger and more heterogeneous samples, validated measurement instruments, and longitudinal designs to gain a better understanding of the evolution of identity negotiation, belonging, adaptation and social inclusion. This type of evidence helps universities to create better policies and interventions to improve academic achievement and overall health of international students.

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