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Intracultural and Intercultural Contact Orientation of International Students in Japan: Uncertainty Management by Cultural Identification

Norihito Taniguchi
Jiro Takai
Nagoya University, Japan

Dariusz Skowronski
Temple University, Japan

ABSTRACT

The lack of exchange between international students and host nationals in Japan has long been a pressing issue, yet very little progress has been made to rectify this situation. In this study, we examined this issue by focusing on how international students in Japan perceive cultural contact with their host and home culture members during their sojourn. The study applied a qualitative approach based on grounded theory, collecting data through semi-structured interviews with 41 international students from China, the United Kingdom, and the United States. According to the social identity and anxiety/uncertainty management approach, we interpreted the findings on how international students manage uncertainty in the Japanese environment by identifying with the host and their own home cultures for their psychological well-being, which we distinguished as intercultural or intracultural contact orientation. International students demonstrated an intracultural rather than intercultural contact orientation due to the host nationals reacting to them as “foreigners.”

Keywords: adaptation, adjustment, cultural contact, cultural identification, international students, psychological well-being, Japan

In 2008, the Japanese government declared a plan to host 300,000 international students by 2020 to fortify its labor force by retaining them after graduation, while simultaneously internationalizing its own college students by increasing their presence on campuses and the cross-cultural interaction thereof (Ashizawa, 2013). By 2019, the number had reached 312,214 (228,403 in higher education institutions), a 4-fold increase from 1999 (Japan Student Services Organization, 2019). A recent survey showed that 92% of privately financed international students were satisfied with their study abroad. However, of these, only about 40% reported that they actually “made Japanese friends” (Japan Student Services Organization, 2018). Contrary to the government’s aims, the increase in the number of international students has not necessarily led to increased relationship building with Japanese cohorts.

This lack of cross-cultural exchange has been documented by academic research (e.g., Kagami, 2006; Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002a, 2002b; Takai, 1995). While various factors affect insufficient engagement on both sides, the literature on this matter makes reference to multiple psychological barriers for international students in Japan. For example, Western students (typically Caucasian) are treated as outsiders, and some complain that they are never allowed to forget that they are foreigners; it makes them aware of being perceived as “different” by the Japanese (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002a). In other studies, Chinese students encounter more psychological difficulties than Western students due to their ambivalent acculturation attitudes toward Japanese culture (Yin et al., 2021). Korean students also feel prejudice and discrimination by the Japanese, most likely due to Japan’s strong sense of group consciousness, which creates a psychological barrier for them to accept Koreans into their peer membership (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002b). Regardless of international students’ nationalities, they face these psychological struggles in their relationship with their hosts, preferring to stay within their own groups.

Meanwhile, such psychological distress might be buffered by receiving social support from compatriots and other foreign nationals in Japan, and thus their social network formation is not limited to the hosts. The psychological well-being (e.g., sense of well-being and self-esteem) of international students in the host country, namely, psychological adjustment, is strongly affected by personality, life changes, and social support (Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Notably, social support from compatriots and co-internationals strongly affects their psychological state in allowing them to maintain their own culture, while helping to cope with stress (Bochner et al., 1977). International students in Japan mainly receive emotional support (e.g., mental stability) from their compatriots, academic

support (e.g., Japanese language and culture) from the Japanese, and recreational support (e.g., off-campus activities) from other foreign nationals (Takai, 1995). Recent research suggests that international students need to learn the social skills of Japanese people to actively receive such support (Tanaka & Okunishi, 2016). Naturally, the more they engage with people, the more they receive social support, leading to their psychological well-being. Thus, social network formation is the key to the international student's mental health, and addressing the issues of social engagement, or the lack thereof, is important.

In the psychological well-being literature, many researchers have confirmed that group identification enhances individuals' psychological well-being (e.g., Haslam, 2004; Jetten et al., 2010; Sani et al., 2015; Wakefield et al., 2017). The concept of group identification, which is our sense of belonging to the group, coupled with our sense of commonality with its members (Sani et al., 2015), derives from the social identity paradigm of social psychology (Haslam, 2004). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) deals with how individuals perceive themselves to be members of a particular social group. Those who share common group membership constitute the ingroup, while those of other groups are the outgroup. In line with this perspective, group identification can buffer the individual from the everyday stress of life by providing a sense of belonging and security, increasing the likelihood of the individual perceiving the availability of useful support from fellow ingroup members (Jetten et al., 2010). Also, stronger identification with each cultural group (or multiple group membership) predicts better psychological well-being in the cross-cultural community (Wakefield et al., 2017). Likewise, in the case of international students who experience identity shift, they can attain psychological well-being by identifying with the host cultural group, while concurrently identifying with their cultural group of origin (cultural identification; de la Sablonnière et al., 2016). Recent literature has found that individuals do not identify with a cultural group that adds negative value to their social identity; instead, if the new cultural group has a positive value, they are likely to want to participate in it, and subsequently increase identification with that group (Cardenas & de la Sablonnière, 2020).

Furthermore, this cultural identification, which serves as norms or guides for how they should think, feel, and behave, allows them to reduce or manage uncertainty effectively in intercultural situations, where their traditional norms may be ineffective (Hogg & Belavadi, 2017). Individuals experience greater uncertainty when communicating with persons from different cultures (Gudykunst, 2005). Additionally, intercultural situations

pose more anxiety than intracultural (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001); thus, hosts may be compelled to avoid encounters with international students (Neuliep, 2012). Likewise, if international students feel intergroup anxiety, and lack self-confidence in communicating with the hosts, they would have difficulty engaging with them (Florack et al., 2014). If both international students and their hosts have a high level of anxiety (and uncertainty), they are less likely to interact (Logan et al., 2014). From the above, it would seem to reason that the anxiety/uncertainty management approach (Gudykunst, 2005), as well as the social identity approach, are crucial for investigating the engagement between international students and their hosts.

Taken together, the literature suggests that investigating the psychological well-being of international students and their engagement with both hosts and nonhosts is crucial for addressing issues pertaining to their mutual engagement or lack thereof. The utility of examining these issues through the social identity and anxiety/uncertainty management approaches is also evident. Accordingly, this study aims to clarify how international students perceive their interaction with the host and home culture members, especially the factors promoting or hindering this engagement.

In this study, “international students” are defined as a student from a foreign country who is granted the status of residence as “university student” (student visa) and who is receiving education at a university in Japan (Japan Student Services Organization, 2019). “Host culture” refers to Japanese culture. “Hosts” or “host culture members” refers to Japanese who engage or communicate with international students, including fellow students (classmates or peers), nonstudent adults at their workplace, and host families. By contrast, “home culture” pertains to that of the international student’s home country. “Home culture members” refers to, in general, friends/relatives in their home country or compatriots in Japan.

METHOD

We employed qualitative research to explore international students’ cultural contact perceptions in Japan using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory aims to generate a theory pertaining to a certain process from data provided by participants post hoc (Creswell & Poth, 2016). For our purposes, the grounded theory was suitable, given the paucity of research on the topic, and the exploratory nature of our research aims to explore international students’ cultural contact perception.

In addition, this study addressed the lack of cross-cultural exchange between international students and the hosts; it required quality assurance of international students’ narratives, not their prejudices. According to the

Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954), quantitative and qualitative contacts are essential to reduce prejudice between international students and host and home culture members. To prevent such prejudice, we set three conditions for participation in this study. First, this study focused on international students from three countries: China, England, and the United States. The reasons to enumerate three countries are because first, those countries are prime study abroad destinations of Japanese students; about 62.1% of Japanese students choose China, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017), and second, those are the leading countries in Asia and Western countries where Japan hosts international students (Japan Student Services Organization, 2019). Next, we set two additional conditions for participation: (a) enrollment in Japanese higher education institutions for over one semester, and (b) engaging in active contact with the Japanese or compatriots/fellow internationals for more than two or three times a week. By setting these conditions, we assured the quality of international students' narratives. After completing the research design, this study was approved by the Nagoya University Institutional Review Board on May 22, 2019 (ID:1286).

Participants and Recruitment Process

We recruited international students by email from June 2019 to February 2020 through several faculty at large public universities with a sizable international student population in Tokyo and Nagoya, Japan. We gathered a total of 53 participants during the above period and selected 41 participants who met all three participation conditions of this study. Table 1 presents the demographic information of participants. The first author conducted semistructured interviews with 41 participants for 60–90 minutes in English. In line with the study's aim and relevant literature review, the contents of the interviews were: (a) demographic information; (b) differences in communication; (c) host/home cultural identity; (d) motivation/stress; (e) behavioral changes; (f) culture shock; and (g) positive/negative experiences through interaction.

Data Collection and Analysis

Guided by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), we used theoretical sampling to collect and analyze data. Theoretical sampling is an iterative sampling process in which data from prior interviews identifies whom to interview, the addition of participants, and subsequent adoption of new

concepts. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participant, and the data were later transcribed. We analyzed transcripts in three steps: initial coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. The first author coded the interview data line by line, then coded these into broader categories, and finally sorted out the tentative major and subcategories.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants (N =41)

Student profile	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	11	27
Female	30	73
Age range		
18–20 years	12	29
21–30 years	29	71
Country		
China	8	19
United Kingdom	9	22
United States	24	59
Academic status		
Undergraduate	17	41
1-year exchange	15	37
Master	3	7
Pre-master	2	5
Pre-doctor	1	3
G30 (Full-degree program taught in English)	3	7
Japanese language proficiency		
High	17	42
Intermediate	12	29
Low	12	29
Period in Japan		
Less than 1 year	28	68
1 to under 2 years	7	17
2 to under 3 years	4	10
More than 3 years	2	5

After the tentative conceptual categories were determined, they were checked for relevance with data, codes, and analytical memos, and fitted

into a tentative conceptual model that reflected this study's phenomena of interest. Then, the first author repeatedly checked the tentative model with the second author and subsequently with the participants to confirm whether it reflected and described their worldviews. If not, we interviewed additional participants and refined the categories. We stopped the interviews when no further data were observed to provide new insights and when the concept was adequately established (theoretical saturation; Charmaz, 2014, p. 214). Such iterative data collection and analysis process controlled authors' biases, reflecting participants' worldviews, and shaping a solid foundation for a robust theoretical model of cultural contact (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Overall, two major categories, each containing four subcategories, emerged from the analysis in this study, which will be provided below.

Table 2
Major Categories and Subcategories

Major categories	Subcategories
1. Intercultural contact orientation	1.1: Identifying with host cultural identity as primary and home cultural identity as secondary 1.2: Motivation to learn host cultural norms / self-imposed stress 1.3: Imitating host cultural behavior 1.4: Engaging with hosts
2. Intracultural contact orientation	2.1: Identifying with home culture identity as primary and host cultural identity as secondary 2.2: Motivation to maintain home cultural norms / stress imposed by hosts 2.3: Maintaining home cultural behavior 2.4: Clashing with host cultural norms

RESULTS

From the responses of the 41 international students, two major categories emerged regarding their cultural contact. The first category was named "intercultural contact orientation." This refers to engagement with people from different cultures. The second category was labeled "intracultural contact orientation." This pertains to engagement with people from the

same or similar cultures. The two major categories are not mutually exclusive. For instance, some may communicate both with the Japanese and the international students equally, whereas others have more or less communication with either group. The two major categories were further divided into four subcategories respectively, as indicated in Table 2. Quotations from research participants are shared to exemplify each category.

Intercultural Contact Orientation

The first major category drawn from the data was intercultural contact orientation. International students with this orientation basically want to assimilate into Japanese culture and be like the Japanese. They tend to engage with the hosts such as Japanese students and Japanese adults at work rather than engaging with other international students. From this perspective, four subcategories explained the properties of the contact orientation in detail.

Identifying with Host Cultural Identity as Primary and Home Cultural Identity as Secondary

Adjustment to Japanese society involves making decisions about how much of the host culture to take on and how much of one's home culture to retain. Many participants saw themselves as actively changing to fit in with Japanese culture, while maintaining the identity, language, and traditions of the home culture was also an integral part of international students' lives while in Japan. In this context, this code emerged during data analysis as the most typical and basic perception of participants through engagement with Japanese students: "I would try (to be) 100% Japanese. I want to assimilate as much as I can. [But] it completely depends on whom I talk to and interact with" (U.S. student).

Notably, several participants felt being accepted by the Japanese, feeling safe and comfortable in their new environment. This accepted experience, in turn, stirred participants to accept the Japanese culture. Consequently, the emphasis on identification with host cultural identity (Japanese) emerged in this study: "Because you are accepted for who you are (by the Japanese), you should accept how they (the Japanese) do things. A lot of my friends or Japanese accepted me for who I am" (U.K. student).

In particular, those who were half-Japanese, regardless of their origins, perceived that their Asian appearance faded their awareness of racial differences, which facilitated them to identify as Japanese culture members: “I honestly forgot (my race) here because it does not really matter. People see me (the Japanese) because I act like Japanese” (U.S. student).

Not to be seen as foreigners by the Japanese was indispensable for participants to be able to recognize themselves as members of Japanese social circles.

Motivation to Learn Host Cultural Norms / Self-Imposed Stress

Many participants who made decisions about taking on Japanese culture often expressed a desire to learn the cultural norms by engaging with many Japanese. Intercultural communication with the Japanese enabled participants to obtain actual cultural information and internalize it: “I would like to interact with more Japanese students just because they are heavily into the[ir] studies (diligence)... I am personally motivated” (U.S. student).

However, some participants who wanted to understand Japanese cultural norms deeply were confused by the indirect communication style of the hosts, causing much ambiguity and unfamiliarity: “It is very hard to gauge how Japanese people feel about you. You always worry about how they might feel about you” (U.S. student).

Those participants with a strong motivation to learn Japanese cultural norms put pressure on themselves to be like the Japanese; some participants changed their direct communication styles to be more indirect to suit their hosts.

Imitating Host Cultural Behavior

Many participants perceived that imitating Japanese cultural behaviors was the most appropriate way to internalize the host culture. Those students first focused on differences in behaviors between the Japanese and their own cultures, and then observed meanings and ways of the behaviors, and finally modeled the behaviors: “I just observe everyone and what is the norm...I tried to change by using more Japanese. I would try to imitate a conversation with people I don’t know” (U.S. student).

As a result of imitating Japanese cultural behaviors, those students felt inclusiveness of the Japanese community while some students even

felt like an inhabitant with prolonged residence: “I tried to assimilate and felt more included. I become more comfortable and have a sense of community like the style of dress, cultural behavior like bowing” (U.S. student).

Such emotional change induced participants to internalize Japanese cultural norms further. The more they internalized these norms, the more they thought, felt, and behaved like the Japanese.

Engaging with Hosts

While many participants imitated Japanese thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, successful experiences of building relationships with the Japanese led participants to assimilate into their culture more easily. The most common relationships were friendships with Japanese students, while others had romantic relationships or marriage relationships with them: “I hang out with [Japanese friends]. Around this time, I wanted to establish a strong relationship with others (the Japanese). I had more self-confidence and social” (U.S. student).

The intimate relationships with the Japanese gradually broke participants’ stereotypes against them, making them feel part of their community. The experiences, then, triggered changes of participants’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the home culture into those of the host culture: “I start[ed] living [in], interacting [with], going to places where the Japanese go, not tourists. I changed the perspective from that of a tourist to that of an inhabitant” (U.K. student). Such deep engagement with the Japanese prompted participants’ identification as members of the Japanese social circle.

As discussed, participants who identified with host cultural identity were motivated to learn host cultural norms and imitate its behaviors. Those participants often established relationships with the Japanese, which further allowed them to identify themselves as host culture members. In this way, participants gradually assimilated into the host culture. This cyclical process refers to the process of intercultural contact.

Intracultural Contact Orientation

The second major category drawn from the data was intracultural contact orientation. International students with this orientation generally maintain their own culture and consider Japanese culture separate. They typically spend time with international students or other foreign people living in Japan from the same or similar cultures, rather than engaging with

the Japanese students. From this view, four subcategories closely described the components of the contact orientation.

Identifying with Home Cultural Identity as Primary and Host Cultural Identity as Secondary

Commonly, any study abroad aims to adjust to the host culture and learn it. However, a majority of participants in this study recognized that their cultural values and personalities were incompatible with the Japanese cultural norms: “I have never wanted to adapt to Japanese culture...I already have all of the cultures that I want...I do not really think it fits with my personality” (U.S. student).

Notably, those participants, in particular Caucasians, repeatedly sensed the Japanese seeing them as foreigners, which hindered their involvement in Japanese culture, resulting in the strengthening of their home cultural maintenance: “I was automatically called *Ryuugakusei* (international student). The fact that I was identified (as an) international student, makes me (feel) like...(I) am temporally here” (U.K. student).

Participants with multicultural backgrounds or strong ethnic identities were fully aware of being treated as foreigners by the Japanese. As those participants originally had strong bonds to their own culture, they had no intention of assimilating into Japanese culture: “I feel like China is very big and propaganda. The nationalism is very big concept and deeply rooted in the Chinese mindset. Wherever I am, I am still Chinese” (U.S. student).

These narratives suggested that their home cultural identities were deeply rooted in their heart, and the “foreigner treatment” by the Japanese is a crucial psychological barrier toward mutual interaction between participants and the Japanese.

Motivation to Maintain Home Cultural Norms / Stress Imposed by Hosts

Participants who realized the incompatibility between their own culture and Japanese culture often maintained their own cultural norms, engaging with those from the same/similar cultures, and recalling their own cultural standards of the home country: “[I have mainly] Chinese friends. It’s easy and fast to get to know each other...Japanese people are slowly and slowly [taking] down the wall” (U.S. student).

Some participants who maintain their own cultural norms felt stress from the Japanese, likely because their home cultural norms rarely worked well in Japan: “It is stressful for me. Usually, the Japanese are really in

their friends' group and walk together. It is hard to get into a relationship” (U.S. student).

Those participants were stressed from the contrast in their interpersonal communication style between the Japanese, such as low context versus high context (Hall, 1989).

Maintaining Home Cultural Behavior

Most participants made considerable effort to follow the Japanese mannerisms, whereas many participants maintained their own cultural norms and behaviors simultaneously. The latter participants often continued engaging with their family and friends back home, so they can be themselves, behaving naturally as if they were in their own country: “I keep in contact with family and friends to maintain my [American] cultural identity. [I] keep normal school schedules as same as I would have in the United States” (U.S. student).

Furthermore, those participants often rejected losing their own culture, as well as imitating Japanese cultural behaviors (e.g., wearing clothing like a Japanese): “I don't want to lose everything I had... Here woman's fashion is such that everybody looks the same... I still want to be myself and an individual person” (U.S. student).

Maintaining their home cultural behaviors made participants feel more distance toward Japanese culture. The more they maintained their own culture, the more they thought, felt, and behaved like they were in their own country despite being in Japan.

Clashing with Host Cultural Norms

Participants who maintained their own cultural thoughts, feelings, and behaviors were forced to confront Japanese cultural norms through engagement with the Japanese. Those participants often experienced clashes between their own values and those of the hosts. The most common clashes were related to traditions of work and gender in Japanese society: “In Japan, women retire from working very early...In the work situation, it is not good to be different and disagree with people and there is also a hierarchy” (U.S. student).

In particular, some participants from China faced stereotyping of foreigners by the Japanese. Although negative portrayals of Chinese tourists in media might have also been an impetus, Chinese participants struggled with a preset unfavorable impression of the Chinese held by Japanese: “One day, when I left work, the manager told me, ‘I don't feel you are like Chinese (You are really Japanese).’ I [was] surprised. I felt very subtle [discrimination]” (Chinese student).

As stated, participants who identified with home cultural identity as primary maintained their home cultural norms and behavior. They often clashed with host cultural norms and finally identified themselves as their own culture members again, having given up trying to adjust to the host culture. In this way, participants gradually separated from the host culture. This cyclical process is typical of intracultural contact, as contrasted with intercultural contact.

Summary of Results

To summarize, participants in our study perceived intercultural contact as a process of assimilation to the host culture and intracultural contact as a process of separation from it. It should be noted that being thought of as a foreigner by the hosts is crucial in whether participants assume identification with the host or home cultural identity as primary. In short, while participants engaged with the Japanese more when they did not feel being perceived as a foreigner by them, but on the contrary, they engaged with their compatriots more if they did feel so.

DISCUSSION

The data analysis derived two cultural contact orientations: intercultural and intracultural. As described in the introduction, we interpreted our findings through the social identity and anxiety/uncertainty management approaches. These approaches allowed us to propose a theoretical model of “uncertainty management by cultural identification.”

Interpretation by Social Identity Approach

First, we interpreted our findings by the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This approach emphasizes the importance of one’s identity, in this case, that of a constituent of the home culture and the host culture. International students, by virtue of their entry into a foreign environment, are compelled to have their “foreignness” accentuated. The intergroup nature of their contact with the hosts is highly salient, and they have a clear sense of ingroup (fellow international students, compatriots) versus the outgroup (hosts). However, as their sojourn progresses, they may come to accept the host culture and feel part of this group as their ingroup. Successful adjustment, then, entails cognitively categorizing oneself as a member of both the home and host cultures, i.e., ingroup identity in both groups. This integration of two identities allows one to have positive affect toward both groups; hence, ingroup favoritism is

unlikely to occur. On the other hand, a strong identity toward one group induces the perception of competition between groups and downward comparison toward the outgroup results, giving the ingroup a feeling of superiority.

In the case of international students, the natural outgroup is the hosts, which could lead to shunning the hosts and attraction toward compatriots. The properties of “intracultural contact orientation” in our findings can be explained in that tightly knit ethnic or cultural groups tend to be exclusive toward other groups, and this exclusion gives them a sense of collective self-esteem. The need to feel a sense of pride for themselves compels them to feel good about their own group, while simultaneously feeling aversiveness toward the host outgroup.

On the contrary, the properties of “intercultural contact orientation” can be described in the following. Once international students feel accepted by the host cultural group, they are not only comfortable with host norms and customs but abiding by these become natural. Internalizing the host culture makes them feel part of the host group; hence the hosts are perceived as their ingroup, just as their compatriots are. As discussed, while international students can cognitively emphasize either the host/home cultural identity, they can also identify themselves as host and home culture members. These variations in assumed identity are what we hereon refer to as host/home cultural identification.

This host/home/both cultural identification is consistent with what had been discussed in prior literature, which purports that individuals positively appraise either host/home or both cultures, participating in the identified cultural group(s), thus increasing their identification with either or both cultures (Cardenas & de la Sablonnière, 2020). The stronger identification with either host/home or both cultural groups would buffer daily stress of life (Jetten et al., 2010), leading to better psychological well-being (Wakefield et al., 2017).

Interpretation by Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Approach

The anxiety/uncertainty management approach (Gudykunst, 2005) also provides a suitable perspective for interpreting our results. This approach posits that international students feel uncertainty/anxiety in intercultural situations and, to manage them, they are motivated to engage with host/home culture members.

The properties of “intercultural contact orientation” can be interpreted by this approach that once international students identify themselves as host culture members, they are motivated to learn host norms, and they feel compelled to engage with the hosts owing to being a part of the host community (Turner, 1988). As the host interactions

increase and international students' anxiety toward the hosts decreases (Logan et al., 2014), they can imitate the host cultural behavior, hence internalizing the host culture within their cognitive-behavioral patterns. Such imitation facilitates them to develop social skills in the host culture (Oguri & Gudykunst, 2002), increasing their confidence in predicting the hosts' behaviors, which Gudykunst (2005) referred to as "attributional confidence," resulting in deriving higher satisfaction with their relationship with the hosts (Florack et al., 2014). As the more host relationships become intimate, their interactions become more personalized, more synchronized, and less apprehensive (Gudykunst et al., 1987; Neuliep, 2012). Consequently, international students increasingly perceive the hosts as their ingroup, and consequently feel more a part of the host community.

By contrast, pertaining to "intracultural contact orientation," if international students identify themselves with their home culture more, they may feel aversiveness toward the hosts. Perceiving the hosts as an external entity makes them feel higher anxiety toward the hosts, and subsequently, they may avoid interaction with them (Logan et al., 2014). In order to reduce this amplified anxiety caused by the hosts, international students are motivated to engage with compatriots to feel comfort in the company of their own kind, hence reaffirming their home cultural norms (Turner, 1988). The more international students engage with home culture members, the more they find similar/shared norms, allowing them to forget about the threats and anxiety imposed by the host culture (Florack et al., 2014). Subsequently, international students maintain their behavior as if they were in their own country. However, such rigid maintenance of home behaviors often leads to clashes with the host culture, having detrimental effects on their relationships with hosts, which heightens their anxiety (Neuliep, 2012; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Consequently, international students perceive the hosts as an outgroup, as a means to protect themselves from stress, and their home cultural enclave provides a defensive function.

Proposing a Theoretical Model of Uncertainty Management by Cultural Identification

We propose a grounded theory model of uncertainty management by cultural identification by integrating interview data and these theoretical accounts. Taken together, social identity approach explains that international students cognitively categorize themselves as host/home culture members. Anxiety/uncertainty management approach describes

uncertainty management as the motivation of cultural contact and highlights interpersonal communication factors that influence uncertainty management, such as motivation to interact, behavioral adaptability, and relationship development. We name the integration of these theoretical accounts “uncertainty management by cultural identification.”

Uncertainty management by cultural identification implies that individuals are motivated to manage uncertainty by identifying as one or more cultural group members in intercultural situations for individuals’ psychological well-being. This model’s basic ideas are provided below. Cognitively, individuals identify with particular culture group members; hence, they fit themselves in with the relevant referent groups. Affectively, identification with a particular group and its subsequent management can evoke both positive and negative emotions. Behaviorally, identification and evoked emotions guide one’s behavior in alignment toward the norms of the specific group they identify with. Interactions with others invoke particular identifications, which subsequently affect cognitive, affective, and behavioral patterns. Cultural contact, then, initiates this cyclical identification process. We propose two identifications: intercultural and intracultural, which we refer to as contact orientation (see Figure 1).

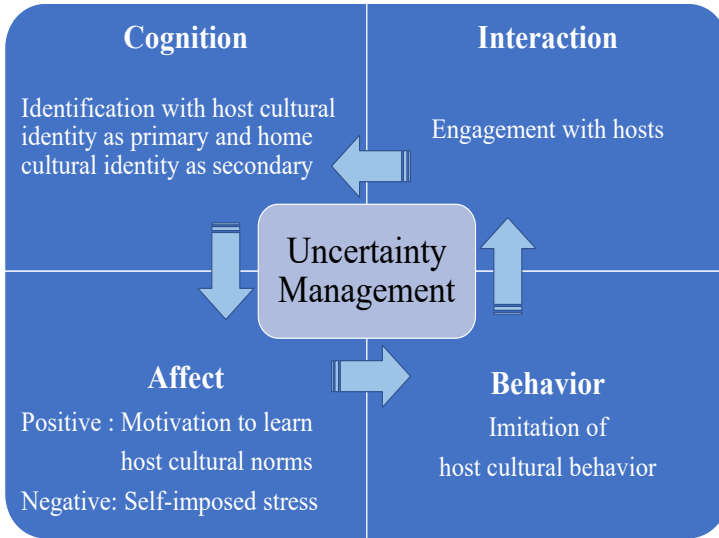
Intercultural Contact Orientation

As had been described earlier, intercultural contact orientation refers to when individuals cognitively identify with host culture group members and feel that they fit in with the host cultural group. On the affective level, they are apt to seek acceptance from the hosts, and they are highly motivated to learn host cultural norms to gain their approval. On the contrary, they may feel pressure and difficulty in trying to become just like the hosts. On the behavioral level, identification with and emotional attachment to the host culture will guide one’s behavior in alignment with the host norms, i.e., internalizing host cultural behaviors. Through increased interaction with the hosts, they mimic the host behaviors, attaining essential social skills and knowledge of interpersonal rituals and customs, which allows them the confidence to expand their involvement with more host members. This high level of engagement with the hosts instills identification with the host culture. Intercultural contact, then, initiates this cyclical identification process involving cognitive, affective, and behavioral components.

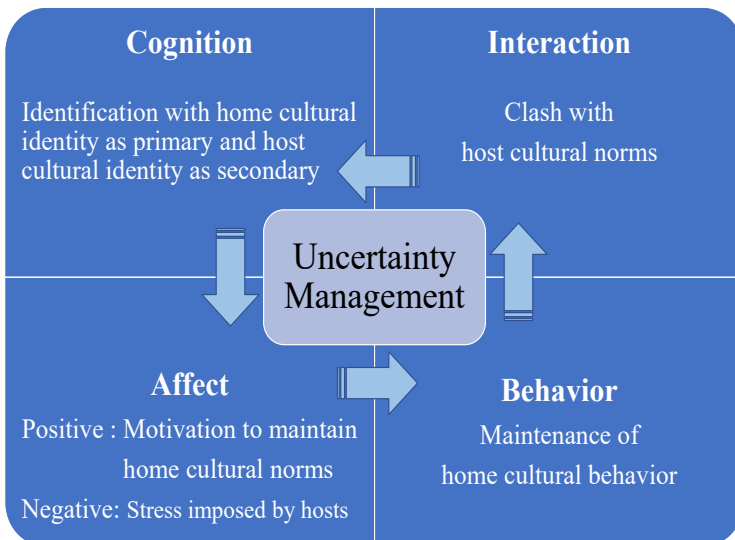
In our case, the Japanese culture, international students with an intercultural contact orientation are likely to engage actively with Japanese hosts, consider themselves as part of their group, sharing their ingroup, and at times consider themselves as bona fide Japanese culture members. They are eager to learn Japanese cultural norms (e.g., bowing) and

Figure 1

Inter-cultural Contact Orientation



Intra-cultural Contact Orientation



consciously mimic Japanese behavior patterns. Consequently, the Japanese hosts feel comfortable relating with such students, which facilitates the expansion of their host interpersonal network. Being completely immersed in Japanese social circles, students come to see themselves as “one of the hosts” and assume a Japanese cultural identity more significant than their home cultural identity. Our study found the typical students with an intercultural contact orientation to be half-Japanese, or those who are foreign nationals born and raised in Japan, along with those interested in working in Japan and those with a Japanese spouse.

Intracultural Contact Orientation

As previously explained, intracultural contact orientation refers to when individuals feel compelled to identify more strongly with the home culture as a reaction to the cultural, environmental transition. Their cognitive orientation, therefore, that of self-perception as a member of the home culture, and with that, their stance toward cultural adjustment is that of cultural maintenance. On the affective level, they derive positive affect from home cultural norms, while feeling stress from the host culture. Behaviorally speaking, they stick to their home cultural norms, without attempting to learn the host behavioral customs and rules. Because of this, their interactions with the hosts are likely to accompany interpersonal clashes. Such discord of values invokes a strong home cultural identification, leading to retainment of their home behaviors.

In our case, international students with an intracultural contact orientation engage more with compatriots and other nationals aside from the hosts. While they may engage in contact with the Japanese, they consider their own home cultural identity as primary and perceive the interaction as being intergroup. They observe their home cultural norms (e.g., greetings) rather than emulating the host norms and behave as though they are in their home country. By interacting with people in Japan, they become aware of the discrepancy between Japanese society’s norms and their own culture, which prompts them to be defensive toward their own culture, feeling that the hosts present a certain extent of the threat to their being. Subsequently, they prefer to form their own subcommunities to protect their values. Some examples of such students include third culture people, those from multicultural backgrounds, those with a strong ethnic identity, and those who consider themselves loyal patriots of their home country.

Summary of Uncertainty Management by Cultural Identification

To summarize, uncertainty management by cultural identification provides two contact orientations: intercultural and intracultural contact orientation. In the continuum between the two orientations, individual international students can be situated regarding their personal cultural contact orientation in intercultural situations for attaining psychological well-being; some communicate both with the Japanese and the international students equally, whereas others have more or less communication with either group. Figure 2 describes the intracultural–intercultural continuum of contact.

Figure 2

Intracultural–Intercultural Continuum of Contact



Intracultural Contact Orientation and “Foreignness” in Japanese Higher Education Institutions

From our findings, we conclude that a majority of international students demonstrate an intracultural rather than intercultural contact orientation due to the perceived feeling of “foreignness” from hosts. The sense of “foreignness” perceived from the Japanese is consistent with previous literature suggesting the psychological barriers felt by international students in Japan (Murphy-Shigematsu, 2002a, 2002b; Yin et al., 2021).

One possible explanation for this phenomenon may result from institutional practices of hosting international students in Japanese higher education institutions. The ratio of international students to all students enrolled in Japanese higher education in 2019 was 7.8% (Japan Student Services Organization, 2019). Due to a relatively culturally homogeneous student body, the Japanese higher education institutions have traditionally treated international students separately from Japanese students in their

academics and lives (Ebuchi, 1997; Takai, 1995). This separatism has been a dominant impetus for policy among Japanese higher education institutions even today. For example, since 2008, major universities had begun offering English language degree programs under the auspices of the Global 30 (G30) initiative of the Japanese government (Kuroda et al., 2019). The curriculum of the G30 program is offered separately from that of Japanese students, and G30 students have little or no opportunity to take courses with Japanese students. Consequently, they form friendships amongst their international classmates, and little mingling between the host students can be afforded. This is consistent with the findings of Kagami (2006), who suggested that institutionalized impediments from within the university, such as vital announcements being made only in Japanese, and separate classes being held for international students and Japanese students, exacerbate their feeling of isolation. Such institutionalized separation between hosts and internationals results in the formation of monocultural communities on campus, with little mixing. The increased number of compatriots and fellow international students on modern-day Japanese university campuses provides them with an adequate pool of potential, “easy” targets to build their local social network. In fact, Takai (1995) demonstrated that international students in Japan rely on social support in the following order: first, their compatriots, second, the Japanese, and last, other nationals. Readily available access to fellow international students leads them to favor contact with compatriots and other nationals, resulting in them adhering to their home cultural identity.

Universities and their faculty in Japan should integrate international students and Japanese students into one student body in both academic and daily lives. This integrationism should be the central principle to host international students in Japanese higher education institutions (Ebuchi, 1997; Takai, 1995). Although separatism is still the dominant principle, some universities and their faculty have embodied cultural integration, by offering an increased number of courses offered in English for co-learning and building residences to house both international students and Japanese students together. These institutional efforts have been effective in ameliorating international students’ academic and living conditions. For international students, being treated as individuals daily in one student body may eliminate the perceived feeling of “foreignness.” Self-initiated relationships, in which partners do not perceive themselves as host or sojourner, go beyond cultural barriers and leads to positive contact based on Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis. Such positive contact is indispensable for the constructive coexistence of international students and Japanese students in Japanese society.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how international students recognize engagement with their host and home culture members. Our findings revealed that international students in Japan demonstrate an intracultural rather than intercultural contact orientation due to the perceived feeling of “foreignness” from hosts. The previous literature presupposed that international students are determined to adjust to the host country; in fact, our present study demonstrated that they decide by themselves to what extent they will adjust to the host culture and engage with the hosts. In short, we demonstrated the importance of reconsidering the meaning of adjustment from the perspective of the international students.

Although our findings from this study add to the existing literature on cultural contact studies, some limitations deserve mention. First, international students are not compelled to experience uncertainty in intercultural contact if the norms are similar between host and home cultures. Future studies, thus, should investigate this proximity in the cultural distance (Triandis, 1995) by adding a large number of countries and gathering a statistically sufficient number of samples. Second, pertaining to individual-level cultural distance, such as the degrees of host/home cultural identification, degrees of understanding and appreciation for host/home culture, and the readiness for cultural contact, should be included and examined in cultural contact experience.

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Author Bios

NORIHITO TANIGUCHI, JD, is a PhD candidate in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at Nagoya University in Japan. His major research interests lie in the area of cross-cultural adjustment, acculturation, and intercultural competence. Email: taniguchi.norihito@i.mbox.nagoya-u.ac.jp

JIRO TAKAI, PhD, is a Professor in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at Nagoya University in Japan. His major research interests lie in the area of interpersonal competence, self in social interaction, interpersonal conflict strategies, and cross-cultural adjustment. Email: jtakai@cc.nagoya-u.ac.jp

DARIUSZ SKOWRONSKI, PhD, is an Associate Professor, psychological studies, Temple University in Japan. His major research interests lie in the area of clinical and counseling psychology, psychotherapy, online counseling, behavioral psychology and neuroscience. Email: dariusz.skowronski@tuj.temple.edu