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Predictors of Intercultural Relationships on the Behavioural and Psychological Cross-Cultural Adaptation among University Students

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural relationships profoundly impact cross-cultural adaptation. However, previous studies have mainly investigated intercultural communication competence, and studies examining intercultural relationships are scarce. This study aimed to identify intercultural relationships, namely academic, friendship, and romantic, as predictors of psychological and behavioural cross-cultural adaptation among university students in Malaysia. This study used the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation as the theoretical framework. Quantitative research was employed using a purposive sampling technique among Malaysian university students, and 340 valid responses were collected. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) was used for the data analysis. The results found that intercultural friendship and intercultural academic relationships are the predictors of behavioural and psychological cross-cultural adaptation. However, romantic relationships were not predictors. The study urged universities and the government to craft policies that embrace a multicultural-friendly environment and foster cross-cultural adaptation through the educational curriculum and co-curricular activities.

Keywords: Intercultural relationships, behavioral and psychological cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural communication, educational environment, university students

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1.0 Introduction

In a world where cultural diversity and inclusivity are being embraced (Yousef, 2024), various intercultural relationships have emerged through intercultural communication in university environments (D'Orazzi & Marangell, 2025; Hang & Zhang, 2023). These intercultural relationships have a profound impact on cross-cultural adaptation (Soh et al., 2025) as they offer social assistance and cultural clues that can help one adapt to a new environment (W. Chen et al., 2025). This has proven that cross-cultural relationships encourage changes in the attitudes of individuals in terms of cultural awareness, tolerance, and self-knowledge involved in the relationships (Kastner, 2021).

Today, the university environment plays a significant role in shaping one's character and culture (Hosein et al., 2023; C.T. Wong et al., 2025). For a multicultural environment like Malaysia, it is a good ground for nurturing intercultural communication (Balakrishnan et al., 2023). For example, Malaysia's international student population has grown rapidly, and it is expected to attract 250,000 international students in 2025 (Walker, 2025). Thus, this creates an environment that consists of people from different cultures, countries, and even religions on top of the existing Malaysian diversity, leading to the emergence of romantic or platonic relationships, which are believed to influence students' ability to adapt to new cultural environments and interact effectively across cultures (Abdul Rohman et al., 2024; Owusu-Agyeman, 2021).

Moreover, studies have shown that social connections with students from other cultures help build psychological resilience and smooth transitions, making it easier for students to overcome cultural barriers (Bethel et al., 2020; Xu & Shapui, 2025). In fact, when one has a high level of cultural intelligence, they are motivated to adapt their behaviour according to the host culture (acculturation) of their current environment (Chu & Zhu, 2023).

Nonetheless, in this rapidly diversifying cultural environment, the different types of intercultural relationships that university students have on cross-cultural adaptation remain unclear (Jamal & Wok, 2020; Niu et al., 2024). Most research has mainly discussed the process that leads to cultural adaptation and the challenges of cultural adaptation (Bano & Liu, 2025) but has not highlighted the perception of cross-cultural adaptation. Moreover, a smaller focus group of international students and expatriate teachers (Le et al., 2024) has been studied, specifically regarding factors influencing cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural challenges, and well-being. However, it limits the scope of research to international students from China and Japan (Ismail et al., 2021; Miao & Zhang, 2024; Niu et al., 2024).

Previous studies have mainly examined the aspect of intercultural communication competence (Balakrishnan et al., 2023; Feng et al., 2025; Xu & Shapui, 2025); however, the angle that examined the specific types of intercultural relationships and the psychological and behavioural cross-cultural adaptation across diverse student populations requires further investigation (Bethel et al., 2020). For instance, Jamal and Wok (2020) examined the cultural adaptation process among international students from a Malaysian local university and concluded that there is a significant relationship between cultural stages (euphoria, culture shock, recovery, and adjustment) and cultural adaptability. However, this study is limited to public university students, and private university students were not included. Therefore, this study was expanded to include both public and private university students to gain more holistic results.

Niu et al. (2024) investigated how psychological resources influence the well-being of Chinese international students in Malaysia. The study overlooked the varied experiences of students from other cultural backgrounds because it was restricted to a single nationality (homogeneous). Similarly, Zhao et al. (2023) examined the factors influencing cross-cultural adaptation among Chinese students in Malaysia, emphasising the importance of longitudinal research and larger sample sizes to capture the full range of adaptation experiences. Despite its contributions, this study lacked an interdisciplinary approach and did not investigate how specific types of intercultural relationships influence cross-cultural adaptation. The difficulties of cultural adaptation faced by overseas students in Malaysia were also examined. For instance, Abdul Rohman et al. (2024) emphasised elements such as discrimination, communication obstacles, and lifestyle changes. However, the study's representativeness was

constrained by qualitative research, despite offering deep insights. The study also did not examine how intercultural interactions and relationships affect students' adaptation.

Despite numerous studies on cross-cultural adaptation as discussed earlier, there are still gaps that need to be addressed, specifically on the role of intercultural relationships in cross-cultural adaptation (Bethel et al., 2020; Jamal & Wok, 2020) among public and private university students in the multicultural setting of Malaysia. This study utilised the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation by Kim (2001, 2017) to examine the types of intercultural relationships (romantic, friendship, and academic) on cross-cultural adaptation (behaviour and psychology) among university students.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Intercultural Relationships

Intercultural relationships are explained as those that exist between two different cultures (Koponen et al., 2021). As people around the world become more globalised, intercultural relationships have become more common, particularly among university students who actively engage in multicultural environments (Naeimi et al., 2023). Intercultural relationships offer opportunities for self-improvement, cultural knowledge, and the growth of intercultural competence (Cai & Marangell, 2022).

Intercultural relationships stem from the notion that culture shapes the way people view themselves, their communication, and their relationships. As highlighted by Habecon (2024), intercultural understanding includes knowledge of and appreciation for cultural similarities and differences. It also includes the capacity to critically reflect on one's own cultural framework, which is vital for developing empathy and respect, allowing individuals to interact across cultures to form a mutual dialogue through these relationships.

Various studies have indicated that intercultural friendships and romantic relationships positively affect individuals' well-being and societal integration (Lu et al., 2021; Naeimi et al., 2023). For example, it has been noticed that people who are in intercultural relationships seem to have reported higher levels of satisfaction and lower levels of isolation feelings than their counterparts who interact mostly within their respective cultural groups (Froidevaux & Campos, 2023). In addition, these types of relationships often instill the participants' feelings of love towards each other, making it easier for them to adapt to different settings, which is crucial for college students finding themselves in heterogeneous education systems (Hassan, 2025). In the multicultural setting of Malaysian universities, teachers, classrooms, and university peers co-existing in educational environments influence students' intercultural relations and psychological well-being (Vromans et al., 2023). In summary, three types of intercultural relationships can be found in the university environment: romantic relationships, friendships, and academic peers. In this context, a romantic relationship is defined as universal love, which is associated with pair bonding across cultures (Fletcher et al., 2015). In addition, an intercultural friendship is defined as a friend from a different culture, as someone to talk to, depend on, and rely on for help, support, and caring, and to have fun and enjoy doing things with (Stevenson & Lawthorn, 2017), which mainly focuses on interpersonal-related matters. Intercultural academic peer relationships in this context are defined as the interpersonal relationships that an individual establishes and develops with classmates from different cultures who are frequently contacted and interacted with in daily academic life in the university or college, which mainly focuses on academic tasks (Yaxin & Noordin, 2024).

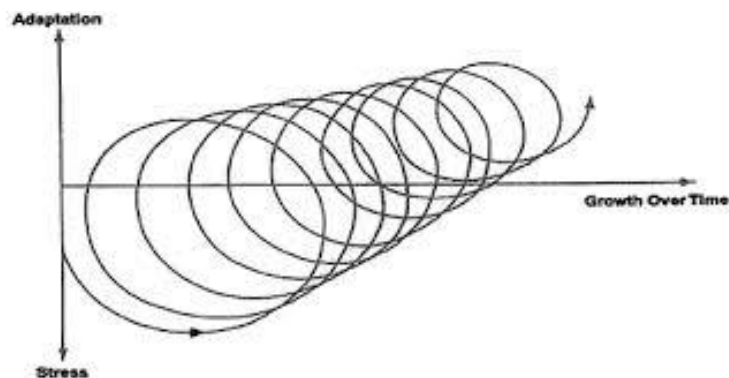
2.2 Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

According to Kim (2001), cross-cultural adaptation is the process of adjusting to a new cultural environment and the psychological and behavioural changes that occur as a result of this adjustment. It emphasises both the emotional and practical aspects of adapting to a new culture. Yu et al. (2019) found that cross-cultural adaptation/acclimation consists of two domains: behavioural and psychological. Behavioural cross-cultural adaptation relates to the acculturation of language, media use, social interaction, and food consumption (Cleveland et al., 2009; Garner, 2023), while psychological cross-cultural adaptation refers to the adjustment of an individual's psychocultural views through involvement and interaction with new cultural systems (Tropp et al., 1999). Thus, this study utilised the Integrative

Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Kim, 2001, 2017) as its theoretical framework. Kim's (2001) perspective of effective cross-cultural adaptation is a cyclic process and the need to continuously communicate and interact (behavioural) between an individual and the host culture, which will eventually lead to the capability of adjusting to a new environment over time (Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024; F. Zhang et al., 2022) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Kim's (2001) Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation



By applying the theory in this context, when individuals face unfamiliarity, they are confronted with the urge to forget or set aside their current culture to fit in the host culture environment. This is explained by the types of intercultural (romance, friendship, academic) relationships, where individuals might go through the process of enculturation as they face numerous cultural challenges, stress, and cultural identity conflict when they start building these relationships (Torres et al., 2025). For instance, Hang and Zhang (2023) found that international academic staff influence students' academic and ethnic acculturation. In addition, co-national friendships influence students' social enculturation, while international friendships affect their ethnic acculturation. Froidevaux and Campos (2023) revealed that individuals in intercultural romantic relationships reported higher romantic relationship commitment and satisfaction than individuals in similar cultures. Based on past literature, it is evident that academic, friendship, and romantic relationships are components of intercultural relationships (Kastner, 2021; Sheng et al., 2022), thereby justifying the framework of this study.

Furthermore, acculturation (Berry, 1992) explains how people choose to adapt to their own culture and the host culture or vice versa. Deculturation is when people make adaptive changes (behavioural and psychological) by removing or pausing their own cultural habits temporarily to acculturate to the host culture's habits, which explains how these relationships can be manifested in the behaviour and psychology of cross-cultural adaptation.

Next, the process of cross-cultural adaptation is further explained through the stress–adaptation–growth dynamic theory. When individuals experience a new culture, they experience stress due to cultural identity conflicts between their previous and new environments. However, this stress forces them to adapt by learning and adjusting to the host culture's environment. After some time, the adaptation process leads to growth, where they develop a better understanding and feel comfortable in the host culture's environment. This process does not follow a linear progression; instead, it exhibits a cyclic pattern. This indicates that individuals face setbacks but eventually regain stability through continuous learning and adjustment (behavioural and psychological).

This theory contributes to explaining how various types of relationships within individuals, whether romantic, intercultural, or academic, adapt when entering a new culture through a dynamic process involving stress, adjustment, and growth. This implies that the theory can be applied to various

relationship contexts. The dynamic cycle mechanism pattern within this process, as described by Kim (2001), can comprehensively explain dynamic intercultural adaptation.

2.3 Hypotheses Development

Recent literature focusing on intimate couples has shown that spending more time talking is generally linked to positive relationship outcomes, while more time arguing leads to negative outcomes, lower satisfaction, and increased negative communication during conflicts (Mayer, 2023). Yurtaeva and Charura (2024), through a scoping review, found that intercultural love/romantic relationships are mainly posited from a challenges perspective, and that transparent communication can serve as a remedy and coping strategy. This is aligned with the notion of Fonseca et al. (2021), where cultural similarities and differences contribute to intercultural couples' relationship goals. According to Kim's (2001) theory, over time, one experiences cross-cultural adaptation through constant communication despite experiencing stress. Hence, romantic couples have proven that they have spent a good amount of time and constant communication (Hogan et al., 2021; West et al., 2022) to form cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Intercultural romantic relationships have a positive effect on behavioural cross-cultural adaptation.

H1b: Intercultural romantic relationships have a positive effect on psychological cross-cultural adaptation.

Integration can be considered the most effective type of cross-cultural adaptation, and research has indicated that the capacity to incorporate aspects of both host and heritage cultures might result in improved social and academic adjustment as well as increased psychological well-being (Lu et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). For instance, Choy et al. (2020) and Zheng (2024) highlighted that intercultural friendships can provide social support, leading to a better cultural adaptation experience. In addition, Gebregergis and Csukonyi (2025) found that favourable intergroup contact was a predictor of sociocultural adaptation among international students. Past studies have also indicated a strong correlation between interpersonal communication and the quality of friendship (Cholappallil et al., 2023; Kastner, 2021) and cultural sensitivity and adaptation (Liang & Pho, 2025). Thus, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H2a: Intercultural friendships have a positive relationship with behavioural cross-cultural adaptation.

H2b: Intercultural friendships have a positive relationship with psychological cross-cultural adaptation.

Considering the multicultural Malaysian university environments, past studies have shown that active class participation is a significant predictor of student success, utilising a new measure that combines attendance and attentiveness despite the presence of cultural barriers (Bekkering & Ward, 2021). Gong et al. (2020) observed how a university staff member learned the Chinese language 'Putonghua' through online classes to communicate with Chinese classmates in New Zealand, which indicated that academic peers also influence cross-cultural adaptation through constant peer interaction of host national connectedness (Bethel et al., 2020). In addition, Sheng et al. (2022) found that academic adaptation and host national friendships were positively associated with both psychological and sociocultural adaptation, which supports the idea that cultural adaptation can help enhance the academic success and well-being of students (Olagunju et al., 2024). Based on the aforementioned discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

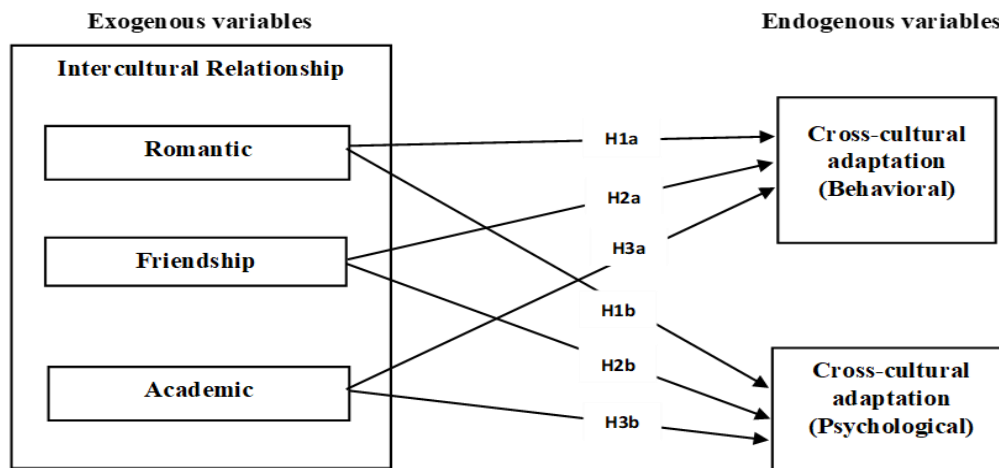
H3a: Intercultural academic relationships will have a positive relationship with behavioural cross-cultural adaptation.

H3b: Intercultural academic relationships will have a positive relationship with psychological cross-cultural adaptation.

Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study.

Figure 2

Proposed Conceptual Framework



3.0 Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study used quantitative research to test the variables for hypothesis testing (Lim, 2024). This approach allows researchers to use standardised measurements, guaranteeing uniformity in answers and making it easier to analyse large groups (Fadele & Rocha, 2025).

3.2 Sampling Procedure

The participants of this study were Malaysian university students from both public and private universities, including local and international students. The multicultural aspect of Malaysian universities provides a unique environment for researching cross-cultural relationships and their adaptation. Students from different ethnic backgrounds communicate and participate in multicultural activities, enhancing the cultural space within these institutions (Suhaili et al., 2019). Table 1 presents the sampling justifications.

This study used purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method in which participants are chosen based on specified criteria, as it specifically targeted university students in Malaysia to examine intercultural relationships and their cross-cultural adaptation. To justify this, Jamal and Wok (2020) used purposive sampling to study international students at a public university, focusing on individuals experiencing cultural adaptation. Although, according to the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (2024), Malaysia has approximately 1.2 million students (local and international), the researchers were unable to obtain the name list of the entire student population (sampling frame) in Malaysian public and private universities. Thus, researchers opted for the G-power analysis, as suggested by Kang (2021) and Memon et al. (2020), which is based on the complexity of the conceptual framework to determine the sample size. Based on the G-power calculation, the minimum required sample size was 146 (predictors: 6; effect size: 0.15; power: 0.95), and the current valid sample size of 340 respondents was sufficient.

Table 1

Sampling Criteria Justifications

Criteria	Justifications
Students currently enrolled in Malaysian universities (public and private)	According to the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Kim, 2001), constant communication and interaction are vital in achieving cross-cultural adaptation. To observe closely, university students in Malaysian universities are chosen, as there is an increase in international students alongside the existing multicultural environment. Thus, students in Malaysian universities are chosen as it is proven to be a ground for a diverse cultural landscape and supports a rich context to study cross-cultural adaptation (Yassin et al., 2020).
Representing diverse cultural backgrounds	To study cross-cultural adaptation, it is important to choose diverse respondents to understand the phenomenon comprehensively. Past research indicates that students from different ethnicities in Malaysian universities engage in cross-cultural activities. The diversity provides a better context for studying intercultural relationships (Yassin et al., 2020).

3.3 Instruments

The instrument used in this research consisted of four sections. Section A covers the demographic part with six questions requiring the respondent's gender, nationality, age, race, education level, and type of university. Screening questions such as “Do you have partners/friends/ academic peers from different cultures?” and “Do you ever participate in any of the cultural activities which are different from your own culture?” have been incorporated to filter the valid respondents, and only respondents who answered “yes” were considered valid responses.

Section B covered intercultural relationship attributes (romantic relationships, friendship, and academic peers). Romantic relationship items were modified from Kozakiewicz et al. (2023), while friendship relationship items were modified from de Jesus Lopes (2023). As for the academic peer relationship, the items were adapted from Hunsu et al. (2018). Section C measured Cross-cultural Adaptation (behavioural aspect), and Section D measured Cross-cultural Adaptation (psychological aspect), where those items are adapted and modified from Yu et al. (2019). A five-point Likert-type scale was used as an anchor, with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. The details of the instrument are provided in Appendix A.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

An online survey was distributed through various social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Gmail, as these mediums are more relevant, prevalent, and effective in reaching broad younger audiences (Keat et al., 2023). Before the respondents answered the survey, the researchers requested their permission through the consent form on the cover page of the online survey to respect the individuals’ rights (O’ Sullivan et al., 2021). The researchers also granted confidentiality and anonymity to the respondents regarding the data collected.

3.5 Common Method Variance

Common method variance (CMV) needs to be addressed before testing the measurement model (C.-F. Chen & Ding, 2025). The researchers applied a procedural measure by incorporating social desirability items embedded in the online survey to reduce bias from single-source data. In addition, the researchers applied a full collinearity assessment using the marker variable technique, and the VIF values were below 3.3 (Kock, 2017), which indicated no serious CMV issue in the dataset (See Table 2).

Table 2

Full Collinearity Using the Marker Variable

Variables	Marker (VIF)
ROM	1.030
FRI	2.750
ACA	2.696
CCAB	2.109
CCAP	1.663

Note. ACA = Academic relationship; CCAB = Cross-cultural adaptation (behavioral); CCAP = Cross-cultural adaptation (psychological); FRI = Friendship; ROM = Romance relationship

4.0 Results

According to the demographic information (Appendix B), more than half of the respondents were female (65.0%), while males comprised 35.0%. The respondents were predominantly Malaysian (81.8%) while international students accounted for 18.2%. Next, for the age group, the majority of the respondents were aged 20 to 25 years old (77.6%), which indicates that students tend to be in their second to third year of undergraduate studies or postgraduate studies in Malaysian universities. In terms of race, more than half were Malay (51.1%). For education, most respondents had a bachelor's degree (75.0%), which shows that the respondents were highly educated. Lastly, the majority of the respondents came from private (80.0%) rather than public universities (20.0%).

4.1 Measurement Model Evaluation

As illustrated in Table 3, the loadings of the items were accepted, except for ACA3, CCAB3, CCAB8, CCAP4, and CCAP5, as these items did not meet the loading threshold of 0.60 (Byrne, 2016) and were removed to improve the measurement model. The items were adapted from previous studies, and they adequately reflect and measure the constructs. The deletion of these items is mainly due to the context of the study, as the majority of the respondents are Malaysian (cost-host) and in a high-context culture, respondents might be quite hesitant to answer the statement, which might be slightly personal, which caused the low loadings.

To measure internal consistency, which is defined as the degree to which items in an instrument can reflect the same construct or concept (Nawi et al., 2020), Cronbach's alpha value should be above 0.70 (Hair et al., 2020). In addition, the composite reliability (CR) value should be above 0.70, as suggested by Hair et al. (2022), and CR value met this criterion (see Table 3).

Besides, Cheah et al. (2024) highlighted that convergent validity refers to the extent to which a single item correlates positively with the reflective multi-item measure of a variable. It is measured through the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), and its values should be above 0.5 (Hair et al., 2022). Hence, the results (Table 3) ascertained convergent validity

Table 3

Measurement Model Assessment

Variables	Items	Item deleted	Loadings	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE
Academic relationship	ACA1	ACA3	0.954	0.903	0.954	0.911
	ACA2		0.955			
Cross-cultural adaptation (behavior)		CCAB3				
	CCAB1		0.750			
	CCAB10	CCAB8	0.728	0.885	0.908	0.555
	CCAB2		0.845			
	CCAB4		0.634			
	CCAB5		0.750			
	CCAB6		0.761			
	CCAB7		0.739			
	CCAB9		0.737			
Cross-cultural adaptation (psychological)		CCAP4				
	CCAP1		0.699	0.705	0.833	0.626
	CCAP2	CCAP5	0.872			
	CCAP3		0.791			
Friendship	FRI1		0.844	0.870	0.920	0.794
	FRI2		0.926			
	FRI3		0.902			
Romantic Relationship	ROM1		0.912	0.878	0.924	0.802
	ROM2		0.858			
	ROM3		0.916			

Discriminant validity is defined as the extent to which each construct is different from the other constructs (Hair et al., 2022), and it is evaluated through the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) method, as suggested by Henseler et al. (2015). According to Hair et al. (2022), the HTMT ratio cannot exceed 0.90, and none of the HTMT values in Table 4 are more than the 0.90 threshold, thereby confirming discriminant validity.

Table 4

HTMT Ratio

Variables	ACA	CCAB	CCAP	FRI	ROM
ACA					
CCAB	0.774				
CCAP	0.694	0.711			
FRI	0.879	0.801	0.660		
ROM	0.208	0.302	0.212	0.402	

Note. ACA = Academic relationship; CCAB = Cross-cultural adaptation (behavioral); CCAP = Cross-cultural adaptation (psychological); FRI = Friendship; ROM = Romance relationship

4.2 Structural Model Evaluation

The results of the structural model are presented in Table 5 and Figure 3. In addition, the VIF values were less than 3.3, the threshold suggested by Kock (2017), indicating that collinearity was not a major issue in this study.

The structural model was assessed using a 10,000 bootstrapping process as suggested by Becker et al. (2025), and the hypothesis was tested using a 1-tailed test based on the directional hypothesis formulated (Eysenck, 1960) in the literature review section. Among the four significant paths, intercultural friendship had a positive and significant relationship with cross-cultural behavioural adaptation ($\beta = 0.396$, $t = 5.962$, $p = 0.020$) and cross-cultural psychological adaptation ($\beta = 0.261$, $t = 3.111$, $p = 0.001$). Intercultural academic relationships were found to have a positive and significant relationship with cross-cultural behavioural adaptation ($\beta = 0.378$, $t = 5.240$, $p = 0.001$) and cross-cultural psychological adaptation ($\beta = 0.368$, $t = 5.160$, $p = 0.000$). Therefore, H2a, H2b, H3a, and H3b were supported in this study. However, intercultural romantic relationships did not significantly impact cross-cultural behaviour and psychological adaptation. Thus, H1a and H1b were rejected in this study.

The R2 value of cross-cultural behaviour adaptation was 0.566, and that of cross-cultural psychological adaptation was 0.348, indicating that 56.6% of changes in the behavioural aspect and 34.8% of the psychological aspect could be predicted by the three intercultural relationships (romantic, friendship, and academic). Following Cohen's (1988) guidelines, the effect size (f^2) values ranged from trivial to small; romantic intercultural relationship and cross-cultural behavioural adaptation ($f^2=0.009$) and psychological adaptation ($f^2 = 0.000$) had trivial effects; intercultural friend relationship and cross-cultural behavioural adaptation ($f^2 = 0.127$) and psychological adaptation ($f^2= 0.037$) had small effects; and intercultural academic peer relationship also had a small effect on cross-cultural behavioural adaptation ($f^2= 0.127$) and psychological adaptation ($f^2=0.080$).

Table 5

Direct Effects

Paths	Std. Beta	Std. error	T	P	LLCI (5%)	ULCI (95%)	D	R ²	f ²	VIF
H1a: ROM -> CCAB	0.068	0.040	1.708	0.044	0.002	0.133	NS	0.566	0.009	1.166
H1b: ROM -> CCAP	-0.017	0.049	0.346	0.365	-0.099	0.062	NS	0.358	0.000	1.166
H2a: FRI -> CCAB	0.396	0.066	5.962	0.000	0.287	0.505	S		0.127	2.854
H2b: FRI -> CCAP	0.261	0.084	3.111	0.001	0.122	0.396	S		0.037	2.854
H3a: ACA -> CCAB	0.378	0.072	5.240	0.000	0.258	0.495	S		0.127	2.593
H3b: ACA -> CCAP	0.368	0.071	5.160	0.000	0.250	0.485	S		0.080	2.593

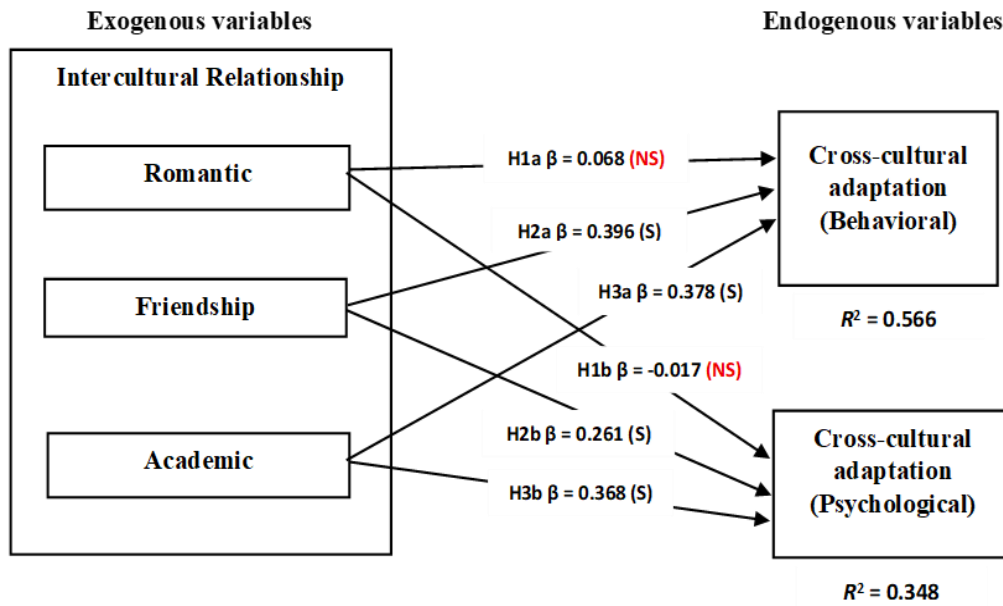
Note. ACA = Academic relationship; CCAB = Cross-cultural adaptation (behavioral); CCAP = Cross-cultural adaptation (psychological); FRI = Friendship; ROM = Romance relationship; LLCI = Lower limit confidence interval, ULCI = Upper Limit confidence interval

S = Supported, NS = Not supported

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$; 1-tailed test

Figure 3

Structural Model



PLSpredict was used to assess the predictive power of the model (Shmueli et al., 2019). The PLS-SEM_RMSE represented the current data generated, whereas LM_RMSE represented the artificial data generated by the algorithm. According to Shmueli et al. (2019), the predictive power of a construct is high if all its PLS-SEM_RMSE values are lower than the LM_RMSE. As can be observed from Table 6, not all the PLS-SEM_RMSE for cross-cultural behaviour and psychology adaptation were lower than the LM_RMSE, indicating medium predictive power.

Table 6

PLS Predict

	Q ² predict	PLS-SEM_RMSE	LM_RMSE	PLS-SEM - LM	Interpretation
CCAB1	0.401	0.682	0.688	-0.006	
CCAB10	0.270	0.718	0.729	-0.011	
CCAB2	0.461	0.646	0.658	-0.012	
CCAB4	0.178	1.088	1.097	-0.009	Medium
CCAB5	0.199	0.793	0.796	-0.003	
CCAB6	0.275	0.721	0.726	-0.005	
CCAB7	0.286	0.716	0.701	0.015	
CCAB9	0.326	0.698	0.695	0.003	
CCAP1	0.082	0.851	0.84	0.011	
CCAP2	0.225	0.641	0.643	-0.002	Medium
CCAP3	0.268	0.739	0.74	-0.001	

5.0 Discussion

The results showed that the relationship between intercultural romantic relationships and behavioural and psychological cross-cultural adaptation among university students in Malaysia was not significant. Thus, H1a and H1b were rejected in this study. This is contrary to the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Kim, 2001), which states that constant communication, especially in intimate romantic relationships, should lead to cross-cultural adaptation. However, this supports the notion of Mayer (2023) and Yurtaeva and Charura (2024), where past studies on intercultural couple relationships have always gained negative perceptions. This could also be due to the context of the study, where Malaysia is a country with a high-context culture, and the respondents might perceive romantic relationships as a personal matter.

Furthermore, the insignificance of the results means that romantic intercultural relationships cannot be used as the primary predictor or the sole measure of successful behavioural and psychological adaptation. This indicates that romantic relationships involve unique interpersonal dynamics, emotions, and personalities and are not simply a representation of their culture. For example, a person can be very intimate with their partner but still reject or not understand their partner's social and cultural behaviours. Furthermore, if individuals come from very different cultures, even if they are involved in a romantic relationship, the adaptation process may still be challenging.

In addition, positive relationships were found between intercultural friendships and behavioural and psychological cross-cultural adaptation among university students in Malaysia, supporting H2a and H2b. These findings support the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Kim, 2001), which suggests that friendships involving frequent interaction and social support facilitate cross-cultural adaptation (Cholappallil et al., 2023; Choy et al., 2020; Kastner, 2021). This is because intercultural friendship is not merely an acquaintance; it involves personalistic interpersonal interactions that are mutually productive and characterised by trust, emotional support, and shared interests. Relationships that embody these features are typically stable, healthy, and meaningful for both parties (M.L.L. Wong & Liu, 2025). Moreover, friendship serves as an interpersonal factor that enhances social communication, especially with hosts. Interactions through friends can reduce tension, enhance adaptation, and promote psychological growth. This means that the number and quality of friendships can influence how quickly and effectively individuals adapt to behavioural and psychological changes in multicultural settings.

Additionally, the relationship between intercultural academic relationships and behavioural and psychological cross-cultural adaptation was found to be significant. Hence, H3a and H3b were supported. This aligns with the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Kim, 2001), which suggests that an educational environment where academic peers constantly interact supports cross-cultural adaptation (Sheng et al., 2022). Notably, Gong et al. (2020) found that the willingness to learn a foreign language to communicate with academic peers from different cultures was influenced by the students' connectedness with host's nationals. This suggests that interpersonal communication with people from different cultures, especially in an academic context, can facilitate adaptive learning processes.

6.0 Conclusion

In summary, this study examined the impact of different types of intercultural relationships (romantic, friendship, and academic) on the behavioural and psychological cross-cultural adaptation of Malaysian university students. The results found that two types of intercultural relationships (friendship and academic) are predictors of behavioural and psychological cross-cultural adaptation. Friendship is the best predictor of behavioral cross-cultural adaptation, followed by academic relationships. However, romantic relationships are not predictors of behavioural and psychological cross-cultural adaptation.

6.1 Implications

Theoretically, this study provides empirical support for Kim's (2001, 2017) Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation, which suggests that more frequent intercultural interactions help achieve cross-cultural adaptation. Based on this research, friendship and academic intercultural relationships are significant to the cross-cultural adaptation processes in the Malaysian multicultural university environment. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that this theory can be applied in examining cross-cultural adaptation in multiple educational settings, both locally and internationally. This research also addresses a gap in the literature by applying the Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Kim, 2001) to further intercultural discourse.

Practically, this research has practical implications for educators, academic institutions, and the Malaysian government, as the study was conducted among Malaysian university students. Universities can upskill and continue promoting multicultural environments in classrooms through peer mentoring, cultural workshops, and networking events to support cross-cultural adaptations. In addition, educators and counsellors across various levels of academia should be empowered by cultural training programmes to equip students or fresh graduates with coping strategies to handle the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation in the VUCA era (Ridaryanthi et al., 2024). On the other hand, academic institutions and the government can adopt refined multicultural-friendly policies to foster good cross-cultural adaptation through co-curricular activities.

6.2 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this research contributes theoretically and practically to the types of intercultural relationships on cross-cultural adaptation, some limitations should be acknowledged. The first limitation is that the study primarily reflects host–host and host–international interactions, which do not occur in classic acculturation contexts. Future studies should examine intercultural relationships and cross-cultural adaptation in other settings, such as organisations and different countries, which will further enrich the findings. Comparative studies examining the multicultural settings of high- and low-context cultures would also be interesting to conduct.

Second, since this research was conducted with purposive sampling among 340 students in Malaysian university settings, the generalisability of the findings is not guaranteed. Future studies can consider applying other probability samplings (if the sampling frame is granted) so that representativeness can be claimed.

Third, this study only applied a quantitative approach, which lacks the reasoning behind the cross-cultural adaptation phenomenon. Thus, future studies can overcome these limitations by including a qualitative or mixed-methods approach to delve deeper into the phenomenon.

Finally, the current study only examined the direct effects of three intercultural relationships that apply to the university context. However, the three relationships can only explain cross-cultural adaptation (behavioural, 56.6%) and (psychological, 34.8%). Future research can explore other intercultural relationships, such as family and platonic relationships. Based on the PLS prediction analysis, the model has moderate predictive relevance, suggesting that it can be further improved in future research with the inclusion of additional variables, such as cultural distance (Tang et al., 2024), cultural empathy (Y.S.D. Zhang & Noels, 2024), cultural intelligence (Liu et al., 2025), and ethnic identity (Balakrishnan et al., 2025). Researchers should also examine demographic variables as moderators to further advance the literature on intercultural communication and relationships.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

TJC - Conceptualisation, Supervision, Formal analysis, Writing - Original draft, Writing - Review and editing. DR - Project administration, Data curation, Writing - Original draft. KB – Methodology, Software, Writing – Review and editing. BSEM - Validation, Investigation, Writing - Review and editing. YBS –Visualisation, Writing – Review and editing

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Ethics Statement

This research did not require IRB approval because it involved an anonymous survey with no collection of personal or sensitive data.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Respondents were informed through the cover page of the online survey that their voluntary participation and the confidentiality of their information would be maintained.

Data Access Statement:

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix A

Variables	Items	Sources
Intercultural romantic relationship	ROM1: I love my partner (girlfriend/boyfriend) who is from a different culture.	Kozakiewicz et al. (2023)
	ROM2: I show affection to my partner (girlfriend/boyfriend) who is from a different culture.	
	ROM3: I miss my partner who is from a different culture (girlfriend/boyfriend) in a short period of time.	
Intercultural Friend Relationship	FRI1: I will help my friends who are from different cultures when they face problems.	de Jesus Lopes (2023)
	FRI2: I feel happy just hanging out with my friends who are from different cultures.	
	FRI3: I do fun things together with my friends who are from different cultures.	
Intercultural academic relationship	ACA1: I have interacted with my classmates/university peers who are from different cultures.	Hunsu et al. (2018)
	ACA2: I have helped my classmates/university peers who are from different cultures.	
	ACA3: I receive mutual benefits when I communicate with my classmates/university peers who are from different cultures. <i>(deleted)</i>	
Cross-cultural adaptation (Behavioral)	CCAB1: I communicate with people from different cultures both online and face-to-face.	Yu et al. (2019)
	CCAB2: I can cooperate and work with people from different cultures.	
	CCAB3: I prefer to work with people from my culture when there is a crisis rather than solving it with people from different cultures. <i>(deleted)</i>	
	CCAB4: I can speak more languages besides my mother tongue.	
	CCAB5: I listen and sing songs from other languages besides my mother tongue.	
	CCAB6: I enjoy eating food from other cultures.	
	CCAB7: I love to explore and travel to learn about other cultures.	
	CCAB8: I prefer to eat food from other cultures compared to my own cultural dish. <i>(deleted)</i>	
	CCAB9: I feel comfortable speaking with people from other cultures.	
	CCAB10: I watch movies/dramas from other cultures/countries.	
Cross-cultural adaptation (psychological)	CCAP1: I am proud to be part of different cultures.	Yu et al. (2019)
	CCAP2: I respect and understand different cultures.	
	CCAP3: I feel comfortable with different cultures.	
	CCAP4: I have the most in common with different cultures compared to my own. <i>(deleted)</i>	
	CCAP5: I share my beliefs and values in different cultures. <i>(deleted)</i>	

Appendix B

Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=340)

Variables	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	119	35.0
	Female	221	65.0
Nationality	Malaysian	278	81.8
	International	62	18.2
Age (years old)	<20	33	9.7
	20-25	264	77.6
	26-30	22	6.5
	31-35	13	3.8
	>35	8	2.4
Race	Malay	175	51.5
	Chinese	57	16.8
	Indian	49	14.4
	Others	59	17.4
Education Level	Foundation/ Diploma	53	15.6
	Bachelor's degree	255	75.0
	Master's degree	22	6.5
	Ph.D	10	2.9
Type of University	Public	68	20.0
	Private	272	80.0