

An Examination of the Relationship between Cultural Intelligence, Communication Effectiveness, and Cross-Cultural Adaptation from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

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Abstract

Against the macro-level backdrop of high-standard opening up and the continued advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, intercultural adaptation competence has become a core factor determining the quality of international talent development and the efficiency of transnational collaboration. However, when addressing cultural conflicts and communication barriers in foreign cultural environments, existing studies often lack an integrated multivariable perspective in examining the internal mechanisms of intercultural adaptation, and there remains an urgent need for empirical evidence based on intercultural groups in the Chinese context. Accordingly, with the integrated theory of intercultural adaptation as its core framework, this study focuses on motivational cultural intelligence and behavioral cultural intelligence, which are most closely associated with real-life interactive contexts, and systematically explores their functional logic in relation to intercultural communication effectiveness and intercultural adaptation. In terms of research design, this study adopts a quantitative analytical paradigm and takes Chinese returnees who have long been exposed to real intercultural interaction contexts as the survey population. Through random sampling, the research team conducted a questionnaire survey in five provinces. After rigorous data cleaning and logical screening, 443 valid samples were ultimately obtained. Using statistical analysis tools such as reliability and validity tests and structural equation modeling, this study rigorously verifies the direct and mediating effects among the core variables. The empirical

results indicate that, first, both motivational cultural intelligence and behavioral cultural intelligence exert significant positive direct effects on intercultural adaptation and intercultural communication effectiveness. Second, intercultural communication effectiveness not only directly promotes individuals' intercultural adaptation but also plays a significant mediating role between motivational cultural intelligence, behavioral cultural intelligence, and intercultural adaptation. The study further confirms that individuals' internal motivation and behavioral regulation capacity can effectively build trust, reduce cultural misunderstandings, and thereby substantially improve adaptation only when they are transformed into smooth, accurate interactions that conform to local contextual norms. By incorporating cultural intelligence, communication quality, and adaptation outcomes into a unified analytical framework, this study effectively extends the explanatory boundaries of the integrated theory of intercultural adaptation in terms of mechanism analysis. The findings not only clarify the transmission pathways of adaptation in foreign cultural environments but also provide clear practical guidance and empirical support for the cultivation of international talent in Chinese universities, employee training in multinational enterprises, and the development of foreign-related service capabilities.

Keywords: intercultural adaptation; cultural intelligence; communication effectiveness; integrated theory

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the ongoing advancement of high-level opening-up, China has introduced several policies to promote the high-quality development of the Belt and Road Initiative, international talent exchange, and mutual learning between civilizations. Relevant policies explicitly call for enhancing citizens' cross-cultural communication and adaptation skills; consequently, research into cross-cultural adjustment holds both academic significance and practical value. The acceleration of global mobility and the integration of diverse cultures have expanded opportunities for cross-cultural experiences, such as studying abroad, working abroad, and employment in international settings (Caligiuri, 2023). Although individuals gain greater opportunities for development in cross-cultural environments, they also frequently encounter cultural clashes, communication barriers, psychological stress, and difficulties in integrating into society (Taylan & Weber, 2023). These issues have had a direct impact on the quality of individual development and have, to some extent, hampered the effectiveness of international cooperation. Therefore, the academic community needs to provide further insight into the process by which individuals adapt to cross-cultural environments and the key factors influencing this process.

Kim's cross-cultural adaptation theory provides an important explanatory framework for this issue. According to this theory, individuals gradually achieve psychological adaptation and social integration through ongoing communication, self-regulation, and interaction with their environment (Chen, 2024). In line with this theoretical framework, the academic community generally regards cultural intelligence and intercultural communication effectiveness as key variables influencing cross-cultural adjustment. Cultural intelligence enhances an individual's ability to recognize cultural differences, understand social cues, and adapt their behavior (Setti et al., 2022). The effectiveness of intercultural communication directly influences the quality of information transmission, the degree of coordination in interactions, and the level of relationship-building (Chipasula & Hamusokwe, 2026). Among the various dimensions of cultural intelligence, motivational cultural intelligence and behavioral cultural intelligence are most intricately linked to real-life interactive situations. Motivational cultural intelligence reflects an individual's intrinsic drive to engage with diverse cultures, participate in cross-cultural communication, and sustain such interactions over time. Whilst behavioral cultural intelligence reflects an individual's practical ability to adapt their

verbal and non-verbal behavior in accordance with situational requirements(Karami & Izadpanah, 2022).

Although academic attention has been focused on the relationship among cultural intelligence, communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment, existing research still suffers from three shortcomings. Firstly, existing research lacks an integrated perspective. Many studies examine the impact of cultural intelligence on cross-cultural adjustment in isolation, or analyze the relationship between communication effectiveness and cross-cultural adjustment separately; few incorporate all three into a single analytical framework. Secondly, existing research lacks an explanation for the underlying mechanisms. Although some studies have incorporated cross-cultural adaptation theory, researchers have largely confined themselves to testing direct effects, with little explanation of how Cultural Intelligence influences adaptation outcomes through the communication process; in particular, there is a lack of systematic analysis of the mediating role of communication effectiveness. Thirdly, existing research lacks evidence specific to the local context. Much of the empirical research relies primarily on Western samples, and there remains insufficient academic attention to authentic cross-cultural groups in China, such as international students and professionals working in cross-cultural settings; consequently, the explanatory power of existing conclusions in the Chinese context still needs to be tested.

In response to the aforementioned shortcomings, this study employs cross-cultural adaptation theory as its core analytical framework to systematically examine the relationships among cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment. This study analyses the impact of motivational and behavioral cultural intelligence on cross-cultural adjustment and examines the mediating role of intercultural communication effectiveness in this relationship. This study defines cross-cultural adjustment as the dynamic process by which individuals continuously achieve psychological adaptation and social functional coordination in a cross-cultural environment. This definition is consistent with the fundamental tenets of cross-cultural adaptation theory and also helps to capture the process-oriented nature of adaptation outcomes.

In terms of the research methodology, this paper begins by reviewing the relevant literature on cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment, and on this basis clarifies the conceptual definitions, dimensional structures, and measurement methods of each variable. The paper then constructs a research model based on theoretical reasoning and puts forward research hypotheses. This study selected international students as its research subjects because, as a group that is constantly engaged in genuine cross-cultural interactions, they are better placed to reflect the practical links between cultural intelligence, communication quality, and adaptation outcomes. This study collected sample data through a questionnaire survey and subsequently conducted reliability testing, validity testing, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and structural equation modeling. This paper focuses on examining the direct effects of cultural intelligence on intercultural communication effectiveness and cross-cultural adjustment, whilst also examining the mediating effect of intercultural communication effectiveness.

This study possesses clear theoretical and practical value. At the theoretical level, it integrates cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment within a single analytical framework; this approach helps to expand the scope of application of cross-cultural theory in terms of variable integration and the explanation of mechanisms. In practical terms, this study helps to identify the key factors influencing cross-cultural adjustment and guides cross-cultural education in higher education institutions, the development of internationally oriented talent, staff training in multinational enterprises, and the development of capabilities in international services. This paper also aims to provide

empirical insights to support efforts to enhance the quality of international exchanges and the level of cross-cultural collaboration in China.

2. Literature review

2.1 Historical literature on the selected research factors

2.1.1 Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

Cross-cultural adaptation theory posits that the process by which individuals adapt to a foreign cultural environment is dynamic, and that cognition, emotion, behavior, and social interaction collectively shape the outcome of that adaptation. Early research primarily attributed differences in adaptation to culture shock and social skills training. Hussain and Zhang (2023) point out that the external cultural environment and an individual's internal regulatory resources jointly influence cross-cultural adjustment. As research has progressed, the academic community has incorporated cultural intelligence into the explanatory framework of cross-cultural adjustment. Tripathi et al. (2024) argue that behavioral cultural intelligence and motivational cultural intelligence can enhance an individual's ability to recognize, understand, and interpret cultural cues, whilst reducing feelings of uncertainty in unfamiliar situations. The academic community also regards communication effectiveness as a key link between cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment. Arwansyah and Suharyanto (2025) found that higher levels of communication effectiveness can facilitate information exchange, reduce misunderstandings during interactions, and strengthen relational identification, thereby improving the quality of adaptation. Consequently, existing research has gradually established an analytical framework that examines the interplay between cultural intelligence, communicative behaviour and adaptation outcomes.

2.1.2 Motivational Cultural Intelligence

Motivational cultural intelligence is a key dimension of cultural intelligence, primarily reflecting an individual's interest, confidence, and sustained commitment to engaging with, understanding, and adapting to diverse cultures in cross-cultural contexts. Egwuonwu et al. (2022) point out that motivational cultural intelligence reflects an individual's willingness to devote attention, energy, and emotional resources to cross-cultural interactions; this willingness constitutes an important psychological foundation for cultural learning and behavioral adaptation. Motivational cultural intelligence differs from cultural knowledge; it places greater emphasis on whether an individual is willing to enter a cross-cultural context and make a sustained effort to adapt. Research has shown that highly motivated individuals typically possess a stronger sense of cross-cultural self-efficacy and are more willing to engage in multicultural interactions. Bobek et al. (2025) found that motivational cultural intelligence can increase individuals' tolerance of cultural differences and enhance their resilience in stressful situations. Bowker et al. (2023) point out that positive adaptive expectations and goal-oriented engagement can reduce anxiety and withdrawal tendencies in cross-cultural interactions. Accordingly, this paper defines motivational cultural intelligence as the interest-driven engagement, willingness to adapt, and sustained commitment demonstrated by individuals in cross-cultural interactions.

2.1.3 Behavioral Cultural Intelligence

Behavioral cultural intelligence is the manifest dimension of cultural intelligence, primarily reflecting an individual's ability to adapt their verbal expression, non-verbal behavior, and interaction styles in accordance with diverse cultural norms during cross-cultural interactions. Scholars such as Kanwal et al. (2022) have pointed out that behavioral cultural intelligence encompasses not only the regulation of speech rate, intonation, facial expressions, and body language but also an individual's ability to respond effectively to situational norms, social etiquette, and role expectations. Behavioral cultural intelligence differs from motivational cultural intelligence in that it places greater emphasis on an individual's ability to demonstrate appropriate adaptability in interactions. Research has shown that individuals with high levels of behavioral cultural intelligence are better able to build trusting relationships

in cross-cultural communication and are more effective at reducing misunderstandings and conflicts. As'ad et al. (2024) found that the greater an individual's behavioral flexibility, the higher their satisfaction with collaboration and communication performance within cross-cultural teams. Reynolds et al. (2023) point out that behavioral cultural intelligence can enhance clarity of expression, coordination in interactions, and responsiveness to feedback, and improve outcomes in cross-cultural adjustment by boosting communication effectiveness. Accordingly, this paper defines behavioral cultural intelligence as an individual's ability to flexibly adapt their verbal and non-verbal behaviour in response to the demands of cross-cultural contexts.

2.1.4 Intercultural Communication Effectiveness

Intercultural communication effectiveness is a key variable in cross-cultural adaptation theory; it primarily refers to an individual's ability to convey information accurately, establish mutual understanding, and maintain cooperative relationships during cross-cultural interactions. Stan and Jongboom (2023) point out that cross-cultural adjustment is essentially an ongoing process of communication and feedback; consequently, communication effectiveness has a direct impact on an individual's psychological adjustment and social integration. Intercultural communication effectiveness differs from mere linguistic proficiency; it places greater emphasis on the coordination of cognitive understanding, emotional regulation, and behavioral responses. Moret - Tatay and Murphy (2022) argue that in cross-cultural contexts characterized by high uncertainty and anxiety, individuals are better able to minimize misunderstandings and communication barriers if they can identify contextual cues and adjust their manner of expression promptly. Aririguzoh (2022) found that communication effectiveness is influenced not only by cultural knowledge and communication skills but is also closely linked to individuals' subjective judgments of cultural differences. The greater the perceived cultural distance, the more likely individuals are to experience psychological barriers, misinterpret information, and withdraw from interaction, and the more likely the quality of communication is to decline. Accordingly, this paper defines 'intercultural communication effectiveness' as an individual's comprehensive ability to ensure the clear transmission of information, the harmonization of relationships, and the achievement of interaction goals in cross-cultural communication.

2.1.5 Cross-cultural Adjustment

Cross-cultural adjustment refers to the process by which an individual, upon entering a different cultural environment, continuously adapts their psychological state, behavior, and social relationships, and gradually achieves harmony with the new cultural context. Early research primarily interpreted cross-cultural adjustment as a coping response to culture shock, whereas cross-cultural adaptation theory places greater emphasis on the ongoing interaction between the individual, the environment, and communication. Dreyer et al. (2022) point out that cross-cultural adjustment follows a 'stress-adjustment-growth' cycle, whereby individuals gradually reshape their cognitive frameworks and behavioral patterns through ongoing engagement with the host culture. Cross-cultural adjustment comprises at least two dimensions: psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. The former manifests as emotional stability and subjective well-being, whilst the latter manifests as situational coping ability and levels of social functioning. Previous research has shown that cultural intelligence, communication skills, social support, and perceived cultural distance all influence cross-cultural adjustment. Nadeem et al. (2023) found that a higher level of cultural understanding and communication mediation skills helps to reduce feelings of uncertainty and stress in unfamiliar environments, and improves adaptation. Accordingly, this paper defines cross-cultural adjustment as the combined outcome of an individual's psychological adaptation, behavioral coordination, and relational integration in cross-cultural interactions.

2.2 Historical literature on the correlations between various factors

2.2.1 Motivational cultural intelligence and behavioral cultural intelligence have a positive impact on intercultural communication effectiveness

Motivational cultural intelligence refers to an individual's willingness and intrinsic drive to actively invest attention, emotion, and behavioral effort in cross-cultural contexts. Cross-cultural adaptation theory holds that an individual's ability to communicate effectively depends not only on whether they possess the necessary skills but also on their willingness to engage consistently in cross-cultural interactions. Existing research generally regards motivational cultural intelligence as a key precursor to the initiation and maintenance of cross-cultural communication. Song et al. (2023) point out that individuals with high motivational cultural intelligence are more willing to engage with unfamiliar cultures and are more likely to view cultural differences as learning opportunities. Chang and Tsai (2022) found that motivational cultural intelligence can enhance individuals' sense of self-efficacy and confidence in cross-cultural communication, whilst also increasing their willingness to express themselves and provide feedback. Hajiyeveva (2024) points out that high levels of motivation help to alleviate the anxiety and withdrawal caused by cultural unfamiliarity, enabling individuals to remain patient, open-minded, and cooperative when communication breaks down. Consequently, this study puts forward the first hypothesis.

H1: Motivational and cultural intelligence significantly and positively predict intercultural communication effectiveness.

Behavioral cultural intelligence refers to an individual's ability to adapt their verbal expression, non-verbal behavior, and interaction style to specific contexts during cross-cultural interactions. Behavioral cultural intelligence differs from motivational cultural intelligence, which emphasizes the willingness to adapt; it more directly reflects an individual's level of behavioral adjustment during the communication process. Scholars such as Rahayu et al. (2025) have pointed out that individuals with high levels of behavioral cultural intelligence can adapt their speaking pace, tone of voice, eye contact, physical distance, and manner of response to the cultural norms of those they are interacting with, thereby reducing misinterpretations and enhancing the harmony of the interaction. Ergün et al. (2026) found that behavioral cultural intelligence enhances clarity of expression, situational appropriateness, and relationship maintenance in communication, whilst also improving the other party's level of understanding and satisfaction with the interaction. Li et al. (2023) also found that, in communication situations involving significant cultural differences, a strong ability to adapt one's behavior helps to improve the accuracy of information transmission and the smoothness of the interaction process. Consequently, this paper argues that behavioral cultural intelligence influences both the efficiency with which communication is conveyed and the quality of the relationships established through communication. Consequently, this study proposes a second hypothesis.

H2: Behavioral cultural intelligence significantly and positively predicts Intercultural communication effectiveness.

2.2.2 Motivational cultural intelligence and behavioral cultural intelligence have a positive impact on cross-cultural adjustment

Motivational cultural intelligence refers to the intrinsic drive that leads individuals to invest time, energy, and emotional resources in cross-cultural contexts in order to actively understand and adapt to different cultural environments. Cross-cultural adaptation theory posits that adaptation is not a passive response to external changes, but rather a process whereby individuals continuously adjust their psychological state and engage in behavioral responses in the face of stress and challenges. Therefore, motivational cultural intelligence is a

key prerequisite for cross-cultural adjustment. Research has shown that a higher level of motivational cultural intelligence can enhance an individual's openness, perseverance, and willingness to learn when faced with cultural differences. Kour and Jyoti (2022) point out that individuals with high motivational cultural intelligence are more willing to enter unfamiliar cultural contexts and are also more inclined to view cultural differences as opportunities for growth. Kaspi et al. (2025) found that individuals with higher levels of motivation are better able to maintain positive emotions during cross-cultural encounters and can reduce the anxiety and feelings of helplessness caused by culture shock. Motivational cultural intelligence can also enhance individuals' sense of self-efficacy in cross-cultural contexts, thereby facilitating the establishment of social connections and participation in the life of the host culture. Consequently, this paper argues that motivational cultural intelligence helps to alleviate the stress of psychological adaptation and also promotes social integration. Consequently, this study proposes a third hypothesis.

H3: Motivational cultural intelligence significantly and positively predicts cross-cultural adjustment.

Behavioral cultural intelligence refers to an individual's ability to adapt their language, communication style, and non-verbal behavior in accordance with specific cultural norms during cross-cultural interactions. Behavioral cultural intelligence differs from motivational cultural intelligence, which emphasizes the willingness to adapt; it places greater emphasis on an individual's actual ability to adapt in cross-cultural contexts and therefore has a direct impact on cross-cultural adjustment. Research has shown that an individual's degree of social integration in a cross-cultural setting depends largely on their ability to respond in a manner appropriate to the situation. Scholars such as Wawrosz and Jurásek (2023) argue that individuals with high levels of behavioral cultural intelligence are better able to adapt their manner of expression promptly in accordance with the host culture's rules of interaction, thereby reducing misunderstandings, conflicts, and communication barriers. Behavioral cultural intelligence can enhance individuals' ability to communicate effectively, be accepted by others, and adapt to their roles in cross-cultural work and life. Ateş-Ös and Bulut-Serin (2024) went on to point out that flexible behavioral adaptation helps individuals establish stable social networks in unfamiliar cultural environments and enhances their sense of control and belonging in new surroundings. Consequently, this study proposes a fourth hypothesis.

H4: Behavioral cultural intelligence significantly and positively predicts cross-cultural adjustment.

2.2.3 Intercultural communication effectiveness has a positive impact on cross-cultural adjustment

Intercultural communication effectiveness is closely linked to cross-cultural adjustment, and existing research generally regards communication effectiveness as a key predictor of the quality of adaptation. Cross-cultural adaptation theory posits that an individual's adaptation to a foreign cultural environment depends not only on their cultural knowledge, but also on the understanding of information, the negotiation of meaning, and the coordination of feedback that occur through ongoing interaction. Jurásek and Wawrosz (2024) point out that cross-cultural adjustment is essentially a process whereby individuals continuously manage stress and rebuild relationships through communication; the smoother the communication, the higher the level of adaptation. Individuals in unfamiliar cultural contexts are more likely to achieve psychological stability and social integration if they can effectively manage uncertainty and anxiety and build consensus through appropriate communication and feedback. Aleksandrova et al. (2024) found that intercultural communication effectiveness not only

improves the accuracy of information transmission but also strengthens interpersonal trust, reduces misunderstandings and conflicts, and thereby promotes sociocultural adaptation. Mickel (2024) further points out that a high level of communication effectiveness helps individuals to understand the norms of the host culture more quickly, accumulate positive interaction experiences, and enhance their sense of environmental control and belonging. Therefore, this study proposes a fifth hypothesis.

H5: Intercultural communication effectiveness significantly and positively predicts cross-cultural adjustment.

2.2.4 The mediating role of intercultural communication effectiveness

Motivational cultural intelligence refers to an individual's intrinsic willingness to actively engage with, understand, and participate in cross-cultural interactions; however, this willingness does not automatically translate into successful adaptation. Cross-cultural adaptation theory posits that individual traits can only be transformed into psychological stability and social integration through effective communication once they enter the actual process of interaction. Previous research has shown that intercultural communication effectiveness plays a significant mediating role between motivational cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment. Yang (2023) points out that individuals with high motivational cultural intelligence typically demonstrate a greater willingness to engage in cross-cultural interactions; they are more inclined to initiate communication, seek feedback, and maintain engagement, thereby enhancing the quality of communication. If individuals are able to manage anxiety and uncertainty effectively in cross-cultural interactions, they will find it easier to establish a shared understanding and adapt positively. Langlinais et al. (2025) found that individuals with higher levels of motivation tend to strengthen interpersonal trust through more frequent and open communication, thereby gradually enhancing their sense of belonging and sense of control within the host culture. Consequently, this study proposes a sixth hypothesis.

H6: Intercultural communication effectiveness acts as a positive mediator between motivational cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment

Behavioral cultural intelligence emphasizes an individual's ability to adapt their verbal expressions, non-verbal behavior, and communication style in accordance with the demands of the situation during cross-cultural interactions. Whilst this ability can improve an individual's performance in cross-cultural settings, its impact on cross-cultural adjustment is typically realized through high-quality communication processes. Research has shown that behavioral cultural intelligence can enhance the clarity of communication, situational adaptability, and the coordination of interactions, and further promote psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Scholars such as Abubakar et al. (2026) argue that individuals with high levels of behavioral cultural intelligence are better able to adapt their behavior in accordance with different cultural norms; this behavioral flexibility can reduce misunderstandings and interpersonal friction, thereby enhancing communication effectiveness. Individuals achieve self-regulation and relationship-building through ongoing communication; therefore, appropriate behavioral responses can only truly foster adaptation when they are translated into effective communication. Nadiger et al. (2024) found that individuals who are able to express themselves accurately, provide timely feedback, and maintain positive interpersonal relationships in cross-cultural settings are more likely to gain acceptance from others and integrate successfully into new social environments. Consequently, this study proposes the seventh hypothesis.

H7: Intercultural communication effectiveness acts as a positive mediator between behavioral cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment

2.3 Research Framework

Drawing on cross-cultural adaptation theory, this study examines the interrelationships between cultural cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment, and constructs a research framework comprising motivational cultural intelligence, behavioral cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment. This theory posits that an individual's adaptation to a cross-cultural environment is not the result of a single factor, but rather a dynamic process involving the combined influence of intrinsic motivation, overt behavior, and the interactive process.

Specifically, motivational cultural intelligence reflects an individual's willingness to actively engage with different cultures and to invest in cross-cultural learning and communication. This study posits that motivational cultural intelligence can both directly enhance the level of cross-cultural adjustment (H3) and indirectly promote cross-cultural adjustment by improving the effectiveness of intercultural communication (H1, H6). Behavioral cultural intelligence reflects an individual's ability to adapt their verbal and non-verbal behavior in response to cultural contexts. This study posits that behavioral cultural intelligence can both directly and positively influence cross-cultural adjustment (H4) and indirectly influence cross-cultural adjustment by enhancing intercultural communication effectiveness (H2, H7). Furthermore, intercultural communication effectiveness can enhance an individual's ability to comprehend information, coordinate interpersonal relationships, and integrate into society; therefore, this study posits that intercultural communication effectiveness will have a direct positive impact on cross-cultural adjustment (H5).

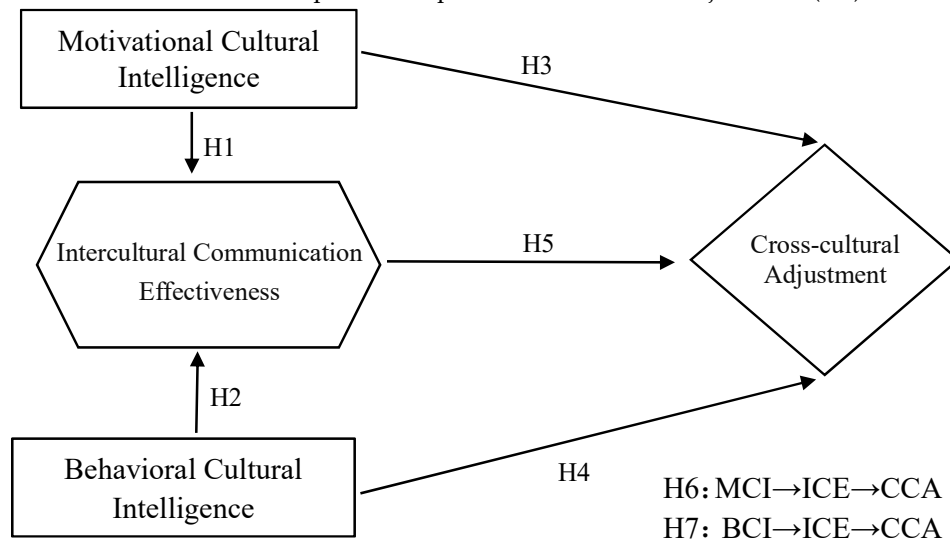


Figure 2.1 Research Framework

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

This study focuses on students returning from overseas study and examines the relationships between motivational cultural intelligence, behavioral cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment. This group was selected for the study primarily because they have undergone a relatively comprehensive process of cross-cultural migration, learning, and return, and thus provide a concentrated illustration of the psychological and behavioral characteristics of the readaptation phase. Returning students typically face practical challenges such as cultural reorientation, role

adjustment, and adapting their communication styles when it comes to their studies, employment, and social integration upon their return; this makes them a particularly suitable group for testing the theoretical hypotheses of this study.

The survey for this study was conducted between November 2025 and March 2026, covering five provinces in China. The research team carried out random sampling based on the number of returning overseas students in each province. The number of returning overseas students in the five provinces is approximately 32,000, 16,000, 27,000, 19,000, and 24,000, respectively, bringing the total to around 118,000. The research team selected the sample on this basis to enhance the regional diversity of the sample and the practical relevance of the study's findings. This study employed a combination of online questionnaires and field visits to collect data. The research team expanded the sample size through an online questionnaire and conducted field visits to gain an understanding of the specific experiences of returning overseas students in terms of cross-cultural adjustment. The research team focused on students who had studied abroad, had returned to their home country, and were in the process of readjusting, to ensure that the sample was relevant to the research topic. Overall, the participants in this study have a clear background in cross-cultural mobility, providing an empirical basis for explaining the relationship between cultural intelligence, communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment.

3.2 Instruments

This study employed a five-point Likert scale as its measurement tool. The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part collects demographic information and details of the respondents' study abroad experiences, specifically including gender, age, province of residence, educational attainment, academic background, country of study, duration of study abroad, level of cross-cultural interaction overseas, and perceptions of reverse culture shock upon returning home. Part two measures four core variables: motivational cultural intelligence, behavioral cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment. The research team established 12 measurement indicators based on four variables to characterize the respondents' motivation, behavior, communication performance, and adaptability in cross-cultural contexts. This measurement design provides a quantitative basis for subsequent testing of the relationships between the variables.

Table 3.1 Survey Questionnaire

Construct	Measurement Items	References
Motivational Cultural Intelligence (MCI)	I am fascinated by learning about and experiencing values and customs that differ from my own culture.	Beaulieu and Jimenez - Gomez (2022)
	Even if others behave differently from me, I am willing to respect and understand the cultural reasons behind their actions.	Radu (2023)
	I actively seek opportunities to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds.	Lazarova et al. (2023)
Behavioral Cultural Intelligence (BCI)	When communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, I am able to adapt my manner of expression flexibly to suit the situation.	Chen (2024)
	When cross-cultural misunderstandings arise, I am confident that I can resolve the issues and smooth over any differences through communication.	Jiang and Zhang (2024)

Intercultural Communication Effectiveness (ICE)	I can recognize any cultural biases I may hold and consciously correct them in my interactions.	Suveren (2022)
	I can clearly express my thoughts and needs to people from different cultural backgrounds.	Taylan and Weber (2023)
	I can accurately understand the underlying meaning behind the words and actions of people from other cultures.	Berger and Packard (2022)
	Through effective communication, I can build relationships based on mutual trust with people from different cultural backgrounds.	Soid et al. (2025)
	Overall, I am satisfied with my life and studies in China.	Zhang et al. (2022)
Cross-cultural Adjustment (CCA)	I can adapt to the local cultural environment and get on well with those around me, including both locals and international friends.	Sheng et al. (2022)
	In the face of the challenges posed by cultural differences, I can maintain a positive attitude and gradually adapt.	Tanasy et al. (2024)

3.3. Sample and data collection

This study takes returnees from overseas study in China as its survey population. In 2025, the number of returnees from overseas study in China reached 535,600; the five provinces selected for this study collectively accounted for approximately 118,000 such returnees. The study determined the model based on the sample size specified by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), concluding that a sample of 384 would suffice for statistical analysis purposes, given a population size of 118,000.

The research team used random sampling to distribute a total of 650 questionnaires across five provinces, with 176, 88, 149, 105, and 132 distributed in each province, respectively. After collecting the questionnaires, the research team screened the data, removing those with highly consistent responses, missing key information, or obvious logical inconsistencies. Ultimately, the five provinces retained 126, 60, 101, 71, and 90 valid questionnaires, respectively, making a total of 443. As the 443 valid samples exceed the theoretically required sample size, they provide a relatively robust empirical basis for subsequent data analysis and hypothesis testing.

4. Results

4.1. Construct reliability and validity

This study employed Cronbach's α to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire (Cronbach, 1951), and used composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) to evaluate the structural validity and convergent validity of the measurement model (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). This study identifies four latent variables, each comprising three measurement indicators, resulting in a total of 12 observed indicators; the model does not include second-order variables.

The research team conducted validity and reliability tests on 12 observational indicators. The results showed that the Cronbach's α coefficients for each latent variable ranged from 0.777 to 0.806, all of which were at or above the acceptable level, indicating that the scales demonstrated stable internal consistency. The CR-values for each latent variable ranged from 0.841 to 0.863, all exceeding 0.80, indicating that the composite reliability of each construct was

satisfactory. The AVEs for each latent variable ranged from 0.638 to 0.678, all exceeding 0.50, indicating that each construct explains a substantial proportion of the variance in the measured indicators. Overall, the measurement model used in this study meets the requirements for empirical analysis in terms of both reliability and convergent validity.

Table 4.1 Reliability and Validity Test Table

Factors	variable	factor loadings	Cronbach'a	CRValue	AVEValue
MCI	MCI1	0.781	0.787	0.850	0.654
	MCI2	0.830			
	MCI3	0.815			
BCI	BCI1	0.815	0.805	0.847	0.649
	BCI2	0.814			
	BCI3	0.788			
ICE	ICE1	0.822	0.806	0.863	0.678
	ICE2	0.823			
	ICE3	0.825			
CCA	CCA1	0.795	0.777	0.841	0.638
	CCA2	0.796			
	CCA3	0.805			

4.2 Factor analysis

This study employed exploratory factor analysis to examine the construct validity of the scale and to assess the degree to which the various measurement items converge on the latent variable. Before factor extraction, the research team used the KMO test (Kaiser, 1974) and Bartlett's sphericity test (Bartlett, 1950) to assess the suitability of the data.

Table 4.2 Results of the scale validity test

Variable	MCI	BCI	ICE	CCA
MCI1			0.781	
MCI2			0.830	
MCI3			0.815	
BCI1		0.815		
BCI2		0.814		
BCI3		0.788		
ICE1	0.822			
ICE2	0.823			
ICE3	0.825			
CCA1				0.795
CCA2				0.796
CCA3				0.805
KMO	0.825			
χ^2	1904.651			
df	66			
Sig.	0.000			
Eigenvalue	4.318	1.562	1.436	1.24
Percentage of Variance	35.982	13.018	11.969	10.335
Cumulative Variance Percentage	35.982	49.001	60.969	71.304

The results of the analysis indicate that the scale's KMO value is 0.825, which is higher than the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70. This suggests that there is a strong correlation

between the various measurement items and that the data is suitable for factor analysis. The Bartlett's sphericity test yielded an approximate chi-squared value of 1904.651, with 66 degrees of freedom and a significance level of $p < 0.001$. These results indicate that the correlation matrix deviates significantly from the identity matrix, suggesting that the sample data provides a sound statistical basis for factor extraction.

The research team then applied principal component analysis to the 12 observed indicators. The results showed that the extracted factor structure was largely consistent with the theoretical framework, with a cumulative variance explained of 71.304%. This explanatory power is significantly higher than the commonly used threshold of 60%, indicating that the extracted factor sufficiently captures the information contained in the original variables and effectively reflects the underlying structure of constructs such as cultural intelligence, communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment. Overall, the results of the factor analysis suggest that the scale possesses good construct validity and provides a reliable foundation for subsequent empirical testing.

4.3 Correlation analysis

This study employs Pearson's correlation analysis to examine the linear relationships between the core constructs, thereby providing a basis for subsequent model analysis. The results show that there are significant positive correlations between motivational cultural intelligence, behavioral cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment.

Table 4.3 Results of the correlation analysis between variables

		MCI	BCI	ICE	CCA
MCI	Pearson's Correlation	1	.380**	.300**	.320**
	Significance(Two-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	Number of Cases	443	443	443	443
BCI	Pearson's Correlation	.380**	1	.337**	.412**
	Significance(Two-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	Number of Cases	443	443	443	443
ICE	Pearson's Correlation	.300**	.337**	1	.300**
	Significance(Two-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	Number of Cases	443	443	443	443
CCA	Pearson's Correlation	.320**	.412**	.300**	1
	Significance(Two-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	Number of Cases	443	443	443	443

** . At the 0.01 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant.

* . At the 0.05 level (two-tailed), the correlation is significant.

Specifically, there is a significant positive correlation between motivational cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment ($r = 0.320$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the stronger an individual's motivation for cross-cultural engagement, the higher their level of adaptation. The correlation coefficient between behavioral cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment is 0.412 ($p < 0.01$), indicating that the stronger an individual's ability to adjust their behavior in cross-cultural contexts, the better their adaptive performance. Intercultural communication effectiveness and cross-cultural adjustment also showed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.300$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that the smoother the communication, the more likely individuals are to achieve positive adaptation outcomes.

These findings are consistent with the core tenets of cross-cultural adaptation theory and provide support for the direction of the subsequent hypothesis testing in this study. The correlation coefficients for each variable fall within a moderate range, indicating that there is a substantial relationship between the variables.

4.4 Model Development

This study employs structural equation modeling to examine the path relationships between cultural intelligence, communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment, and to evaluate the research hypotheses on this basis. The research team used Amos software to construct structural models and employed the maximum likelihood method to estimate the path coefficients between the latent variables.

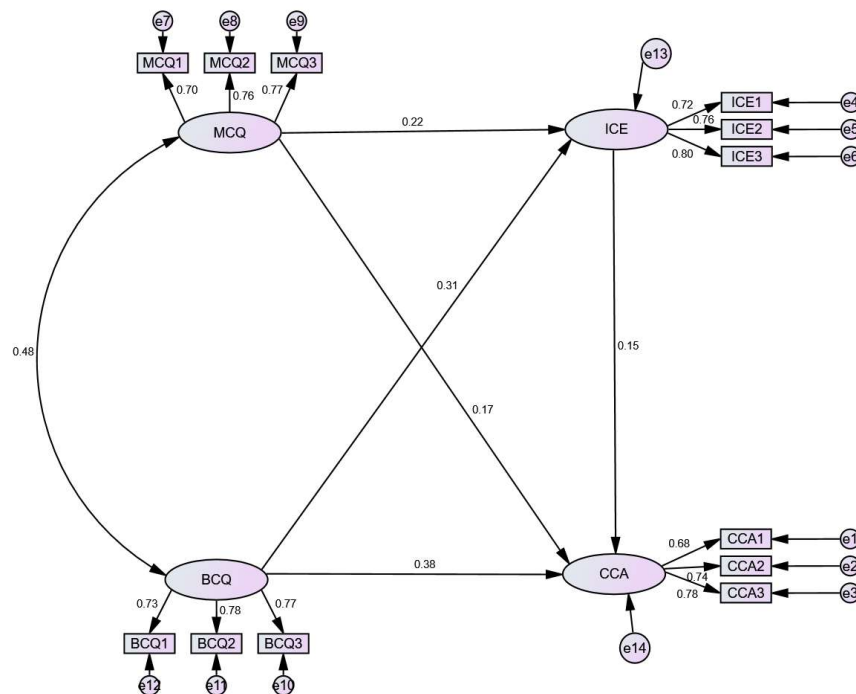


Figure 4.1 Structural equation model

Once the model estimation was complete, the research team further assessed the model's fit to determine the extent to which the theoretical model corresponded with the sample data. The results show that the model's chi-square-to-degrees-of-freedom ratio is 1.359, which falls within the acceptable range of 1 to 3, indicating that the model's overall structure is simple and that the data fits the model well. In terms of absolute fit indices, the GFI stands at 0.977 and the AGFI at 0.962; both exceed the commonly accepted threshold of 0.90, indicating that the model provides a strong explanation of the sample covariance matrix.

In terms of incremental fit metrics, the NFI stands at 0.953, which is higher than the threshold of 0.90, indicating that the model offers a significant improvement over the baseline model. In terms of residual measures, the RMSEA is 0.028, which is below the strict threshold of 0.05, indicating that the model has a low level of approximation error and a high overall fitness.

Table 4.4 Goodness-of-fit indices for the structural equation model (n=443)

Measurement model	X^2/df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
Evaluation	<5	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	>0.90	<0.08

indicators						
Outcome model	1.359	0.977	0.962	0.953	0.991	0.028

4.5 Analysis of main effects and mediating effects

This study used path analysis to examine the main effects between the core variables. The research team assessed the direction, strength, and significance of each path based on the estimates, standard errors, confidence intervals, and p-values.

Table 4.5 Analysis of main effects of variables

Hypothetical	Path	Path Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		P	Conclusion
H1	MCI → ICE	0.222	0.087	0.345	0.010	Support
H2	BCI → ICE	0.311	0.187	0.421	0.012	Support
H3	MCI → CCA	0.172	0.045	0.294	0.016	Support
H4	BCI → CCA	0.380	0.245	0.499	0.010	Support
H5	ICE → CCA	0.155	0.069	0.274	0.017	Support

The results in Table 4.5 show that the standardized coefficients for each hypothesised path range from 0.155 to 0.380, and are all positive. This result indicates that the independent variables in the model have a positive effect on the dependent variable. The p-values for each path ranged from 0.010 to 0.017, all of which were below 0.05, indicating that the main effects were statistically significant. The CR values for each path also met the significance threshold, further supporting the path relationships specified in the model.

Based on the above results, hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5 proposed in this study are all supported. This indicates that cultural intelligence and communication effectiveness not only directly influence cross-cultural adjustment but also constitute stable explanatory pathways within the overall theoretical framework. The results of the main effects analysis support the fundamental tenets of cross-cultural adaptation theory.

Table 4.6 Analysis of Mediating Effects

Hypothetical	Path	Path Coefficient	95% Confidence Interval		P	Conclusion
H6	MCI-ICE-CCA	0.039	0.015	0.097	0.006	Support
H7	BCI-ICE-CCA	0.077	0.036	0.148	0.003	Support

This study employs the Bootstrap method to test the mediating role of intercultural communication effectiveness (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). The results in Table 4.6 show that the indirect effects of the two mediating pathways are 0.039 and 0.077, respectively, and both are positive. This suggests that cultural intelligence can influence cross-cultural adjustment via intercultural communication effectiveness. The results of the significance tests show that the p-values for the two mediating pathways are 0.006 and 0.003, respectively, both of which are below 0.05. This indicates that the two indirect effects are statistically significant. On this basis, this study concludes that H6 and H7 are supported.

The above results indicate that intercultural communication effectiveness mediates the relationship between cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment. Cultural intelligence not only has a direct impact on cross-cultural adjustment but also indirectly promotes successful adaptation by enhancing communication effectiveness. This finding further supports the 'ability-interaction-adaptation' chain of effects proposed by cross-cultural adaptation theory.

5. Discussion

From the perspective of cross-cultural adaptation theory, this study constructed and tested a model of the mechanisms underlying the relationships between cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment. This paper defines cross-cultural adjustment as the dynamic process by which individuals continuously adapt their psychological state and coordinate their social functioning within a culturally diverse environment. In light of this issue, this paper focuses on examining the pathways through which motivational cultural intelligence and behavioral cultural intelligence influence cross-cultural adjustment, as well as the mediating role of intercultural communication effectiveness. Empirical results show that both motivational cultural intelligence and behavioral cultural intelligence have a significantly positive impact on cross-cultural adjustment, and intercultural communication effectiveness also exerts a significantly positive influence on cross-cultural adjustment. Further analysis reveals that intercultural communication effectiveness plays a significant mediating role between motivational cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment, as well as between behavioral cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment. The above findings indicate that cultural intelligence is not only a crucial foundation for individuals' ability to cope with cultural differences but also a key predictor of improved communication quality and enhanced adaptation. Based on this, the study has validated the applicability of cross-cultural adaptation theory in explaining the complex process of cross-cultural adjustment.

5.1 Motivational cultural intelligence and behavioral cultural intelligence exert positive effects on intercultural communication effectiveness

The quantitative results indicate that motivational cultural intelligence has a significant positive impact on intercultural communication effectiveness. An individual's interest in other cultures, engagement in interactions, and persistence constitute key psychological determinants of communication quality. These findings suggest that cross-cultural communication is not merely an outward manifestation of linguistic skills but is also driven by individuals' motivation to actively engage with different cultures and participate in ongoing interactions. Individuals with high levels of motivational cultural intelligence are more likely to initiate communication, remain patient, and seek feedback. Motivational cultural intelligence provides the psychological foundation for individuals to enter unfamiliar cultural environments and maintain meaningful interactions. A high level of motivation can enhance an individual's cross-cultural self-efficacy, making them more likely to respond proactively when faced with communication barriers. Feng et al. (2025) argue that positive motivation helps individuals manage uncertainty and anxiety, thereby improving the accuracy of information transmission and the continuity of interaction.

The findings also indicate that behavioral cultural intelligence has a significant positive impact on intercultural communication effectiveness. An individual's contextual adaptation of speech patterns, speech rhythm, facial expressions, and body language is a key factor in enhancing communication effectiveness. Individuals with high cultural intelligence can adapt their communication style in line with cultural norms, thereby reducing misunderstandings and friction. Behavioral cultural intelligence represents the outward manifestation of cultural intelligence and directly influences the quality of an individual's cultural responses. Sharipova (2025) points out that barriers to cross-cultural interaction often stem from behavioral expressions that do not align with local norms; individuals who can adapt their behavior flexibly are more likely to gain acceptance and trust, thereby improving the flow of communication and the quality of cooperation.

5.2 Motivational cultural intelligence and behavioral cultural intelligence exert positive effects on cross-cultural adjustment.

The findings indicate that motivational cultural intelligence has a significant positive impact on cross-cultural adjustment. An individual's interest, confidence, and willingness to engage in cross-cultural contexts constitute key precursors to their psychological adjustment

and social integration. Individuals with high levels of motivational cultural intelligence are more willing to engage with unfamiliar cultures and view cultural differences as opportunities for learning. Chenyang (2022) argues that motivational cultural intelligence can provide a sustained psychological boost for cross-cultural interactions. Only by maintaining a strong sense of intrinsic motivation can individuals gradually adapt to pressure, learning, and adjustment. Highly motivated individuals are better able to maintain a positive emotional state and reduce the anxiety and withdrawal caused by culture shock.

The findings also indicate that behavioral cultural intelligence has a significant positive impact on cross-cultural adjustment. An individual's ability to adapt their language use, communication style, and non-verbal behavior in a cross-cultural setting is a key factor influencing the quality of their adaptation. Individuals with a high level of behavioral cultural intelligence are better able to adapt their interactions to the norms of the host culture, thereby reducing misunderstandings and conflicts. Alifuddin and Widodo (2022) argue that behavioral cultural intelligence determines an individual's ability to translate cultural understanding into appropriate behavior. Situational sensitivity and behavioral adaptability have a direct impact on cross-cultural adjustment. Furthermore, individuals who can adapt their behavior flexibly are more likely to be accepted by the host group and to establish stable relationships.

5.3 Intercultural communication effectiveness exerts a positive effect on cross-cultural adjustment

Previous research has shown that intercultural communication effectiveness has a significant positive impact on cross-cultural adjustment. An individual's psychological adaptation and social integration in a cross-cultural environment depend to a large extent on the smoothness of communication, the accuracy of feedback, and the sustainability of interactions. Cross-cultural adjustment is not merely a process of accumulating cultural knowledge, but rather a process in which individuals continually adapt themselves and rebuild relationships through ongoing communication, understanding, and negotiation. Sokol (2025) argues that effective communication can reduce uncertainty and anxiety in cross-cultural interactions, whilst enhancing a sense of control over one's environment and fostering interpersonal trust. Effective communication not only helps individuals gain an understanding of the host culture but also enhances their sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and social support. Consequently, effective intercultural communication can significantly enhance cross-cultural adjustment by facilitating the understanding of information, improving interpersonal relationships, and alleviating adjustment stress.

5.4 The mediating role of Intercultural Communication Effectiveness

The findings indicate that intercultural communication effectiveness plays a significant mediating role between motivational cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment. A strong willingness to engage in cross-cultural activities does not directly translate into successful adaptation; individuals also need to achieve psychological adjustment and social integration through high-quality communication. Liu et al. (2022) point out that motivational cultural intelligence can enhance individuals' interest, confidence, and persistence in cross-cultural communication; highly motivated individuals typically possess a stronger sense of cross-cultural self-efficacy and are therefore more inclined to adopt proactive communication strategies. Only by obtaining information about their environment, revising their perceptions, and adjusting their behavior through continuous and effective communication can individuals gradually achieve cross-cultural adjustment. At the same time, effective communication helps to reduce anxiety and uncertainty, whilst enhancing a sense of control and belonging.

The findings also indicate that intercultural communication effectiveness plays a significant mediating role between behavioral cultural intelligence and cross-cultural adjustment. Behavioral regulation skills can only truly enhance adaptability when they are translated into smooth, accurate interactions that conform to situational norms. Behavioral

cultural intelligence refers to an individual's ability to adapt their verbal expression, tone of voice, and non-verbal behavior in accordance with the cultural context. Akande et al. (2025) believe that cross-cultural barriers often stem from behavioral expressions that do not align with local norms; a strong ability to adapt one's behavior helps individuals build trust, reduce misunderstandings, and elicit positive responses in communication. Consequently, behavioral cultural intelligence further promotes cross-cultural adjustment by enhancing the appropriateness of communication and the coordination of interactions.

6. Research contributions, research impact, and research limitations

6.1 Research contributions

The theoretical contributions of this study are primarily reflected in three aspects. Firstly, this paper integrates cross-cultural adaptation theory, cultural intelligence, and intercultural communication effectiveness into a unified analytical framework and systematically examines the specific pathways through which cultural intelligence influences cross-cultural adjustment, thereby broadening the scope of explanation in research on cross-cultural adjustment. Existing research has largely sought to explain adaptation outcomes through personality traits, social support, or individual abilities, with few studies examining the interactive mechanisms between individual capabilities and social processes. This paper thus reveals the causal role of cultural intelligence in the development of cross-cultural adjustment. Secondly, this paper further clarifies the mediating mechanisms underlying intercultural communication effectiveness. The findings indicate that cultural intelligence not only directly influences cross-cultural adjustment but also indirectly promotes adaptation by enhancing communication effectiveness. This finding suggests that an individual's cross-cultural adjustment depends not only on their ability to understand different cultures, but also on their ability to translate that understanding into effective interaction. Finally, this paper supplements the theoretical framework of cross-cultural adjustment by examining the interactive process. The findings indicate that cross-cultural adjustment is influenced by both cultural intelligence and communication practices. This finding provides new empirical evidence for explaining how individuals achieve psychological adaptation and behavioral coordination in cross-cultural contexts.

6.2 Research Implications

The findings of this study offer practical insights for organizations in the areas of cross-cultural management and the development of talent for internationalization. Firstly, organizations should regard the development of cultural intelligence as the foundation for fostering cross-cultural adaptation, rather than relying solely on job experience or general management practices. Managers can enhance their team members' ability to identify, understand, and adapt to cross-cultural cues through cross-cultural training, role-playing exercises, and overseas placements, thereby improving their ability to adapt to new cultural environments. Secondly, organizations should recognize the crucial role played by intercultural communication effectiveness. The findings indicate that cultural intelligence not only directly influences cross-cultural adjustment but also exerts a further influence through communication effectiveness. Managers must therefore not only help team members build up their cultural knowledge, but also enhance their communication skills through feedback training, negotiation exercises, and interactive support, enabling them to translate cultural understanding into effective communication. Finally, both organizations and higher education institutions should focus on the ongoing process of cross-cultural adjustment. Organizations can establish supportive communication mechanisms and team integration schemes, whilst universities can enhance their cross-cultural communication courses and practical platforms. Only by continuously improving their psychological adaptability and behavioral coordination through ongoing interaction can individuals better cope with complex cross-cultural situations.

6.3 Limitations of the study

Although this paper systematically examines the relationship between cultural intelligence, intercultural communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment, the study still has certain limitations. Firstly, the research context of this paper is relatively narrow, focusing primarily on a specific cross-cultural contact setting; different cultural environments, organizational types, and task characteristics may alter the strength of the relationships between variables. Future research could further test the findings of this paper in contexts such as corporate secondments, education for international students, and international team collaboration. Secondly, the sample in this study is subject to certain limitations; the participants are relatively similar in terms of age, educational background, and cross-cultural experience, and this homogeneity may weaken the generalisability of the findings. Future research could expand the sample size and conduct comparative analyses across different countries, industries, and occupational groups. Finally, the variable settings in this paper could be further expanded. Cross-cultural adjustment is influenced by a variety of factors; this paper focuses primarily on the relationship between cultural intelligence, communication effectiveness, and cross-cultural adjustment. Future research could incorporate variables such as perceived cultural distance, social support, and cross-cultural anxiety to further analyze their mechanisms of action, thereby developing a more comprehensive explanatory framework.

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