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## Cultural Familiarity, Ethnic Discrimination, and Adjustment of South Asian Students in South Korea

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study explores the adjustment of South Asian international students in South Korea using social identity and self-determination theories. Survey data from 267 students (2024–2025) were analyzed with STATA 19.5 to examine how pre-arrival cultural familiarity, perceived ethnic discrimination, and post-arrival cultural experiences affect daily life and academic adjustment. The findings indicate that cultural familiarity positively predicts daily life and, to a lesser extent, academic adjustment. While perceived discrimination has no direct effect, post-arrival experiences, such as positive interactions with locals, social engagement, and favorable perceptions of work and education culture, significantly buffer its negative effects. Notably, perceptions of technological advancement exacerbate the adverse impact of discrimination on academic adjustment. Overall, the results emphasize the critical role of social connectedness and supportive institutional environments in fostering resilience and promoting the well-being of South Asian students adapting to South Korean higher education.*

**Keywords:** Adjustment, Ethnic Discrimination, International Student, Perceived Cultural Distance, Self-Determination Theory, Social Identity Theory

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## INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of higher education has dramatically increased in recent decades, with South Korea emerging as a major hub for international students. In 2023, the South Korean government set a target for 300,000 international students by 2027 through its ambitious ‘Study Korea 300K Project’ when the number then stood at approximately 200,000 (MoE, 2023). A recent report by the ICEF monitor revealed that this target was achieved nearly two years ahead of schedule, and more than 95% of these students came from Asian countries (ICEF, 2025). The global outburst of Korean cultural waves, such as K-pop and K-drama, rapid technological development and the expansion of English-medium programs, contributed to the influx of international students.

The South Asian region mostly consists of developing countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka (SAARC, 2020) with low per capita income and a long colonial history. In the past several decades, international students from these countries have looked to highly developed Western educational systems to pursue higher education. However, with rapid economic growth and educational internalization in East Asian countries such as South Korea, international students from South Asia have been increasingly enrolling themselves in Korea’s academic institutions in recent years (ICEF, 2025).

Despite this remarkable growth, various studies suggest that many Asian students face considerable challenges when they adjust to Korean society. These challenges range from language and cultural barriers to experiences of social isolation, academic pressure, dietary challenges and perceived discrimination (Noh & Kim, 2025; Kim & Amar, 2025; Lee & Yoo, 2022; Lee & Rice, 2007). In other words, although South Korea’s ambitious internalization policies have significantly increased the number of international students in the country, they have not been matched by adequate support systems and clear pathways for

integration in society and continue to provide contradictory experiences to students in contrast to their expectations (Kim & Lah, 2022). Moreover, Korean society is characterized by a unique sociocultural context, including ethnic homogeneity, hierarchical social structures, and bloodline-based nationalism, which create distinct adjustment challenges that differ from those documented in Western host countries (Lee et al., 2017; Kim & Feyissa, 2022).

This research makes several important contributions to the literature, as it aims, theoretically, to integrate social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) to explain how cultural familiarity and post-arrival cultural impact factors jointly shape adjustment outcomes. While previous research has analyzed these frameworks separately, this integration offers a dual-level explanation of international student adjustment by linking intergroup identity processes to psychological need-fulfillment mechanisms.

Moreover, the research focuses specifically on the adjustment of international students from the South Asian region. While many studies have examined other Asian students, such as Chinese students in South Korea, a gap remains in the literature on South Asian students, which this research aims to fill. Although the literature has focused on Western contexts (Asif, Jain, & Dolan, 2024; Rahman & Rollock, 2011; Atri & Sharma, 2006), scholarly attention to intra-Asian mobility patterns and the challenges faced in ethnically homogeneous East Asian societies such as South Korea remains limited (Lee et al., 2017).

Moreover, various studies in recent decades have emphasized mental health concerns and adaptation struggles among international students in Korea. Studies have reported high levels of acculturative stress, perceived discrimination and psychological distress among Asian international students in Korean educational institutions (Kim & Amar, 2025; Suh et al., 2019; Atteraya, 2020). Understanding the ways to enable easier adjustment processes, especially for South Asian international students, has an immediate impact on institutional policies, support services and the overall success of internationalization efforts. By examining five specific post-arrival cultural impact factors—food experience, technological advancement, the kindness of locals, social interaction, and work/education culture—this research provides important insights into the mechanisms through which adjustment occurs.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Adjustment**

#### ***The Concept of Adjustment***

The definition of adjustment is found in the discussion of Oberg's (1960) four phases of 'culture shock', which are part of early writings on international relocation. In the fourth phase, positive adjustment is discussed as "reflecting enjoyment of and functional competence in the new environment." Here, functional competence can refer to the ease of accessing day-to-day services as well as behavioral proficiency, which facilitates a comfortable living, without any hassle due to changes in the cultural environment. In the context of international

education, adjustment reflects the degree to which foreign students achieve comfort, satisfaction and functional competence in the host culture (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). It involves psychological adjustment, which represents emotional well-being, and sociocultural adjustment, which denotes the individual's ability to effectively navigate social norms prevalent in the host culture and daily interactions with locals (Searle & Ward, 1990). Berry's (1997) acculturation framework conceptualizes adaptation as a two-way process that involves the interaction between individuals and host societies. He emphasized the importance of acculturation strategies, perceived cultural distance and acceptance by the host community for facilitating ease of adjustment.

### ***General Factors of Adjustment***

Adjustment is driven by a mixture of individual and contextual factors. The key factors include personality traits such as openness and resilience, previous cross-cultural experience, language skills, perception of discrimination, and the amount of social support available from peers or locals (Vanchinkhuu & Shin, 2023; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Cultural distance—the perceived difference between the home and host cultures—also plays a major role. The greater the distance perceived, the more difficult the adjustment process becomes (Ward & Kennedy, 1992). Furthermore, studies indicate that gaps between expectations and reality can worsen psychological distress (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1991). On the other hand, Ward (1996) suggested that psychological adjustment is best understood through the lens of a stress and coping framework, whereas sociocultural adaptation is more explained within a social skills or culture learning paradigm.

In the present study, adjustment is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising two distinct domains: daily life adjustment and academic life adjustment. Daily life adjustment refers to students' perceived ease in managing everyday activities, accessing services, and navigating social interactions in the broader host environment, reflecting sociocultural adaptation. Academic life adjustment refers to students' adaptation to institutional norms, classroom expectations, pedagogical styles, and academic demands within the university context. This distinction follows prior research conceptualizing adjustment as multidimensional rather than unitary (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992) and provides the conceptual foundation for the hypotheses developed in this study.

### ***Adjustment process for South Asian international students in South Korea***

South Asian international (SAI) students come from countries that have similar cultural traits that are very much more concentrated on family, religion, and community experience through their collective nature (Abbas, 2010). However, moving to South Korea, which is very advanced in technology but socially very homogenous, many South Asian international students have to address challenges that are all products of the incongruity of culture, students' limited interactions with locals, and competing academic pressure (Lee & Rice, 2007; Rahman & Rollock, 2004). The colonial past (Bose & Jalal, 2017) has left

many South Asians to be fluent in English, yet they still face difficulties in coping with acculturation and identity loss and have less access to social support networks (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Khatiwada et al., 2021). On the other hand, the struggle in their daily lives, such as dietary acculturation, financial limitations, and restricted social inclusion, can lead to loneliness and stress.

## **Cultural Familiarity**

### ***The Concept of Cultural Familiarity***

Cultural familiarity is the extent of an individual's knowledge and understanding of the host's cultural practices, values, traditions, and communication styles prior to their arrival. Cultural familiarity integrates key constructs such as mutual recognition and the internalization of host culture norms (Li, Xue, & He, 2023); cultural intelligence, encompassing motivational, cognitive, and behavioral capabilities to manage cultural differences (Hong et al., 2021); and cross-cultural adaptation, the process through which international students adjust psychologically and socioculturally to the host environment (Searle and Ward 1990; Ward and Kennedy, 1992; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

In this study, cultural familiarity refers specifically to pre-arrival cognitive awareness and perceived understanding of Korean society, including knowledge of cultural norms, educational structures, and institutional systems. It does not imply cultural similarity or identity overlap but rather the extent to which students possess anticipatory knowledge that may reduce uncertainty upon arrival. Such familiarity may function as a preparatory resource facilitating subsequent adjustment.

### ***Relationship between Cultural Familiarity and Adjustment***

***In their model of international adjustment***, Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou (1991) emphasized the importance of predeparture preparation and familiarity. Individuals with a good understanding of the host culture will be able to interpret actions and cope with uncertainty more easily, thereby facilitating smooth communication. Social identity theory (SIT) can serve as a framework for understanding the impact of cultural familiarity on the adjustment process. SIT states that individuals derive part of their self-concept from belonging to certain social groups, and they try to portray others negatively while favoring their own group to maintain a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The concept of homophily refers to the inclination of people to associate with those who are similar. This concept supports the idea that cultural familiarity promotes social connection and integration. Empirical studies further demonstrate that perceived cultural distance negatively predicts sociocultural adaptation, whereas perceived similarity, personality traits, and social support are positively associated with psychological well-being (Galchenko & Van de Vijver, 2007; Ward & Kennedy, 1999).

### **The Concept of Ethnic Discrimination**

The concept of ethnic discrimination among international students has been analyzed through the lenses of neoracism and nationalism (Lee et al., 2017). Neoracism implies that discrimination is not only based on race but also on the so-called hierarchy of cultures and regions where people from developing countries are thought of as less developed if not totally inferior (Lee et al., 2017; Barker, 1981). In contrast, neinationalism indicates the revival of national identity and uniqueness in response to globalization, but it also leads to social divisions characterized as culturally incompatible, if not entirely inferior (Lee et al., 2017; Barker, 1981). It leads to social divisions characterized by negative attitudes toward those believed to be at the bottom of the perceived global hierarchy (Lee et al., 2017; Gingrich, 2006; Paquin, 2002).

This aligns with the social identity process, which emphasizes that ethnic discrimination emerges when dominant groups maintain privilege and distance themselves from perceived “out-groups” (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Consequently, ethnic discrimination not only obstructs cross-cultural integration but also undermines autonomy, relatedness, and competence—the three core psychological needs identified in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

### ***The Relationship between Ethnic Discrimination and Adjustment***

Research on the ethnic discrimination and adjustment of international students in South Korea has evolved over time, mirroring the increasing interest in the areas of acculturative stress, social support, and academic integration problems (Atteraya, 2020; Suh et al., 2019). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that discrimination is a threat to individuals’ feelings of belonging and self-esteem and ultimately results in their isolation and less input in the host culture. The data obtained from various studies indicate that believed discrimination magnifies acculturative stress and loneliness while it diminishes life satisfaction (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Lee & Rice, 2007). In historically homogeneous contexts such as South Korea, subtle forms of exclusion and negative stereotyping can accumulate and negatively affect international students’ overall transition, social engagement, and attitudes toward the host institution (Lee et al., 2017).

### **Post-arrival Cultural Impact Factors**

Building on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the post-arrival cultural impact factors examined in this study represent distinct domains through which international students’ basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy may be fulfilled or frustrated in the host society. These domains also correspond to fundamental areas of everyday functioning emphasized in broader motivational frameworks, such as Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs, which highlights the importance of basic, relational, and self-development needs in individual well-being and adjustment. Rather than testing independent mechanisms, the following hypotheses apply a common theoretical logic across multiple post-arrival contexts to examine how everyday experiences

condition the relationships between pre-arrival cultural familiarity, ethnic discrimination experience, and adjustment outcomes.

As moderators, we identify five dimensions of post-arrival cultural impact factors: (1) food experience, (2) technological advancement, (3) the kindness of locals, (4) social interaction, and (5) work and education culture. These five dimensions correspond to distinct basic psychological needs articulated in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Food experience and technological advancement are related primarily to competence, as they reflect students' ability to effectively navigate new environmental and institutional challenges. The likeness of locals and social interaction are related, as they indicate social acceptance, emotional support, and interpersonal connectedness within the host society. Work and education culture is associated with autonomy, as it shapes the extent to which students perceive freedom, choice, and personal agency in academic and everyday contexts.

### ***Post-arrival Cultural Impact Factors: Food Experience***

Food experience has a major effect on international students' adjustment, which includes food that is nutritious, of their culture, and emotional needs (Kim & Kim, 2019). Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) supports a food experience to gain competence by enabling students to manage their daily tasks and relatedness by providing emotional comfort and connection to their heritage. Additionally, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) sees food consumption as an essential physiological requirement that underpins overall higher-level well-being. South Asian students living in Korea experience a range of dietary problems, from predominantly being subjected to differences in spice profiles (Kim & Lee, 2021), having very few Halal options available for Muslim students, and religious restrictions on the consumption of beef among Hindu and vegetarian students (Lee, 2023). In this scenario, students may still count on cooking at home, but it can be both difficult and costly to find familiar ingredients, making it necessary to gradually adapt to local cuisine (Noh & Kim, 2025).

### ***Post-arrival Cultural Impact Factors: Technological Advancement***

In the case of the adjustment of international students, technological advancement is interpreted as the ability of students to manage and make use of the country's digital infrastructure through academic, social and daily living. From the perspective of self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), technological adaptation satisfies the need for competence by building trust and skill in dealing with new difficulties. In the case of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943), technology provides accessibility to the satisfaction of both basic needs (e.g., food delivery, safety information) and high-order needs such as belonging and esteem through communication and academic engagement. In South Korea's highly digitalized society, international students who perfectly cope with technical systems, such as mobile payments, transportation apps, and online learning platforms, are the ones who go through easier adjustment and enjoy better psychological well-being.

This study hypothesizes that positive experiences with technological advancement attenuate the relationship between pre-arrival cultural familiarity and adjustment. Moreover, positive experiences with technological advancement are also expected to buffer the negative effects of ethnic discrimination on adjustment.

***Post-arrival Cultural Impact Factors: Kindness of Locals***

The kindness of locals expresses the warmth, helpfulness, and acceptance that international students feel from locals, which in turn influences their sense of belonging and emotional health (Zhang, 2024). In the case of South Korea, which is a socially homogeneous and Confucian-influenced society, there are strong in-group norms that might hinder deeper interactions with foreigners, thus leading many students to feel alienated (Lee et al., 2017; Thibault, 2024). Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) postulates that such kindness satisfies the psychological need for relatedness, thereby enabling connection and emotional security. Similarly, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) classifies belongingness and love needs as prerequisites for psychological stability. Hence, the genuine friendliness and acceptance of locals can act as a cushion against the adverse effects of discrimination, making international students feel less isolated and improving their overall adjustment and well-being.

Moreover, the kindness of locals is expected to buffer the negative effects of ethnic discrimination on adjustment. When international students experience genuine warmth, friendliness, and social support from host nationals, these interactions counteract the alienation and exclusion that often result from discriminatory experiences.

***Post-arrival Cultural Impact Factors: Social Interaction***

Social interaction is the aspect that covers all types of international students' relationships with the people around them. It includes the whole spectrum, from close personal ties to formal involvement in academic or community activities, thus facilitating engagement and a feeling of being part of the community. People who have been exposed to the culture of the host country beforehand usually find it easier to contact locals and create cross-cultural contact. In terms of self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), social interaction is one way of fulfilling the human psychological need for relatedness, whereas Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) identifies belongingness as vital for emotional stability. Positive social interaction experiences are expected to buffer the negative effects of ethnic discrimination on adjustment, thereby enhancing international students' overall adjustment and psychological well-being in the host society.

***Post-arrival Cultural Impact Factors: Work and Education Culture***

The culture of work and education encompasses the academic norms, expectations, and teaching practices that shape international students' learning experiences in the host country. In South Korea, the education system still implies hierarchical structures, reverence to teachers and, most frequently, exam-based

evaluation, which might be difficult for students coming from less formal or more relaxed systems (Thibault, 2024). Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) states that autonomy-supportive classrooms promote the growth of competence, independence, and social ties—the basic requirements for well-being and motivation. Similarly, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) emphasizes the needs for esteem and self-actualization as the main factors of personal development.

This study hypothesizes that positive experiences with work and education culture—particularly the degree to which the educational environment supports autonomy—strengthen the relationship between pre-arrival cultural familiarity and adjustment. Moreover, positive experiences with work and education culture are expected to buffer the negative effects of ethnic discrimination on adjustment.

### **Integrating Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in the Context of International Students’ Adjustment**

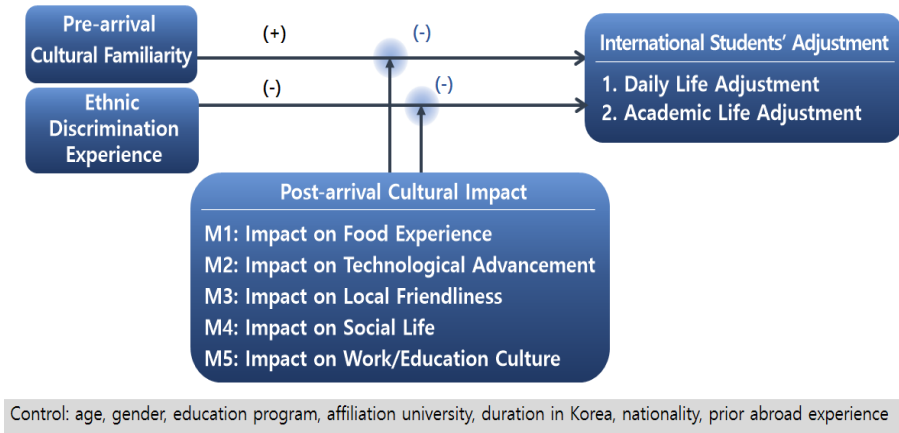
This study integrates social identity theory (SIT) and self-determination theory (SDT) to provide a multilevel explanation of international student adjustment. SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how individuals interpret their position within intergroup contexts. In host societies characterized by strong national identity and cultural boundaries, experiences of discrimination or perceived cultural distance heighten out-group salience and generate identity threat, potentially weakening belonging and engagement.

A key point of integration between the two theories lies in perceived intergroup distance. When students perceive greater social distance between themselves and members of the host society, the identity threat becomes more pronounced. From an SDT perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2000), such identity threat may frustrate basic psychological needs—particularly relatedness—and in some contexts, competence and autonomy. Conversely, when cultural familiarity and positive post-arrival experiences reduce perceived distance, psychological needs are more likely to be satisfied, facilitating adaptive functioning.

Thus, the integration is complementary rather than redundant. SIT clarifies how intergroup positioning produces identity-based stressors, whereas SDT explains the motivational mechanisms through which environmental conditions amplify these effects via need fulfillment. Compared with broader acculturation frameworks (e.g., Berry, 1997), this combined approach allows for a more precise examination of how identity processes and psychological needs jointly shape daily and academic adjustment.

## **METHOD**

Moderation analyses of models linking cultural familiarity, ethnic discrimination experience, cultural impact, and international students’ adjustment are presented in Figure 1. Adjustment was measured as a multidimensional construct comprising two domains: daily life adjustment and academic life adjustment.



**Figure 1: Research Model**

### Data Collection

This study draws upon a survey conducted among international students enrolled in South Korean higher education institutions between 2024 and 2025. Most participants were enrolled at Kyungsung University, a private university in Busan, which serves as an important host institution for South Asian students. The survey was administered as part of a broader research initiative examining international students' adaptation, discrimination, and integration experiences in Korean universities. The respondents were asked to report on their academic adjustment, social interactions, perceived discrimination, and general sense of belonging during their stay in South Korea.

For the purposes of this paper, the analysis focuses exclusively on students from countries in the South Asian region that are living in South Korea for their studies. Thus, the sample includes international students from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia, who together represent the largest and most cohesive regional group in the dataset. This focus is theoretically grounded in the shared religious, cultural, and socioeconomic background of South Asian students, as well as their distinct historical and geopolitical relationships with South Korea as an emerging educational destination. Filtering the dataset to this group allows for a more contextualized understanding of how mobility, discrimination, and belonging are negotiated within a common regional experience. After respondents from non-South Asian countries were excluded, the analytic subsample included 267 participants (out of 295 total). Descriptive statistics were computed using all available observations ( $n = 267$ ) for each variable to maximize information. Multivariate regression analyses, which required the simultaneous inclusion of all the predictors, moderators, and control variables, were estimated using complete cases only.

Across key variables, the proportion of missing data was relatively low. Most independent and moderating variables exhibited less than 5% missingness, while adjustment-related outcome variables showed slightly higher missing data rates (approximately 6–7%). Given the modest level of missingness and the need to estimate interaction models including multiple moderators, listwise deletion was adopted for the regression analyses. This approach is typically used when the proportion of missing data is limited and does not appear to be systematically patterned. Following listwise deletion for missing data, the final regression model was based on 237 valid cases.

## **Measures**

The dependent variables in this study are (1) international students' adjustment to life in South Korea and (2) ethnic discrimination experience. International students' adjustment was measured using two items assessing (a) adjustment to daily necessities and (b) adjustment to university life. Each item was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very difficult, 5 = very easy), with higher scores indicating better adjustment.

The independent variables are (1) pre-arrival cultural familiarity and (2) ethnic discrimination experience. The first independent variable, pre-arrival cultural familiarity, captures the degree to which students were familiar with different aspects of Korean society prior to arrival. This construct consists of five dimensions: Korean culture, the Korean education system, the Korean economy and technology, and Korea's global influence and diplomacy. All the items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not familiar at all, 5 = very familiar) and were combined into a single factor after the reliability test (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.6137$ ). Although the reliability coefficients for pre-arrival cultural familiarity and ethnic discrimination experience fall slightly below the conventional 0.70 threshold, values above 0.60 are generally considered acceptable, particularly when the constructs are broad and measured with a limited number of items (Hair et al., 2010).

The second independent variable, ethnic discrimination experience, was measured using two items: (1) whether the respondent experienced discrimination (1 = no, 2 = yes, occasionally, 3 = yes, frequently), and (2) perceived intentionality of discrimination (1 = not discriminatory, 2 = unsure or unintentional but hurtful, 3 = highly intentional). These two items were combined to form a composite variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.6622$ ).

The moderating variable is post-arrival cultural impact, conceptualized as the perceived influence of Korean cultural elements on students' experiences after arrival. This variable consists of five dimensions: (1) food experience, (2) technological advancement, (3) the kindness of locals, (4) social interaction and community life, and (5) the work culture and education system. Each dimension was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very negative, 5 = very positive).

Control variables were selected on the basis of their theoretical relevance to cross-cultural adjustment and subjective evaluations of cultural experience. These include age, gender, education program, affiliation with the university, nationality, duration in Korea, and prior international experience. Age was

measured as a continuous variable. Gender was measured as a binary variable (male or female). The education program was categorized as bachelor's or master's enrollment. Although prior research suggests that academic major and financial support status may influence international student adjustment, data on these variables were not collected in the present study. As a result, they were not included as control variables in the regression models.

Students were enrolled at one of four institutions: (1) Kyungsoong University, (2) Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology (UNIST), (3) Seoul Theological University, or (4) New Delhi University. Duration in Korea was categorized as follows: 1–2 months, 6–12 months, less than 6 months, or more than 2 years. Prior foreign experience was measured as a binary variable indicating whether the respondent had previously lived abroad. The dataset included six major South Asian groups: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia.

### **Analysis Methods**

To empirically test the proposed hypotheses, moderation analyses were performed employing pooled ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models using STATA 19.5. Separate regression models were estimated for daily-life adjustment and academic-life adjustment. Control variables were included in all the models. Missing data were handled using listwise deletion, and robust standard errors were applied to address potential heteroskedasticity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted independently by the authors. All ethical principles for research involving human participants were followed. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and rights and provided voluntary informed consent prior to participation. No identifying or sensitive personal information was collected, and all the responses were kept strictly anonymous and confidential. The data were securely stored in password-protected files and used solely for academic research purposes. The study adhered to the ethical standards outlined by the American Psychological Association for the protection of human participants. Prior to data collection, exceptions were obtained, confirming that this study was minimal-risk research involving anonymous adult participants and therefore did not require formal IRB review under applicable institutional guidelines.

We checked the descriptive statistics to determine the basic characteristics of the responses. Descriptive statistics were computed using all available observations for each variable to maximize information and avoid unnecessary data loss. As shown in Table 1, the number of valid observations varies slightly across variables because of item-level nonresponse. Specifically, missing values were limited in magnitude, ranging from 1 case for pre-arrival cultural familiarity items ( $n=266$ ) to 17 cases for daily life adjustment, academic life adjustment, and prior foreign experience ( $n=250$ ). 5 post-arrival cultural impact measures revealed between 6 and 11 missing cases, with the greatest degree of missingness observed for food experience ( $n=256$ ).

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (N = 267)**

Variable		Measurement Questionnaire	M	SD	
D.V.	International Students' Daily Life Adjustment	How easy or difficult was your adjustment to daily necessities? (min.1-max.5)	2.494	1.085	
	International Students' Academic Life Adjustment	How easy or difficult was your adjustment to university life in Korea? (min.1-max.5)	2.604	0.981	
	I.V.	Pre-arrival Cultural Familiarity	Before coming to Korea, how familiar were you with Korean culture (min.1-max.5)	2.468	1.221
			Before coming to Korea, how familiar were you with Korean education system (min.1-max.5)	2.607	1.241
I.V.	Pre-arrival Cultural Familiarity	Before coming to Korea, how familiar were you with Korean economy and technology (min.1-max.5)	2.801	1.177	
		Before coming to Korea, how familiar were you with Korea's global influence and diplomacy (min.1-max.5)	2.652	1.227	
	Ethnic Discrimination	Have you experienced any discrimination? (mix.1-max.3)	1.827	0.701	
		How intentional was it? (mix.1-max.3)	1.671	0.817	
M.V.	Post-arrival Cultural Impact	Post-arrival cultural impact ranking of food experience (min.1-max.5)	3.051	1.001	
		Post-arrival cultural impact ranking of technological advancement (min.1-max.5)	2.294	1.064	
		Post-arrival cultural impact ranking of kindness of locals (min.1-max.5)	3.057	1.135	

Variable	Response Category	N	Pct.(%)
	Post-arrival cultural impact ranking of social interaction and community life (min.1-max.5)	2.962	1.072
	Post-arrival cultural impact ranking of work culture/education system (min.1-max.5)	2.805	1.006
	18 - 20	58	21.64
Age	21- 24	157	58.58
	25 - 30	47	17.54
	31 and older	6	2.24
	Female	163	60.82
Gender	Male	105	39.18
	Bachelor's	232	87.55
Education Program	Master's	33	12.45
	Delhi University	1	0.37
Affiliation University	Kyungsung University	264	98.51
	Seoul theological university	1	0.37
	Ulsan National Institute of Science and Technology	1	0.37
	Seoul Theological University	1	0.37
Control Var.	1-2 years	36	13.48
	6-12 months	86	32.21
	Less than 6 months	46	17.23
	More than 2 years	99	37.08
Prior Abroad Exp.	No	226	90.40
	Yes	24	9.60
Nationality	Bangladesh	46	17.16
	India	8	2.99
	Nepal	185	69.03
	Pakistan	8	2.99
	Sri Lanka	16	5.97
	Indonesia	4	1.49

Note. SD = standard deviation, Pct. = percentage

The control variables exhibited minimal missingness, with most variables remaining in the full analytic sample.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the main study variables. On average, the respondents reported moderate levels of adjustment to daily life (M=2.49) and academic life (M=2.60), indicating that adaptation was neither particularly easy nor extremely difficult. Pre-arrival cultural familiarity was generally modest across domains, while post-arrival cultural impact evaluations were relatively more positive, especially regarding the food experience and perceived kindness of locals. The sample was predominantly composed of undergraduate students, with most respondents having no prior international experience and residing in Korea for more than six months.

**RESULTS**

**Pearson Correlation Analysis**

According to the results of the Pearson correlation analysis, several noteworthy relationships emerged among the main variables when international students’ adjustment experiences in South Korea were examined. First, the results indicate that pre-arrival cultural familiarity is positively associated with daily life adjustment but negatively associated with several post-arrival cultural impact factors, including food experience, perceived kindness of locals, and work and education culture.

**Table 2. Correlation Matrix between the Main Variables**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) Daily adjustment	1								
(2) Academic adjustment	.116	1							
(3) Pre-arrival Familiarity	.149*	.113	1						
(4) Ethnic Discrimination	.117	.063	-.075	1					
(5) Food experience	-.049	.061	-.194**	.065	1				
(6) Tech. Advancement	.040	.101	.022	.191*	.384**	1			
(7) Local kindness	-.060	-.039	-.177**	.174*	.429**	.346**	1		
(8) Social life	-.084	-.037	-.061	.082	.381**	.414**	.566**	1	
(9) Work/Edu. Culture	-.128*	-.008	-.157**	.022	.466**	.507**	.476**	.434**	1

Rather than indicating a measurement artifact, this pattern suggests that greater pre-arrival familiarity does not necessarily translate into more positive post-arrival evaluations. Pre-arrival familiarity in this study primarily reflects cognitively constructed images of Korean society shaped by media exposure and institutional knowledge, whereas post-arrival impact factors capture affective and relational evaluations grounded in everyday lived experience. In the South Korean

context, students with greater familiarity may have more idealized expectations influenced by global cultural representations, becoming more sensitive to discrepancies between expectations and lived experiences in everyday and relational domains, thus reflecting an expectation–reality gap. On the other hand, the experience of ethnic discrimination demonstrated positive and significant correlations with the perceived post-arrival impact on the technological advancement and kindness of locals.

## **Moderation Analysis**

### ***Main Effects (H1a, H1b, H2a, H2b)***

Models 1, 2, 13, and 14 tested the direct effects of pre-arrival cultural familiarity and ethnic discrimination on South Asian international students' adjustment. Pre-arrival cultural familiarity was found to have a positive and statistically significant effect on adjustment, supporting H1a but not H1b. In contrast, ethnic discrimination was not significantly negatively associated with adjustment, providing no support for H2a or H2b.

## **Moderating Effects of Post-arrival Cultural Impacts**

### ***Food Experience as a Moderator (H3a, H3b, H3c, H3d)***

Models 3, 8, 15, and 20 examined the moderating effect of the cultural impact of food after arrival. The interaction term between ethnic discrimination and food impact was statistically significant, indicating that post-arrival food experience buffers the relationship between ethnic discrimination experience and adjustment, supporting H3d. However, the interaction term between pre-arrival cultural familiarity and food impact was not statistically significant, thus not supporting H1a, H1b, and H3c.

### ***Technological Advancement as a Moderator (H4a, H4b, H4d, H4d)***

Models 4, 9, 16, and 21 tested the moderating effect of cultural familiarity and post-arrival technological advancement impact and the moderating effect of discrimination experience and post-arrival technological advancement impact. The interaction between pre-arrival cultural familiarity and technological advancement was not statistically significant. The interaction effect between ethnic discrimination and technological advancement was positive and significant, contrary to our hypothesis (H4c). These findings may reflect a phenomenon in which international students often struggle to use technologically advanced public facilities. This may aggravate feelings of alienation among newcomers to Korea and repeatedly remind them of linguistic and cultural barriers.

***Kindness of Locals as a Moderator (H5a, H5b, H5c, H5d)***

Models 5, 10, 17, and 22 assess whether the perceived kindness of local people attenuates the effects of cultural familiarity and discrimination on adjustment. The interaction term for pre-arrival familiarity × kindness of locals was significant for daily life adjustment, supporting H5a. Similarly, the interaction term for ethnic discrimination × kindness of locals on daily life adjustment was significant, providing support for H5b. This finding shows that the kindness of locals supports international students’ adjustment processes by acting as a buffer against negative effects. On the other hand, the moderating effect of locals’ kindness did not significantly affect academic life adjustment.

***Social Interaction as a Moderator (H6a, H6b, H6c, H6d)***

Models 6, 11, 18, and 23 tested the moderating effect of the cultural impact of social interaction on adjustment. The interaction effect between cultural familiarity and social life was significant, supporting H6a. The interaction effect between discrimination experience and social life was significant as well, supporting H6b and highlighting the importance of social support in daily life adjustment. There was no moderating effect of social life on academic life adjustment.

***Work and Education Culture as a Moderator (H7a, H7b, H7c, H7d)***

Models 7, 12, 20, and 24 examine the moderating effect of work and education culture. The interaction term for cultural familiarity × work/education culture was significant for both daily-life adjustment and academic-life adjustment, supporting H7a and H7c. Moreover, the interaction between discrimination and work/education culture was not significant, not supporting H7b and H7d. To summarize, the moderation analyses show that several dimensions of post-arrival cultural experience significantly alter the strength and direction of the relationships between pre-arrival familiarity, ethnic discrimination, and international students’ adjustment.

**Table 3. Moderation Analyses on International Students’ Daily Life Adjustment**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Cultural Familiarity	.133** (.021)		.381* (.066)	.361** (.051)	.693*** (.061)	.686*** (.057)	.448** (.060)					
Ethnic Discrimination		.112 (.061)						.290 (.200)	-.281 (.147)	.466** (.160)	.011 (.160)	.491** (.161)
Food experience			.253 (.226)					-.044 (.108)				
				.335*					.110			



Nationality	.075	-.012	.081	.082	.092	.109	.082	-.001	.027	.023	.012	.015
	(.081)	(.126)	(.081)	(.082)	(.079)	(.079)	(.080)	(.127)	(.126)	(.126)	(.128)	(.123)
Abroad	.016	.009	-.000	.014	-.019	-.014	-.021	-.034	-.019	-.018	-.034	-.039
experience	(.016)	(.024)	(.016)	(.016)	(.016)	(.016)	(.016)	(.025)	(.024)	(.024)	(.025)	(.024)

Note. †p<0.1, \*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.05, \*\*\*p<0.01

**Table 4. Moderation Analyses of International Students’ Academic Life Adjustment**

	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
Cultural Familiarity	.094		.448**	.202	.082	.178	.483**					
	(.019)		(.059)	(.045)	(.056)	(.053)	(.054)					
Ethnic Discrimination		.045						.082	.052	.008	-.009	.393
		(.051)						(.168)	(.124)	(.137)	(.135)	(.136)
Food experience			.442**					.020				
			(.201)					(.091)				
Advanced technology				.265					.145			
				(.177)					(.080)			
Local kindness					-.002					.013		
					(.184)					(.082)		
Social life						.071					.018	
						(.181)					(.081)	
Work/Edu Culture							.477**					.071
							(.199)					(.088)
Familiarity × Food Experience			-.438†									
			(.019)									
Familiarity × Tech. Advancement				-.193								
				(.016)								
Familiarity × Local Kindness					.026							
					(.018)							
Familiarity × Social Life						-.144						
						(.017)						
Familiarity × Work/Edu Culture							-.542*					
							(.018)					
Discrimination × Food Experience								-.041				
								(.052)				
Discrimination × Tech. Advancement									.039			
									(.045)			
										.028		



between familiarity, discrimination, and adjustment. Dimensions associated with relatedness—particularly the kindness of locals and social interaction—played a strong buffering role in daily life adjustment. These findings support SIT’s argument that identity threat can be reduced when intergroup boundaries are softened through positive interpersonal contact. They also align with SDT’s proposition that the fulfillment of relatedness strengthens resilience in challenging environments.

Work and education culture had moderating effects on both daily and academic adjustment in relation to pre-arrival familiarity, highlighting the importance of autonomy-supportive academic environments. In contrast, technological advancement produced a counterintuitive effect: while it facilitated academic functioning, it intensified the negative association between discrimination and daily life adjustment. This suggests that in highly digitalized contexts, technological systems may simultaneously serve as institutional enablers and psychological stressors, particularly when language barriers and social exclusion cooccur. Food experience showed a limited but meaningful buffering role, indicating that basic daily living stability can mitigate strain adjustment under certain conditions.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Theoretically, the findings suggest that adjustment cannot be understood solely through additive models of resources and stressors. Instead, adjustment emerges from the interaction between identity-based positioning and the extent to which post-arrival environments enable or frustrate psychological needs. The counterintuitive moderating role of technological advancement is particularly instructive in this regard. While advanced digital systems enhance functional competence in academic settings, they may simultaneously amplify daily life stress under conditions of discrimination, language barriers, and social exclusion. These findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between institutional efficiency and subjective accessibility and suggest that competence-supportive structures may function differently depending on students’ social positioning within the host society.

A comparative perspective clarifies why South Asian students may face distinct adjustment challenges in South Korea relative to other international student groups. Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), adjustment can be understood as shaped not only by individual resources but also by perceived intergroup distance, visibility, and host-society categorization practices.

Chinese students, for example, often report relatively smooth adjustment in South Korea, particularly in domains such as food experience, technological systems, and everyday social interaction. Prior research suggests that perceived cultural proximity, phenotypical similarity, and shared Confucian-influenced norms reduce social distance and lower the likelihood of immediate out-group categorization (Lee & Rice, 2007; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). In addition,

originating from similarly digitalized societies may facilitate competence-related adjustment in navigating Korea's advanced technological infrastructure.

Southeast Asian students tend to occupy an intermediate position. While they are more culturally and phenotypically distinct from Koreans are Chinese students, shared regional experiences may ease certain aspects of daily life adjustment relative to more distant groups (Suh et al., 2019). Nevertheless, persistent perceptions of foreignness and limited social inclusion expose them to subtle forms of exclusion, resulting in partial rather than full integration.

Students from Western countries often report relatively high levels of comfort and adjustment in both daily and academic life despite substantial cultural distance. This pattern has been attributed to Korea's asymmetric global cultural hierarchy, in which Western nationals—particularly from North America and Europe—are associated with prestige and symbolic capital (Lee et al., 2016). As a result, Western students may receive more hospitable and autonomy-supportive treatment from host nationals, mitigating identity threat through mechanisms distinct from those available to Asian students.

In contrast, South Asian students appear to face greater structural and symbolic barriers to adjustment. They are more likely to be visibly categorized as out-group members because of racial, religious, and cultural differences, heightening identity threat and restricting access to informal social support. Prior research has documented compounded challenges related to dietary restrictions, religious practices, and stereotypes associated with economic underdevelopment (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Khatiwada et al., 2021). Moreover, for students from less digitally saturated environments—such as Nepal or Bangladesh—Korea's advanced technological systems may paradoxically intensify adjustment difficulties, transforming competence-related demands into additional sources of stress.

Taken together, these comparisons suggest that adjustment in South Korea is strongly conditioned by how international students are positioned within perceived local group boundaries. From a social identity theory perspective, South Asian students experience a relatively wide perceived intergroup distance and limited symbolic protection from positive host-society stereotypes, helping explain why post-arrival cultural impact factors, particularly those related to relatedness and autonomy, play a disproportionately critical role in shaping their adjustment outcomes. From a Bourdieusian perspective, these patterns reflect a misalignment between South Asian students' habitus and the dominant norms of Korean academic and social fields, resulting in symbolic exclusion despite formal institutional inclusion (Bourdieu, 1987).

Beyond intergroup distance, the adjustment experiences of South Asian students can be further understood through Iris Marion Young's (1990, 2011) framework of structural oppression. Young conceptualizes oppression as enduring social processes that systematically disadvantage particular groups through marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. Marginalization is evident in restricted opportunities for meaningful social participation, even when formal institutional access is granted. Powerlessness emerges through asymmetric interactional norms, whereby South Asian students

are expected to adapt to dominant expectations while having limited influence over institutional or interpersonal norms, undermining respectability and psychological safety (Young, 2011). Most saliently, cultural imperialism operates through the normalization of dominant Korean cultural practices as universal standards, rendering South Asian cultural, religious, and dietary norms invisible or deviant. In this context, post-arrival cultural impact factors are embedded within unequal cultural hierarchies that shape whose ways of living are recognized as legitimate.

The Korean context provides a distinctive setting in which adjustment processes unfold under conditions of strong ethnic homogeneity, hierarchical academic norms, and advanced digital infrastructure. Unlike host societies, where multicultural accommodations are institutionally embedded, Korean universities often combine formal openness with informal boundary maintenance. Within this context, international students' adjustment is shaped not only by individual preparedness but also by how institutional practices, everyday interactions, and digital systems intersect with perceived group boundaries. By focusing on South Asian students, who occupy a particularly marginalized position within these hierarchies, this study illuminates how post-arrival cultural experiences operate as structurally conditioned moderators rather than as neutral environmental factors.

Overall, these perspectives highlight how adjustment is shaped not only by individual preparation or motivation but also by the interaction of identity positioning, psychological need fulfillment, and structurally embedded forms of exclusion. This integrated view helps explain why international South Asian students face distinctive adjustment challenges in the Korean context.

### **Policy Implications**

Collectively, the findings underscore that adjustment is not determined solely by individual preparation or experiences of discrimination but by the interplay between identity positioning and post-arrival environmental support. Relatedness- and autonomy-enhancing contexts appear especially critical in sustaining stable adjustment. These results extend SIT and SDT by demonstrating how identity threat and psychological need satisfaction operate dynamically within international higher education settings.

From a practical perspective, universities in South Korea should prioritize inclusive institutional climates that foster interpersonal warmth, meaningful social interaction, and autonomy-supportive academic practices. Digital accessibility, multilingual systems, and targeted technological orientation programs are particularly important in highly digitalized environments. Strengthening this structural and relational support may reduce social distance, alleviate adjustment stress, and promote long-term academic persistence among international students.

Beyond general support services, the findings point to the need for more targeted institutional interventions that address the psychological, cultural, and systemic sources of adjustment difficulty faced by international students from

culturally distant backgrounds. For students such as those from South Asia, cultural and racial differences—combined with unfamiliar technological systems—may intensify feelings of alienation rather than facilitate integration. Highly institutionalized digital systems can function as additional barriers rather than support. Although many university services provide information in Korean and English, English translations are often incomplete, inconsistent, or insufficiently detailed, limiting their practical usability. As a result, technologically advanced systems may inadvertently reinforce dependency, frustration, and feelings of marginalization among students who are unfamiliar with these infrastructures. This highlights the need for dedicated technical support mechanisms that actively assist international students who are not familiar with the system in navigating digital and administrative systems.

In this context, Korean universities should more actively institutionalize professional counseling and support systems specifically tailored to international students. University counselors and international student advisors can play a critical role in supporting psychological stability and guiding students' adaptation to highly digitalized academic and administrative environments rather than in the context of baseline technological competence.

In addition, structured peer-linkage programs within departments and colleges can provide effective informal support. Many Korean universities already operate senior–junior mentoring systems, which could be more intentionally leveraged for international students. Connecting newly arrived international students with senior students, both domestic and international, can facilitate access to social groups, academic norms, and everyday coping strategies. Such programs are particularly valuable when senior students actively introduce newcomers to existing student communities, thereby reducing social isolation and fostering a sense of belonging.

Finally, the institutional accommodation of cultural and religious diversity requires greater attention. While universities in Europe and North America increasingly provide vegan, halal, and culturally inclusive dining options, the number of Korean universities remains limited in this regard. South Asian students represent diverse religious backgrounds, including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity, each associated with distinct dietary practices. Expanding culturally inclusive food options on campuses is not merely a matter of convenience but also a structural intervention that supports daily life stability and psychological well-being. More broadly, such system-level adjustments signal institutional recognition and respect, which are essential for sustainable adjustment in increasingly internationalized higher education settings.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-report data, which restrict causal inference. The sample is heavily concentrated at a single institution (Kyungsung University) and is predominantly composed of Nepalese students, limiting its generalizability to other universities or South Asian subgroups in South Korea. Institutional

characteristics and local campus climate may have shaped the observed relationships. Future research should employ multi-institutional samples and more diverse national representations to strengthen external validity.

With respect to missing data, one potential source of item nonresponse concerns measures of post-arrival food experience. Given that the majority of respondents were from Nepal and Bangladesh, contexts in which Hindu and Islamic dietary restrictions are prevalent, some students may have experienced moral or religious discomfort when evaluating Korean food practices that heavily rely on beef- or pork-based dishes. Even when students consumed Korean food in practice, acknowledging positive evaluations may have conflicted with ethical or religious norms, potentially leading to item nonresponse. This culturally specific sensitivity may partially account for the relatively higher level of missingness observed for this variable.

Likewise, item nonresponses to adjustment measures may reflect the evaluative and self-referential nature of these items. Prior survey research has shown that questions requiring self-assessment are more likely to elicit nonresponse, particularly when they are perceived as reflecting personal success or failure (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000). Moreover, acculturation research conceptualizes adjustment as an ongoing process, which may further contribute to response hesitation in providing definitive evaluations (Berry, 1997).

In addition, the national composition of the sample may have shaped the interpretation of certain post-arrival experiences. The majority of the respondents were Nepalese, a group that tends to be strongly family oriented and religious; these characteristics are broadly shared across South Asian societies but expressed with varying intensity across countries. These cultural orientations may influence how adjustment, social interaction, and daily life experiences are perceived and evaluated.

Moreover, compared with other South Asian groups, some aspects of everyday life in South Korea—such as rice-based diets and soup- or stew-centered meals—may be relatively familiar to Nepalese students. This cultural overlap may attenuate perceived difficulty in food-related adjustment and partially explain the relatively limited or selective effects observed for food experience as a post-arrival cultural impact factor. Consequently, the buffering role of food experience identified in this study may not be generalizable to South Asian students from contexts with more divergent dietary practices.

Relatedly, the strong family- and community-oriented background of Nepalese students may amplify the importance of relatedness-based post-arrival factors, such as the kindness of locals and social interaction, in shaping adjustment outcomes. While these findings underscore the central role of social connectedness, they may overstate the relative weight of relational mechanisms relative to autonomy- or competence-based factors among South Asian students from less collectivistic backgrounds.

Taken together, the dominance of Nepalese and Bangladeshi respondents suggests that some post-arrival cultural impact effects identified in this study may reflect subgroup-specific patterns rather than universal dynamics among all South Asian international students. Future research should disaggregate South Asian

subgroups and examine how variations in religious practices, family orientation, and everyday cultural familiarity condition the relationship between post-arrival experiences and adjustment. In addition, the present study did not include several potentially relevant control variables, such as academic major and sources of financial support. Prior research suggests that these factors may influence adjustment outcomes. Their omission may introduce residual confounding. Future studies should incorporate these variables for a more comprehensive analysis.

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## APPENDIX

The survey questionnaire and codebook used in this study are available as supplementary materials online.

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