



How Interethnic Networks Shaped Foreign Residents' Identity Threat and Settlement Quality during COVID-19 in South Korea: The Moderating Role of Perceived Interethnic Acceptance*

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In host societies where ethnic boundaries are maintained and periodically reactivated through crisis events, foreign residents occupy a structurally vulnerable position that renders their perceptions of identity and settlement quality contingent on the climate for interethnic communication. Drawing on a survey of foreign residents (N = 750) in Busan, South Korea, conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study examines how host national network embeddedness (HNNE) shapes perceived settlement quality (PSQ) through perceived identity threat (PIT) and whether perceived interethnic acceptance (PIA) moderates this process. Integrating cross-cultural adaptation theory, social identity theory, and communication accommodation theory, a moderated mediation model (PROCESS Model 59) is proposed and tested. Results reveal that HNNE positively predicts PIT, counterintuitively, indicating that interethnic networks with Korean nationals intensified identity threat under hostile interethnic conditions during the pandemic; PIT in turn significantly diminished PSQ. PIA moderates both pathways, functioning most powerfully as a buffer against the conversion of identity threat into settlement dissatisfaction. The index of moderated mediation further suggests that PIA regulates the pathway from HNNE to PSQ via PIT, providing additional evidence of the interethnic communicative climate as a structural condition. Implications are discussed regarding ethnic identity boundaries and city-level interventions for social integration.

Keywords Interethnic Networks, Identity Threat, Settlement Quality, Interethnic Acceptance, Foreign Residents

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I. Introduction

Evidence shows that public crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic, do not affect all residents equally (Kenntemich et al., 2023). In South Korea (Korea hereafter), as in many other countries, foreign residents were found in a structurally unstable situation during the pandemic: they were under more public scrutiny, even racialized as disease carriers in media discourse and everyday life (Noh and Sim, 2026; Lee et al., 2021). For the foreign residents living in Korea at the onset of COVID-19, the crisis represented not merely a public health emergency, but a moment of acute identity self-evaluation, which constitutes a juncture at which the boundary between identities of insider vs. outsider was redrawn sharply along ethnic and national lines (Yu, 2023; Dionne and Turkmen, 2020; Seol and Skrentny, 2009). In this concern, the current study investigates how foreign residents in Busan, the second-largest city in Korea, navigated the intersection of interpersonal communication, ethnic identity, and local life during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on identity threat as a possible mediator to bridge interethnic networks and settlement quality. Moreover, far from being uniform, this mechanism could be moderated by the broader communicative climate, in which foreign residents evaluate their interactions with the local population. Therefore, the moderation by interethnic acceptance is proposed, as a climate that may condition the key theorized relationships.

II. Literature Review

1. Ethnic Boundaries in Korea during the Pandemic

To understand the influence of interethnic networks on foreign residents,

a starting point is to situate individual psychological processes within the macro-structural conditions that govern intergroup relations in a host society. In Korea, such conditions are shaped by a historically entrenched ethnic boundary that constructs Korean national identity in explicitly ethnocultural terms, rendering the “foreigner” category a structurally subordinate position, not simply a transitional status (Seol and Skrentny, 2009). According to Wimmer (2008), ethnic boundaries are not natural expressions of cultural difference but actively produced and maintained through everyday interactions and discursive events. The COVID-19 pandemic constituted a discursive event, reactivating and sharpening the boundary between Korean nationals and foreign residents by associating foreignness with contagion and threat in public discourse (Noh and Sim, 2026; Lee et al., 2021). It is within this context that the communicative climate for interethnic contact acquires its structural significance. The climate perceived by foreign residents is not merely an aggregation of individual attitudes but a subjective reflection of ethnic boundaries, linking the macro-structural layer to the communication accommodation dynamics theorized by Giles et al. (1991).

Furthermore, the racialization of foreignness in Korea shapes the identity-relevant consequences of foreigners' contact with Korean nationals. Following the conceptualization of racialization by Murji and Solomos (2005), group differences could be naturalized into hierarchical social positions during intergroup interactions. Likewise, Bonilla-Silva's (1997) structural interpretation of racism supports that interethnic contact in an ethnically stratified society exposes foreign residents to a racializing mechanism marking their outsider status. Such structural dynamics provide a critical complement to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) on identity threat: identity threat is not simply a psychological response to interpersonal conflicts, but an identity-based sense of racialized boundary encounters. Meanwhile, under Castles' (2010) framework of structural vulnerability, foreign residents' evaluations

of settlement quality are situated within institutional arrangements of the receiving society. Therefore, satisfaction with labor conditions, healthcare, and the broader living environment reflects not only individual experience, but the perceived degree to which the host society includes or excludes foreign residents from social participation. This aspect of settlement quality connects to Kim's (2001) cross-cultural adaptation theory, as various life domains assume not only specific contexts for foreign residents to network with host nationals, but also the downstream objects for evaluation following those interethnic contacts.

2. Theoretical Frameworks on Migrants' Identities and Networks

Probing the structural context of ethnic boundaries in Korea, the current study sits at the intersection of at least three bodies of scholarship, rarely brought together into the discourse on migrants' identities and networks so far. To begin with, research on immigrant social networks and cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001) positions host national networks as the primary communicative pathway through which migrants gain access to cultural learning, social support, and a reconfigured sense of self. Second, social identity theory (SIT) by Tajfel and Turner (1986) provides a conceptual architecture for understanding how perceived intergroup relations shape the salience of minority identity. Furthermore, communication accommodation theory (Giles, 1973; Giles et al., 1991), or CAT hereafter, offers a framework for analyzing how perceptions of host openness to intergroup communication amplify or attenuate the identity-relevant consequences of interethnic contact.

Integrating the three frameworks, this study aims to examine a moderated mediation model in which host national network embeddedness (HNNE) influences perceived settlement quality (PSQ) through the mediating role of perceived identity threat (PIT), with perceived interethnic acceptance (PIA)

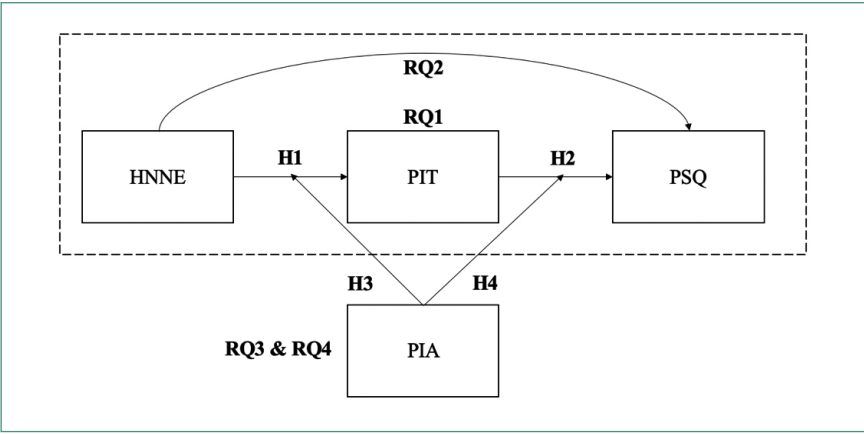


Figure 1 Conceptual Model, RQ3 and RQ4 are placed next to PIA, as two questions regarding the moderating effects of PIA on the structure delineated by the dotted line.

moderating these pathways, especially during hard times like COVID-19. Figure 1 provides a visualization of these variables in the proposed model, noting the hypotheses and research questions raised later.

3. Host National Network Embeddedness and Identity Threat

A line of research has documented the well-being benefits of social integration for immigrants and foreign residents. Cross-cultural adaptation theory (Kim, 2001) posits that participation in host national networks is the primary communicative mechanism through which migrants acquire cultural knowledge, build social capital, and gradually reconstruct a sense of belonging in the receiving society. Empirical studies across multiple contexts have broadly supported this claim, linking greater embeddedness within host national networks to reduced acculturative stress, improved mental health, and higher life satisfaction (Berry et al., 2006; Ward and Kennedy, 1999). Yet, the relationship between host national networks and identity-relevant psychological outcomes is considerably more complex than this.

The contact theory (Allport, 1954) specifies that positive intergroup contact requires conditions of equal status, cooperative goals, institutional support, and personal acquaintance. However, these conditions are rarely met in the everyday lives of foreign residents, who have long occupied structurally subordinate positions in the labor market and public sphere (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). When such conditions are absent, intergroup contact may function as not a resource but a site of exposure to threat: under conditions of inequality, repeated interethnic encounters, even for social support, could increase opportunities for identity-marking interactions, during which minority group members are reminded of their outsider status (Shelton and Richeson, 2005). Such mechanisms were particularly salient in pandemic contexts, as racialized narratives blamed foreigners and heightened the salience of ethnic boundaries (Yu, 2023; Lee et al., 2021), rendering foreigners' everyday contact with host nationals a potential trigger for perceived identity threat, instead of a buffer against it. In this concern, Hypothesis 1 (H1) was proposed, somewhat counterintuitively.

H1: Host national network embeddedness (HNNE) is positively associated with perceived identity threat (PIT).

4. Identity Threat and Settlement Quality

SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) posits that individuals derive a meaningful portion of their self-concept from membership in social groups, and that threats to such group memberships produce negative psychological consequences. For foreign residents, the experience of being marked as an outsider constitutes a membership challenge. This is what Major and O'Brien (2005) theorize as identity threat, arising from stigmatized social positions. When the foreigner identity becomes salient, it displaces other

available self-definitions and redirects cognitive and emotional resources toward identity management or threat appraisal, rather than functional engagement with the host society (Branscombe et al., 1999). Research on acculturative stress consistently finds that perceived discrimination and identity marginalization are among the strongest predictors of reduced life satisfaction and diminished host-society evaluation among immigrants (Pascoe and Smart Richman, 2009; Schmitt et al., 2014). In settlement contexts, perceptions of identity threat undermine the psychological conditions necessary for place attachment and functional satisfaction with local services, infrastructure, and social environment (Lewicka, 2011). Meanwhile, in predicting settlement quality, migrants' perceived identity threat could bridge the host national networks with the satisfaction outcome. Yet, little evidence can be found surrounding such indirect effects to specify any hypothesis, especially during a public crisis. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 (H2) and Research Question 1 (RQ1) were proposed.

H2: Perceived identity threat (PIT) is negatively associated with perceived settlement quality (PSQ).

RQ1: (RQ1a) Does PIT mediate the relationship between HNNE and PSQ? (RQ1b) If so, how does it work?

Meanwhile, given prior literature's equivocal findings on the direct effects of social integration or engagement on host-society satisfaction (Ward and Kennedy, 1999; Appau et al., 2019), Research Question 2 (RQ2) was posed.

RQ2: (RQ2a) Does HNNE directly predict PSQ? (RQ2b) If so, how does it work?

5. The Moderating Role of Perceived Interethnic Acceptance

Existing research has established robust associations between social

network and immigrant well-being (Berry et al., 2006; Ward and Kennedy, 1999), as well as between perceived discrimination and psychological distress (Pascoe and Smart Richman, 2009). However, little attention has been paid to the communicative conditions under which interpersonal ties with host nationals attenuate or intensify identity threat. To address this, CAT (Giles, 1973; Giles et al., 1991) provides a basis for understanding why the identity-relevant consequences of host national contacts are contingent on the communicative climate. CAT proposes that people continuously evaluate whether their communication partners are converging toward or diverging from their communicative norms, and that perceived non-accommodation (i.e., signals of unwillingness to engage across group boundaries) activates intergroup categorization and reinforces social boundaries (Giles, 1973; Giles et al., 1991). For foreign residents, perceptions of host openness to interethnic communication constitute a macro-level accommodation signal, contextualizing individual encounters with Korean nationals. When the climate is perceived as accepting, interactions with Korean residents carry integrative potential; on the other hand, when the climate is perceived as closed or even hostile, the same interactions are reframed through a lens of intergroup vigilance, amplifying identity threat (Shelton and Richeson, 2005).

This line of reasoning implies a moderating effect by perceived interethnic acceptance (PIA) at two stages of the hypothetical mediation chain. First, the extent to which HNNE translates into PIT should depend on PIA: under conditions of high perceived acceptance, Korean social ties retain their protective and integrative function, suppressing the threat-inducing dimension of contact; under conditions of low perceived acceptance, however, the same ties serve as sites for threat-inducing experiences. Second, even when identity threat is already elevated, the extent to which it damages settlement quality may be buffered by perceived interethnic acceptance, which provides a sense of social legitimacy preventing identity

threat from cascading into dissatisfaction with the host society (Berry et al., 2006). Overall, if the mediation chain exists, it is plausible to assume that PIA may moderate the indirect effect as well; yet little evidence can be found for the specification of any hypothesis on this. Accordingly, Hypotheses 3 and 4 (H3-4) were raised, along with Research Question 3 (RQ3) that could add to RQ1 and RQ2.

H3: PIA moderates the relationship between HNNE and PIT, such that the positive association between HNNE and PIT is attenuated under conditions of higher PIA.

H4: PIA moderates the relationship between PIT and PSQ, such that the negative association between PIT and PSQ is attenuated under conditions of higher PIA.

RQ3: (RQ3a) Does PIA moderate the indirect effect of HNNE on PSQ via PIT, if any (addressed in RQ1), demonstrating a moderated mediation? (RQ3b) Does PIA moderate the direct effect of HNNE on PSQ, if any (addressed in RQ2)?

While the CAT-derived moderation logic applies to each pathway in the mediation chain, empirical evidence on the relative strength of each moderating effect remains limited. Thus, Research Question 4 (RQ4) was further asked.

RQ4: At which stage of the hypothesized mediation chain does PIA exert a stronger moderating influence?

Taken together, this study proposes a moderated mediation model in which HNNE positively predicts PIT (H1), which in turn negatively predicts PSQ (H2). The mediating role of PIT is further addressed in RQ1. Whether HNNE directly predicts PSQ is examined as another open question (RQ2). PIA is proposed to moderate both the HNNE-PIT (H3) and PIT-PSQ pathways

(H4). Whether PIA moderates the direct or indirect effect of HNNE on PSQ is examined in RQ3. The relative strength of moderating influences across the HNNE-PIT and PIT-PSQ pathways is addressed in RQ4.

III. Methods

1. Data Description and Background

The current study used a large-scale survey of foreign residents ($N = 750$) in Busan, during June 4th to July 3rd, 2020, by Busan Women and Family Development Institute (Kim, 2020). The data collection was conducted under the provisions of the Statistics Act of the Republic of Korea (Article 33), which governs the protection of respondent confidentiality in government-commissioned surveys. Formal IRB review was not required for the secondary analysis of this anonymized dataset, which has been made publicly available on Korea Social Science Data Archive (KOSSDA) since October 27th, 2025.

This dataset is notable for its timing that captured experiences at the height of COVID-19, and its composition that encompassed foreign residents across a wide range of nationalities, visa categories, and lengths of stay (Kim, 2020). As the second-largest metropolitan area with a growing foreign population in Korea, Busan represents a type of receiving context, which has been largely overlooked in Korean migration research, since this body of literature has focused on Seoul or the capital area (Shafray and Kim, 2017; Cho, 2022). Outside the capital city, migrants living in other major cities like Busan usually lack access to dense co-ethnic communities for social support (Ornelas and Perreira, 2011), making their interethnic networks with Korean nationals consequential for everyday life, especially during hard

times in need of support. The extreme circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic enabled a natural experiment in identity threat, since typical identity management strategies during normal times were disrupted by the pandemic (Cover, 2021). The identity of being a “foreigner” was forced into the foreground, offering rare situational validity for the hypotheses related to identity threat. Thus, respondents to this survey, on the life status and supporting during COVID-19 (Kim, 2020), should be considered suitable as the subjects for the current study. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the sample.

Notably, the sample was about 63% female, likely reflecting the composition of foreign residents in Busan, as a population that includes a substantial proportion of marriage migrants, dominated by women (Seol and Skrentny, 2009; Ko and Kim, 2024). Besides, gender showed no significant association with either focal construct (i.e., PIT and PSQ) in preliminary analyses. This imbalance is not expected to systematically bias the findings.

2. Measures

This section details the operationalizations of each key variable, along with the theoretical basis for relevant adaptations from the survey. All survey items were originally administered in Korean; English translations are provided for reporting.

1) Independent variable

Operationalized as a formative index (Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001) of Korean contacts for multidimensional social supports, host national network embeddedness (HNNE) draws its theoretical foundation from the core concepts of cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001). Kim (2001) distinguishes between the host network and the co-ethnic network, arguing that the

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics ($N = 750$)

	Category	n	%
Age ($M = 2.821$, $SD = 0.880$)	1) aged 10~19	2	0.27
	2) aged 20~29	312	41.60
	3) aged 30~39	296	39.47
	4) aged 40~49	107	14.27
	5) aged 50~59	24	3.20
	6) aged 60 or above	9	1.20
Gender	1) Male	275	36.67
	2) Female	475	63.33
Stay ($M = 2.205$, $SD = 0.767$)	1) below 2 years	159	21.20
	2) 2~5 years	278	37.07
	3) above 5 years	313	41.73
Education ($M = 4.011$, $SD = 1.346$)	1) Primary school	12	1.60
	2) Middle school	73	9.73
	3) High school	266	35.47
	4) Junior college	61	8.13
	5) University	220	29.33
	6) Graduate school	118	15.73
Language ($M = 2.016$, $SD = 0.768$)	1) Clumsy	215	28.67
	2) Normal	308	41.07
	3) Proficient	227	30.27
Income ($M = 2.988$, $SD = 1.858$)	1) below 500,000 ₩	269	35.87
	2) 500,000~1,000,000 ₩	74	9.87
	3) 1,000,000~1,500,000 ₩	104	13.87
	4) 1,500,000~2,000,000 ₩	101	13.47
	5) 2,000,000~2,500,000 ₩	123	16.40
	6) 2,500,000~3,000,000 ₩	60	8.00
	7) above 3,000,000 ₩	19	2.53
Key Measures	$M (SD)$		
HNNE ^a	0.516 (1.059)		
PIT ^b	3.109 (1.055)		

Table 1 (continued)

	Category	<i>n</i>	%
PIA ^c		3.162 (0.801)	
PSQ ^d		3.493 (0.681)	

Note: For Stay, length of stay in Busan was reclassified based on input values (Kim, 2020).

For Education, the highest level of schooling completed was self-reported.

For Language, Korean language proficiency was coded based on self-rated skill dimensions (Kim, 2020).

For Income, monthly income was self-reported; ₩ = Korean Won.

^a Host National Network Embeddedness. Mean of input values for 7 items.

^b Perceived Identity Threat. Mean of 2 items. 1 = “Not at all” to 5 = “Very much”.

^c Perceived Interethnic Acceptance. Mean of 3 items. 1 to 5 for each semantic differential item.

^d Perceived Settlement Quality. Mean of 8 items. 1 = “Not at all” to 5 = “Very much”.

former serves as the primary channel for cultural adaptation, which directly influences the pace and direction of identity reconstruction. Reflecting this concern, the present study relied on seven items to measure the degree of embeddedness within Korean networks for social support among foreign residents in Busan. One question was raised — “Is there anyone you can talk to or turn to for help in the following situations?” — preceding seven items: “1) Someone you turn to for advice when you or your family are facing difficulties,” “2) Someone to discuss job-related matters,” “3) Someone to discuss children’s education,” “4) Someone who shares leisure or hobby activities,” “5) If you are feeling unwell and need help,” “6) If you suddenly need to borrow a large sum of money,” and “7) If you are feeling down or depressed and need someone to talk to.” Under the category of Korean contact, participants were first asked to indicate whether they have such contacts for each scenario, by selecting “Yes” or “None”; in cases of “Yes”, they were asked to enter a specific number. Any missing values generated in this process were replaced with zeros during preprocessing,

to reflect the substantive absence of Korean networks under a given functional domain rather than conventional missing data. Responses to the seven items were averaged to generate the HNNE index ($M = 0.516$, $SD = 1.059$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .909$).¹

This measurement captured the scale of interethnic networks across multiple scenarios, not merely the presence or absence of certain connections. Research on social support networks by Wellman and Wortley (1990) indicates that multidimensional supports from social networks, including instrumental, emotional, and companionship support, collectively constitute the holistic concept of network embeddedness. In this sense, the seven scenarios for measuring HNNE are not homogeneous. They measured three distinct types of social support: instrumental support (i.e., for work, education, and money-borrowing), emotional support (i.e., for difficulties and depressions), and companionship support (i.e., for leisure and health). By aggregating such social supports across dimensions into a composite indicator, the HNNE index represents the degree of interethnic network embeddedness in the host society better than a single-scenario measure does. These life scenarios collectively reflect the general tendency to establish connections with Korean residents for support. The aggregation can be therefore justified, with bootstrapping alleviating normality concerns during analysis.² Besides,

¹ For aggregation, there is a conceptual difference between averaging and summing such data. While the sum represents the total size of Korean networks across the seven domains, the mean represents the average number of Korean contacts per scenario. For the current study, although taking the simple arithmetic mean of the seven scenarios risks implying that each scenario contributes equally to interethnic networks, using the averaged data for HNNE is preferable, as it controls for the influence of the domain number. If a respondent selects none for certain scenarios and skips them (with the null later converted into zero), the sum would be artificially lowered by zeros, whereas the mean already includes these zero-valued domains in the denominator, reflecting the average embeddedness across the seven scenarios.

² As a formative index, the constituent dimensions of HNNE are not required to co-vary as interchangeable indicators of a single latent trait but jointly define the breadth of this

Cronbach's α (.909) provides evidence for internal consistency.

2) Mediator

Perceived identity threat (PIT) is measured by two items. It captures the extent to which foreign residents perceive their group identity to be threatened in the social environment since the onset of COVID-19. After asking "How do you feel about the following questions in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?" two dimensions were listed: (1) a sense of identity threat at the individual level (i.e., "I feel like a stranger"), and (2) a sense of identity threat at the environmental level (i.e., "societal discrimination and prejudice against foreigners are intensifying"). Responses to both items were based on a 5-point scale (1 = "Not at all", 5 = "Very much"), then averaged for the PIT index, with the higher score indicating the stronger perceived identity threat ($M = 3.109$, $SD = 1.055$, $r = .628$, $p < .01$). This measurement corresponds to Major and O'Brien's (2005) Identity Threat Model of Stigma, which distinguishes between the sense of self-level identity marginalization and the environment-level

construct (Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001), thus not presumed to follow a normal distribution. This accounts for the pronounced positive skewness observed in HNNE (skewness = 4.09, kurtosis = 22.89), confirmed by Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests (both p s < .001), which reflects the reality that most foreign residents in the sample maintained few Korean contacts across the seven scenarios ($M = 0.52$, $SD = 1.06$). This distributional pattern itself could be substantively informative: far from being the norm, host national networks remain the exception among foreign residents in Busan. Besides, as PROCESS employs OLS regression, normality assumptions apply to model residuals instead of predictors; with $N = 750$ and bootstrap-derived confidence intervals, the skewed distribution of HNNE should not severely threaten the validity of inferential results. A sensitivity analysis was later conducted, using a square-root-transformed version of HNNE to assess the robustness of key findings: the direction and significance of all focal paths were fully consistent with those reported in the main analysis; both the HNNE-PIT association ($\beta = .719$, $p = .003$) and the interaction effect of HNNE and PIA on PIT ($\beta = -.260$, $p < .001$) emerged more robustly compared to the main analysis results ($\beta = .247$, $p = .048$; $\beta = -.086$, $p = .019$), confirming that the skewed distribution of HNNE does not affect the core conclusions of this study. Full sensitivity analysis results are available upon reasonable request.

perception of group devaluation. The two items represent two expressive dimensions of the same identity threat construct, conceptually supporting the aggregation.

3) Moderator

Perceived interethnic acceptance (PIA) is rooted in CAT (Giles, 1973): when foreigners perceive local people's attitudes as closed or exclusionary, their motivation for communicative accommodation decreases, thereby accelerating the solidification of identity boundaries. For the measurement of such communicative climate, one option is the Perceived Societal Acceptance subscale from the International Comparative Study of Ethnocultural Youth (ICSEY) project (Berry et al., 2006), which measures minorities' perceptions of the majority group's acceptance using a semantic differential format. Consistent with this approach, the three items used to measure PIA in the current study were also semantic differential scales, measuring foreign residents' evaluation of Korean residents' attitudes toward foreign residents by asking "What do you think of the way residents in Busan treat foreign residents?" with three items: "1) Negative-Neutral-Positive," "2) Closed-Neutral-Open," and "3) Discriminatory-Neutral-Nondiscriminatory." Responses to these items were based on a 5-point scale (for each semantic option, 1 = the left end, 5 = the right end), then averaged for the PIA index, with the higher score indicating the higher perceived interethnic acceptance ($M = 3.162$, $SD = 0.801$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .908$)

4) Dependent Variable

Perceived settlement quality (PSQ) draws on place attachment theory (Low and Altman, 1992): the level of satisfaction with settlement quality reflects whether foreign residents view Busan as a suitable place to live, and whether they have formed a sense of place identity. The measurement tool

for PSQ was adapted from the established Abbreviated Place Attachment Scale (APAS) by Boley and colleagues (2021), specifically designed for immigrants. The following items were used: “Are you satisfied with the following aspects of life in Busan? 1) Busan’s policies for supporting foreign residents; 2) the labor environment in Busan; 3) the residential environment in Busan; 4) the cultural environment in Busan; 5) the transportation environment in Busan; 6) the healthcare environment in Busan; 7) the educational environment in Busan; 8) the overall living environment in Busan.” Responses to the eight items were based on a 5-point scale (1 = “Not at all”, 5 = “Very much”), then averaged for the PSQ index, with the higher score indicating the higher perceived settlement quality ($M = 3.493$, $SD = 0.681$, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .890$).

Notably, the WHOQOL-BREF scale by WHO (2004) operationalizes quality of life as a comprehensive assessment of satisfaction across multiple life domains, covering four major areas: physical, psychological, social relationships, and environment. The eight items used for measuring PSQ in this study cover functional domains such as work, housing, culture, healthcare, and education, corresponding to the environment domain in the WHOQOL-BREF, namely an individual’s accessibility and satisfaction regarding various resources in their social environment. In essence, PSQ assesses foreign residents’ satisfaction with settlement services and functional life in Busan, beyond simply subjective experiences of their QOL (i.e., quality of life). This also aligns with the well-established tradition of measuring sociocultural adaptation in earlier immigration literature (Ward and Kennedy, 1999). Furthermore, among the eight items, while the remainder measures satisfaction in seven functional life domains that can also be evaluated by the general public, the first item measures satisfaction with policies specifically targeting foreigners, which represents a unique experiential dimension exclusive to foreign residents and enhances the comprehensiveness

Table 2 Pearson Correlations of All Variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	HNNE	PIA	PIT	PSQ	Age	Gender	Stay	Education
HNNE	0.516	1.059	1							
PIA	3.162	0.801	-0.032	1						
PIT	3.109	1.055	-0.010	-0.276***	1					
PSQ	3.493	0.681	0.017	0.333***	-0.180***	1				
Age	2.821	0.880	0.035	-0.176***	0.111**	-0.041	1			
Gender	1.633	0.482	0.105**	0.018	-0.048	0.078*	0.015	1		
Stay	2.205	0.767	0.125***	-0.126***	0.118**	-0.058	0.446***	0.135***	1	
Education	4.011	1.346	0.056	0.211***	0.112**	0.095**	-0.045	0.027	0.013	1

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

of the PSQ measurement in the current context. Meanwhile, Cronbach's α (.890) ensured the internal consistency for reliability.

5) Covariates

Table 2 presents a correlation matrix of all variables included in the final model. Four covariates were retained. Age, gender, and length of stay were included as standard demographic controls, given their established associations with social network formation and host-society evaluation in migration research (Berry et al., 2006; Ward and Kennedy, 1999). Education was retained as an indicator of socioeconomic status. As for other covariates, monthly income, Korean language proficiency, co-ethnic network size, and other-foreigner network size were excluded after inspections of bivariate correlations and primary regression diagnostics (all $ps > .20$) to maintain model parsimony.³

³ Monthly income and Korean language proficiency both showed negligible associations with the focal constructs across preliminary models (all $ps > .20$). Similarly, although co-ethnic and other-foreigner networks were constructed in parallel with HNNE (all measured in the same way, while under different ethnic categories of contact) and theoretically confounding for the proposed model, they demonstrated no significant predictive value for either PIT or PSQ (also $ps > .20$). Retaining these variables produced no meaningful change in R^2 and

3. Analytical Strategy

After data preprocessing and preliminary analysis, Hayes' (2022) PROCESS macro (Model 59) for SPSS was employed to test the proposed moderated mediation (Hayes, 2022; Preacher and Hayes, 2008). Both predictors and the moderator were mean-centered to reduce multicollinearity and facilitate interpretation of interaction terms. Indirect effects were estimated using 5,000 bootstrap resamples, with 95% percentile confidence intervals (CI). The index of moderated mediation (IMM) was used as the primary criterion for moderated mediation (Hayes, 2015): if the bootstrap confidence interval for the IMM excludes zero, the indirect effect of HNNE on PSQ through PIT varies as a function of PIA.

IV. Results

1. Direct and Main Effects

Addressing RQ2a and RQ2b first, HNNE did not significantly predict PSQ in a direct manner ($\beta = .104, p = .195$), indicating that host national network embeddedness exerts no independent effect on perceived settlement quality. H1 predicted a positive association between HNNE and PIT, which was supported ($\beta = .247, p < .05$), challenging the optimistic belief in interethnic networks as an identity threat buffer. H2 predicted a negative association between PIT and PSQ, which was strongly supported ($\beta = -.364, p < .001$), implying that perceived identity threat would largely erode perceived settlement quality. Among covariates, education was a significant, positive

introduced unnecessary model complexity. They were therefore excluded for parsimony.

predictor of PIT ($\beta = .134, p < .001$).

2. Moderating Effects

H3 predicted that PIA would attenuate the positive HNNE-PIT relationship. This was supported ($\text{HNNE} \times \text{PIA}$'s $\beta = -.086, p < .05$): as perceived interethnic acceptance increased, the positive association between HNNE and PIT weakened. A simple slope analysis (Figure 2 and Table 3) further clarified the pattern: the HNNE-PIT association was significant and negative at high PIA ($B = -.094, p < .05$), non-significant at the mean ($B = -.025, p = .468$) and low PIA ($B = .044, p = .364$). This pattern indicates that social supports from Korean residents reduce identity threat only if the host climate is perceived as accepting.

It bears clarification that H1 was tested at the unconditional level, where HNNE positively predicted PIT ($\beta = .247, p < .05$). The simple slope results here reveal that this overall positive association could diverge substantially across PIA levels. The unconditional positive effect reported for H1 thus

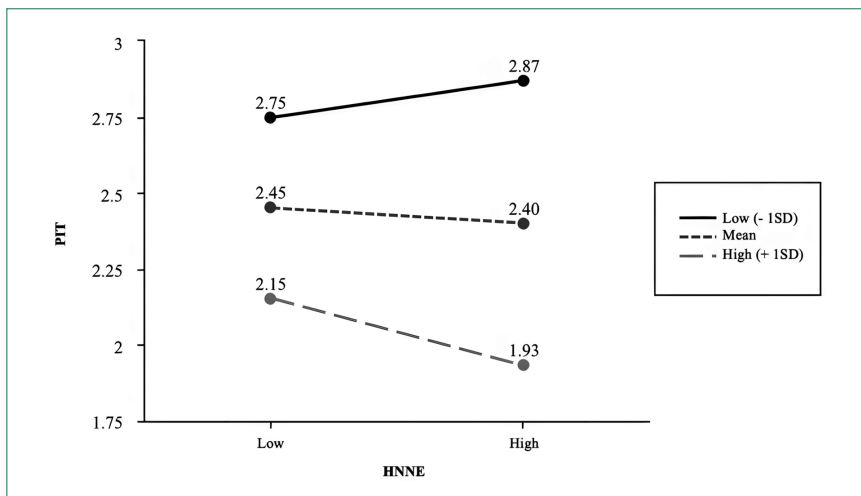


Figure 2 Simple Slope Plot for HNNE-PIT

Table 3 Simple Slope Analysis Results for HNNE-PIT

Moderator level	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Mean	-0.025	0.035	-0.726	0.468	[-0.094 , 0.043]
High (+1SD)	-0.094	0.043	-2.198	0.028	[-0.179 , -0.010]
Low (-1SD)	0.044	0.048	0.909	0.364	[-0.051 , 0.138]

reflects not a uniform directional tendency; instead, the direction and magnitude of the HNNE-PIT association are contingent on the PIA climate.

H4 predicted that PIA would buffer the negative PIT-PSQ association. This was also supported ($\text{PIT} \times \text{PIA}$'s $\beta = .092$, $p < .001$). A simple slope analysis (Figure 3 and Table 4) further revealed that the negative effect of PIT on PSQ was relatively strong and significant at low PIA ($B = -.148$, $p < .001$), moderate and significant at mean PIA ($B = -.075$, $p < .01$), and virtually absent at high PIA ($B = -.002$, $p = .953$). Perceived interethnic acceptance thus functions as a near-complete buffer: when foreign residents perceive the host climate as highly accepting, elevated identity threat fails to translate into settlement dissatisfaction.

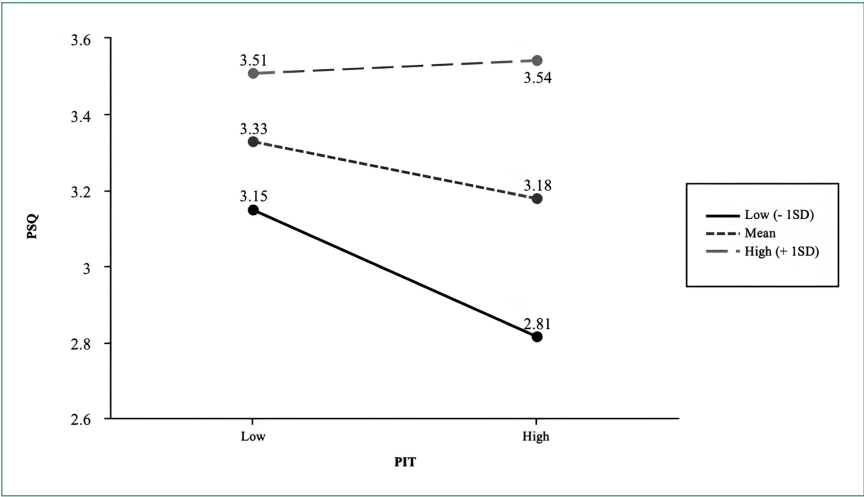


Figure 3 Simple Slope Plot for PIT-PSQ

Table 4 Simple Slope Analysis Results for PIT-PSQ

Moderator level	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI
Mean	-0.075	0.024	-3.177	0.002	[-0.121, -0.029]
High (+1SD)	-0.002	0.029	-0.058	0.953	[-0.058, 0.055]
Low (-1SD)	-0.148	0.032	-4.647	0.000	[-0.211, -0.086]

Note: The *p* value for the low level < 0.001, not actual zero.

3. The Mediation Chain and Moderated Mediation

RQ1a asks whether PIT mediates between HNNE and PSQ. The results provide some pattern-level partial support for mediation. The significant IMM (Index = .046, Boot SE = .030, 95% CI [.009, .124]) indicates that the indirect pathway from HNNE via PIT to PSQ varies systematically as a function of PIA. However, none of the three conditional indirect effects reached individual significance in isolation (Table 5), perhaps due to the statistically modest HNNE-PIT association ($\beta = .247, p < .05$), rather than an absence of mediation per se. Following Hayes (2015), the significant IMM should be treated as the primary criterion for the presence of a functioning indirect pathway. For clarification, a baseline mediation analysis was conducted, controlling for PIA with the other covariates. It revealed that the indirect effect was non-significant ($a \times b$ Effect = .002, Boot SE = .003, 95% CI [-.002, .008]), suggesting that PIT does not function as a stable mediator. RQ1a should be therefore answered with complications, as the findings could be interpreted differently by Hayes (2015) and Yzerbyt et al. (2018). Considering such interpretative restraints, these findings are used to indicate a climate-contingent tendency, not a robust mediation mechanism.⁴

⁴ The moderated mediation conclusion rests partly on the significant index of moderated mediation (IMM = .046, 95% CI [.009, .124]). Following Hayes (2015), a significant IMM constitutes sufficient evidence for moderated mediation without requiring point-level

RQ1b further inquiries about how this mediation operates. The pattern of conditional indirect effects at three levels of PIA (Table 5) illuminates notable tendencies in the overall modest mechanism: at low PIA, the indirect effect estimate was negative (Effect = $-.006$, CI [$-.024$, $.006$]), suggesting a tendency, albeit statistically marginal, for HNNE to suppress PSQ via elevated PIT under hostile interethnic conditions; this tendency turned positive at mean PIA (Effect = $.002$, CI [$-.003$, $.008$]); at high PIA, the indirect effect was effectively zero (Effect = $.000$, CI [$-.008$, $.008$]), indicating that under accepting interethnic conditions, the identity threat pathway is deactivated, with HNNE exerting no meaningful indirect influence on PSQ in either direction. It can be told that the mediation, again, does not operate as a stable mechanism; instead, it is a climate-dependent process in which both the conversion of Korean social supports into identity threat and the subsequent conversion of identity threat into place settlement dissatisfaction are regulated by the perceived interethnic acceptance. This pattern also reflects the path-level moderating logic formalized in H3 and H4. In sum, the pathway from HNNE to PSQ via PIT is better characterized as a moderated mediation contingent on PIA, not a simple mediation.

RQ3a can also be addressed by the IMM and conditional indirect effects. The IMM was significant, suggesting that PIA moderates the overall indirect pathway from HNNE to PSQ via PIT, although no individual conditional indirect effect reached significance in isolation (Hayes, 2015). Addressing RQ3b, results showed that PIA did not significantly moderate the direct

significance at discrete values of the moderator. However, Yzerbyt et al. (2018) argue that when all conditional indirect effects are individually non-significant, IMM-based claims warrant caution. A baseline mediation analysis also revealed that the indirect pathway was not uniformly present. Accordingly, the indirect effect here is characterized as a directional tendency contingent on the moderator, instead of robust mediated moderation. Replications with larger samples or more variance in host national network embeddedness would provide stronger evidence for this climate-contingent mediation.

Table 5 Results for Conditional Indirect Effects

Mediator	Moderator level	Level value	<i>B</i>	SE	95% CI
PIT	Low (-1SD)	2.361	-0.006	0.007	[-0.024, 0.006]
	Mean	3.162	0.002	0.003	[-0.003, 0.008]
	High (+1SD)	3.963	0.000	0.004	[-0.008, 0.008]

Note: Confidence intervals based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Moderator = PIA

effect of HNNE on PSQ (HNNE $\times$ PIA's $\beta = -.024$, $p = .302$), which indicates that the perceived interethnic acceptance climate does not condition the extent to which host national network embeddedness directly influences perceived settlement quality. The moderation by PIA operates exclusively through identity threat, without any direct reappraisal of interethnic networks. The communicative climate shaped by perceived interethnic acceptance does not alter foreign residents' settlement evaluations simply by virtue of having Korean social supports; instead, its influence is contingent on whether those support networks have first been processed through the lens of identity threat. The moderation should be therefore more precisely understood as a regulation of the identity-centered pathway, not a general amplifier or buffer of network effects on settlement quality.

As for RQ4, a descriptive comparison of the incremental variance explained by two interaction terms in moderation analysis suggests that PIA exerted stronger moderating influence on the PIT-PSQ pathway ($\beta = .092$, $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = .017$, $f^2 = .020$) than on the HNNE-PIT pathway ($\beta = -.086$, $p < .05$, $\Delta R^2 = .007$, $f^2 = .008$). Although no formal statistical test of the difference between these two moderating effects was conducted,⁵ the pattern of effect sizes here indicates that perceived interethnic acceptance operates more

⁵ The two effect sizes are not directly comparable as they derive from separate regression equations with different dependent variables.

powerfully as a buffer at the point where identity threat is converted into settlement dissatisfaction.

4. Post Hoc Findings

The ad hoc baseline mediation analysis revealed an additional mediation, not specified in original hypotheses: PIA exerted a significant indirect effect on PSQ via PIT ($a \times b$ Effect = .025, Boot SE = .011, 95% CI [.004, .049]). The path from PIA to PIT ($B = -.394, p < .001$) and the path from PIT to PSQ ($B = -.064, p < .01$) were both significant, while the direct effect of PIA on PSQ remained significant ($B = .254, p < .001$) after accounting for the mediator, indicating a partial mediation. These findings suggest that interethnic acceptance also shapes settlement quality through two complementary routes: a direct pathway in which perceived acceptance immediately elevates satisfaction with the host environment, and an indirect pathway in which acceptance reduces identity threat and in turn alleviates settlement dissatisfaction. This pattern is coherent within the current study's integrated framework, inviting future research to formally test PIA as an antecedent, beyond solely a moderator, in models for migrant well-being.

V. Discussion

Overall, the findings suggest that the relationship between foreign residents' interethnic networks, identity threat, and settlement quality is not simply linear. It depends on the level of interethnic acceptance climate whether social networks with Korean residents for support during hard times could buffer foreign residents' sense of identity threat and enhance their perceived settlement quality in Busan. Specific implications for

interventions and theoretical debates are discussed, along with limitations and directions for future research.

1. Practical Implications

The null direct effect of host national network embeddedness on perceived settlement quality suggests that interventions aimed merely at increasing the quantity of foreign residents' contact with Korean residents are unlikely to improve settlement satisfaction, unless the broader interethnic climate is simultaneously addressed. Municipal programs that facilitate cross-cultural social mixing without attending to the communicative norms and attitudes of the host community risk generating more opportunities for identity-threatening encounters instead of real integration, especially during hard times like COVID-19. Meanwhile, the lasting issues of structural vulnerability (Castles, 2010) also encourage institutional reforms. Improving foreign residents' settlement quality requires not only fostering interethnic goodwill but dismantling access barriers in various aspects of daily life, as they might systematically exclude foreign residents from full social membership and cause identity threats. Municipal governments in cities like Busan should therefore prioritize policymaking for institutional inclusion, such as anti-discrimination provisions, equitable access to public services, and formal channels for foreign residents' participation in local governance or civic discourse. Even if civic engagement for political agenda is not feasible, social membership or place identity can be shared and enhanced by improving accessibility to cultural institutions like city museums, where on-site resources and environments allow for intergroup discourse and understanding based on the local context (Lei, 2023a; 2023b). Targeting the root conditions at the institutional level, these interventions may structurally address the ethnic boundaries captured by perceived interethnic acceptance.

The counterintuitively positive relationship between host national network embeddedness and perceived identity threat could be attributed to the macro-societal context of pandemic-era racialization in Korea. When foreigners were systematically marked as threatening outgroup members, reaching out through Korean social networks did not offer sanctuary from identity threat but instead increased exposure to interactions during which one's outgroup status was rendered salient. Generally, during intergroup interactions, when members of a minority group perceive that the majority group is unwilling to engage in communicative accommodation (i.e., when the majority group responds to intergroup communication with closed or exclusionary attitudes), they will strengthen their identification with their own group identity and increase the degree to which they display that identity (Giles, 1973). In this study, perceived interethnic acceptance assumes a measure of perceived majority group's willingness to accommodate foreigners. It was found with moderating effects on perceived identity threat and settlement quality among foreign residents. Specifically, the buffering effect of perceived interethnic acceptance on the path between perceived identity threat and settlement quality points to a productive intervention target: local governments and civil organizations should prioritize initiatives that shift host community attitudes toward greater openness for foreign residents, as such perceptions could provide a psychological safety net to prevent identity threat from eroding settlement evaluations. In Busan, where foreign residents usually lack co-ethnic networks, the perceived stance of the host population could carry disproportionate weight. Public awareness campaigns, intercultural competency training for local service providers, and institutional signals of inclusion (e.g., multilingual public information and services) may contribute to ambient acceptance climate, identified as protective in the current study. Moreover, the significant positive association between education and perceived identity threat suggests that highly

educated foreigners require special attention. Status inconsistency between their human capital and social positioning in Korean society may render them particularly sensitive to identity-marking experiences, which has rich implications for Korea's broader ambition to attract and retain skilled international talents (Shin and Choi, 2015).

2. Theoretical Contributions

The current study also speaks to broader theoretical debates about the conditions under which intergroup communication is beneficial for minority group members. The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) and its contemporary elaborations (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006) have primarily examined the effects of contact on prejudice reduction among majority group members; however, little evidence can be found about how minority group members experience intergroup communication under conditions of public hostility, which is the typical communicative climate rendered particularly visible by the pandemic. The present study extends this line of research by foregrounding the perspectives of minority group members during COVID-19. Host national network embeddedness was found negatively associated with perceived identity threat only under conditions of high perceived interethnic acceptance, which contributes an important corrective to optimistic accounts of interethnic contact: interethnic networks with host nationals are not inherently protective when the broader environment signals exclusion (i.e., low acceptance). This also echoes Shelton and Richeson's (2005) account of interethnic contact anxiety: under pandemic conditions of heightened boundary-marking (Knot, 2025), foreign residents' networks with host nationals may function as a site of identity threat, even when seeking for help. Structurally, when the racialized boundary regime of the host society is held, interethnic contact is threatening, since the communicative climate

encodes every cross-boundary encounter with the asymmetric power relations, as theorized by Wimmer (2008) and Bonilla-Silva (1997). This invites identity scholars to approach perceived interethnic acceptance not as a psychological moderator alone, but as a macro-structural signal with identity-relevant meanings produced by institutional arrangements that precede and outlast individual-level interactions.

By integrating CAT (Giles et al., 1991) with SIT (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), this study further demonstrates that interethnic acceptance assumes a contextual regulator of both the identity threat generation process and the downstream consequences for settlement satisfaction. The asymmetry between the two moderating effects, as an exploratory finding, could be theoretically meaningful: the host communicative stance is more consequential at the point where accumulated identity threat is converted into settlement dissatisfaction. This finding extends CAT beyond its traditional dyadic focus (ingroup vs. outgroup) to the macro-level perception of group-wide accommodation norms, contributing to emerging scholarship on ambient intergroup climates and minority well-being (Schmitt et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the moderated mediation, while being modest, reveals that identity threat functions as a climate-contingent mediator. The nonsignificant, near-zero indirect effect under conditions of high perceived interethnic acceptance indicates that an accepting climate effectively deactivates the threat-to-dissatisfaction conversion. It offers a psychological account of why some foreign residents remain resilient in the face of identity-threatening experiences. By identifying perceived interethnic acceptance as a boundary condition, this study advances prior meta-analytic work on perceived discrimination and well-being (Pascoe and Smart Richman, 2009; Schmitt et al., 2014). Post hoc findings further revealed that interethnic acceptance itself functions as an antecedent for identity threat, found with a significant partial mediation pathway to settlement quality via identity

threat, alongside its moderating role. The dual function of perceived interethnic acceptance suggests that this construct operates at multiple levels of the causal chain, posing a complexity that warrants dedicated theoretical elaboration in future work.

3. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be noted. First, the cross-sectional design precludes robust causal inferences. Particularly, the directionality of the relationship between host national network embeddedness and perceived identity threat cannot be established simply from the current data. Longitudinal designs tracking foreign residents before, during, and after the pandemic would allow for stronger causal claims, illuminating whether the counterintuitive positive association between Korean social networks and perceived identity threat is stable for immigrant experience, or just a pandemic-specific phenomenon.

Besides, the operationalization of host national network embeddedness, as a count-based composite of Korean contacts across seven domains for support, does not distinguish between contact quality and quantity. Future research should incorporate measures of perceived contact quality, depth, or reciprocity, as these dimensions are likely to moderate whether Korean contacts generate identity threat or social belonging. Moreover, the sample's heterogeneity may have introduced construct-level noise into some measures, as the subjects encompass labor migrants, marriage migrants, international students, and business residents. The identity salience dynamics of these migrant groups may differ substantially, especially considering the influence of class (Yin, 2026). Although subgroup analyses are beyond the present scope of interest, such follow-up investigations represent a promising avenue for in-depth inquiry. Furthermore, the sample's uneven

gender composition (about 63% female) warrants acknowledgment again. While the overrepresentation of female respondents likely reflects the structure of Busan's foreign residents or the intent of the survey institution (Kim, 2020), it somewhat limits the generalizability of findings. Future replications should seek gender-balanced samples, or employ purposive sampling strategies targeting male foreign residents, to determine whether the mechanism operates equivalently across genders. Replications of this study are also recommended in other Korean cities, or comparative East Asian contexts (e.g., China, Japan), where similar tensions between official multiculturalism rhetoric (e.g., "we are being diverse and welcoming") and daily ethnic boundary (e.g., "we are not the same after all") have been documented (Seol and Skrentny, 2009).

VI. Conclusion

The present study provides concrete implications for identity-relevant policymaking in the context of crisis-era migration governance, along with contributions to literature on social identity, interethnic network, and intergroup communication. As one important takeaway for current East Asian cities receiving an increasing number of immigrants, host national networks do not straightforwardly protect foreign residents against identity threat or enhance their satisfaction with local life. Revisiting the integrationist assumptions from earlier cross-cultural adaptation studies, this study calls for more investigations into how interethnic networks can really help with foreign residents' identity and settlement quality during hard times, as an agenda merely starting here with the COVID-19 context in Busan.

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