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Intercultural Friendship Formation through the Lens of Cosmopolitan Agency

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a group of international students' experiences on intercultural friendship formation in one British university in the UK through the lens of cosmopolitan agency (Kudo, 2023), which is an ecological perspective of meaningful interactions between international and home students. Under the context that internationalisation continues to be on the agenda of higher education in the UK, this article examines how international students form and develop friendships among themselves and with home students within constraints mainly on power and privilege. Semi-structured interviews with 22 international students were carried out: Nigeria, Cameroon, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, as well as four British home students. Thematic analysis was used to explore their experiences in greater depth. The result indicated that the participating students demonstrated dynamic and discursive engagement with the four states of cosmopolitan agency, exhibiting specific manifestations of the agency relating to linguistic abilities, socioeconomic status, gender and religion.

Keywords: intercultural friendship formation, cosmopolitan agency, cosmopolitan capital, linguistic skills, socioeconomic status

Introduction

The benefits of promoting intercultural friendship for all students in higher education are widely acknowledged in academic literature as a positive response to the internationalisation agenda of higher education worldwide (Galloway et al., 2017; Gareis, 2012). Intercultural friendships play a critical role in reducing depression, enhancing academic performance, and boosting student satisfaction (Glass et al., 2014; Poyrazli et al., 2004). Much research has recorded negative intercultural experiences encountered by international students who feel lonely and marginalised during their sojourners in the UK (Owusu-Kwarteng, 2021; Zheng & Baker, 2022). Constraints such as power and privilege remain influential and significant in students' intercultural interactions, particularly for newly arrived international students. 'Privilege' comes in many manifestations: race, gender, sexuality, language, ability, wealth, physical fitness and education.

Meanwhile, 'power' entails the capacity to impact and determine outcomes that affect oneself and others. Opportunely, a growing number of studies acknowledge the challenges of intercultural interactions when studying abroad, especially with home students, because of the privileges that home

students have (Sherry et al., 2010; Xu, 2021). This article presents how international students build intercultural friendships in a multicultural HE campus in the UK through the lens of cosmopolitan agency theory (Kudo, 2023). Multiculturalism is an indispensable part of UK HE, and this is particularly so in regard to internationalisation and intercultural communication. In such an environment, intercultural friendship formation becomes necessary for a successful international educational experience since this will be a daily practice for students and staff. This idea has been framed within the concept of intercultural citizenship (Porto et al., 2018) and cosmopolitanism (Whalen & Woolf, 2020). In this article, cosmopolitan agency is the focus point. Intercultural friendship, intercultural interactions and intercultural encounters are interchangeable.

The cosmopolitan agency is a reflexive expression of openness, inclusion and morality beyond cultural and personal differences towards a better future (Kudo et al., 2020). Cosmopolitan agency manifests at the dynamic intersection of 'cosmopolitan capital' and 'affordances in convivial proximity' (Kudo, 2023). Adopting a cosmopolitan agency lens to understand how international students employ their 'cosmopolitan capitals' (such as linguistic and cultural repertoire, past experiences and resources) and influence their 'cosmopolitan agency' (such as amicable, critical, latent and inactive through reflexivity) in the process of developing intercultural friendship. In addition, 'affordances in convivial proximity' (such as good vibes) also influence the generation of 'cosmopolitan agency'. As Kudo's framework is relatively new, it has not yet been widely applied in international students' contexts. Thus, this article addresses the research gap, providing a timely empirical analysis. It explores the multifaceted elements of linguistic capital, socioeconomic status, gender and religious considerations among international students. It searched through the subtle delineation and interactions of these issues within the international student population. The article critically examines the social construction of individual cosmopolitan agency in connection with power and privilege. It offers significant perspectives into individual-focused research strategies, highlighting the nurturing of a growth mindset among students and fostering meaningful intercultural friendships. Two research inquiries are examined in this study:

1. How do students interpret the possible restrictions that could potentially shape their intercultural interaction?

2. What agentic strategies/proactive approaches do these students employ to navigate intercultural interactions despite potential limitations?

The article starts by examining the potential barriers documented in the existing literature that impact the formation of intercultural friendships, followed by an introduction to the theoretical frameworks of cosmopolitan agency (Kudo, 2023) adopted in this paper. After outlining the methodological design and procedure, the paper illustrates how the students in this study practised the four modes of cosmopolitan agency, showcasing their internal mechanisms for negotiating agency and constraints within intercultural environments.

Potential Constraints

In the specific context of international Asian students in this research, the English language seems a salient constraint in intercultural interaction and friendship formation. Given that language is intricately linked to individual identity, worldview and perspective, it shapes the interactions and perceptions between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. (Jackson, 2014). Language is also extensively accepted as an advantage or capital in forming intercultural friendships within the receiving nation (Lin & Betz, 2009; Poyrazli et al., 2004). On many occasions, language barriers are seen as cultural hindrances if one does not have a sufficient comprehension of language features. Therefore, to foster intercultural friendship, it is imperative to comprehend the key role that linguistic dimension plays in intercultural communication (Jackson, 2014). In practice, many international Asian students' intercultural friendship development is likely to be influenced by their self-assessment of their English language proficiency (Abel, 2002), their perception of acceptance or rejection from peers (Glass et al., 2014; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011) as well as their inability to speak good English. For example, Chinese international students are reported only to socialise within their Chinese circle due to the concern of not speaking good English in the UK (Zheng & Baker, 2022). In New Zealand, a third of the South East Asian students perceived that their proficiency in English was a barrier to forming friendships with

local students. (Ward et al., 2005). Gareis et al. study (2011) corroborates this relationship between language ability and satisfaction in intercultural friendships. Meanwhile, very limited research indicates that the imperfect English skills of international students in the United States did not significantly impede the development of intercultural friendships. Instead, their friends' linguistic errors often contributed to light-hearted humour and playful interactions (Sias et al., 2008). Despite the progress and effort made by many universities to improve international students' language and communication skills, there remains a need for further work to address the sociocultural challenges faced by international Asian students (Holliman et al., 2023).

In the specific context of this research, language is not an obvious challenge for black African students, especially for students from former UK colony countries. However, according to Damen et al. (2021), socioeconomic status (SES) plays an interesting role in explaining intercultural friendships. Many Black African students face challenges stemming from negative perceptions of African identity, influenced by the marginalised status of their societies within the global economic system and the colonial experience (Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014). Most of the time, the general public perceives them as low SES. Research confirms that many Black African students struggle with finance while studying in the UK. More than 90% were concerned about how they would finance their education (Blake, 2006; Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014). The financial pressure has led to poor intercultural friendship development (Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014; Irungu, 2013; Oluwaseun, 2016;). Meanwhile, recent research on Black African students studying abroad also indicates a hesitancy to abandon their African identity in favour of adopting the culture of the host country. The process of abandoning one's identity to assimilate into a new culture presents a significant challenge for many mature Black African students, primarily due to the enduring effects of cultural marginalisation and the destruction left by the colonial period (Beoku-Betts, 2006). Many of them experience cultural estrangement and solitude as a result of enduring racial prejudice and biased portrayals of Africa in the media, leading to adverse perceptions of Black African students (Maundeni, 2001; Owusu-Kwarteng, 2021). In addition, Black African students perceive the cultural disparity between their home country and the host nation as daunting (Irungu, 2013), so they were reported to have a strong preference for living with co-nationals (Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014). It seems they struggled to alter their deeply ingrained cultural beliefs during their brief study period in the UK.

Considering prevailing gender role norms, African black female students are reported to have no time to be involved in intercultural communication because 'they struggle in juggling multiple roles of student, worker, wife, mother and daughter' as vividly described by Oluwaseun (2016). In Nigeria, the roles of wife and mother carry all influence (Mensah, 2023). Many African women have acknowledged that these roles do not align with societal expectations in the UK (Zhao et al., 2023). Consequently, they actively balance their student identity alongside their social roles. For women, managing these roles seems increasingly crucial beyond the university environment as they endeavour to maintain their traditional gender roles within their families and the conventional African community. In traditional Nigerian society, boys are raised to perceive themselves as the leader of the household, responsible for providing and protecting, and superior to women. Meanwhile, girls are taught to fulfil domestic duties, be nurturing, be obedient, and generally be subordinate to men (Igbelina-Igbokwe, 2013). Despite studying in a seemingly gender-equitable society in the UK, Nigerian women principally adhere to society's expectations placed upon them as wives and mothers, in addition to fulfilling their roles as students (Kofman et al., 2000).

International students also experience incidents of racism and religious incidents in the UK (Brown & Jones, 2013). International students may encounter prejudice based on their ethnicity or religious affiliation. Moreover, amidst the rising Islamophobia in the UK, Muslims are particularly susceptible to religious discrimination (Allen, 2010; Quie & Solarin, 2023). In Britain, Muslim women encounter discrimination, racist abuse, and violence, often stemming from the intersection of factors such as race or ethnicity, religion and gender (Akram, 2020; Ashraf et al., 2023). Both anti-Muslim prejudice and racial discrimination continue to pose significant societal challenges in the UK (Jaspal et al., 2021).

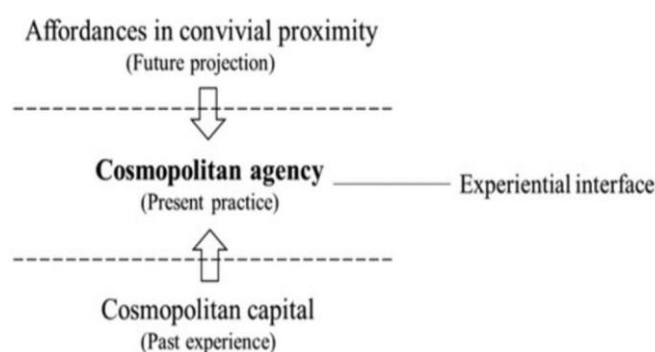### *Student Agency and Cosmopolitan Agency*

Cosmopolitanism, which posits that all individuals belong to a shared global community, has been extensively employed in research on intercultural communication. It represents a moral standpoint

emphasising the intrinsic value of all human beings irrespective of their geographical location, challenging the boundaries imposed by nation-states (Whalen & Woolf, 2020). Cosmopolitanism emphasises receptiveness to individuals, cultures, objects and encounters that originate beyond local boundaries (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007, p. 730). Openness implies cultured, inclusive, worldwide, international, broadminded and unprejudiced, which is a theoretical focus of this research. Crosbie (2014) alerts that being a world citizen does not mean one should give up loyalty to local connections; such identifications are a valuable source of richness in life and are to be proud of and cherished.

Another focus is student agency, which refers to students' capacity to make choices within the constraints of their lived realities. It also pertains to how students interact with their surroundings, encompassing diverse concepts of agentic possibility ('power') and agentic orientation ('will') towards action (Klemenčič, 2015). It should be noted that agency is something to be conceived rather than possessed, and agency exists in an ecological environment (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). This article adopts cosmopolitan agency (Kudo, 2023), which is a hallmark of intercultural friendships. Figure 1 showed the cosmopolitan agency and meaningful intercultural interactions.

**Figure 1.**

Cosmopolitan Agency. Source: (Kudo, 2023).

Note. From *Cosmopolitan agency and meaningful intercultural interactions: An ecological and person-in-context conceptualisation*, by Kudo (2023).

Cosmopolitan agency in this research refers to the quality of students' engagement in intercultural friendship formation. According to Kudo (2023), cosmopolitan agency is generated by cosmopolitan capital and convivial proximity. Cosmopolitan capitals refer to students' past experiences and resources, such as languages spoken and cultural repertoire. The more cosmopolitan agency generated, the more likely it is to build meaningful intercultural friendships. Therefore, this research examines what cosmopolitan agency international students adopt during intercultural interactions and what cosmopolitan capital they use to generate the agency. According to Kudo (2023), there are four different cosmopolitan capitals: elite, diasporic, enriched, and banal as shown in Figure 2. Banal is not regarded as an appropriate capital in this research as it lacks originality, freshness, or novelty in a conversation effort but is often seen in intercultural encounters.

Figure 2

Cosmopolitan Capital
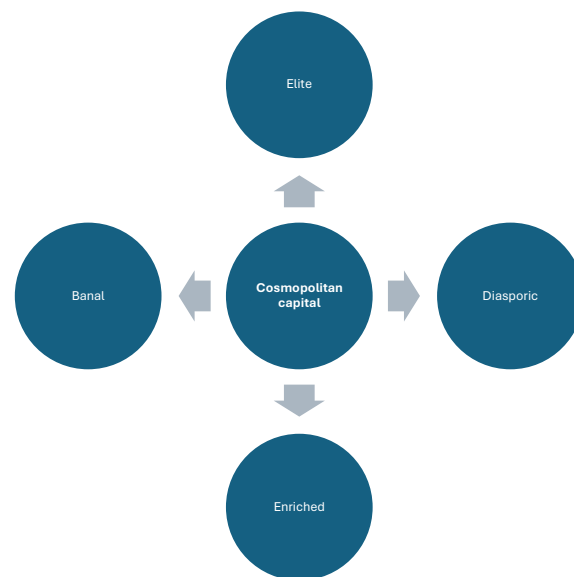
Elite cosmopolitan capital involves students who themselves have abundant knowledge in intercultural communication and high intercultural communication competence as a result of rich international travel experience or parents who work internationally. Diaspora cosmopolitan capital indicates students who themselves have migrant backgrounds; for example, they are hybrid children or second generation of a diaspora group. Enriched cosmopolitan capital touches upon face-to-face encounters with diverse cultures throughout their academic journey (Oikonomidoy & Williams, 2013). Kudo (2023) emphasised that cosmopolitan capitals are the conditions to generate cosmopolitan agency, but cosmopolitan agency can or cannot lead to a convivial proximity. Adversely, convivial proximity helps the accumulation of cosmopolitan capitals. There are four types of cosmopolitan agency: amicable, critical, latent and inactive as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Cosmopolitan Agency
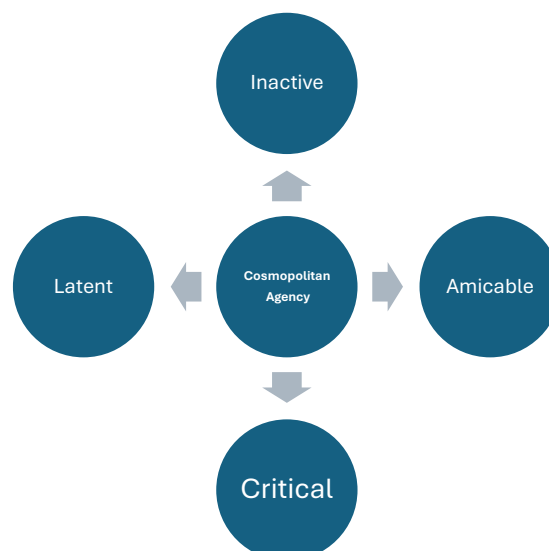
The defining features of the amicable cosmopolitan agency include 'the display of friendliness, acceptance and interest toward the (potential) relational partners beyond personal and cultural differences' (Kudo, 2023). It is perceived as a characteristic of purposeful, natural or selective engagement in intercultural relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships (Kudo et al., 2020). The critical cosmopolitan agency is marked by a power placed in the relationship, such as 'positionality within unequal power relationships' (Delanty & Harris, 2019). It challenges the division of students along home and host cultural lines (Sobré-Denton, 2011). It also means the ethics of sharing: 'sharing the power to set rules for exchanges, sharing the right to perform culturally distinct practices, sharing experiences – both good and bad – with one another' (Plage et al., 2017). The critical cosmopolitan agency also means students clearly understand their power privileges in the relationship but choose to use them to help other students, known as reciprocal altruism (Trivers, 1971).

The latent cosmopolitan agency indicates 'when students have elite, diasporic and/or enriched cosmopolitan capital but (opt to) engage in transactional interactions with instrumental focus at superficial level' (Kudo, 2023). This state of agency endeavours to cultivate intercultural relationships but experiences a deficiency in emotional attachment, characterised by a strong emphasis on personal goals and vision. Inactive cosmopolitan agency relates to 'when students are in convivial proximity with intercultural peers but utilise merely banal cosmopolitan capital, which is developed from the consumption of cultural products and media representations of foreign others rather than direct intercultural interactions' (Igarashi & Saito, 2014). Under this situation, the interactions remain transactional, seldom evolving to a stage where personal and cultural disparity are acknowledged, and reciprocity is fostered. Instead, there is a prevalent phenomenon of cultural othering, marked by the commodification and instrumentalisation of cultural differences (Kudo, 2023). It is further claimed that students who have practised amicable/critical cosmopolitan agency in previous intercultural interactions may also present inactive intercultural communication. Those inactive students with banal capital normally prioritise job hunting and family responsibilities over seeking intercultural friendship (Kudo, 2023).

Methods

This article delves into the narratives of international students regarding their experiences in navigating the formation of intercultural friendships, focusing on the four states of cosmopolitan agency. Qualitative research is adopted, seeking to uncover the underlying meanings, patterns, and themes embedded within qualitative data, showing a deeper understanding of social phenomena and human behaviour. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 students from Nigeria, Cameroon, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, China, Myanmar and the UK. The participant students were selected through selective sampling, spanning various countries of origin. This guarantees that students come from different linguistic and cultural heritage. Both males, females and other gender identities were selected to document any experiences influenced by gender. The demographic details of the participants are presented in Appendix A.

The student participants are uniformly spread across genders. Marriage status and number of children are included as an indication of constraints. Each participant's interview lasted approximately one hour and occurred on campus in one British university. Upon accepting the interview invitation, students were queried about their attitudes towards and strategies for meaningful intercultural interactions. For instance, they were queried, 'Do you want to make a friend who is not from your own country and if so, why?', 'Has it been successful?', 'How do you think you can find an intercultural friend? ' The interviews were carried out in English, recorded, and subsequently transcribed using AI software Otter. This research is small-scale qualitative; it does not aim to create statistical generalisations for all international students. In addition, participants recruited from Myanmar and Cameroon are not equally numbered with other ethnic groups, which is a limitation. The researcher conducted thematic analysis, which revealed themes from deductive coding, such as 1) personal attitudes towards building intercultural friendship, 2) perceived barriers and influences on intercultural friendship formation, and 3) strategies adopted to positively engage in meaningful intercultural interaction. Ethical approval for this research

was obtained from the University Research Ethics Committee in the UK with reference number FHSS2022-050. This research adhered to ethical guidelines regarding informed consent and voluntary participation. No identifying information about participants was included in this article. Pseudonyms were employed when referring to participants throughout. The limitation of this research stems from the small dataset utilised. To address this in future studies, expanding the dataset to include data from a broader range of universities and disciplines will be pursued.

Research Findings

Students' perceived challenges, social-cultural influence, and agentic strategies in intercultural friendship formation are presented in this part within Kudo's (2023) typology of four modes of cosmopolitan agency. Diverse limitations have influenced the dynamic manifestations of various reflections among the 22 students. Despite this, they generally exhibited a strong desire to cultivate intercultural friendships.

Amicable Cosmopolitan Agency

This state of agency is considered 'to emerge when students mobilise elite, diasporic or enriched cosmopolitan capital in convivial environments that afford the expression of amicability with personal focus' (Kudo, 2023). Fortunately, a significant number of students adopt amicable cosmopolitan agency, and many of them use their elite cosmopolitan capital:

> I don't mind where they come from. We both attended the same class, and we are friends. We both like fashion. We contacted each other after the class and went to London a few times.
> (Wai, Myanmar, female)

Although race and country do not matter for many students, they do care about how good their partner's English is because they don't want anyone to influence their group work. For example:

> I don't mind their nationality, skin colour, etc. I want to be in a group with someone who is good at English and has a good attitude towards learning. Otherwise, group work is difficult.
> (Farharn, Bangladesh, female)

Students with an amiable cosmopolitan agency extend their learning from intercultural friendship:

> We have contacted each other by phone since we met in the global cafe. Most of the time, we ask each other what we are doing, but I learned something about her country since we became friends.
> (Jean, Cameroon, female)

> Through chatting, I learned that their country, Cameroon, has an English-speaking area and a French-speaking area, and there is a crisis in the English-speaking area, so I have learned a lot from the conversation.
> (Wai, Myanmar, female)

> The daily conversations with home and other international students enhanced my capability and confidence to speak English. However, most of the time, I was greeted with "How are you doing?" and I didn't know how to answer it.
> (Ying, China, female)

> We discussed international politics and colonial history, and they were interested in learning about the history of my country.
> (Oluwatobi, Nigeria, male)

Intercultural romantic relationships are also noticed in the interview:

> I actually have a British girlfriend. Many of my friends admire me. I don't think they are unreachable. But I found out she is very timid and needs me to protect her. I studied in a high school in Germany before I came to the UK, so maybe she likes my intercultural experiences…I don't know.
> (Hao, Chinese, male)

Students use their elite and diaspora cosmopolitan capital to engage in intercultural friendship:

> Developed countries like the UK have poor people, and developing countries like Bangladesh have rich people. We are all students here, and we are equal.
> (Mohammad, Bangladesh, male)

> I lived in Uganda until I was 16. I returned to the UK for my A levels. Throughout my life, I was surrounded by black people, and I have no problem communicating with them.
> (Emily, British, female)

Utilising enriched cosmopolitan capital in settings that foster conviviality with a personal and/or cultural emphasis creates opportunities to develop amicable or critical cosmopolitan agency.

> I dared not talk to home students before, but sitting at the same table with two home students in this module is nice because the atmosphere is immediately different, and class dynamics are good. I learn a lot from them.
> (Hua, Chinese, female)

In addition, banal capital has the capacity to transform into an enriched cosmopolitan capital.

> The whole conversation is awkward because we are struggling to find a topic. But I noticed among home students that they also talk about superficial topics like the weather and how they are doing, so I am used to it now.
> (Ying, Chinese, female)

> I am a female Muslim. I can't easily form friendships with anyone like Western people. But I still can make female friends who are not from my culture.
> (Naurah, Pakistan, Female)

One Indian student, in particular, shows a culture-free mindset when studying in the UK: in his eyes, culture does not really matter.

> Middle-class Indian students are part of UK/USA society. There are not many cultural issues in friendship development.
> (Hassan, Indian, Male)

Critical Cosmopolitan Agency

A more prevalent mode of the critical cosmopolitan agency was noticed. Some participants are aware of the stereotypes and potential bias towards them, but they think it depends on the individual and challenge them to look for compromise. They challenge power and privilege in financial constraints, religion and gender stereotypes as well as language spoken. Two postgraduate students described how they formulated their strategies in communications during intercultural interactions. Two examples of using their power and privilege as a result of challenging the constraints are presented below.

> I know what they think of us. I come from a developing country, but I don't feel inferior. I am middle-high class in my country, and I travel a lot. I find that some local lower-class people are racist, but that won't hurt me because I know it is their problem, not mine. Nearly all the middle to upper-class people I met are very friendly.
> (Mohammed, Bangladesh, male)

> We didn't come with a lot of money. My husband works full-time while I study. He earns good money, and my tuition fees are all paid by his income through instalments and our expenses in the UK. We made a lot of international friends from work and university.
> (Sharmin, Bangladesh, female)

One interesting finding is that three Nigerian students attempted to use their English language privilege (they thought) over a Chinese student in group work, which demonstrated their critical cosmopolitan agency in intercultural interactions; the Chinese student used her better IT skills to enhance the group's PPT slides so their intercultural interaction started with suspicious to each other but ended with success.

> I joined a group with three black Nigerian girls. As my English is not so good, they said if I gave them 50 pounds, I wouldn't need to do any work. They would do the work for me. I was so shocked! But I noticed they didn't have as good computers as me, so I offered to do the PPT using my laptop, and we became friends after that.
> (Jing, Chinese, Female)

Financial considerations were commonly mentioned as constraints in socialising outside of the classroom setting, illustrating the limitations imposed by SES. While the students lacked the agency to spend some money on social costs, they could not see each other outside the classroom setting. A few students employed the critical cosmopolitan agency when faced with financial constraints. Rather than eating out in a restaurant or someone's home, they made their compromises when talking about ways of entertainment:

> They suggested having a meal in the restaurant together, but it's too expensive for me, so I suggested a drink, or maybe just a talk.
> (Jean, Cameroon, female)

One British home student mentioned how he adopts his critical cosmopolitan agency in making international friends because he knows his linguistic and cultural capital are popular with international students. Meanwhile, his language partner also knows how to use her privilege as a native Mandarin speaker to seek opportunities to practise her English:

> I invited her to chat in a pub because I am learning Mandarin and will go to Taiwan next year.
> (John, UK, male)

> I knew he was going to Taiwan to study Chinese, so I accepted his invitation. I can practise my English with him.
> (Ying, Chinese, female)

The critical cosmopolitan agency was fully unitised by participants in the decision-making procedures of intercultural friendship formation. This mode appears to have a strong association with financial limitations (high SES in a developing country) and national identity (language spoken). Using reverse linguistic and cultural capital to find home students who study the Chinese language to make friends is a strategy for some Chinese students to practise reciprocal altruism (Trivers, 1971).

Latent Cosmopolitan Agency

Another group of students revealed latent cosmopolitan agency in confronting various constraints of intercultural interaction, and they adopted third-party involvement as a strategy to facilitate the process.

Third-party involvement refers to group division by teachers and official activities such as induction events, global cafes, excursions, etc. This third-party involvement affords convivial proximity, which helps generate latent cosmopolitan agency. For instance, three students reported they do not want to take the initiative to make intercultural friends. However, they do not object to interaction because they are allocated to one group for presentation. In doing so, they managed to gain a legitimate reason to talk to each other:

> It's impossible to talk to a stranger on the road if you don't know the person. If we are in one group, starting a conversation is natural. So, I like this module (managing across cultures) because it provides a chance to understand each other's culture in a formal class setting.
> (Hua, Chinese, female)

> We only talked about our group presentation. We don't go any further over the formal task. There is no emotional connection; it is very superficial and functional.
> (Ifedayo, Nigeria, female)

> I am a shy person. I feel I have a reason to contact you if I am asked to do so by the teacher.
> (Lucy, British, female)

Through third-party involvement, the manifestation of latent cosmopolitan agency was more evident among the relatively less self-expressive group, as they possess a distinct perception of their character. Instead of communicating bluntly, the function of the official arrangement is more operational and can provide legitimate reasons for communicating. Additionally, third-party involvement was also evident among students who need more leadership training and support:

> They (the Chinese) want to do their own work after the division of labour. I suggest doing it together. Everyone has different ideas, and it is a challenge to work in groups. We need a team leader.
> (Isaac, Nigerian, male)

Those findings suggest that the Latent cosmopolitan agency needs institutional support or third-party involvement.

Inactive Cosmopolitan Agency

Two students with an inactive cosmopolitan agency are presented. They had thought about the possibility of developing intercultural friendships, but they are subject to self-perceived language and cultural bias, so their agency was diminished by being 'not bothered'. For instance, Wang mentioned the reason that he was not active in any intercultural friendship development:

> My English was not good, so I struggled to express the meaning, which made us feel awkward. I only have friends from my own country.
> (Wang, Chinese, male)

A similar situation was reported by Lily. She commented

> I have no common topics if I talk to them (home students). I like to talk about gossip with close friends, but there is no gossip to talk about. I don't think we have anything in common.
> (Lily, Chinese, female)

Recognising the perceived stereotype (insufficient English and no common topics), these two students chose to believe the myths rather than change. No evidence from this study indicated that these two participants endeavoured to devise a plan of action to challenge the perceived constraints in language and culture (Abel, 2002; Glass et al., 2014; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). In essence, they did not challenge the linguistic barriers imposed on them from a Chinese perspective. The findings also indicate

that both male and female Chinese students actively contributed to perpetuating those barriers among themselves. Some black African students did not think the English language is a barrier at all but on race, they complained about not being truly accepted by the white society:

> In group work, white people don't choose us. If I approach them, they say the group is full. I finally have to work with black fellows.
> (Isaac, Nigerian, male)

A female student who wears a hijab from a religious background expressed the difficulties of initiating an intercultural conversation:

> When people see me dressed like this, they tend to ignore me. In my culture, it's not okay to smile at everyone, especially men.
> (Naurah. Pakistan, female)

Nigerian students also report that they have no time to socialise due to gender role expectations (Oluwaseun, 2016). Aden, a female student from Nigeria, commented below:

> My husband is a typical African husband. I look after the children, cook, clean and attend university. It's okay for me to do all the housework, and that's fine. But I don't have time to socialise with anyone.
> (Aden, Nigeria, female)

Although Aden did not complain about doing all the housework and family responsibilities while studying in the UK, her motivations conform to the African male power and female responsibilities within a family. Another Nigerian female participant explained how the African gender role expectation advantages him:

> In Nigeria, it's highly patriarchal. Women are considered inferior to their husbands. Nigerian women want to be seen as wives and mothers.
> (Ifedayo, Nigeria, female)

Some female participants were no exception in self-policing the gender role expectation in marriage and childbirth. As Orisa mentioned:

> After a couple gets married, the extended family and friends often prioritise their fertility and express hopes for them to have as many children as possible.
> (Orisa, Nigeria, female)

Orisa's explanation shed light on her reluctance to cultivate intercultural friendships in the UK due to her status as a married woman with two children. Consequently, she adopted a passive stance towards intercultural interactions. Recognising the self-perceived stereotypes held by the participants regarding language and culture (for the Chinese) and race and gender role expectations (for the Nigerian and the Pakistani), their behaviour can be interpreted as an adoption of passive cosmopolitan agency in intercultural interactions. They are cognizant of the biased structures but choose to conform to them. In terms of cosmopolitan capitals, they are banal. Multiple instances of fractured reflexives from the data are identified. Firstly, the confirmation of gender role expectations that hindered individuals' intercultural experiences in the UK, alongside actions aimed at challenging these structures. Secondly, the unitisation of existing structures to justify their actions, whether taking initiatives in intercultural interactions or not, thereby actively responding and perpetuating the disadvantageous structures for both others and oneself.

Discussion

This paper has explored how international students navigate intercultural interactions to find solutions. Utilising Kudo's framework of four states of cosmopolitan agency, this article examines how students enact their cosmopolitan capital within perceived constraints. It examines the interdependent dynamics relationship between these constraints and agency and their expression within the specific sociocultural contexts of power and privilege. For certain international participant groups, their cosmopolitan agency is constrained by self-perceived linguistic, socioeconomic status, gender and religious structures. Limited evidence suggests that participants in this research demonstrated agency in challenging or disrupting these constraints, with some observed to confront and perpetuate biased constraints. However, there is also clear evidence that one's home country does not necessarily correlate with cosmopolitan agency. Across various cultures, some students embrace cosmopolitan agency, and some do not.

The data indicates the multifaceted and time and space-bound nature of students' engagement in intercultural interactions. This empirical analysis is anticipated to add a brick to the existing research on meaningful intercultural interactions among all students. Instead of highlighting the challenges many international students encounter (Damen et al., 2021; Jackson, 2014;), the specific focus on students' cosmopolitan capital provides a dynamic understanding of power and privilege in intercultural interactions. The argument posited that students possessing elite, diasporic and enriched cosmopolitan capital enjoy more autonomy in initiating intercultural dialogues than those with mundane cosmopolitan capital (Participant Aden). However, unlike the stagnant conceptualisation of power and privilege in intercultural communication, the findings emphasise the significance of cultivating a growth mindset to nurture cosmopolitan agency.

Furthermore, a banal cosmopolitan capital has the potential to evolve into an enriched cosmopolitan capital with the correct mindset (Participant Ifedayo). Moreover, enhancing cosmopolitan capital may motivate students to challenge and potentially alter the unequal distribution of privilege by engaging in critical cosmopolitan agency (Participant Mahammad). Reconfirming Kudo's (2023) findings, this paper allows a third option, which is meaningful intercultural interactions between inactive, awkward, problematic intercultural conversation and completely developed admirable intercultural friendships (Participant Wai). Hence, instead of immediately emphasising the significance of establishing equitable and cohesive intercultural relationships, meaningful intercultural friendships can develop when there is encouragement for convivial interactions. This article primarily examines the often-neglected aspects of students' reflexivity in forming their intercultural friendships.

Conclusion and Implications

This article utilises the cosmopolitan agency framework to explore how international students actively mediate the development of intercultural friendships. It illustrates how cosmopolitan agency, alongside potential hidden constraints, influences the internal reflexive processes of individual students. Applying Kudo's (2023) framework of cosmopolitan agency, this article demonstrates how the typology can facilitate the comprehension of international students' real-life intercultural experiences, particularly in the context of forming intercultural friendships. The discursive and dynamic expressions of the four modes of agency, as positioned within Kudo's cosmopolitan agency framework, question the notion of adopting a universal approach to its application.

This article suggests adopting an individual-focused, empowering approach to assist intercultural friendships within a multicultural campus. Rather than solely concentrating on the outcomes of various constraints that hinder intercultural friendship formation, this approach focuses on supporting students' development. Interventions should aim to assist international students in comprehending how constraints may affect their lives while also exploring strategies and fostering the appropriate mindset to empower international students' cosmopolitan agency in overcoming these obstacles. One possible strategy to assist international students is to encourage them to comprehend and utilise amicable cosmopolitan agency, promoting reflections on the appropriateness of their actions, the underlying motivations behind their decisions, and the potential presence of bias, mental fallacies, or misconceptions. The additional strategies exhibited by participant students in this research can also be

disseminated to a broader audience to empower others through shared experiences. This is especially crucial for international female students and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, who may benefit from positive influencers to enhance their agency in challenging existing social bias. Ultimately, the 'affordance of convivial proximity', including environmental factors and organisational support, holds equal significance in guiding students in cultivating cosmopolitan capital for the practice of cosmopolitan agency among many international students.

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Conflict of Interest

The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

The author was responsible for the conception, design, writing, and revision of the manuscript.

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Appendix A

The participants' demographic information

	Pseudonym	Country of origin	Gender	Marriage status	Cosmopolitan agency	Cosmopolitan capital
1	Aden	Nigeria	F	Married	Inactive	Banal (fixed gender role; a study in the UK for maintaining status in marriage)
2	Oluwatobi	Nigeria	M	Married	Amicable	Elite (high SES: businessman)
3	Ifedayo	Nigeria	F	Married	Inactive	Banal
	Ifedayo	Nigeria	F	Married	Latent	Banal
4	Isaac	Nigeria	M	Single	Inactive	Banal
	Isaac	Nigeria	M	Single	Latent	Banal
	Orisa	Nigeria	F	Married	Inactive	Banal
5	Jean	Cameroon	F	Single	Critical	Elite (high SES: businesswoman)
	Jean	Cameroon	F	Single	Amicable	Elite (high SES: businesswoman)
6	Wai	Myanmar	F	Married	Amicable	Elite (high SES: chartered accountant for MCs)
7	Ying	China	F	Single	Critical	Elite (use native language power to make UK friends)
	Ying	China	F	Single	Amicable	Elite (use native language power to make UK friends)
8	Hua	China	F	Single	Critical	Elite (high SES, make African friends)
	Hua	China	F	Single	Latent	Elite (high SES, make African friends)
	Hua	China	F	Single	Amicable	Elite (high SES, make African friends)
9	Jing	China	F	Single	Inactive	Banal (Not confident in

						topics)
	Jing	China	F	Single	Critical	Banal (Not confident in topics)
10	Hao	China	M	Single	Amicable	Enriched (cultural contact, has a British girlfriend)
11	Mohammad	Bangladesh	M	Single	Critical	Enriched (travel a lot: USA, etc.)
12	Farhan	Bangladesh	F	Married	Amicable	Enriched (businesswomen; trade with China)
13	Naurah	Pakistan	F	Married	Inactive	Banal (religious, wear hijab)
	Naurah	Pakistan	F	Married	Amicable	Banal (religious, wear hijab)
14	Yusuf	Pakistan	M	Single	Amicable	Enriched (media person)
15	John	UK	M	Single	Critical	Elite (father works for MNCs)
16	Emily	UK	F	Single	Amicable	Diasporic (Indian heritage)
17	Kate	UK	F	Single	Amicable	Enriched (Lived in Uganda)
18	Lucy	UK	F	Single	Latent	Enriched (studying French)
19	Lily	China	F	Single	Inactive	Banal
20	Wang	China	M	Single	Inactive	Banal
21	Sharmin	Bangladesh	F	Single	Critical	Diasporic
22	Hassan	India	M	Single	Amicable	Enriched