



Challenges of Chinese Students In Intercultural Communication: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to understand students' successful experiences in intercultural communication, this study systematically reviewed the challenges Chinese students face in intercultural communication, the strategies used to address these challenges—including coping strategies and interventions—and the impact and outcomes of their implementation. Following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, five online databases were searched, yielding 60 studies for analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to examine the data. Findings indicate that 'comprehension and production' and 'forming a common ground' are the primary challenges Chinese students encounter. To address these, 'competence-driven strategies' and 'constructing an appropriate context' emerged as the most frequently employed coping mechanisms and interventions. However, no clear one-to-one correspondence was found between specific challenges and coping strategies/interventions, and their effectiveness varied significantly across different contexts. Additionally, the impact of most strategies and interventions has not been rigorously tested. This study provides valuable insights into the role and manifestation of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) and offers a foundation for developing more effective approaches to enhance engagement in intercultural communication.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Cross-Cultural Communication, Chinese Students, Thematic Analysis, Systematic Literature Review, Higher Education

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication competence (ICC) is considered not only a capability that enhances professional competitiveness in the international labour market but also a key factor in building harmonious multicultural communities (Griffith, Wolfeld, Armon, Rios & Liu, 2016; Luo & Chan, 2022). Over the past decade, the wave of international student mobility (Choudaha, 2017) has led to a growing interest in researching intercultural communication in higher education (Deardorff, 2006; Deardorff & Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017; Fantini, 2020). As the largest group of international students worldwide (God & Zhang, 2018), Chinese students have thus become a focal point in intercultural research (Héliot, Mittelmeier & Rienties, 2020; Lee, Knutson, Koch, Brown & Keyes, 2022; Sadykova, 2014; Spencer-Oatey, 2018). To understand this group, scholars have investigated their intercultural experiences and found that Chinese students encounter numerous challenges in intercultural communication. These challenges are considered to have a negative impact on their engagement in intercultural communication, thereby hindering their adaptation to new learning and living environments. Previous research has indicated that individuals with higher ICC are more likely to overcome adverse factors and thus better adapt to new cultural environments (Kim, 2001; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Consequently, the question of how to better engage in intercultural communication becomes a matter of how to develop one's ICC.

Understanding successful experiences in overcoming adverse factors in intercultural communication is crucial for the development of individuals' ICC (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992). However, no studies have yet systematically reviewed successful experiences in intercultural communication. It remains challenging to comprehensively understand the difficulties Chinese students face in intercultural communication, as well as how these challenges have been approached and overcome.

Current intercultural communication-related reviews mainly focus on ICC conceptualisation (Arasaratnam, 2015; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), assessment methods (Griffith et al., 2016; Müller et al., 2020; Luo & Chan, 2022), and effectiveness evaluation (Zhang & Zhou, 2023). However, no study has reviewed students' intercultural experiences, particularly those of Chinese students in intercultural communication encounters. A comprehensive understanding of Chinese students' experiences in approaching challenges during intercultural communication

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can clarify which challenges have been well managed on the one hand, while also identifying those that remain unresolved on the other. The findings of this review contribute to a systematic presentation of challenges in intercultural communication and the regulatory responses used to address them. This provides valuable insights for selecting or designing solutions to overcome barriers in intercultural communication.

The purpose of this review is to examine the challenges encountered by Chinese students in their intercultural communication experiences, the regulatory responses to these challenges, and the effectiveness of such responses. Therefore, our research questions are as follows: What are the main challenges Chinese students face in intercultural communication encounters? What are the regulatory responses to the challenges Chinese students encounter in intercultural communication? The regulatory response includes two categories: one is self-initiated (i.e., coping strategies), and the other is initiated by an external source (i.e., intervention) such as a human instructor, peer, technology, etc. Two sub-research questions are therefore: What coping strategies do Chinese students use to deal with intercultural communication challenges? What interventions have been applied to Chinese students to address challenges in intercultural communication? Lastly, how effective are these regulatory responses?

We begin with a definition of intercultural communication, followed by an explanation of the challenges, and subsequently delineate coping strategies and interventions.

1.1. Definition Of Intercultural Communication

There are many definitions of the concept of *intercultural communication*, one of which emphasizes the *exchange process* and *different cultures* (e.g., Gudykunst & Kim, 1984; Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). For example, it has been defined as “the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities attempt to negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation within an embedded societal system” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012, p. 24). However, there are different schools of thought regarding how culture and intercultural communication should be defined, particularly in relation to cultures *interacting* with each other.

There are three main schools of thought that define culture in different ways (Gabelica & Popov, 2020). The first is the *value-based approach*, represented by Hofstede (1980), which regards countries as meaningful cultural units. From a psychological perspective (Bond et al., 2004), the second school of thought conceptualizes culture as a set of psychological constructs (e.g., beliefs, values, expectations, cognitive styles, and behavioral meanings) shared among individuals, meaning that culture resides in people’s minds and behaviors. In contrast to this psychological perspective, the third school of thought—the *contextual view*—argues that culture exists outside individuals’ minds and behaviours and that individuals simply react to it (Schwartz, 2014).

This review synthesizes these schools of thought and thus considers culture as a product of personal experiences. We do not equate *country* with *culture*; however, we still use the label *Chinese* to highlight a commonality among the subjects of this review—namely, that their primary personal experiences were shaped in China. Therefore, in this review, *intercultural communication* refers to communication between individuals whose main personal experiences have been shaped in different contexts.

1.2. Challenge

In this article, *challenge* is used as an umbrella term encompassing various factors that negatively affect intercultural communication, such as weaknesses in ability and feelings of discomfort. Additionally, *challenge* is used interchangeably with synonyms such as *problem* (Fox, 2020), *barrier* (Cao, Zhu & Meng, 2021), and *difficulty* (Bilotserkovets et al., 2020), all of which indicate impediments to effective intercultural communication.

1.3. Regulatory Responses

Regulatory responses are defined as “strategic practices enacted dynamically by individuals or the collective” (Järvelä & Hadwin, 2024). These practices refer to responses to challenges in intercultural communication and can be initiated either by Chinese students themselves or by external sources (e.g., human instructors, peers, technology, etc.).

Self-initiated responses are referred to as *coping strategies*, which we define as cognitive, motivational, behavioural, and metacognitive actions that students engage in to manage challenges in intercultural communication. In contrast, responses initiated by external sources are referred to as *interventions*, which involve the influence of external factors on students’ behaviour, cognition, motivation, and emotions, guiding and shaping their interaction processes.

2. Method

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Page et al., 2021) was adapted for this systematic review, and the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram was used to guide the process of identifying relevant publications and assessing their quality.

2.1. Search Strategy

Five online databases were searched: Scopus, ERIC, Web of Science (core collection only), PsycINFO (via ProQuest), and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Four sets of search terms were used, corresponding to (1) *culturally diverse contexts*, (2) *communicative challenges and corresponding coping*

strategies, (3) *Chinese students*, and (4) *higher education*, as shown in Table 1. The search terms were selected based on previous reviews and the most frequently cited studies (e.g., Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009) that focus on intercultural communication.

Table 1: Database and search statements

*Database	**Search terms
1. Scopus 2. ERIC 3. PSYCINFO 4. Web of Science	#1 intercultur*, "cross-cultur*", "cross cultur*", "cross-nation*", "multi-nation*", multination*, transnation*
	#2 communicat*, "communicat* competence", "communicat* capability", "communicat* skill*", interact*, collaborat*, "co-operat*", cooperat*, "global competence", "cultural sensitivity", acculturation, "cultural adaptation", "cultural awareness", "cultural integration", challeng*, difficult*, barrier*, problem, dilemma, intervention, improv*, cultivat*, foster*, develop*
	#3 "Chinese student*", "international student*", "Asian student*", "Chinese learner"
	#4 "higher education", "tertiary education", "post-secondary education", "postsecondary education", university, college, undergraduate, postgraduate, doctor*, master*
5. China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI)	#1 国际、跨文化、多文化、全球、对外 #1: international, intercultur*, multi-cultural, global, cross-cultur*
	#2 交际、交流、合作、协作、交际能力、交流能力、困难、阻碍、障碍、提高、培养、建设 #2: communicat*, interact*, cooperat*, "social competence", "commiunicat* competence", difficult*, barrier, obstacle, improve, foster, cultivate
	#3 中国大学生、大学生、本科生、研究生、博士生 #3: "Chinese student*", "college student*", undergraduate, postgraduate, "doctoral student"
	#4 高等教育、研究生教育、博士生教育 #4: "higher education", "postgraduate education", "doctoral education"

* The search area across the five databases included title, abstract, and keywords. **The statement's Boolean logic is #1 AND #2 AND #3 AND #4, and terms are connected by 'OR'.

These four sets of search terms were designed to target *communication involving Chinese students within culturally diverse contexts in higher education*. The first set of search terms narrowed the context to cultural diversity. We selected terms frequently used to denote culturally diverse contexts within the field of cultural studies. We did not choose *multicultur* although it is also a term indicating cultural diversity. First, this term is widely used across various research fields, leading to an overwhelming number of search results. Second, few of the expanded results focused on individual communication processes, which is our primary interest. Lastly, we noted that studies focusing on communication processes would not be missed by excluding this search term, as their descriptive information still met other search criteria.

The second set of search terms aimed to identify studies describing challenges and corresponding coping strategies within the communication process. We initially selected search terms directly related to challenges and coping strategies. Many studies focusing on competence assessment, effectiveness, and competence development may also contain important information related to challenges and coping strategies, but they cannot always be retrieved using these directly related search terms. To avoid missing potentially relevant studies, we also selected search terms closely associated with these topics to locate them.

The last two sets of search terms corresponded to *Chinese students* and *higher education*, respectively.

2.2. Inclusion Criteria

To be included in this review, studies had to:

1. Focus on intercultural communication and include descriptions of the communication process or draw conclusions related to challenges and corresponding coping strategies based on the investigation of the communication process.
2. Target students in higher education, with Chinese students involved.
 - Studies exploring intercultural communication among non-student groups, in contexts outside higher education, or those that could not verify the participation of Chinese students were excluded.
3. Be peer-reviewed articles only.
4. Be published between 2012 and 2022.
 - For the sake of timeliness, this review covered only recent literature published between January 2012 and December 2022.
5. Be empirical or review research.
6. Be published in English or Chinese.

Due to language constraints, the author can only read Chinese and English literature.

2.3. Identification Of Relevant Publications

We applied the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram to guide the selection process (see Graphic 1). Initially, we conducted searches in five electronic databases in November 2022: ERIC (via EBSCO), Scopus, PSYCINFO (via ProQuest), Web of Science, and CNKI. The database search produced 1,136 papers, excluding duplicates.

Abstracts of these papers were then screened according to the inclusion criteria. While abstract screening helped filter out studies that were clearly unsuitable, the screening process was broad because many abstracts did not specify whether the study was empirical, whether it involved Chinese students, or whether it included information on challenges and/or corresponding coping strategies in the intercultural communication process. Following a full-text review, 108 papers were further excluded as they did not meet all the inclusion criteria outlined in Section 2.2. Additionally, we excluded one study that used unvalidated data collection instruments and did not report the data collection process. As a result, the final number of articles included in this study was $n = 60$, all of which were written in English (see Table 2 for an overview).

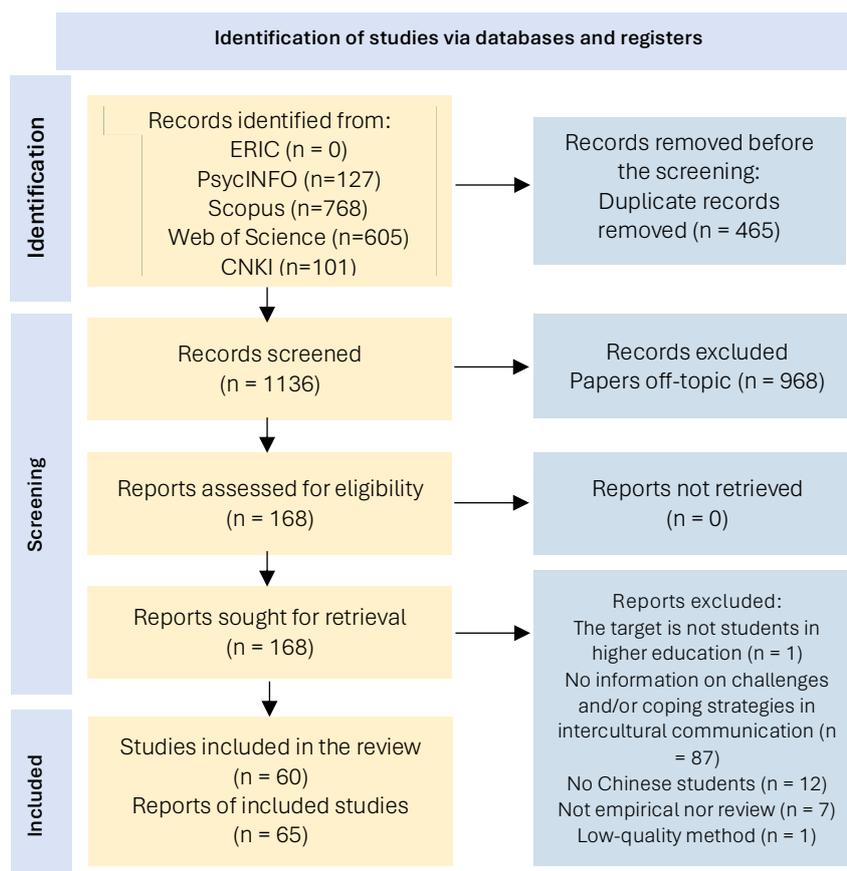


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram

Table 2: Overview of studies

	Number of studies	
Publication year	2012-2016	9
	2017-2022	51
*Context	United Kingdom	13
	The United States	8
	Australia	7
	China	7
	Netherlands	4
	Online	4
	Belgium	3
	Hong Kong	3
	Ukraine	3
	Canada	2
	**English speaking countries	2
Finland/Germany/Malaysia/South Korea	Only 1 study was identified in each of these countries	

* Context refers to countries/regions where Chinese students gain intercultural communication experiences. **The research subjects include Chinese students returning from various English-speaking countries.

2.4. Analysis

Building on previous studies that have used similar methods to review large journal article datasets (Arasaratnam, 2013, 2015; MacIntosh-Murray, Perrier & Davis, 2006) and given that this method allows for data analysis without a pre-existing theoretical framework, we applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to answer the first and second research questions. We followed the three steps of thematic analysis—data immersion, initial identification of themes, and refinement of themes—to confirm the themes in this review (Arasaratnam, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The theme-refining process adheres to Patton's (2002) dual criteria for judging categories in terms of *internal homogeneity* and *external heterogeneity*.

During the full-text reading, we applied data immersion by marking content related to challenges, coping strategies, interventions, and the handling of challenges. Subsequently, in the step of initially identifying themes, we provisionally coded the marked content (e.g., *usage of the host language*, *lack of confidence*) and combined similar codes into categories. In the step of refining themes, we further reduced the categories by consolidating existing classifications into higher-order themes (e.g., *comprehension and production challenge*, *competence-driven strategy*).

To address Research Question 3, we employed descriptive analysis to examine the implementation of coping strategies and interventions in addressing challenges, as well as their effects and outcomes after implementation.

3. Results

3.1. Challenges Encountered By Chinese Students In Intercultural Communication (RQ 1)

We identified two main challenges (as defined in Section 1.2) encountered by Chinese students in intercultural communication and recorded 105 occurrences of these challenges and their sub-challenges (i.e., some studies reported more than one occurrence) in Table 3.

Table 3: Challenges Encountered By Chinese Students In Intercultural Communication

Theme refinement	Category	Code	Reference	No of study
Comprehension and production challenge 48 occurrences in 35 studies	Usage of language challenges	Usage of lingua franca	Cai, Fang, Sun & Jiang (2022); Cao et al. (2021); Dennen & Bong (2018); Han, Li, Bao & Cao (2020); Jiang & Altinyelken (2022); Li & Pitkänen (2018); Meng, Li & Zhu (2019); Rakushin & Hak-Soo (2022); Sadykova (2014); Tang, Collier & Witt (2018); Ye & Edwards (2015); Y. Yu (2019)	12
		Usage of host language	Adisa, Baderin, Gbadamosi & Mordi (2019); Babushko, M. Solovei & L. Solovei (2022); Bilotserkovets et al. (2020); Burdett (2014); Cena, Burns & Wilson (2021); Fox (2020); Heng (2020); Hou & McDowell (2014); Joyce & Hopkins (2014); Kwon (2013); Li & Pitkänen (2018); Liang & Schartner (2020); Lai & Lu (2020); Maeder-Qian (2017); Meng et al. (2019); Preston & Wang (2017); Sonnenschein (2021); Willoughby-Knox & Yates (2021); Zhu (2017)	19
	Approaching uncomfortable sense	Lack of confidence	Babushko et al. (2022); Cao et al. (2021); Joyce & Hopkins (2014); Liang & Schartner (2020); Ou & Gu (2020); Popov et al. (2022); Willoughby-Knox & Yates (2021)	7
		Sense of anxiety and stress	Burdett (2014); Heng (2020); K. M. Kim (2022); Lee et al. (2022); Liang & Schartner (2020); Lin & Zhang (2021); Maeder-Qian (2017); Meng et al. (2019); Wang et al. (2020); Willoughby-Knox & Yates (2021)	10
Challenge of forming a common ground 59 occurrences in 41 studies	Challenge of achieving mutual understanding	Different classroom norms	Burdett (2014); Cao et al. (2021); Heng (2020); Hou & McDowell (2014); K. M. Kim (2022); Li & Pitkänen (2018); Popov, Brinkman, Fortuin, Lie & Li (2022); Sadykova (2014); Spencer-Oatey (2018); Tang et al. (2018); Wang, Moskal & Schweisfurth (2020); Wu (2015); Y. L. Zhang (2013)	13
		Different socialization norms	Adisa et al. (2019); Achirri (2021); Babushko et al. (2022); Bilotserkovets et al. (2020); Cao et al. (2021); Dennen & Bong (2018); God & Zhang (2018); Han et al. (2020); Heng (2020); Hou & McDowell (2014); Hu, Zhao, & van Veen (2016); Hu, Zhao & van Veen (2020); K. M. Kim (2022); Kwon (2013); Lee et al. (2022); Li & Pitkänen (2018); Lin & Zhang (2021); Maeder-Qian (2017); Rakushin & Hak-Soo	24

Theme refinement	Category	Code	Reference	No of study
			(2022); Sadykova (2014); Sonnenschein (2021); Spencer-Oatey (2018); Y. Yu (2019); Zhu (2017)	
	Segregation and prejudice	segregation	Burdett (2014); Heng (2020); Hoang & Jordan (2019); Héliot et al. (2020); Joyce & Hopkins (2014); Lee et al. (2022); Liang & Schartner (2020); Lin & Zhang (2021); Ou & Gu (2018); Preston & Wang (2017); Wang et al. (2020); Willoughby-Knox & Yates (2021)	12
		Prejudice	Hoang & Jordan (2019); Héliot et al. (2020); Jiang & Altinyelken (2022); Kwon (2013); Liu (2017); Meng et al. (2019); Park, Klieve, Hodge & Klopper (2020); Rakushin & Hak-Soo (2022); Wang et al. (2020); Zhai & Razali (2022)	10
Total	The review recorded 107 occurrences in 56 studies.			

Among the two main challenges, the ‘challenge of forming a common ground’ was reported slightly more frequently than ‘comprehension and production challenges’, with each comprising two sub-themes.

3.1.1. Comprehension and production challenge

The *comprehension and production challenge* refers to difficulties in understanding others and expressing oneself, encompassing two sub-themes: *usage of language challenges* and *approaching an uncomfortable sense*.

The first sub-theme, *usage of language challenges*, refers to the challenges Chinese students encounter when communicating in a foreign language, which occurs in two contexts. One context is when Chinese students and their interlocutors use a non-native language (i.e., lingua franca), and the other is when Chinese students use the native language of the other party (i.e., host language). For instance, when Chinese students communicate with local students in English-speaking countries using English, it is considered the use of the *host language* (e.g., Hou & McDowell, 2014; Willoughby-Knox & Yates, 2021). However, when they communicate with local students in non-English-speaking countries using English, it is considered the use of a *lingua franca* (e.g., Cai et al., 2022; Li & Pitkänen, 2018).

The second sub-theme, *approaching an uncomfortable sense*, refers to challenges arising when Chinese students experience discomfort in intercultural communication. Managing this discomfort—including a lack of confidence (e.g., Joyce & Hopkins, 2014; Popov et al., 2022), anxiety, and stress (e.g., Lin & Zhang, 2021; Wang et al., 2020)—becomes a significant challenge. Overall, both language use and psychological state affect Chinese students’ ability to understand others and express themselves in intercultural communication.

3.1.2. The challenge of Forming a Common Ground

The *challenge of forming a common ground* refers to difficulties in establishing shared knowledge and communication norms. This challenge consists of two sub-themes: *challenge of achieving mutual understanding* and *segregation and prejudice*. We elaborate on the content included in both sub-themes.

The *challenge of achieving mutual understanding* occurs in both classroom and social contexts.

- *Different classroom norms* refer to difficulties in participating in classroom activities due to differing attitudes towards engagement among students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Hou & McDowell, 2014; Wang et al., 2020).
- *Different socialization norms* occur when differences in interpersonal communication norms lead to misunderstandings. For instance, variations in language expression habits (e.g., God & Zhang, 2018), preferred social activities (e.g., Lin & Zhang, 2021), and greeting styles (e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2018) are all part of social norms. A lack of understanding of these differences can result in misaligned expectations (e.g., Hu et al., 2016, 2020; Maeder-Qian, 2017) and difficulties in forming friendships or establishing connections (e.g., Cao et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022).

The *segregation and prejudice* sub-theme consists of two aspects:

- *Segregation* refers to active or passive disconnection from groups of other cultural backgrounds. Some studies report that Chinese students remain within their comfort zones, preferring to interact only with those from the same major, cultural background, or language group (e.g., Héliot et al., 2020; Maeder-Qian, 2017; Ou & Gu, 2018). Additionally, other studies document the phenomenon of Chinese international students being excluded from group discussions by other cultural groups (e.g., Joyce & Hopkins, 2014; Liang & Schartner, 2020).
- *Prejudice* refers to discrimination or judgment based on cultural background. Ten studies reported that Chinese international students experienced verbal insults and aggressive behaviors during their studies abroad. These affronts were explicitly targeted at their cultural backgrounds, including language and nationality (e.g., Kwon, 2013; Rakushin & Hak-Soo, 2022; Zhai & Razali, 2022).

3.2. Coping Strategies And Interventions For Approaching Challenges In Intercultural Communication (RQ 2)

We identified coping strategies and interventions (as defined in Section 1.3) used to address challenges in intercultural communication, recording 29 occurrences from 21 studies and 24 occurrences from 19 studies, respectively, as shown in Table 4.

We extracted coping strategies under the theme of *Competence-driven strategy* and interventions under the theme of *Constructing an appropriate context*. Each of these two main themes encompasses two sub-themes and several specific codes.

Table 4: Coping Strategies And Interventions For Approaching Challenges In Intercultural Communication

Theme refinement	Category	Code	Reference	No of Study
Competence-driven strategy 31 occurrences in 22 studies	Resourcing strategy	Self-learning	Babushko et al. (2022); Cai et al. (2022); Einfalt (2020); K. M. Kim (2022); Park et al. (2020); Spencer-Oatey (2018); Wu (2015); Ye & Edwards (2015); Zhai & Razali (2022)	9
		Developing communication opportunities	Adisa et al. (2019); Babushko et al. (2022); Boonsuk & Fang (2021); Cai et al. (2022); K. M. Kim (2022); Li & Pitkänen (2018); Ou & Gu (2018); Park et al. (2020); Spencer-Oatey (2018); Y. Yu (2019); Yu & Moskal (2018); Y. Zhang (2022); Zhu (2017)	13
	Help-seeking strategy	Sharing others and seeking out support	Adisa et al. (2019); Cao et al. (2021); Hu et al. (2016); Hu et al. (2020); Lee et al. (2022); Sadykova (2014)	6
		Self-regulation	Lee et al. (2022); Park et al. (2020); Ye & Edwards (2015)	3
	Constructing appropriate context 24 occurrences in 19 studies	Creating context	Exposure to culturally mixed group work	Burdett (2014); Einfalt (2020); Hennebray & Fordyce (2017); Hou & McDowell (2014); Joyce & Hopkins (2014); Liang & Schartner (2020); Willoughby-Knox & Yates (2021); Wu (2015)
Targeted event, course, and training			Babushko et al. (2022); Einfalt (2020); Fomenko et al. (2020); Fox (2020); Joyce & Hopkins (2014); M. Lin (2018); Sadykova (2014); Sonnenschein (2021); Yu & Van Maele (2018); Zhai & Razali (2022)	10
Improving context		Meaningful intercultural interaction	Bean & Boffy-Ramirez (2017); Fomenko et al. (2020); Rakushin & Hak-Soo (2022); Sadykova (2014); Zou & Yu (2019)	4
		Shared instrument	Popov et al. (2019)	1
Total	The review recorded 55 occurrences in 37 studies.			

These themes, sub-themes, and codes are elaborated in the latter sections.

3.2.1. Competence-Driven Strategy

The competence-driven strategy refers to approaching challenges by acquiring new skills or improving existing competencies, and it consists of two sub-themes, namely ‘Resourcing strategy’ and ‘Help-seeking strategy’. Resourcing strategy involves utilizing others, such as supervisors, peers, and literature, as learning resources to compensate for knowledge gaps and adapt to new contexts through observation and learning. Two codes were categorized under this sub-theme. Self-learning encompassed various forms, including reading materials (e.g., Babushko et al., 2022; K. M. Kim, 2022), observing others (e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2018; Wu, 2015), self-assessment (e.g., Einfalt, 2020), and self-reflection (e.g., Spencer-Oatey, 2018; Ye & Edwards, 2015). ‘Developing communication opportunities’ refers to students proactively initiating interactions with individuals from other cultural backgrounds by exposing themselves to the target language environment (e.g., Boonsuk & Fang, 2021; Park et al., 2020) or initiating engagements (e.g., Cai et al., 2022; Li & Pitkänen, 2018). Help-seeking strategy refers to enlisting others or external resources to address challenges in intercultural communication. Among the two codes, ‘Sharing with others and seeking out support’ emphasizes skills and knowledge such as communication skills (e.g., Hu et al., 2016) and knowledge about local culture (e.g., Cao et al., 2021). It includes both seeking aid from compatriots (e.g., Cao et al., 2021; Fox, 2020) and seeking assistance from individuals of other cultural backgrounds (e.g., Lee et al., 2022; Sadykova, 2014). ‘Self-regulation’ focuses on psychological aspects, such as developing self-confidence (e.g., Park et al., 2020; Ye & Edwards, 2015) and managing stress and anxiety (e.g., Lee et al., 2022).

3.2.2. Constructing Appropriate Context

Constructing appropriate context refers to interventions aimed at improving intercultural communication by creating or enhancing the context in which interactions occur. It encompasses two sub-themes: ‘Creating context’ and ‘Improving context’. ‘Creating context’ refers to structured intercultural settings designed to facilitate interaction among students. This sub-theme includes two codes: one focuses on multicultural group work (e.g., Burdett, 2014; Einfalt, 2020), and the other concentrates on intercultural events, courses, and training (e.g., Joyce & Hopkins, 2014; M. Lin, 2018). ‘Improving context’ includes two codes: ‘Meaningful intercultural interaction’, which focuses on the interaction itself, including the form, content, process, and participant structure (e.g., Zou &

Yu, 2019), and ‘Shared instrument’, which refers to the development of functional tools to optimize the interaction process (e.g., Popov et al., 2019).

3.3. Implementation of Coping Strategies And Interventions (RQ 3)

In the previous sections 3.1 and 3.2, we elaborated on the challenges Chinese students face in intercultural communication, as well as the coping strategies and interventions used to address these challenges. Building on these findings, we will further elucidate how to implement these coping strategies and interventions, as well as the effects and outcomes of their implementation. We initially present coping strategies and interventions that address these challenges (see Table 5). Subsequently, Table 6 provides a detailed account of the impacts and outcomes associated with the implementation of these coping strategies and interventions, citing the sources that evaluate these effects.

Table 5: Matrix of coping strategy, intervention, and challenge

Coping Strategy/Intervention	①Self-learning; ②Developing communication opportunity; ③Sharing others and seeking out support; ④Self-regulation; ⑤Exposure to culturally mixed group work; ⑥Targeted event, course, and training; ⑦Meaningful intercultural interaction; ⑧Shared instrument							
	Challenge Reference	Usage of lingua franca	Usage of host language	Lack of confidence	Sense of anxiety and stress	Different classroom norms	Different socialization norms	segregation
Adisa et al. (2019)	n/a	②③	n/a	n/a	③	③	②	n/a
Babushko et al. (2022)	n/a	⑥	n/a	n/a	①	⑥	n/a	n/a
Bean & Boffy-Ramirez (2017)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑦	n/a
Boonsuk & Fang (2021)	②	n/a	②	②	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Burdett (2014)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑤	n/a	n/a	n/a
Cai et al. (2022)	n/a	①②	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Cao et al. (2021)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Einfalt (2020)	n/a	⑤	n/a	⑤	n/a	⑤	n/a	⑤
Fomenko et al. (2020)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑥⑦	n/a	⑥⑦
Fox (2020)	n/a	⑥	n/a	n/a	⑥	n/a	n/a	n/a
Hennebry & Fordyce (2017)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Hou & McDowell (2014)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑤	⑤
Hu et al. (2016)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	③	n/a	③
Hu et al. (2020)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	③	n/a	③
Joyce & Hopkins (2014)	n/a	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤	⑤	n/a	n/a
K. M. Kim (2022)	n/a	①	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	②	n/a
Lee et al. (2022)	n/a	n/a	n/a	③④	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Li & Pitkänen (2018)	②	②	n/a	n/a	②	②	②	n/a
Liang & Schartner (2020)	⑤	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑤	⑤	⑤
M. Lin (2018)	⑥	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑥
Ou & Gu (2018)	②	n/a	②	n/a	n/a	n/a	②	n/a
Park et al. (2020)	②	②	④	④	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Popov et al. (2019)	⑧	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑧	⑧	n/a	n/a
Rakushin & Hak-Soo (2022)	⑦	⑦	n/a	n/a	⑦	⑦	n/a	⑦
Sadykova (2014)	n/a	⑦	n/a	n/a	③⑥⑦	⑥⑦	n/a	n/a
Sonnenschein (2021)	⑥	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑥	n/a	n/a
Spencer-Oatey (2018)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	①②	n/a	n/a
Willoughby-Knox & Yates (2021)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑤	n/a
Wu (2015)	n/a	n/a	n/a	①	⑤	n/a	n/a	n/a
Ye & Edwards (2015)	n/a	①	①④	①④	n/a	n/a	n/a	①④
Y. Yu (2019)	n/a	②	n/a	n/a	n/a	②	n/a	n/a
Yu & Van Maele (2018)	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	⑥
Yu & Moskal (2018)	n/a	②	n/a	②	n/a	n/a	②	②
Zhai & Razali (2022)	①⑥	n/a	n/a	n/a	①	n/a	n/a	n/a
Y. Zhang (2022)	②	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Zhu (2017)	n/a	②	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	②	n/a

Coping Strategy/Intervention	①Self-learning; ②Developing communication opportunity; ③Sharing others and seeking out support; ④Self-regulation; ⑤Exposure to culturally mixed group work; ⑥Targeted event, course, and training; ⑦Meaningful intercultural interaction; ⑧Shared instrument							
Challenge	Usage of lingua franca	Usage of host language	Lack of confidence	Sense of anxiety and stress	Different classroom norms	Different socialization norms	segregation	Prejudice
Zou & Yu (2019)	n/a	n/a	⑦	⑦	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Challenge category/coping strategy & intervention code	Usage of language challenges/①②⑤⑥⑦⑧	Approaching uncomfortable sense/①②③④⑤⑦	Approaching uncomfortable sense/①②③④⑤⑦	Approaching uncomfortable sense/①②③④⑤⑦	Challenge of mutual understanding/①②③⑤⑥⑦⑧	Challenge of achieving mutual understanding/①②③⑤⑥⑦⑧	Segregation and prejudice/①②③④⑤⑥⑦	Segregation and prejudice/①②③④⑤⑥⑦

Source: By the authors.

We found that with the exception of the help-seeking strategy which was not effective in addressing the ‘usage of language challenges’, all categories of coping strategies and interventions were capable of approaching each type of challenge category. To further ascertain the extent to which these challenges have been addressed, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of the outcomes, we have elaborated on the pertinent information for each study (see Table 6).

Table 6: Evaluation of coping strategy/intervention implementation

Reference	Effects/Outcomes	Validity & Reliability
Adisa et al. (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve oral communication skills. Gradually understand and accept British culture. Help students establish and expand social relationships. 	Analysis of interviews and focus group discussions.
Babushko et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance students’ Ukrainian language proficiency to improve communication with locals. Assist students in better understanding academic requirements and assessment systems. Help students gain a deeper understanding of Ukrainian culture and customs. 	Untested, suggestions based on findings.
Bean & Boffy-Ramirez (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate interactions between students from different cultural backgrounds. 	Analysis of survey.
Boonsuk & Fang (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help students understand the diversity of English and improve their English proficiency. Reduce anxiety in using English and build communication confidence. 	Analysis of interviews
Burdett (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only achieve limited positive intercultural learning outcomes. 	Analysis of interviews
Cai et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attitudes towards English accents have changed, with a focus now on content and pronunciation rather than accent. 	Analysis of interviews
Cao et al. (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeking help from compatriot communities to achieve academic success. 	Analysis of interviews
Einfalt (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoted open communication with strangers and reduced fear and nervousness about interacting. Develop intercultural communication competence. Enhancing cultural awareness and reducing stereotypes. 	Analysis of interviews, survey, and written reflection data.
Fomenko et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance language skills. Understand and adapt to a new academic context. 	Analysis of interview and survey data.
Fox (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance language skills. Understand and adapt to a new academic context. 	Analysis of interviews, written reflection, and observation data.
Hennebry & Fordyce (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some believe they can learn new knowledge, while others think they gain nothing. 	Analysis of survey and focus group.
Hou & McDowell (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase interaction among students. Reduce prejudice between groups. 	Untested, suggestions based on findings.
Hu et al. (2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Better understand each other’s intentions and behaviors. Learn to understand and evaluate learning behaviors from each other’s cultural and educational backgrounds. 	Analysis of self-reported experiences.
Hu et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce misunderstandings due to cultural differences in behavior. 	Analysis of interviews.
Joyce & Hopkins (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gradually adapt to working in an intercultural group. Continuously face challenges, leading to poor group relationships. 	Analysis of survey and focus group.
K. M. Kim (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significantly improve English proficiency. Promote the socialization process and identity construction. 	Analysis of written reflections, interview and observation.
Lee et al. (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn to deal with setbacks and uncertainty. 	Analysis of interviews.
Li & Pitkänen (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve language skills. Adapt to the new educational context. Establish intercultural social contacts. 	Analysis of interviews.
Liang & Schartner (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance understanding of different cultures, and attitudes become more open and inclusive. 	Analysis of survey and interviews.

Reference	Effects/Outcomes	Validity & Reliability
M. Lin (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply intercultural competence, such as communication and cooperation, reflection and self-regulation. • Enhance English proficiency. • Help to understand cultural differences and identify barriers and misunderstandings in intercultural communication. 	Untested
Ou & Gu (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance linguistic and cultural confidence. 	Analysis of interviews and observation.
Park et al. (2020)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance English proficiency. • Helps to reduce self-consciousness about English and build confidence. 	Analysis of survey.
Popov et al. (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote effective communication and collaboration. • Promote social interaction and critical discussion. 	Analysis of survey and the content that are produced by online interaction.
Rakushin & Hak-Soo (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce prejudices caused by historical and political issues. • Help to adapt to the new contexts in terms of the host university and society. 	Analysis of survey.
Sadykova (2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps with understanding and adapting to the host country's culture. • Building social connections and understanding and adapting to new learning contexts through interaction. 	Analysis of interviews, reflective journals and the content that are produced by online interaction.
Sonnenschein (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce conflicts among team members. • Improve English proficiency. 	Analysis of interviews.
Spencer-Oatey (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to respond to greetings naturally and engage in conversations. 	Analysis of participants' portfolio.
Willoughby-Knox & Yates (2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceiving self-improvement 	Analysis of survey.
Wu (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significantly reduce the frustration and stress caused by the new learning context. • Improve the ability to communicate and cooperate with people from different cultural backgrounds. 	Analysis of interviews.
Ye & Edwards (2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overcoming language barriers and perceived discrimination. • Building self-identity, enhancing self-confidence. 	Analysis of interviews and focus group discussion.
Y. Yu (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve English proficiency. • Understand the Western and Christian culture. 	Analysis of interviews and survey.
Yu & Van Maele (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to view cultural issues from multiple perspectives. 	Analysis of written reflections.
Yu & Moskal (2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance English proficiency. • Help to better cope with the pressure of discrimination and cultural adaptation. 	Analysis of interviews and observation.
Zhai & Razali (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt to the host country's English accent and expressions, while the results are minimal. 	Analysis of interviews.
Y. Zhang (2022)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance intercultural competence. 	Analysis of survey.
Zhu (2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance English proficiency. • Expand social networks. 	Analysis of interviews, reflective journals, and observation.
Zou & Yu (2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage the expression of personal opinions and build self-confidence. • Create a comfortable space to promote participation in intercultural interactions. 	Analysis of interviews, observation, and focus group discussion.

Source: By the authors.

We observed significant variation in the evaluation of effects and outcomes across different studies, even when the same coping strategies and interventions were employed. For instance, Burdett (2014) found that exposure to an intercultural group work context yielded only limited learning outcomes for students. However, Einfalt (2020) discovered that within such a context, students' fear and anxiety about interaction were reduced, and they became more open to strangers. Hennebry & Fordyce's (2017) evaluation falls somewhere in between. They found that domestic students were more likely to endorse intercultural group work because they believed it offered rich learning outcomes, while international students felt their gains were limited. Furthermore, we found that evaluations of effects and outcomes heavily relied on self-reported data, such as interviews, surveys, and written reflections. Only about one-quarter (9 out of 37) of the evaluations were based on the analysis of mixed data, incorporating both self-reported data and other forms of data, such as observation, focus group discussions, and records of online interactions.

4. Discussion

We fully agree that no group should be isolated in intercultural relationships, and even the division of cultural groups should be approached with caution. To align this review with the larger project framework and to keep the review within a manageable scope, we chose to investigate the Chinese student population. This does not mean that we have ignored other groups; we are aware that the ideal scenario would be to observe all parties within intercultural relationships. The results observed from Chinese students alone may lack generalizability, but our

aim is not to identify common challenges for everyone or specific methods for addressing certain issues. Instead, our goal is to understand the feelings and reactions of a subset of individuals in intercultural communication to explore the factors that influence behaviour. Based on the findings of this review and subsequent discussions, we believe that communication needs are a potential influencing factor.

4.1. Challenges Arise From Communicative Needs

The importance of context in understanding and analyzing intercultural communication has been emphasized and confirmed (Kimmel & Volet, 2010; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009), and it is considered fundamental to effective communication (Gudykunst, 2005). However, we find that the success of intercultural communication may not have a direct causal relationship with context. For instance, both successful and unsuccessful cases of intercultural communication can be found in various contexts, such as the host country (e.g., Hu et al., 2016; Zhu, 2017), local settings (e.g., Han et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2018), international colleges in China (e.g., Ou & Gu, 2018, 2020), and online environments (e.g., Popov et al., 2019; Sadykova, 2014). This pattern also holds within the same context, such as intercultural group work (e.g., Einfalt, 2020; Hou & McDowell, 2014). In all contexts where challenges in intercultural communication arise, at least one party is unable to meet the communicative needs of the situation.

For example, a Chinese student was excluded by other European group members for not meeting the communicative needs of a group discussion (Joyce & Hopkins, 2014). The student struggled to keep up with the interaction pace due to unfamiliarity with the accents and speaking speed of other group members. At the same time, the European group members neglected the Chinese student's communicative needs by failing to adjust their speaking pace or assist in adaptation. Another study found that Chinese students were able to fully participate in interactions and express their opinions in intercultural group work (Zou & Yu, 2019). Additionally, an example from an international college in China showed that Chinese students were reluctant to use English in daily social interactions, which affected their ability to express themselves freely and fully understand others. However, they were highly willing to use English to explain Chinese culture to international peers during specific activities (Ou & Gu, 2018). Ou & Gu (2018) interpreted this shift in attitude as a reflection of language power dynamics and identity. We, however, interpret it as a difference in communicative needs. Therefore, the severity of challenges perceived by students may depend on the extent to which they can meet communicative needs.

4.2. Communication Needs Affect Communication Evaluation

There seems to be no direct one-to-one correspondence between coping strategies or interventions and specific challenges (see Table 5). In other words, there is no “silver bullet” to address a particular challenge. Moreover, sometimes coping strategies and interventions have very limited effects. For example, Chinese students found it difficult to cope with the challenges of language usage in the host country through self-learning (e.g., Zhai & Razali, 2022). However, there are also cases where self-learning proved to be an effective way to improve language proficiency in the host country (e.g., K. M. Kim, 2022). In both cases, the students' self-learning strategies were very similar, involving the use of textbooks, audio materials, and videos, yet the outcomes were vastly different.

Beyond individual differences, we speculate that the primary reason for this divergence in evaluation is their respective communicative needs. In the former case, the student's communicative need was to successfully socialize with local teachers and students, while in the latter case, the goal was to achieve academic success. Hennebry & Fordyce (2017) clearly reflected this in unstructured intercultural collaborative learning, where students with different communicative needs showed significant differences in their evaluation of learning outcomes. For example, some students believed that this method of learning clarified lecture content, while others expressed doubt because they did not obtain clear answers or results from the exchange. Conversely, in structured intercultural collaborative learning, students' evaluations of learning outcomes showed greater consistency, including improved understanding and respect for collaboration methods from different cultural backgrounds (Popov et al., 2019).

Therefore, when participating in or organizing intercultural communication, it is necessary to first consider clarifying and unifying communication needs.

5. Implications

Based on the findings and discussions of this review, we propose an intercultural communication diagnostic diagram (Figure 2).

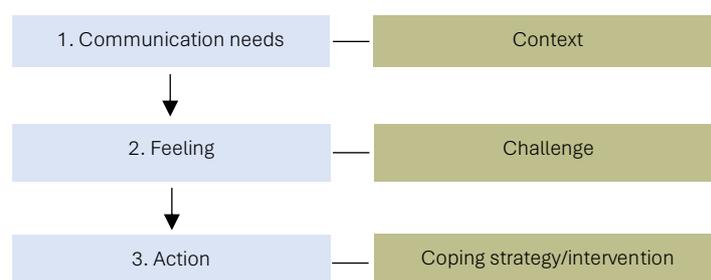


Figure 2: Intercultural Communication Diagnostic Diagram

Figure 2 is primarily used for diagnosing intercultural communication experiences, aiding reflection, and providing actionable recommendations. The first step in diagnosis is to confirm communication needs. These needs may encompass expectations for clarity, breadth, and depth of information, as well as the need for feedback. At this step, it is not only necessary to identify one's own communication needs but also to reflect on the needs of others and context-imposed communication needs, such as contributing ideas in a group discussion. The second step involves understanding communication feelings. Here, one must reflect on the relationship between perceived challenges and the fulfillment of communication needs for oneself, others, or the context. The third step is to review the actions taken. In this step, it is important to review what strategies were employed to address challenges and their effectiveness. This diagnostic diagram aids in reflecting on the process of intercultural communication rather than evaluating outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This review has examined the challenges encountered by Chinese students in intercultural communication, mapped the relationships between these challenges and the coping strategies and interventions employed to address them, and further elucidated the effects and outcomes of implementing these coping strategies and interventions. We found that there is no one-to-one correspondence between challenges and coping strategies or interventions, and sometimes the implementation of coping strategies or interventions has little effect. From this, we discussed the relationship between challenges and context in intercultural communication and speculated that the emergence of challenges is related to communication needs. We then continued to discuss the impact of communication needs on individuals' evaluations of their intercultural communication experiences, affirming the importance of communication needs in intercultural communication. Based on the above findings and discussions, we propose a diagnostic diagram for intercultural communication, which serves as a framework for reflecting on intercultural experiences. This framework is primarily used for reflecting on the communication process rather than assessing outcomes.

7. Limitations

We state the limitations of this review here to avoid potential bias. The first limitation is that keyword searches may not capture all relevant studies, as some pertinent information is hidden within the text rather than in the abstract, title, or keywords. Additionally, subjective selection methods, such as reading titles, abstracts, and full texts, may also lead to misjudgments and omissions. The second limitation is the potential bias introduced by the authors' own context, such as a focus on the educational development of Chinese students.

8. Future research

This review study points to numerous worthwhile areas for future research. Firstly, we continue to advocate for the use of diverse data sources (e.g., peer evaluation and observation) to avoid biases that arise from an overreliance on self-reported data. Secondly, we believe that groups beyond sojourners should be given more attention. Furthermore, communication needs may serve as a significant indicator in evaluating intercultural communication experiences, and the correlation between communication needs and individuals' behaviours and perceptions within intercultural communication warrants further validation.

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