

Forming Intercultural Friendships with Hosts:
A Comparative Study of Serbians in Japan and Japanese in Serbia

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Forming Intercultural Friendships with Hosts: A Comparative Study of Serbians in Japan and Japanese in Serbia

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Introduction

In this modern era of globalization, when people are crossing geographical and cultural boundaries more than ever, intercultural research has become increasingly important. Successful interactions with the local population and adjustment to other cultures are significantly facilitated by intercultural friendships.

Majority of studies on intercultural friendship have been focused on experiences of international students studying abroad. These studies have discovered various benefits of intercultural friendship formation, some of them being better language proficiency, greater life satisfaction, lower levels of stress, and enhanced perceptions of the host country (Gareis, 2017). Prioritizing friendships in life was associated with better health and well-being (Lu, Oh, Leahy & Chopic, 2021). Demir et al. (2012) found that social skills are associated with positive psychological states and enhanced friendship experiences. Although benefits are obvious and frequently reported, the lack of friendship between sojourners and host nationals is commonly found in acculturation research (Gareis, 2011). Therefore, newer studies increasingly focus on factors that influence intercultural friendship formation and on measures for promoting them.

In the acculturation studies, there is a distinction between sociocultural adaptation and psychological adaptation. Psychological adaptation refers to well-being or satisfaction, and it is influenced by personality, coping skills and social support. Sociocultural adaptation is defined in terms of behavioral skills, as an ability to “fit in” or effectively interact with members of the host culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). It has been associated with cultural learning and acquisition of social skills in the host culture. Both psychological and sociocultural adaptation are significantly facilitated by intercultural friendships, so as the integration, the most favorable acculturation strategy (Berry, 1995, 2005).

In Japan, in an attempt to improve internationalization of higher education, back in 2008 the Japanese government proposed accepting 300,000 international students by 2020, a goal that was reached in 2019. Moreover, many Japanese students left Japan to study abroad in

various countries. Rapid increase of international students exchanges inspired academic research on acculturation of the international students. Tanaka and associates have conducted a large body of research about adjustment of international students in Japan, focusing on social support (Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama, Minami, & Fujihara, 1994), language use patterns (Simic, Tanaka & Hasegawa, 2006; Simic, Tanaka & Yashima, 2007; Simic-Yamashita & Tanaka, 2011) and cross-cultural social skills (Tanaka & Fujihara, 1992). Social skills are defined as useful cognitive and behavioral strategies used for beginning, maintaining and developing interpersonal relationships. In a cross-cultural context, they are a behavior changes that occur while living or adjusting to a social setting in a host culture (Tanaka & Okunishi, 2016). Tanaka and associates found that international students in Japan use wide variety of social skills in order to form friendships with hosts, and that skills usage is influenced by individuals' original behavior repertoires, the difficulty of skill acquisition, the willingness to use the skills, and the evaluation of the skills' usefulness, which is possibly influenced by the hosts' attitudes.

In recent years, as the number of Muslim students in Japan has been increasing, research about their acculturation to the host country has received special attention. Muslim students experienced difficulties in upholding religious practices, but also in social life, given that in Japan, all public places are used by both males and females, which is unusual in Islamic countries (Nakano, Okunishi & Tanaka, 2015). Nakano, Tanaka & Simic-Yamashita (2017) found that short-term evasion, avoiding Japanese and accommodating to a Japanese passive interpersonal tendency by actively approaching, were strategies Muslim students use to cope with acculturation difficulties. They also developed a distinct set of academic-related and culture-specific social skills to cope with the challenges (Sozen, A. I., Tanaka, T., & Nakano S. (2020).

In addition to the extensive research on acculturation and intercultural friendships of international students in Japan, a series of qualitative studies was conducted with the Japanese international students in various countries. For the Japanese students in Australia, it was found that frequent interactions, similarity of personal characteristics and self-disclosure promoted the development of friendship with hosts (Kudo & Simkin, 2003). Tanaka and Takahama (2013) stated the importance of learning social skills as a part of the preparations for Japanese students to go to the U.S. to study. They found that learned and actively applied social skills helped Japanese students to acquire more social support, and as a result, to experience studying abroad in the U.S. as more enjoyable (Takahama, A., Nishimura,

Y., & Tanaka, T., 2008). In France, Japanese students struggled with assertiveness, time-related looseness and excessive sociability of their hosts (Tetsukawa & Tanaka, 2016, Nakano & Tanaka, 2019), while in Taiwan (Chen, Tanaka & Nakano, 2014), hosts being unreliable and asking personal questions were some of the challenges Japanese sojourners experienced. Similarly, in Turkey, Japanese participants had difficulties to accept some of common Turkish cultural norms, such as self-expression or private space, what made forming friendships with the hosts challenging (Nakano & Tanaka, 2019).

The present study focuses on Serbia and Japan. Japan and Serbia are distant countries, and people don't know much about each other. However, a diplomatic relationship between them officially exists since 1882, when the Japanese emperor Meiji accepted Serbia as an independent kingdom, and started official correspondence with the new Serbian king, Milan Obrenovic. Since then, the two nations have maintained a relationship of friendship, solidarity and cooperation. As of 2021, around 150 Japanese live in Serbia, while approximately 200 Serbians live in Japan.

In this study, we looked into dynamics of intercultural friendship formation between Serbians and Japanese, and compared socialization patterns of two nations. This small, exploratory study was done as a part of a large series of studies about cross-cultural social skills, adaptation and social network of international students in Japan, and Japanese students abroad. Prior to this study, similar studies were conducted in the US (Tanaka and Takahama, 2013), Taiwan (Chen, Tanaka & Nakano, 2014), Turkey (Nakano & Tanaka, 2019) and France (Tetsukawa & Tanaka, 2016; Nakano & Tanaka, 2019).

This study was the first one that explores the cross-cultural experiences of Serbians and Japanese, both in the role of guests in each other's countries.

Method

A qualitative research design using case studies was employed in this study. Qualitative studies focus on understanding and interpreting the nature of the research problem rather than on the quantity of observed characteristics.

Participants were 7 Serbians living in Japan and 7 Japanese living in Serbia. Due to a small sample, groups were not demographically the same, but they were similar in that the majority of the participants were international university students. However, some of them were

employed at the time of the interview, but had a history of studying in the host country prior to employment. In the semi-structured interview, which was same for both groups, we asked participants following questions: 1) how they initiated friendships with host friends, 2) what were their biggest challenges in developing friendships and 3) how did they overcome those challenges, or in other words, which strategies or social skills they used in order to maintain those friendships;

First part of the study was conducted in summer and autumn 2017, when we interviewed seven Serbians living in Japan (4 females and 3 males, 5 students, 2 working, age 21-35). Interviews were done in person or online, in Serbian language. For the second part of the study, we went to Serbia in winter 2017, and interviewed Japanese participants who lived there (5 females, 2 males, 4 students, 3 working, ages 20-32). Interviews were conducted in person, in Japanese language.

All interviews lasted between 45 minutes to 2 hours, were recorded and transcribed, and then translated from Serbian and Japanese language into English. We used the KJ method to organize the qualitative data. Various themes emerged, and they clearly illustrated different patterns of challenges and strategies in two cultural groups.

Results and discussion

In this study, we compared how Serbians in Japan and Japanese in Serbia formed friendships with their hosts, what their challenges were, and what social skills they used to develop and maintain such friendships. The results are divided in two sections – (1) challenges and social skills of Serbians in Japan, and (2) challenges and social skills of Japanese in Serbia.

1. Serbians in Japan

Table 1 shows categories of intercultural challenges and applied social skills of Serbians in Japan.

Table 1: Intercultural challenges and social skills of Serbians in Japan

Serbians in Japan - challenges	Serbians in Japan - social skills
<p>1. Expectation of foreignness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stereotypes about foreigners (loud, direct, speak only English) • expected to take initiative 	<p>1. Communicating like Japanese</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • carefully choosing topics • avoid being too intimate • politeness
<p>2. Friendship protocol</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • meticulous pre-planning • meeting rarely • don't mix friends 	<p>2. Maintaining foreignness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • initiate contact first • using humor • be open and friendly
<p>3. Lack of reciprocity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • visit my home but never invite me • use me for English practice • I opened up by they didn't 	<p>3. Embracing differences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pay bills separately • plan socializing with friends • not meeting too frequently

1.1. Serbians in Japan - challenges

As their biggest challenges for making friends with Japanese, Serbian participants reported expectation of foreignness, strict friendship protocol and lack of reciprocity.

1.1.1. Expectation of foreignness

Serbian participants perceived that many Japanese people had a firm stereotype about 'foreigners' – a term that frequently equals with being Westerner, or more precisely, American, and foreigners are commonly portrayed as being open, friendly, loud, direct, and speak only English. Most of the Serbian students from this study majored in Japanese language so they were knowledgeable of Japanese language and culture, and wanted to communicate in Japanese, but they had impressions that they are not “foreign” enough for Japanese friends. One participant said *“When I try to behave in a more Japanese way, such as bowing and speaking in Japanese, they find that weird and expect me to behave more like a “foreigner”.* Moreover, Serbian participants noticed that they were frequently expected to make a first move and initiate a conversation, or be the first one to invite a Japanese friend to meet.

“I was told that they would be happy if I initiated the interaction first, which I sometimes did, but if I don't take out my scheduler and make an appointment immediately, nothing ever happens.”

Some Serbians described their own personality as shy and quiet, and they felt that such demeanor didn't seem to be sufficiently attractive to make many friends.

“I am naturally modest and polite, and people often tell me that I behave like a Japanese person. People wonder how a foreigner can be so quiet and polite and I find that attitude insulting. There are modest and polite people outside of Japan too, for me that is common sense.”

1.1.2. Friendship protocol

Serbians found it very surprising that meetings with Japanese friends must be carefully planned, well in advance. In Serbia, going out with friends happens spontaneously, appointments are easy to make and no planning is necessary. Friends meet often, daily or few times a week. However, in Japan, friends rarely get together, and outings are meticulously pre-planned, they often must be scheduled one month in advance or even longer. Places and activities are carefully decided, and time spent together is limited. People usually carry a notebook where they schedule their meetings including those with friends, and for Serbians that was strange, and they reported feeling like they were at a business meeting.

“With Japanese people there are no friendships without a particular occasion, such as just casually going out or for a drink or coffee. Going out always must be planned in advance, in small details, and it feels like a business meeting and not friendship.”

In addition to this, for Serbians it was unusual that Japanese people tend to keep separate friends from distinct groups (school, work, club) and they don't introduce them among themselves, therefore, it is difficult to expand the network of friends, while in Serbia it is quite the opposite.

“I realized that Japanese people have distinct private friends, school friends, club friends, work friends, and they don't mix them. This is not just with foreigners, but Japanese-Japanese friendships too”

1.1.3. Lack of reciprocity

Another thing that was challenging for Serbians was that they perceived non-reciprocity in Japanese friendships. Serbians often invited Japanese friends to their home, which they gladly accepted and, in some cases, they even came uninvited. However, Japanese friends never invited them back to their homes.

“I invite someone to my house or to play futsal, they eagerly come and we have a good time, but they never invite me back. Other foreigners invite us home, but not Japanese.”

The reason for this is because it is not customary in Japan to invite friends to their home, as homes are reserved only for family members. However, Serbians found this unfair and opportunistic. Moreover, Serbians perceived how Japanese friends were sometimes using them just to practice English and had no intentions of developing deeper friendships.

“When I show a friendly attitude, they think that it’s because I am a foreigner, not because I am honest and interested in friendships with them. I felt disappointed many times when I put in emotions and showed effort, but didn’t get anything back; I feel that it’s good for their image to hang out with foreigners, but they don’t consider me a friend.”

1.2. Serbians in Japan - Social skills

All Serbian participants, especially those who stayed longer in Japan, developed some social skills that helped them overcome challenges and make friendships with Japanese people. The skills were divided into the following three categories: communicating like Japanese, maintaining foreignness and embracing differences.

1.2.1. Communicating like Japanese

Learning to communicate in a Japanese way meant not only using Japanese language but also using gestures, such as bowing or nodding, that are typical for Japan, and avoiding handshakes and kisses, that are typical in Serbia. Furthermore, politeness is very important in Japanese culture, thus using polite language, especially with older people, being considerate about others and letting them lead the conversation, and apologizing often, even if there is no obvious need for it, because apologies are a form of greetings in Japan, were some of the strategies that Serbian students used to maintain friendships with Japanese. Another important point was choosing appropriate conversation topics – Japanese people generally don’t like talking about themselves, therefore avoiding personal questions, and using neutral but interesting topics instead, such as food, games, sport, animals or world facts shown as a good strategy to develop friendships with hosts.

1.2.2. Maintaining foreignness

Adjusting to a Japanese style of communicating was important, however, Serbians realized that maintaining foreignness, which meant, not trying to be too “Japanized”, being who they are, being open and direct, and taking initiative in conversation helped them make more friends. Showing interest and often approaching first, using humor and jokes and having a friendly attitude toward everyone were some of the strategies they used to open up the interaction.

1.2.3. Embracing differences

Finally, Serbians got used to Japanese ways of interacting and maintaining friendships, and just accepted them as they were. One Japanese custom that was originally very strange to Serbians was the “*betsu-betsu*” system, or paying all the bills separately, and explicitly requesting to pay their share even if they were invited to a party or a friend’s birthday. In Serbia, it is a matter of honor to pay for friends, especially if they are invited as guests, so this attitude toward money was shocking to Serbians. However, they learned and accepted that the Japanese way was different, so they got accustomed to paying bills separately. Moreover, pre-planning meetings with friends, and not meeting them too often also became part of their normal social functioning in Japan.

“When I let go of spontaneous invitations to go out, I was immediately relieved. I understood that in Japan you have to plan time with friends, and that is OK to me now. I understood that no one is rejecting me because they don’t like me, but because it is customary in Japan to make plans and reservations for outings with friends. With Serbs and other foreigners, I still hang out spontaneously, but with Japanese I plan. It’s very important that you always keep in mind that you are in a foreign land and that you have to adjust and not them. That’s why I could develop friendships in Japan - I understood that I shouldn’t expect from the Japanese the same relationships and same systems of friendships as in Serbia.”

2. Japanese in Serbia

On the other side of the globe, Japanese people living in Serbia had their own share of struggles when interacting with hosts. Table 2 shows categories of intercultural challenges and applied social skills of Japanese in Serbia.

Table 2: Intercultural challenges and social skills of Japanese in Serbia

Japanese in Serbia - challenges	Japanese in Serbia –social skills
<p>1. Group cohesiveness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure to act in small groups • Monotony • Belongingness and loyalty 	<p>1. Directness (avoiding ‘aimai’)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • become more open and direct • avoid silence (short comments) • explicitly show trust
<p>2. Communication style</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent messaging • Silence is intolerable • Simultaneous talking 	<p>2. Boundaries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explicitly say what you like or dislike • respond clearly and immediately • ignore annoying questions
<p>3. Spontaneity/Looseness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making agreements too quickly • Bringing other people • Frequent last-minute cancelations 	<p>3. Proactivity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • active greetings; learn Serbian • respond quickly to SMS • invite someone first

2.1. Japanese in Serbia – challenges

The biggest challenges Japanese participants faced when communicating with Serbian friends were group cohesiveness, communication style and Serbian spontaneity (or looseness).

2.1.1. Group cohesiveness

Japanese living in Serbia were confused by the group dynamics of Serbian friendship. They perceived how Serbian friendships function in small groups of 4-6 people, and those groups tend to be very tight and cohesive. Friends meet very frequently, often on a daily basis, with the same members, they take care of each other, don't fight, don't criticize each other, they are comfortable with each other, like a family. However, groups also request loyalty, which means that individual activities outside the group, or hanging out with people from other groups, are frowned upon and discouraged. Groups do mingle among themselves, and it is easy to expand a network of friends and acquaintances, but the core group members stay the same. In Japan, on the other hand, people can belong to various groups (school, club, work, neighborhood), they have different friends for different occasions, and the groups stay separated, they don't interact with each other. These boundaries between groups provide a variety of people and activities. However, in Serbia, people join groups with people who are similar to them and with whom they feel comfortable and relaxed, thus faces, activities and even conversation topics rarely change. This was very monotonous for Japanese and they found this group cohesiveness and restricting behaviors pressuring and stressful.

“All friendship activities are happening in small groups who are very cohesive and members always stick together; A group always goes out together, and if you want to go with only one or two of them, they don’t think well about it, and they ask “Why didn’t you call me? They meet almost every day, but there is no content - they always do the same things and talk about the same topics. I find that annoying and intimidating.”

2.1.2. Communication style

Another characteristic of Serbian friendships that was curious but also irritating to Japanese, was Serbian communication style. Japanese people are raised to quietly listen while someone else is speaking, and this is their way of showing respect to the speaker. However, in Serbia, people dislike silence and find it uncomfortable, and listener is expected to actively participate in a conversation. Therefore, if another person is quiet, they may feel insulted, and may ask questions like “Am I boring you”? or “Why don’t you say something”? Moreover, they tend to speak simultaneously with other people. In a group of 5-6 people, it is not unusual to see all of them talking and commenting at the same time, which is unheard of in Japan. This behavior was confusing for Japanese, and hard for them to get used to.

“When someone talks, I keep quiet and listen carefully until the end - but Serbians can’t tolerate silence and always talk at the same time. If I’m quiet they always ask “What’s wrong? Are you bored?” Serbians don’t seem to listen what other person is talking”.

In addition to this, Serbians seem to send SMS messages to their friends way too often, and expect them to respond immediately, which was rather annoying to Japanese.

“SMS or phone calls are too frequent and most often without a particular reason, just to check in. If you don’t reply soon, they may get insulted or angry.”

2.1.3. Spontaneity/Looseness

Finally, Serbians are very spontaneous and invite people and organize meetings instantly, without much pre-thinking or planning. It is common to hear “Let’s go for a coffee now” “or “Let’s meet tonight to watch a movie!” Japanese people find this too quick and feel caught unprepared. One reason for this is because they got used to plan for meetings well in advance. In addition to this, if they have something else already planned, they often have to reject the person who invited them, and they find that uncomfortable and stressful.

Moreover, Serbians don’t hesitate to invite various people to the same gathering, which means that they often invite people who don’t know each other. Japanese people find this very

uncomfortable.

“I was invited to a barbeque party, and there were plenty of people I never saw before; that is very unusual in Japan; I was a little shocked. That would never happen in Japan as we always know who will come, so I felt anxious”.

Finally, Serbian appointments are not just easy to make, but are also easy to break. Agreements are “not written in stone”, and since there is no much planning involved, last-minute cancelations, coming late to the meeting or not showing up at all are fairly frequent, which is very disappointing and frustrating for Japanese students.

“Three, four times I made an agreement with a friend, and each time she canceled for various reasons; something came up every time; I didn’t get angry but I was annoyed; if she does that to me again, probably I will lose interest in seeing her again”.

2.2. Japanese in Serbia - Social skills

Despite many challenges, all Japanese participants successfully made high quality friendships with their Serbian friends. Social skills they adopted in the process that helped them smoothen the friendship formation are divided in three categories – directness (avoiding ‘aimai’), boundaries and proactivity.

2.2.1. Directness (avoiding ‘aimai’)

Japanese participants learned to behave much more directly than they used to be in Japan. Directness and openness are highly valued in Serbia, and they save a lot of time and thinking as well. Therefore, avoiding being ambiguous, learning to say “yes” or “no” clearly, being more explicit in what you like and especially what you dislike is necessary for a person to be heard and to create comfortable boundaries. As previously mentioned, Serbians dislike silence, therefore, Japanese participants learned to avoid being quiet and to actively participate in a conversation by nodding, giving short comments and minimal encouragers, and expressing their feelings about the topic through their facial expressions. Besides, explicitly showing trust seemed to be a valuable skill to strengthen friendships.

“Serbians are very open and friendly in the beginning, but with time they may become closed if they see that you don’t show trust; So, if you want to be friend with someone, explicitly show that you trust them”.

2.2.2. Boundaries

Creating safe boundaries was a social skill that greatly helped Japanese participants to feel comfortable in a Serbian setting. They learned that it is perfectly fine to decline someone's sudden invitation when they have something else planned or they are just not in the mood to join them. Serbians do not get offended if people speak their mind, but they have to say it clearly, simply and immediately, and avoid waiting time to pass after they think it through and choose proper and more polite words.

“Tell clearly, promptly, simply, openly, directly. Don't wait until you accumulate many small things and accumulate frustration, because it can cause misunderstandings; show emotions openly (anger, frustrations, disappointment, annoyance)”

Finally, they found that, when faced with Serbian over-directness, noisiness and annoying personal questions, it is the best strategy to plainly ignore them.

2.2.3. Proactivity

Japanese participants also learned that in order to make solid friendships with Serbians, they have to be more proactive than they used to be in Japan. This included actively greeting people, preferably in Serbian, with a firm handshake, hug or a kiss on the cheek, smiling and saying their name clearly. Next, they learned that, although annoying, frequent messaging is important for Serbians to establish closeness and continuity of the friendship. Therefore, responding to SMS messages promptly, or sending them first came up as a strategy they adopted.

“Keep frequent contact with people by SMS and Facebook messages – they really like that. Short and simple reply is OK, but reply quickly, otherwise they may get angry. Frequent contact is important for Serbians to make friends with them”.

On top of that, they learned that it is important to sometimes invite your friends first, and not always wait to be invited.

“If you invite someone first to do something together, they will be glad and you can soon become friends”

Conclusions

In this study, we compared how people from two distant cultures, Serbia and Japan, formed friendships with each other, what their challenges were, and what social skills they used to develop and maintain those friendships.

Seven Serbians living in Japan and seven Japanese living in Serbia participated in the semi-structured interviews. We asked them about occasions for initiating friendships, cross-cultural challenges, and about strategies they adopted for maintaining friendships.

Serbian participants reported that their biggest challenges in making friendships with Japanese hosts were perceived non-reciprocity (Japanese friends frequently visited their homes but never invited them back, or they maintained contact only for the benefit of practicing English with foreigners), meticulous pre-planning and lack of spontaneity (deciding time, place and activity of meeting for a month in advance), and difficulty to deepen friendships, due to infrequent contacts and avoiding deeper conversation topics, such as private issues or political opinions. These findings are in line with the study about Turkish students in Japan (Sozen, Tanaka & Nakano, 2020). Similar to Turkey, Serbia is also known as a “high contact” culture, where physical contact, frequency and intimacy in interpersonal relationship are valued. On the contrary, Japan is a “low contact” culture, where personal space and privacy and not bothering other people are valued (Nakano & Tanaka, 2019). Their study found that differences between Japanese and Turkish cultural norms were obstructing interpersonal relationships in a similar way like in the present study with Serbians.

To develop and maintain friendships they adopted several new strategies: being open and approaching first, meeting friends in ‘Japanese way’ (plan in advance, meeting out rather than at home), choosing ‘safe’ conversation topics (such as food, sport, hobbies, games or culture), giving ‘*okaeshi*’, gestures such as bowing, and speaking Japanese while maintaining ‘foreignness’. Many of these skills are previously identified by Tanaka & Okunishi (2016) and are widely used by the international students in Japan.

As for Japanese participants in Serbia, they reported following challenges in forming friendships: strong group cohesiveness (feeling ‘trapped’ in a small, homogeneous group of

friends where members, conversation topics and activities rarely change; being judged when acting individually or initiating contacts with people 'outside' the group), frequent SMS-ing, straightforwardness, interrupting while speaking, last-minute cancellation of appointments (without much apologizing) and making appointments too soon (without planning). In order to maintain friendships, they applied following cross-cultural social skills: active greetings (strong handshake, kiss and hug when appropriate), avoiding '*aimai*' (talking directly, clearly and promptly, without delay and too much consideration), telling jokes, explicitly showing trust, using Serbian language, avoiding being silent while partner is talking (nodding, giving short comments, prompting by face expressions), and explicitly requesting not to be interrupted while speaking.

This study revealed that initiating and maintaining friendships, as well as considerations in interpersonal relationships differ in Japan and Serbia. In Japan, friendships require maintaining Japanese harmony. This means having consideration about other people's needs, allowing others time, space and privacy, showing respect and making sure that everyone in the group is comfortable. Avoiding '*meiwaku*' (bothering other people) is an important concept in Japanese culture. Friends and family are distinct from each other, and mostly do not mix. On the other side, in Serbia, assertive interpersonal style and direct expressions are preferred, similar to what was found in France (Tetsukawa & Tanaka, 2016) or Turkey (Nakano & Tanaka, 2019). People are open, spontaneous and make friends easily. Frequency and intensity of friendships are highly valued, as is honesty and closeness. Friends are considered an extension of family, and visiting each other's homes is normal. Thus, lack of boundaries is typical for Serbian friendships.

Results showed that cultural differences in socializing between Serbians and Japanese brought challenges to forming friendships. However, both groups enthusiastically maintained friendships by actively using culturally relevant social skills. Therefore, deliberately behaving in line with cultural values and customs of the host country is an effective way to make friends. Nevertheless, maintaining a certain level of "foreignness" is needed for people to create boundaries and stay comfortable in another culture. In acculturation studies this is called 'integration' – it occurs when individuals are able to adopt the cultural norms of the dominant or host culture while maintaining their culture of origin (Berry, 1996), and it is a strategy that has the most favorable psychological outcomes (Berry, 2005). As one Serbian student said:

“You don’t have to change yourself completely and become Japanese, and get rid of all habits; you just need to understand that their culture is different than ours, to accept that, and to tweak a little bit in their direction, that’s all.”

Study also implies that intentional learning of cross-cultural differences and social skills would improve mutual understanding and promote friendships between two cultures. Therefore, providing cross-cultural social skills training to the international students prior to the departure, and teaching relevant social skills and coping strategies, would ease their acculturation process, facilitate friendship formation and enrich their overall study abroad experience.

Limitation of the study

This study has few limitations. First, the sample is small and limited to a total of 14 participants, seven from each country, therefore, it is difficult to generalize findings. It is unclear whether the results are influenced by the culture or by the individual characteristics of participants, such as their introverted or extraverted personality, or their interests and motivation to live in Japan. Most of the Serbian participants were majoring in Japanese language and culture, therefore, their attitudes and motivation to Japan and make friends with Japanese were influenced by that, which may have been reflected on the findings we got. Future studies should consider a larger and more demographically varied sample.

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