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## ARTICLE

# Show me your friends, I'll tell you your emotions: Emotional fit of immigrant-origin minority youth in cross-cultural friendship networks

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## Abstract

The typical emotional responses to certain types of situations differ across cultures. Being reprimanded by your teacher in front of the class may be cause for anger and indignation among pupils in one cultural context, but for anger, shame, and possibly respect for the teacher among pupils in another cultural context. The consequence for immigrant-origin minorities is that they may not fit the emotions of the majority culture. Previous research has found that minorities who have majority contact have higher emotional fit with the majority culture. In the current study, we suggest that *friendships with majority peers* are particularly important to minorities' emotional fit. Students (945 minority and 1256 majority) from a representative sample of Belgian middle schools completed a sociometric questionnaire on their classroom friendships and rated their emotional experiences in two situations. Multilevel models yielded higher levels of emotional fit for minority youth with many (vs. few) majority friends as well as for minorities whose majority friends are connected (vs. less connected) to each other, or who are well-connected in the majority peer network. Having majority friends predicted emotional fit over and above majority contact in general.

## KEYWORDS

culture, emotional acculturation, friendship, immigrant-origin minority

## INTRODUCTION

Emotional fit with others is key to individuals' wellbeing and social inclusion (De Leersnyder et al., 2014, 2015; Livingstone et al., 2011; Townsend et al., 2013; Yoo & Miyamoto, 2018). At the same time, the prevalent emotions vary significantly across cultures in ways that can be understood from the cultural goals and values (De Leersnyder et al., 2018; Mesquita et al., 2016; Tamir et al., 2016). These findings together have two important implications in our increasingly multicultural societies. First, there may be cultural

misfit in emotions, and second, this misfit is likely to come at the expense of both individual wellbeing and social cohesion.

To illustrate this, let us look at Ayşe, a Turkish minority student in Belgium whose home culture emphasized honour, including paying people older than herself proper respect. When her (Belgian) teacher reprimanded her for talking in class, Ayşe felt angry, deeply ashamed, and respectful towards the teacher. Also meet Ann, Ayşe's Belgian majority student classmate whose upbringing prioritized independence and autonomy. When Ann was reprimanded by the teacher, she felt angry, and little else. The emotions of both Ayşe and Ann are grounded in different cultural values (Mesquita et al., 2016): Ayşe's emotions reflect, as well as help to realize, her honour ideals by showing she knows her place and respects the teacher. Ann's anger reflects, and helps to realize, her autonomy. It is not hard to imagine that Ayşe and Ann's different emotions would increase the distance between the girls, because they are at cross-purpose. This in turn may hamper their relational wellbeing.

An important question, then, is how cultural differences in emotions can be bridged in multicultural class rooms. There may be many ways to bridge the emotion gap. For example, recent work has suggested that majority culture members *want* to adopt aspects of the immigrant minority cultures (Haugen & Kunst, 2017; Kunst et al., 2021) when they have frequent and positive intercultural contact (Lefringhausen et al., 2020); it is possible that majority cultural individuals similarly adopt minority emotions. However, the focus of the current study is on the conditions under which minority students align their emotions with the majority norm. By taking minorities' emotional fit with the dominant (i.e., the majority) culture as a starting point of this research, we hope to get insight into some of the pathways for immigrant minority inclusion, which would ultimately lead to their access to resources, information, and protection that have been the privilege of the cultural majority. We suspect that the shift of minorities' emotions in the direction of the majority culture norm is particularly relevant in Western European societies where assimilationist pressures are dominant (Alba & Foner, 2014; Phalet et al., 2015). In this study, we examine the role of cross-cultural friendships in promoting minority students' alignment to majority emotions. We focus especially on friendships in the school context because many immigrant-origin minorities are emotionally socialized in their heritage culture at home (Raval & Walker, 2019), and first face the majority culture norms of emotions when they meet majority peers at school. The minority participants in our study were from a large and representative sample of students in middle schools in Belgium.

## Minorities' emotional fit

The emotions of people who live together tend to be similar. This is the case for couples, roommates, work teams, and also cultures (Anderson et al., 2003; De Leersnyder et al., 2014, 2015; Delvaux et al., 2015; Yoo & Miyamoto, 2018). Consistently, previous research has found that when immigrant-origin minorities have enough exposure to the majority culture, their emotional fit with the majority emotion norm will be higher—even if the emotions of immigrant minorities on average do not fit the majority norm (De Leersnyder et al., 2011; Jasini et al., 2019). For example, third generation minority individuals, but not second or first, had high emotional fit with the majority emotions (e.g., Jasini et al., 2019).

Furthermore, emotional fit has been found to promote relational wellbeing and stability. Though minorities' emotional fit with the majority emotional norm was not associated with their acculturation attitudes, it was associated with (self-reported) majority contact (De Leersnyder et al., 2011; Jasini et al., 2019)—a measure of social inclusion (and possibly wellbeing).

## The role of intercultural friendships for minorities' emotional fit with the majority

### Adolescent friendships

Friendships are arguably the most important relational context for emotion learning in this stage of life. They are characterized by intense feelings of closeness, reciprocity, liking, and trust (Newcomb &

Bagwell, 1995; Parker & Gottman, 1989; Youniss & Haynie, 1992). Moreover, friends provide each other with the mutual validation of experiencing, expressing, and regulating emotions (Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007; Legerski et al., 2015). Friends do this through modelling, rewarding, or discussing each other's emotions (Klimes-Dougan & Zeman, 2007; Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2016). While friends may generally help to shape each other's emotions into compliance with cultural norms, the effect will be more notable in cross-cultural friendships given that people in different cultures—as the example of Ayşe and Ann illustrates—may be socialized to experience different patterns of emotions (Raval & Walker, 2019).

Our *first* hypothesis is that majority friends afford higher emotional fit than would be afforded by minorities' general contact with majority others. There are several reasons for this hypothesis. First, close relationships—and specifically friendships—make high quality contact readily available across a large range of different situations, in a way cursory contacts with majority others (often restricted to one particular context) do not. Second, adolescent friendships are characterized by high levels of intimacy (e.g., strong *self-disclosure* norms; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995; Parker & Gottman, 1989), expectations for mutual support, and efforts to maintain interaction and communication despite disagreements (Hartup, 1996), all of which make them ideal context for emotional learning. Finally, it is possible that friendships with majority peers more broadly improve minorities adolescents' position in majority-dominated environments. For instance, majority friendships protect minorities against feeling misunderstood in interactions with majority others and foster positive contact (Shelton et al., 2014; Turner et al., 2007). In addition, having majority friends is linked to the extent to which minorities immerse themselves in the majority culture along their heritage culture (Berry et al., 2006; Mok et al., 2007). These unique features of intercultural friendships (as opposed to other more casual forms of intercultural contact) make them optimal as 'emotion learning laboratories' to minority youth.

## Better and worse ambassadors

While minorities may have higher emotional fit with majority culture if they have any majority friends, some friendships may provide more effective 'emotion learning laboratories' than others. Our *second* hypothesis is that majority members who are well-connected in the network are better 'ambassadors' of their culture than less well-connected majority members, and therefore more likely to influence the emotional fit of their minority friends. Consistent with this idea, previous research has found that peers with a higher number of connections in the network (i.e., higher level of peer acceptance) influence the behaviour of those with fewer connections (Laursen et al., 2012). Applied to the current context, we postulate that minorities' emotional fit is contingent on having majority friends who (i) are *friends with each other*, and (ii) are *well-connected* in the majority subnetwork.

### Friends who are friends with each other

When minority youth are befriended with majority peers who are also friends with each other, minorities will be part of a larger network of majority emotional interactions. This may be conducive to minorities' emotional fit with the majority culture, because it allows minorities to observe the interactions between majority friends. As such, minorities may learn, and possibly mimic, the emotions that are most intense and frequent among majority members as well as witness the consequences specific emotions have in majority relationships. We will test this idea by examining the link between the number of interconnected pairs of majority friends and minority youths' emotional fit with the majority culture.

### Well-connected friends

Having majority friends who are well-connected with other majority peers may (i) increase the opportunities for minorities to befriend other majority in the network, and (ii) expose them to emotional patterns

that are representative of the majority culture in the network (c.f., Haynie, 2001). We study whether majority friends are well-connected by examining their centrality in the majority peer network. Hence, we expect that central majority friends may expose minorities to emotional patterns that are representative of the normative emotional patterns in the local network and, therefore, predict minorities' emotional fit with that network.

## Fitting to whom?

In the present study, we will test our hypotheses for minorities' emotional fit both at the proximal (local) and at the distal level of majority culture, which, in earlier research with adolescents, were differentially associated with majority contact: proximal, but not distal emotional fit was associated with majority contact (Jasini et al., 2019). We similarly expect that having (well-connected) majority friends positively predicts minorities' emotional fit with the proximal culture in which these friendships are formed and maintained. We explore how having close majority friends predicts minorities' emotional fit with the culture at large, and thus fit with the emotions of unknown majority members.

## The current research

The current research examines the role of minorities' *actual* friendship network in their emotional fit with the majority culture. Specifically, we predict that friendship ties with majority peers in their class-network explain variance in emotional fit above and beyond what can be accounted for by minorities' general levels of contact with majority members (H1). In addition, we postulate that reciprocal majority friendships are more strongly related to minorities' emotional fit with the majority than are unilateral friendship ties. Reciprocal ties point to the mutual acceptance, trust, and equality that characterize 'true' friendship (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995), whereas unilateral ties merely signify that either of the partners sees a friendship. Yet, we also explore the associations between emotional fit and the unilateral ties with majority (incoming nominations from majority and outgoing nominations to majority). Furthermore, we test if minorities' emotional fit is higher when their majority friends are more interconnected in the class-network (H2). Emotional fit is measured both as proximal and as distal fit.

## METHOD

### Participants

Over 2000 minority and majority adolescents in 37 secondary schools in Flanders-Belgium participated in the survey. We classified students as 'minority' if they indicated that they themselves, or at least one of their parents, or grandparents were born outside Belgium and in a country that does not neighbour Belgium ( $N = 945$ ; 45%). Minority participants originated from more than 50 different countries from all over the world (26% originated from Morocco and Turkey). We classified students as 'majority' if they themselves, their parents, and their grandparents were born in Belgium [ $N = 1256$ ; 49%; See the [Supplementary Material](#) for more information on the whole sample]. On average, the minority youth were slightly older than the majority youth (Minority:  $M_{\text{Age}} = 14.82$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ; Majority:  $M_{\text{Age}} = 14.42$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ;  $t(2047) = 8.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Minority and majority groups did not differ in terms of gender (44% minority girls, 43% majority girls;  $\chi^2(1) = 0.79$ ,  $p = .373$ ). Due to several data exclusion steps and the list-wise deletion procedure used in the analyses, we included between 49.95% ( $N = 472$ , 244 girls, 228 boys, aged 13 to 18,  $M_{\text{Age}} = 14.66$  years) and 57.03% ( $N = 539$ , 271 girls, 267 boys, one participant's gender unknown, aged 12 to 18,  $M_{\text{Age}} = 14.71$  years) of the minority sample in the final analyses<sup>1</sup> (see the data exclusion criteria in [Supplementary Material](#)).

## Procedure

This study made use of wave 1 data from the Leuven Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (Phalet et al., 2018), which recruited participants through a stratified random sampling procedure based on a comprehensive list of secondary education schools issued by the Flemish Ministry of Education (Phalet et al., 2018). Informed consent was obtained from school administrators, teachers, parents, and adolescents themselves. Minority and majority participants completed questionnaires during class hours in the presence of research assistants and a teacher. The questionnaires were in Dutch, the language of instruction in the schools. Findings reported in this paper constituted only a small part of the full questionnaire: the demographic questions, the Emotional Patterns Questionnaire (EPQ; De Leersnyder et al., 2011), questions on majority contact, and a sociometric questionnaire in which participants nominated their friends in class.

## Materials

### Emotional Patterns Questionnaire

We measured minorities' emotional fit with the majority culture using the Emotional Patterns Questionnaire, a validated scale to measure emotional fit among immigrant-origin minorities (EPQ, De Leersnyder et al., 2011). The EPQ consists of prompts that indicate the valence (good, bad) and the social engagement (socially connecting or engaging versus socially individuating or disengaging) of the situation. These two dimensions are found to define the emotional space across cultures (Kitayama et al., 2000). The prompts in this study were meant to guide emotional recall of events happening in the school context. The prompts read: *Think about an event that you experienced at school not so long ago, as a result of which you felt bad (vs. good) about your relationships with other people (vs. yourself).* Each participant received two prompts: they were asked to recall one positive and one negative situation. Half of the participants received prompts for two socially disengaging situations ('about yourself'), the other half for two socially engaging situations ('about your relationship with other people').

After recalling a personal experience, participants rated the degree to which they had felt a list of 15 emotions in the situation (on 5-point Likert scales: 1 = 'not at all', 5 = 'very much'). The list covered a broad range of emotions and balanced positive versus negative emotions as well as socially engaging (i.e., emotions that promote relatedness; e.g., *feeling respectful*) versus disengaging emotions (i.e., emotions that promote individual autonomy; e.g., *feeling proud*). The specific emotion items were: I felt... *good, happy, sad, proud, guilty, connected, frustrated, elated, ashamed, angry, surprised, indebted, relying upon, disappointed, respectful*. A Simultaneous Component Analysis (SCA; De Roover et al., 2012) established measurement equivalence for 12 out of the 15 emotion items across minority and majority groups: across groups the items loaded similarly on the hypothesized components (positive disengaging emotions factor: *happy, proud, elated*; positive engaging emotions factor: *connected, relying upon, respectful*; negative disengaging emotions factor: *frustrated, angry, disappointed*; negative engaging emotions factor: *guilty, ashamed, indebted*). Whereas the items of 'felt good' and 'felt sad' were a priori omitted as they were meant as checks for the 'general' valence of the prompts, the emotion *felt surprised* was omitted because it consumed one whole component in the SCA. We based emotional fit scores on the remaining 12 emotions (See the [Supplementary Material](#) for a full description of the SCA).

A participant's emotional fit was obtained by correlating their pattern of emotions for a particular prompt with the average pattern of either their *majority classmates* (proximal fit) or the *nationwide group of majority* (distal fit) for the same prompt. The proximal majority group consisted of an average of 7.21 majority classmates (the number of majority classmates ranged from 1 to 23); the distal majority group consisted of the 1256 majority youth that participated in the study. An emotional fit score was determined if the participant had rated at least nine (out of 12) emotion items. Participants had up to two emotional fit scores: one for the positive and one for the negative situation. We Fisher-transformed the fit scores and

averaged them to compute one value for Proximal and one for Distal Emotional Fit (See the descriptive statistics in Table 1; See the correlations between the variables included in the analyses in Table S4).

## Network-related variables

All participants indicated up to 20 close friends in class based on a list of classmates' names. The resulting sociometric information was submitted to the Package for Social Network Analysis in R (SNA R), to compute (i) the number of close friendship ties with majority members (H1), (ii) the degree to which close majority friends were well-connected in the network (H2), and, as a control variable, (iii) the density of the classroom friendship network.

### Number of close friendship ties with majority

We computed close friendships with majority first as *the reciprocal friendship ties with majority* (i.e., the minority participant identifies a majority classmate as a friend and this identification is reciprocated). We also examined the role of *incoming friendship ties from majority* (i.e., a majority classmate identifies the minority participant as a friend), as well as *outgoing friendship ties towards majority* (i.e., the minority participant identifies a majority classmate as a friend). On average, minorities and majorities reported similar numbers of *incoming* and *outgoing ties*.<sup>ii</sup>

### Degree of majority friends' interconnectedness in the network

#### *Friends who are friends with each other*

We measured the interconnectedness of each minority's majority friends as the number of times that they have two majority friends who are friends with each other (i.e., minority 'a' is connected to both majority 'b' and majority 'c', while majorities 'b' and 'c' are also connected to one another). This measure was computed using the reciprocal friendship ties that minorities and their friends had with each other.

#### *Well-connected majority friends*

To establish the extent to which each minority participant's majority friends (on average) occupied key positions in the network, we computed minorities' majority friends' own connectedness in the majority subnetwork in class. We did so by taking average eigenvector centrality scores for the network positions of the majority friends (the function 'event' in R 'sna' package; Butts, 2016). Eigenvector centrality considers not only the degree of connectivity of each network member, but also how well-connected the contacts of each member are (Bonacich, 1972).

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics on the variables denoting the friendship ties with majority and the interconnectedness of majority friends.

	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Proximal emotional fit	0.727	0.425	-.528	1.690
Distal emotional fit	0.636	0.507	-2.454	2.251
Reciprocal friendship ties	0.758	1.201	0	8
Outgoing friendship ties	1.294	1.839	0	12
Incoming friendship ties	1.273	1.567	0	10
Friends who are friends with each other	0.775	2.749	0	44
Well-connected majority friends	0.613	0.706	0	2.761

## Control variables

### *Frequency of contact with majority*

As in previous studies (Jasini et al., 2019), we measured the frequency of majority contact by a composite index of two items ( $r(806) = .62, p < .001$ ), namely: 'How many of your friends are of Belgian origin?' (1 = 'almost none or none at all' to 5 = 'almost all or all'); and 'How often do you spend your school breaks with students of Belgian origin?' (1 = 'never' to 5 = 'every day').

### *Network density*

Network density is measured as the proportion of existing ties out of the total potential ties in the network (i.e. the ratio between the actual number of ties and its maximum possible value, which is  $N(N-1)$  for a network among  $N$  nodes). Network density has been found to be a reliable predictor of norm alignment (e.g., Haynie, 2001), and should thus be bracketed when examining the association between majority friends and emotional fit the majority norm. We used participants' information on friendship ties to calculate the overall network density.

### *Demographics*

Participants reported their gender, age, and educational track (vocational vs. academic or technical). In the final sample included in the analyses, 44% of the participants attended the vocational track ( $N = 239$ ) and 55% attended the academic/technical track ( $N = 298$ ; two participants did not report their educational track).

## Hypothesis testing

To test our hypotheses we estimated two-level (minority students within 143 classes) random intercepts models (that allow the average levels of emotional fit to vary at the level of the class) in MLwiN 2.29. The overall variation in minorities' proximal emotional fit (i.e., fit with majority peers in their class) was 74.61% at the individual level and 25.39% at the class level. The overall variation in distal emotional fit (i.e., fit with all majority members in the sample) was 70.88% at the individual level and 29.12% at the class level. In total, we specified 10 multilevel models that each estimate the associations between one type of minorities' emotional fit (i.e., proximal or distal) and one of our hypothesized predictors [reciprocal friendship ties with majority, (but also incoming ties and outgoing ties), friends who are friends with each other, well-connected friends]. In each model, we controlled for the three individual factors (*age*, *gender*, *educational track*) as well as the structural factor *network density*. The variables *age* and *network density* were centered around the grand mean and *gender* (with boy as the reference category) and *educational track* (with vocational track as the reference category) were both entered as dummy coded variables.<sup>iii</sup> Moreover, in models testing H1, for each type of friendship tie, we also controlled for the *frequency of majority contact*.

To test H1, we ran six multilevel analyses, three for each type of emotional fit. Specifically, we estimated if minorities' emotional fit is positively associated with each one of the three indicators of friendship: (a) the number of *reciprocal friendships with majority*; (b) the number of *outgoing friendship ties towards majority*, which are thus unilaterally defined by the minorities; and (c) the number of *incoming friendship ties from majority*, which are thus unilaterally defined by majority members.

To test H2, we ran four different analyses. For both proximal and distal fit, we tested if minorities' emotional fit is associated with their majority friends' connectedness in the class; specifically with (a) *friends who are friends with each other* and (b) *well-connected friends*.

We estimated each model using the Maximum Likelihood approach. We used the Likelihood Ratio Test (Snijders & Bosker, 2012) to test whether the difference between the fit indicators of nested model ( $-2 \log$ likelihood) is different from zero; the difference is  $\chi^2$  distributed. We considered our hypotheses 'supported' when (i) the models including our predictor of interest (i.e., the indicators of majority friendships and majority friends' interconnectedness in the network) fit the data better than the controls-only



models (i.e., models with only control variables), and when (ii) the associations between our predictor of interest and emotional fit (as defined by the regression coefficients) were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) and in the expected direction.

Finally, to test how robust our findings are, we replicated the same models while only including students from Turkish and Moroccan minority groups, the two largest and most stigmatized minority groups in Belgium (Baysu & Phalet, 2019) ( $N = 269$  participants in 80 classes).<sup>iv</sup> Given the unbalanced distribution of these participants over classes (47% of the classes had only 1 participant), we ignored the nested nature of the data for these analyses.

## RESULTS

### Hypothesis 1: Minority adolescents' emotional fit is positively associated with their number of friendship ties with majority members in their class

#### Proximal emotional fit

##### *Reciprocal friendship ties*

The model with reciprocal friendship ties as predictor of minorities' proximal fit, controlling for *frequency of contact with majority*, fit the data better than the controls-only model ( $\Delta-2LL(1) = 4.53, p = .033$ ). Minorities' reciprocal ties with majority classmates were associated with proximal emotional fit with the majority culture,  $t(493) = 2.16, p = .032, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.004, 0.078]$  (See Table 2, Model 1). In fact, having one additional reciprocal friendship with majority reduces the gap between the average levels of minority and majority proximal fit ( $=0.18$ ) by 23%.

TABLE 2 Minorities' proximal emotional fit predicted by *reciprocal friendship ties* (Model 1), *outgoing friendship ties* (Model 2), and *incoming friendship ties* (Model 3).

	Null model	Model with controls	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Fixed part					
Intercept	0.640 (0.030)***	0.586 (0.052)***	0.577 (0.052)***	0.578 (0.052)***	0.576 (0.052)***
Age		0.004 (0.026)	0.009 (0.026)	0.007 (0.026)	0.011 (0.026)
Gender		0.024 (0.044)	0.025 (0.044)	0.028 (0.044)	0.024 (0.044)
Education track		0.066 (0.66)	0.067 (0.064)	0.068 (0.065)	0.066 (0.064)
Network density		0.011 (0.315)	-0.056 (0.308)	-0.018 (0.310)	-0.074 (0.308)
Contact with majority		0.049* (0.020)	0.034 (0.021)	0.041 (0.021) <sup>†</sup>	0.032 (0.021)
Reciprocal friendship ties			0.041 (0.019)*		
Outgoing friendship ties				0.016 (0.012)	
Incoming friendship ties					0.035 (0.015)*
Random part					
Class level: variance in intercept	0.065 (0.015)	0.060 (0.015)	0.053 (0.014)	0.055 (0.014)	0.053 (0.014)
Individual level: residual variance	0.191 (0.014)	0.190 (0.014)	0.192 (0.014)	0.192 (0.014)	0.192 (0.014)
-2*loglikelihood:	712.831	685.763	681.236	684.136	680.568
Units: class	145	143	143	143	143
Units: pupil	514	499	499	499	499

Note. Model presents unstandardized regression results with standard errors in parentheses.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ .

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Outgoing friendship ties*

The model with outgoing friendship ties as a predictor of minorities' proximal fit, controlling for *frequency of contact with majority* did not fit the data better than the controls-only model ( $\Delta-2LL(1) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .202$ ). Thus, the proximal emotional fit of minority students was not any higher if minority students nominated majority students as their friends,  $t(493) = 1.33$ ,  $p = .183$ , 95% CI [-0.008, 0.040] (See Table 2, Model 2).

*Incoming friendship ties*

The model with incoming friendship ties as a predictor of minorities' proximal fit, controlling for the *frequency of contact with majority* fit the data better than the controls-only model ( $\Delta-2LL(1) = 5.20$ ,  $p = .023$ ). Minority students who were more often considered as best friends by their majority classmates, showed a higher emotional fit with the proximal majority than others,  $t(493) = 2.33$ ,  $p = .020$ , 95% CI [0.006, 0.064] (See Table 2, Model 3). In fact, having one additional incoming friendship tie from majority reduces the gap found between the average levels of minority and majority proximal fit ( $= 0.18$ ) by 20%.

## Distal emotional fit

*Reciprocal friendship ties*

The model with reciprocal friendship ties as a predictor of minorities' distal fit, controlling for *frequency of contact with majority* fit the data better than the controls-only model ( $\Delta-2LL(1) = 7.20$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Minority students who had more reciprocal ties with majority classmates, showed a higher distal emotional fit  $t(516) = 2.73$ ,  $p = .007$ , 95% CI [0.012, 0.070] (See Table 3, Model 4). In other words, having one additional reciprocal friendship reduces the gap found between the average levels of minority and majority distal fit ( $= 0.14$ ) by 29%.

TABLE 3 Minorities' distal emotional fit predicted by *reciprocal friendship ties* (Model 4), *outgoing friendship ties* (Model 5) and *incoming friendship ties* (Model 6).

	Null model	Model with controls	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Fixed part					
Intercept	0.715 (0.026)	0.613 (0.042)***	0.606 (0.041)***	0.606 (0.041)***	0.607 (0.041)***
Age		-0.016 (0.021)	-0.012 (0.020)	-0.013 (0.021)	-0.011 (0.020)
Gender		0.115 (0.035)**	0.115 (0.035)**	0.119 (0.035)*	0.114 (0.035)**
Education track		0.104 (0.053)*	0.103 (0.052)*	0.106 (0.053)*	0.103 (0.052)*
Network density		-0.012 (0.261)	-0.089 (0.255)	-0.045 (0.257)	-0.097 (0.256)
Contact with majority		0.006 (0.016)	-0.008 (0.016)	-0.002 (0.016)	-0.008 (0.017)
Reciprocal friendship ties			0.041 (0.015)**		
Outgoing friendship ties				0.015 (0.010)	
Incoming friendship ties					0.030 (0.012)*
Random part					
Class level: variance in intercept	0.053 (0.011)	0.045 (0.010)	0.040 (0.010)	0.041 (0.010)	0.040 (0.010)
Individual level: residual variance	0.129 (0.009)	0.125 (0.009)	0.125 (0.009)	0.126 (0.009)	0.125 (0.009)
-2*loglikelihood:	550.331	505.157	497.961	502.824	499.154
Units: class	149	147	147	147	147
Units: pupil	539	522	522	522	522

Note: Model presents unstandardized regression results with standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$  (2-tailed).

### *Outgoing friendship ties*

The model with outgoing ties as a predictor of minorities' distal fit, controlling for *frequency of contact with majority* did not fit the data better than the controls-only model ( $\Delta-2LL(1) = 2.33, p = .127$ ). No significant association was found between *outgoing friendship ties towards majority* and distal emotional fit,  $t(516) = 1.50, p = .134, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.005, 0.035]$ . Thus, minority students who nominated a higher number of majority classmates than their friends did not have more distal emotional fit (See Table 3, Model 5).

### *Incoming friendship ties*

The model with incoming ties as a predictor of minorities' distal fit, controlling for *frequency of contact with majority* fit the data better than the controls-only model ( $\Delta-2LL(1) = 6.00, p = .014$ ). Minority students who were more often nominated as best friends by majority in the class, showed a higher distal emotional fit than others  $t(516) = 2.50, p = .013, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.007, 0.054]$  (See Table 3, Model 6). In other words, having one additional incoming friendship tie from majority reduces the gap between the average levels of minority and majority distal fit ( $=0.14$ ) by 21%.

## **Hypothesis 2: Minorities' emotional fit with the majority is positively associated with the extent to which their majority friends are well-connected in the class network**

### Proximal emotional fit

#### *Friends who are friends with each other*

The model with minorities' number of *interconnected pairs of majority friends* as a predictor of their proximal fit, fit the data better than the controls-only model ( $\Delta-2LL(1) = 5.47, p = .019$ ). Minorities who had majority friends who were also friends with each other had higher emotional fit,  $t(502) = 2.29, p = .022, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.002, 0.030]$  (See Table 4, Model 7). In fact, every additional pair of interconnected majority friends reduces the gap between the average levels of minority and majority proximal fit ( $=0.18$ ) by 9%.

#### *Well-connected friends*

The model with *the average centrality of majority friends* as the predictor of proximal fit, fit the data better than the controls-only model ( $\Delta-2LL(1) = 38.35, p < .001$ ). However, the association did not reach conventional levels of significance,  $t(467) = 1.74, p = .082, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.006, 0.128]$  (See Table 4, Model 8). Still, when the average centrality of majority friends increased with 1, the gap found between the average levels of minority and majority proximal fit ( $=0.18$ ) was reduced by 34%.

### Distal emotional fit

None of the models revealed significant associations between minorities' distal emotional fit and the interconnectedness of their majority friends (see Table 5). Therefore, minorities' distal emotional fit was not predicted by the degree to which their majority friends were well-connected in the class-network.

## **Replication with Turkish and Moroccan minority students only**

The regression models with data from the Turkish and Moroccan minority participants ( $N = 269$ ) yielded the same patterns of results as the multilevel regressions with the larger sample: We found significant associations between proximal emotional fit and *reciprocal friendship ties* ( $B = 0.13, SE = 0.05, \beta = .21, t(157) = 2.50, p = .014, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.027, 0.230]$ ), *incoming friendship ties* ( $B = 0.12, SE = 0.04, \beta = .28, t(157) = 3.26, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.045, 0.185]$ ), *friends who are friends with each other* ( $B = 0.05, SE = 0.03, \beta = .16, t(160) = 2.08, p = .039, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.003, 0.099]$ ), and *well-connected friends* ( $B = 0.25, SE = 0.08,$

**TABLE 4** Minorities' proximal emotional fit predicted by *friends who are friends with each other* (Model 7) and *well-connected majority friends* (Model 8).

	Null model	Model with controls	Model 7	Model 8
Fixed part				
Intercept	0.640 (0.030)***	0.589 (0.052)***	0.583 (0.051)***	0.585 (0.053)***
Age		-0.003 (0.026)	0.002 (0.026)	0.001 (0.027)
Gender		0.020 (0.044)	0.016 (0.043)	0.047 (0.046)
Education track		0.081 (0.065)	0.082 (0.065)	0.086 (0.067)
Network density		0.106 (0.316)	0.081 (0.310)	-0.170 (0.326)
Friends who are friends with each other			0.016 (0.007)*	
Well-connected majority friends				0.061 (0.034)†
Random part				
Class level: variance in intercept	0.065 (0.015)	0.063 (0.015)	0.058 (0.015)	0.050 (0.013)
Individual level: residual variance	0.191 (0.014)	0.190 (0.014)	0.190 (0.014)	0.201 (0.015)
-2*loglikelihood:	712.831	699.285	693.818	660.933
Units: class	145	143	143	137
Units: pupil	514	507	507	472

Note: Model presents unstandardized regression results with standard errors in parentheses.

† $p < .10$ .

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$  (2-tailed).

**TABLE 5** Minorities' distal emotional fit predicted by *friends who are friends with each other* (Model 9) and *well-connected majority friends* (Model 10).

	Null model	Model with controls	Model 9	Model 10
Fixed part				
Intercept	0.715 (0.026)***	0.616 (0.041)***	0.614 (0.041)***	0.616 (0.043)***
Age		-0.022 (0.020)	-0.020 (0.020)	-0.017 (0.021)
Gender		0.108 (0.035)**	0.107 (0.035)**	0.127 (0.036)***
Education track		0.106 (0.053)*	0.106 (0.053)*	0.107 (0.055)†
Network density		0.033 (0.259)	0.025 (0.258)	-0.131 (0.273)
Friends who are friends with each other			0.004 (0.006)	
Well-connected majority friends				0.045 (0.027)
Random part				
Class level: variance in intercept	0.053 (0.011)	0.044 (0.010)	0.044 (0.010)	0.043 (0.010)
Individual level: residual variance	0.129 (0.009)	0.126 (0.009)	0.126 (0.009)	0.122 (0.009)
-2*loglikelihood:	550.331	514.832	514.302	461.018
Units: class	149	147	147	139
Units: pupil	539	530	530	489

Note: Model presents unstandardized regression results with standard errors in parentheses.

† $p < .10$ .

\* $p < .05$ .

\*\* $p < .01$ .

\*\*\* $p < .001$  (2-tailed).

$\beta = .31, t(138) = 3.29, p = .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.099, 0.397]$ ). In contrast to the findings of the larger sample, we found that in this group of participants, there was also a significant positive association between proximal emotional fit and *outgoing friendship ties* ( $B = 0.07, SE = 0.03, \beta = .18, t(157) = 2.14, p = .034, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.005,$

0.129]). Furthermore, we found significant associations between distal emotional fit and *reciprocal friendship ties* ( $B = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $t(167) = 2.38$ ,  $p = .018$ , 95% CI [0.016, 0.173]) and *incoming friendship ties* ( $B = 0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t(167) = 2.63$ ,  $p = .009$ , 95% CI [0.018, 0.126]). Similarly to the findings of the larger sample, distal emotional fit was not associated with *outgoing friendship ties* ( $B = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $t(167) = 1.81$ ,  $p = .073$ , 95% CI [-0.004, 0.092]), *friends who are friends with each other* ( $B = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $\beta = .13$ ,  $t(170) = 1.71$ ,  $p = .089$ , 95% CI [-0.005, 0.070]), and *well-connected friends* ( $B = 0.08$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $t(146) = 1.37$ ,  $p = .172$ , 95% CI [-0.034, 0.185]).

## DISCUSSION

### Summary of the findings

The current study is the first to establish a link between minorities' friendships with majority peers and their emotional fit with the majority culture: Immigrant-origin minorities who have majority friends—especially majority friends who are themselves well-connected—are more likely to fit with the majority culture's normative patterns of emotional experience.

Our research is based on the assumption that people in different cultures are socialized emotionally in different ways (Friedlmeier et al., 2011; Mesquita, 2022; Röttger-Rössler et al., 2013). Indeed, previous studies have concluded that immigrant parents socialize their children's emotions in different ways from the majority parents—with immigrant parents often socializing their children in ways that fit the heritage culture (Raval & Walker, 2019). Such differences may explain the finding that, at middle-school age, minorities have on average lower emotional fit with the majority culture emotion norm than the majority culture members, and that their emotional fit is predicted by the extent to which they are exposed to the majority culture (Jasini et al., 2019).

Many minority youth, especially those living in highly segregated societies, may encounter majority emotion norms for the first time when they come into contact with the majority peers in the school context. In this study, we focused on the association between minorities' friendships with majorities (as proxies for high-quality majority contact) and their fit to majority emotions. To identify the unique role of majority friends, we examined the association between majority friends and emotional fit to the majority, taking into account the frequency of other social interactions minorities had with majority. Consistent with our hypotheses, minorities who had more (vs. fewer) majority friends in their class-network had higher emotional fit with the majority peers in their class (proximal fit), as well as with all majority peers in the sample (distal fit). In fact, each additional (reciprocal) majority friend reduced the average gap between the minorities' and classroom majorities' emotional patterns by 23% (29% for distal majorities' patterns). Having majority friends predicted minorities' proximal and distal fit, even when controlling for general majority contact. The associations between friendship ties and emotional fit replicated when only considering the Turkish and Moroccan minority students, and were even more pronounced for these groups than for the whole group of minorities.

Also consistent with our hypotheses, *well-connected* majority friends have additional benefits for minorities' emotional fit since these friendships offer opportunities for exposure and extended contact with majority others. Minorities' fit with the proximal majority emotions was higher if their majority friends were friends with their other majority friend(s) or if their majority friends were central in the majority subnetwork in the class. These findings suggest that we should pay more attention to the larger network of friendship relations in class when trying to understand the process by which minority students emotionally get attuned to the majority culture.

### Proximal versus distal fit

It is notable that emotions of minorities who have majority friends not only resemble the emotions of known majority peers, but also the emotions of the national majority sample consisting mostly of unknown majority peers. However, minority students had higher proximal, but not higher distal, fit when their majority friends were more connected to others in the class. This finding suggests that the processes

by which intercultural friendships are associated with minorities' emotional fit take place at the local level, and—only by proxy—have some effect on minorities' emotional fit at the national level as well.

Finally, the different results for proximal and distal emotional fit strongly suggest within-culture heterogeneity: There is a distinction between local and national emotion standards.

## On friendships

Interestingly, the association between emotional fit and *reciprocal* friendship ties was consistently higher than that of unilateral friendship ties. These findings speak to the unique nature of reciprocal friendships: Reciprocal friends can be thought to mutually accept each other and to give equal importance to the relationship. It is this type of context that is most likely to accommodate emotion socialization through modelling, rewarding, or talking about emotions (Klimes-Dougan et al., 2014; Legerski et al., 2015; Miller-Slough & Dunsmore, 2016).

However, even though the size of the association was consistently lower, minorities reported higher proximal and distal emotional fit also when they received many friendship nominations from their majority classmates. It is this association that best speaks to the possibility that minority students who have higher emotional fit with the majority are sought out by their majority peers, and that the direction of the relationship between emotional fit and having (well-connected) majority friends may also be reversed (see below).

Least predictive of fit to the majority culture, were the unreciprocated friendships that minorities reported (i.e., outgoing friendship ties). This is interesting because it suggests the important role for the majority friend's commitment to minorities' fit to majority emotions. It is also an interesting finding methodologically, as it means that minorities' self-reported friendships are less likely to be linked to emotion fit. This finding underscores the methodological advance of using a social network method, beyond self-reports of contact and relationships. Indeed, if we would have focused only on minorities' outgoing friendship nominations, we would have missed the important evidence that reciprocal friendships are the types of relationships most closely related to minorities' emotional fit.

## Friendships with majority: a context of emotional and other kinds of acculturation

The evidence collected in the present research contributes to the literature by suggesting that people may learn the emotional repertoires that are normative and valued in the culture they engage in, by frequently interacting and forming important relationships with members of that culture (for an analogous description of early emotion socialization, see Saarni, 2008). Our findings also parallel findings from previous research indicating that pairs and groups of people embedded in close and ongoing relationships often share similar emotional experiences (e.g., Anderson et al., 2003; Delvaux et al., 2015; Gonzaga et al., 2007). This study goes beyond previous research, by providing a stepping stone to understanding how minorities come to have emotions in line with the majority culture.

Earlier research has found that minority individuals who have majority friends have also a strong orientation towards the majority culture. For example, a study by Berry et al. (2006) found that minority youth who reported having majority friends were more likely to adopt mainstream culture values. Though majority friendships may be associated with acculturation orientations and emotional fit, the relationship between acculturation orientations and emotional fit is not straightforward. In several studies, we have found that the two are unrelated (De Leersnyder et al., 2011; Jasini et al., 2019). Therefore, it is possible that an immigrant-origin minority person is eager to be part of majority culture, whereas their emotions do not fit the majority norm. This could for instance be the case for new immigrants. But the reverse is possible as well: Immigrant-origin minorities' emotions may fit the majority norm, even as they reject majority values and identity. This is conceivably the case when second and third generation minority individuals have always lived in the majority culture, but feel discriminated against.

The processes that link different aspects of acculturation are as yet unknown. It is possible that adoption of the majority context over time fosters friendships with the majority (Binder et al., 2009), which in turn may promote fit with the majority emotion norms. It is also possible that emotional fit facilitates intergroup contact, which in turn may contribute to minorities' acculturation orientations (Berry et al., 2006; te Lindert et al., 2021). It is important that future research explores these different pathways to inclusion.

Finally, our findings speak to the importance of cross-cultural friendships for bridging the gap in minorities' and majorities' emotional patterns, especially in contexts where assimilationist pressures and the threshold for minority inclusion and belonging are high. This is particularly the case in the Belgian school context, where assimilationist diversity policies are prevalent (Celeste et al., 2019). Assimilationist policies limit the maintenance of the heritage culture in the school context (e.g., by forbidding the use of minorities' mother tongue), and have been found to predict lower school belonging among minority students, as compared to majority students (Celeste et al., 2019). While in theory, bridging the gap in emotions need not be shouldered by minorities only (see below in Limitations), in assimilationist school contexts, minorities may have less influence both on class emotion norms and in micro-interactions with peers. In such contexts, minorities' fit with the majority culture emotion norm may be important because it may help facilitate the fluency of minorities' interactions with majority. One implication of our findings is thus that friendships with majority may be important for minority youths' emotional fit, which may in turn facilitate their inclusion in the majority group.

## Limitations and future directions

The present study is not without its limitations. The most obvious is that the cross-sectional method does not allow us to draw firm conclusions on the direction of the relationship between emotional fit and friendships. Based on the current results we cannot rule out—and in fact would assume—that minorities' emotional fit facilitates contact and friendship with majority peers. This may be so because a minority individual who experiences emotions that are congruent with the majority culture communicates that they share an understanding of the social reality with majority members, which may bring them closer together (Anderson et al., 2003; Gottman & Levenson, 1992) and afford friendships (Leszczensky et al., 2016). However, some of our findings do suggest that minorities are socialized to experience majority emotions through interactions and relationships with majority others: The highest association of emotional fit was with reciprocal (rather than unilateral) friendships, and with majority peers who were well-connected in the network. Future research using longitudinal network designs should establish the direction of the association between minorities' friendships with majority peers and emotional fit with the majority culture.

Furthermore, the current study focused only on majority friendships as relationship contexts where minorities can learn the emotion norms of the majority culture. But, in these friendships, majority adolescents may also learn the emotion norms of the heritage (or minority) cultures of their minority friends. Recent work on majority culture members has indeed suggested that acculturation is a two-way process (e.g., Haugen & Kunst, 2017; Kunst et al., 2021): majority members have been found to have a higher orientation towards the immigrant minority cultures when they have frequent and positive contact with minorities (Lefringhausen et al., 2020). It is also possible that both minorities and majorities in a class may contribute to an emergent emotion norm, and that the number of friends minority or majority individuals have with peers in a class may predict how close they are to the class norm of emotion. The focus of the current study is limited to minorities' emotional fit with the majority culture.

We believe that such an exploration is in itself novel and important, and minorities' fit to the majority norm is both measurable and meaningful for a cross-sectional study. Future research should expand this focus, and uncover how, over time, minority and majority friends negotiate emotions and who converges to whom. The cross-sectional data of the present study are not well suited for studying all the facets of the complex puzzle of emotional fit. In addition, majority individuals' emotional fit to minority norms is elusive, as many different minority cultures co-exist in classrooms. This may be one of the reasons that

in our recent studies, we have not found a direct link between majorities' contact with minority and their emotional fit with minority cultures (Jasini et al., 2023). Future research should examine how (and which) minority cultures are foregrounded, and how they come to influence the majority students.

Finally, the current research is based on the assumption that minority participants in our study live in a society and attend schools that endorse assimilationist policies (Celeste et al., 2019). An examination of the link between the diversity policies and minorities' emotional fit was beyond the scope of the current research. Future research may focus on this question and help to understand the role of diversity policies in the relation between minorities' friendships with majority and their emotional fit.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the current study provides evidence that minorities emotional fit with the majority culture is related to their friendships with majority classmates. Specifically, we found that minority youths' emotional patterns were more similar to those that were normative in the Belgian majority culture when they had more Belgian majority friends and when these friends were better connected to other majority members in the class's social network. Importantly, cross-cultural friendships predicted minorities' emotional fit with the majority above and beyond their general levels of contact with the majority. Therefore, the process of achieving emotional fit with the majority culture in minorities of immigrant origin, seems to be afforded by close and reciprocal relationships with—preferably well-connected—majority peers.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Alba Jasini:** Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; methodology; project administration; resources; software; validation; visualization; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Jozefien De Leersnyder:** Conceptualization; methodology; resources; supervision; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Matteo Gagliolo:** Data curation; formal analysis; resources; software. **Judit Kende:** Data curation; resources. **Karen Phalet:** Data curation; funding acquisition; investigation; project administration; resources. **Batja Mesquita:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; supervision; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> Thirty percent of the minorities ( $N = 281$ ) were first generation, 28% ( $N = 267$ ) were second generation, 25% ( $N = 235$ ) were interethnic second generation minorities, and 15% ( $N = 140$ ) were third and higher generation [For 2% of the participants, ( $N = 22$ ) the generational status could not be computed due to missing data.] Sixty-five percent of the first generation minorities had migrated before the age of 10 (Age of migration = 6.85;  $SD = 4.71$ ).
- <sup>ii</sup> Both minorities and majorities reported on average four incoming ties (Majority ties ranged from 0 to 13,  $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 2.40$ ; minority ties ranged from 0 to 10,  $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ) and four outgoing ties (Majority ties ranged from 0 to 20,  $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 2.90$ ; minority ties ranged from 0 to 19,  $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 2.91$ ).
- <sup>iii</sup> We also explored whether friendships predicted emotional fit if we controlled for the *generation status* of the non-neighbouring minorities. In these analyses, we included only the data of 1st, 2nd and 2nd interethnic generation minorities given that 3rd generation minorities did not differ in their emotional fit from majority members (Jasini et al., 2019). The analyses yielded significant associations, mostly in line with the main findings: First, reciprocal friendships with majority, majority friends who were friends with each other, and well-connected majority friends significantly predicted minorities' proximal emotional fit. Second, reciprocal, incoming, and outgoing friendship ties with majority as well-connected majority friends, significantly predicted minorities' distal emotional fit.
- <sup>iv</sup> We also tested the robustness of the findings with only 1st, 2nd and 2nd interethnic generation minorities ( $N = 653$  minority participants in 130 classes). Please see SOM for an overview of these analyses.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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