

Hybrid Belongings: Polish and Thai Migrants Navigating Ireland's Cultural Landscapes

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Research Article

Keywords: acculturation, super-diversity, hybridity, cultural rights, Poland, Thailand

Posted Date: May 6th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-9394279/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Ireland, long associated with emigration, has become an increasingly attractive destination for migrants, with around one in five residents now foreign-born. This demographic transformation is accompanied by growing cultural and religious diversity amid secularisation and the enduring presence of Catholicism. Drawing on qualitative research with ten Polish Catholic and ten Thai Buddhist migrants, this article examines how they negotiate cultural identities and social locations in Ireland, and how their acculturation strategies are shaped by everyday encounters with Irish society. The analysis mobilises Berry's acculturation framework and debates on super-diversity and cultural hybridity to explore how migrants position themselves between "home" and "host" cultures. Rather than focusing on doctrine, the article considers Catholicism and Buddhism as cultural resources and identity markers intersecting with nationality, class, gender and place. The research highlights three linked processes: the negotiation of contrasting social norms, the development of hybrid practices in super-diverse settings, and the formation of cross-migrant communities that generate bridging capital. Beyond the Irish case, the article argues that acculturation is best understood as a relational, domain-specific and multi-directional process: migrants do not simply adapt to a receiving society, but also reshape local cultural life through hybrid family practices, minority–minority solidarities and the circulation of norms across national settings.

1. Introduction: Acculturation, identity and social locations

I think it's important for [my children] to learn how to pray in Polish, and also how to pray in Irish. I don't know what kind of spouses they will have, what nationality... I am trying to help them build their cultural confidence even on that level so that they know how to express their faith in different languages. (Czesia)

In Thailand, most people would look down on someone who is in a lower position in society. I love how in Ireland, people are nice to security guards, have a chat with them, and also how they say "thank you" to the driver when they leave the bus. So I will try to do the same when I am in Thailand. (Banjamas)

These reflections from Polish and Thai migrants in Ireland capture the entanglement of culture, social norms and belonging in contemporary migration. Migrants do not simply "move" from one bounded national culture to another. They navigate multiple cultural repertoires, institutions and expectations, while positioning themselves in relation to racialised hierarchies, gendered norms and contested notions of "Irishness".

Ireland has undergone significant demographic change over the past two decades. A country that historically experienced mass emigration now records sustained net immigration: permanent-type migration has risen steadily since EU enlargement, and recent figures show a foreign-born share of the population comparable to many longer-established immigration countries (OECD 2023; CSO, 2025). Census 2022 shows that 20 per cent of the usually resident population were born outside Ireland (around 1.02 million people), compared with 17 per cent in 2011 (CSO, 2023a; 2023b). Around 12 per cent of residents are non-Irish citizens, with almost half of these coming from other EU countries

(Murphy et al., 2025). More recent administrative data suggest that the foreign-born share has risen further, partly due to inflows of workers and protection applicants, including over 100,000 arrivals from Ukraine granted temporary protection between March 2022 and June 2024 (CSO, 2024). The latest ESRI *Monitoring Report on Integration 2024* indicates that migrants are, on average, more likely than Irish-born residents to be employed and highly educated, yet face higher risks of poverty, housing cost overburden and discrimination (Laurence et al., 2024).

Religious affiliation has changed alongside this demographic shift. Catholicism remains numerically dominant, with 3.5 million residents identifying as Roman Catholic in 2022, but this represents a declining share of the population; numbers of those with “no religion” and those belonging to minority religions have risen sharply (CSO 2023a). Among these minorities, Buddhism – though small in absolute terms – constitutes a visible element of Ireland’s new religious landscape (Cox, 2013). The 2022 census records 9,053 Buddhists, including a modest but growing number of Thai-born residents. Within this changing context, migrants encounter an Ireland that is at once historically Catholic, increasingly secular and ever more super-diverse. Catholicism functions less as a comprehensive moral regime than as a cultural repertoire, while other religious and secular identities seek recognition in public life (Cox & Bocking, 2022). Migrants from majority-Catholic societies such as Poland may find a familiar institutional and symbolic environment; those from Buddhist-majority societies such as Thailand experience a double transition as religious and ethnic minorities. Yet in both cases, pathways of cultural adaptation and belonging are shaped not only by religion, but by legal status, socio-economic position, locality, gender and family situation.

Cultural integration, in the sense of meaningful participation in social, cultural and political life without enforced assimilation, is central both to migrants’ well-being and to the democratic quality of receiving societies (Algan et al., 2012; Murphy & Vieten, 2025). Ireland’s rapid transition from an almost mono-ethnic, mono-religious society towards a more complex, increasingly super-diverse cultural landscape raises specific questions about how migrants negotiate belonging in a context where Catholicism is historically dominant but increasingly contested, and where national identity is still strongly coded as white and Irish-born (Lentin & McVeigh, 2006; Scanlon & Kumar, 2019).

This article addresses that gap through a theoretically purposive comparison of first-generation Polish Catholic and Thai Buddhist migrants in Ireland. Holding the receiving-society context constant, the comparison brings into view how acculturation is mediated by differences in legal positioning, institutional recognition, community size and racialised location: Poles typically enter Ireland as EU migrants and members of a historically dominant Christian tradition, whereas Thais more often occupy non-EU and minority-religious positions. Using Ireland as a strategic site rather than a merely national case, the article argues that cultural integration in super-diverse societies is relational, uneven and multi-directional, and that minority–minority encounters are as important as minority–majority ones in the making of belonging (Ward, 2024; Crul, 2024; Murphy & Vieten, 2025).

2. Literature and theoretical lens

2.1 Migration, culture and integration in Ireland

Debates on immigrant integration in Europe increasingly conceptualise it as a multidimensional, interactive process grounded in interdependent legal-political, socio-economic and cultural-religious dimensions (Penninx & Garcés-Mascreñas, 2016). Culture is conceptualised here in a broad, dynamic sense, as a “set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group” encompassing not only art and literature but also lifestyles, value systems, traditions and beliefs (UNESCO, 2001:§ 5). In the Irish context, this includes historically dominant narratives linking Catholicism, the Irish language and rurality, as well as newer repertoires emerging from globalised consumer culture and immigration (Mulcahy, 2017; Scanlon & Kumar, 2019).

Research on migration and religion in Ireland has begun to map how faith-based organisations mediate migrants’ access to resources and shape social integration (Conner 2019; Gray & Lago, 2011; Gallagher & Trzebiatowska, 2017; Nordin & Otterbeck, 2023). Other work has, for example, analysed how Catholic-centric practices in schools and parishes reproduce an operational religious hegemony (Stapleton, 2020), how differential responses to Ukrainian and non-European refugees reveal racialised logics of religious and cultural proximity (Daly & O’Riordan, 2023), and how the small but diverse Buddhist presence unsettles taken-for-granted understandings of religion in Ireland (Cox & Bocking, 2022). However, there remains limited qualitative research that places migrants’ own narratives of cultural identity and acculturation at the centre, particularly in relation to less-studied religious minorities such as Buddhists.

Postcolonial analyses highlight the long-standing tension between efforts to assert a distinctively Irish identity and the realities of economic and cultural dependence on Britain and Europe (Scanlon & Kumar, 2019). The early decades of the state saw the promotion of an exclusionary vision of Irishness tied to Catholicism, heterosexual family norms and “high culture” forms, marginalising Travellers, Protestants and others (Debnath, 2019; Lentin & McVeigh, 2006). Contemporary cultural policy documents, such as *Culture 2025. Éire Ildánach* and the *Migrant Integration Strategy* (Gol, 2016; 2017), formally embrace a more inclusive view of culture, emphasising diversity and participation. However, critics argue that migrant cultures are still often recognised instrumentally – as “add-ons” to economic contributions – or filtered through a narrow multicultural lens that leaves power relations intact (Higgins & Donnellan, 2023; Steiner, 2023).

Sociological work on racism and migration in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland has drawn attention to structural inequalities and the economic instrumentalisation of migrants (Lentin & McVeigh, 2006; McIvor, 2011; McGuinness et al., 2018). The *Monitoring Report on Integration 2024* shows that, although foreign-born residents are more likely than the Irish-born to be in employment and to have tertiary education, they face higher risks of poverty and housing cost overburden (Laurence et al. 2024). These findings provide an important backdrop for understanding the social locations occupied by the migrants in this study and the constraints they encounter when attempting to translate religiously inflected belonging into wider civic participation.

Within this shifting landscape, migrants' cultural rights – understood as the right to participate in and reshape cultural life individually and collectively – remain marginal in public debate (Higgins & Donnellan, 2023; UN-CESCR, 2009). Scholarship on immigrant integration in Europe has often prioritised socio-economic and legal-political indicators – employment, education, citizenship – over cultural and identity-related dimensions (Algan et al. 2012; Djogbenou et al. 2024). Cultural integration has sometimes been reduced to a question of “values” or “national identity”, framed in highly politicised and normative terms. By contrast, qualitative studies demonstrate that migrants' everyday negotiations of belonging are complex, heterogeneous and fluid, involving the creative recombination of cultural repertoires and the formation of hybrid identities (Schwartz et al., 2010; Sokolowska, 2014; Wang & Giovanis, 2023).

Situating migrant cultural integration within a human-rights framework underlines that it is not simply a matter of “fitting in” to a pre-existing national culture, but of participating in, and legitimately transforming, the cultural life of the receiving society (Higgins & Donnellan, 2023; Algan et al., 2012). This perspective is particularly important in super-diverse contexts where no single cultural template can plausibly claim normative primacy.

2.2 Super-diversity, hybridity and intersectionality

Vertovec's (2007) notion of super-diversity captures the multiplication of intersecting variables – country of origin, legal status, education, gender, locality – that shape migrant experiences beyond simple host/guest binaries. Rather than more groups, super-diversity refers to new combinations of difference that transform local social orders. In European cities, this often appears as neighbourhoods where dozens of nationalities and languages intersect, with intricate stratifications in housing, labour markets and civic participation (Crul, 2015; Djogbenou et al., 2024).

Ireland increasingly fits this picture. Census 2022 shows especially high shares of foreign-born residents in the 25–44 age group, often in urban and peri-urban locations (CSO, 2023a; 2023b). McGuinness et al. (2018) demonstrate how racialised minorities in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland face layered disadvantages in employment and housing, even as official narratives celebrate “diversity”. Recent work on migrant wellbeing in smaller towns and rural areas of Europe similarly highlights how migrants combine dense local networks with transnational ties, navigating both inclusion and isolation (Wang & Giovanis, 2023). In this article, participants frequently describe their workplaces as micro-scale representations of super-diversity: “In my team, there are 30 people, and only five or six Irish. There are people from different nationalities around the world” (Benya). Vertovec's later insistence on super-diversity as multidimensional “reconfigurations” of legal, socio-economic and cultural variables (rather than simple ethnic proliferation) directly speaks to the Polish–Thai contrast in terms of EU vs non-EU legal status and work/visa channels (Vertovec, 2023:100–101).

Super-diversity also invites attention to hybridity – the creative, often messy ways in which people combine elements from different cultural repertoires. Rather than simple “mixing”, hybridity reflects ongoing negotiation: choosing which practices to keep, which to adapt and which to resist (Buchanan,

2009). Migrants may draw on multiple cultural repertoires – national, religious, local, transnational – in different spaces and times, producing what Wang and Giovanis (2023) call “multi-layered subjective identities.”

Intersectionality adds another layer, foregrounding how race, gender, class, legal status, disability and religion intersect to produce specific forms of privilege and oppression (Benkirane & Doucerain, 2022; McGuinness et al., 2018). Intersectional approaches to migration and acculturation emphasise that migrants’ options for engaging with both heritage and receiving cultures are structured by immigration regimes, labour markets and institutional racism, not simply by individual “preferences” (Röder, 2011; Savaş & Dutt, 2023; Murphy & Vieten, 2025). For example, Thai women partnered with Irish men may gain legal security while confronting stereotypes about Asian femininity, shaping their self-presentation in public; likewise, Polish workers in construction or logistics may be praised as “hard-working” yet still face accent-based discrimination and restricted mobility.

Studies of contemporary Irish identity argue that language and religion, once “cultural bedrock”, now interact with new meanings brought by migrants and by returning Irish citizens, producing contested but increasingly plural visions of what counts as Irish (Buchanan, 2009). Scanlon and Kumar (2019) show that understandings of Irishness have moved away from older associations with rurality, Catholicism and the Irish language towards more plural and contested definitions. McGuinness et al. (2018) discuss emerging forms of “inclusive indigeneity” that seek to reconcile ethnic-majority histories with the realities of multi-ethnic, multi-faith Ireland. The present study engages with these debates by examining how migrants themselves respond to, and participate in, shifting meanings of Irishness. It pays particular attention to how hybrid identities are formed at the intersection of multiple axes of difference, and how migrants negotiate the tension between cultural continuity and change in their everyday lives (Vertovec 2023; Benkirane & Doucerain 2022; Sokolowska, 2014).

2.3 Acculturation theory and decolonial critiques

Acculturation is broadly defined as the cultural and psychological change that occurs when individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds come into continuous contact (Berry, 1980; 2022). Earlier theories equated acculturation with assimilation, positioning heritage and receiving cultures as opposite poles of a single continuum. Such assimilationist models conceptualised acculturation as a largely one-way process in which migrants gradually adopt the culture of the receiving society, shedding their heritage culture over time (Gordon 1964). In contrast, Berry’s influential bidimensional model distinguishes between (1) preferences for maintaining heritage culture and identity, and (2) preferences for participating in the wider society. Crossing these dimensions yields four acculturation strategies for non-dominant groups – integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation – and corresponding orientations in the majority society – multiculturalism, melting pot, segregation and exclusion (Berry, 1997; 2005; 2022). (Fig. 1)

Berry also distinguishes between *acculturation experiences* (the broader contact conditions), *acculturation strategies* (individual or group orientations) and *adaptation outcomes* (psychological and

sociocultural). Shaped by power relations and institutional contexts, together they explain the *what*, *how*, and *how well* of the acculturation process (Berry 2005; 2022).

Berry's work remains foundational, not least for highlighting that integration (high involvement in both heritage and receiving cultures) tends to be associated with more positive psychological and sociocultural outcomes (Schwartz et al., 2010; Choy et al., 2021; Tatarko & Berry, 2024). However, several scholars have raised conceptual and methodological critiques.

Ward and Kus (2012) argue that acculturation research has often operationalised strategies through static survey categories, overlooking fluid, situational identities and power relations. Recent reviews of Berry's acculturation model call for multi-level perspectives that link individual adaptations to policy regimes, racism and global inequalities (Ward & Szabó, 2023; Doucerain et al., 2025; Kosic, 2025). Decolonial and intersectional perspectives go further, questioning the assumption that migrants should adapt to a taken-for-granted "host culture". Savaş and Dutt (2023) and Murphy and Vieten (2025) emphasise that integration regimes can reproduce colonial hierarchies, framing racialised migrants as objects of management while obscuring the need for transformation in receiving societies. Ku et al. (2025) show how migrant youth develop "pluriversal" identities that draw on multiple cultural horizons to resist racialisation, while de Lima et al. (2022) highlight the importance of decolonial methods in research on migrants in rural Europe. From this angle, acculturation is not a neutral process of cultural learning but a field of struggle over whose practices and values are recognised as legitimate.

This article adopts Berry's framework as a heuristic tool rather than a rigid typology. It uses the language of "integration", "separation", "assimilation" and "marginalisation" to structure parts of the analysis, while remaining attentive to the dynamic, context-dependent and power-laden nature of migrants' strategies. The second theoretical pillar – super-diversity and hybridity – helps illuminate how migrants navigate not only majority–minority relations but also cross-migrant interactions and multi-layered social locations. Together, these lenses support a relational, rights-sensitive understanding of cultural integration, consistent with international human rights instruments that affirm everyone's right to participate in cultural life and to enjoy their own culture in community with others (UN General Assembly, 1948; UN-CESCR, 2009).

2.4 Migrants in a transforming Irish cultural landscape

Polish citizens constitute one of the largest migrant groups in Ireland, with 93,680 non-naturalised Polish nationals recorded in 2022 (CSO 2023a). Many arrived in the decade following EU enlargement in 2004, facilitated by Ireland's decision not to impose transitional restrictions on workers from the new Member States. Polish migration has generated extensive scholarship on labour market participation, transnational family life and religious practice (Gray & Lago, 2011; Gallagher & Trzebiatowska 2017; Sokolowska, 2014).

By contrast, Thai migrants form a relatively small and under-researched community, often arriving through marriage migration, service-sector employment or education. Theravada Buddhism in Ireland

has developed through a combination of convert communities and ethnic Buddhist groups from countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka and Vietnam (Cox, 2013). Thai Buddhists therefore occupy a more marginal position in Ireland's symbolic and institutional religious landscape than Polish Catholics, who can tap into the infrastructure of the majority church.

Both groups navigate an Ireland that is increasingly multicultural but also marked by ambivalent – and sometimes openly hostile – public attitudes towards immigration. While survey data suggest generally positive perceptions of migrants and refugees, recent years have witnessed far-right mobilisation, racist rhetoric and often violent protests against asylum accommodation (Laurence et al., 2024; Hamilton, 2024). These dynamics, together with longer-standing structures of racism and exclusion, form part of the broader acculturation context within which migrants' strategies and identities are shaped (Lentin & McVeigh, 2006; McGuinness et al., 2018).

The comparison between Polish Catholics and Thai Buddhists is methodologically purposive rather than ethnographically arbitrary. The two groups share the same destination context and both treat religion less as doctrine than as a cultural and social resource, allowing the study to hold the receiving society constant while varying analytically important conditions: EU versus non-EU legal positioning, large and institutionally familiar versus smaller and more marginalised community status, and differing degrees of racialisation and religious proximity to dominant constructions of Irishness. The comparison therefore helps distinguish what stems from Ireland's wider super-diverse environment from what is shaped by legal status, institutional recognition and minority positioning (Bloemraad, 2013; Crul, 2024).

3. Methodology

The study investigates the acculturation pathways of Polish Catholic and Thai Buddhist migrants in Ireland, using a qualitative, interpretivist and constructionist approach. The researcher's own migrant background and engagement with Catholic and Buddhist contexts informed the choice of topic and interpretation, but details are omitted here to preserve anonymity for peer review. A reflexive stance is therefore adopted throughout, with the explicit aim of producing research that benefits, rather than harms, migrant communities.

Epistemologically, the study is located in an interpretivist paradigm that seeks to understand the social world through participants' own meanings and interpretations. Empirically, the project uses a multiple case-study design centred on two exemplifying cases: Polish Catholic migrants and Thai Buddhist migrants in Ireland. Twenty first-generation adults were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, working with Polish and Thai gatekeepers (including religious and spiritual leaders) across Ireland. Inclusion criteria required participants to be over 18, resident in Ireland as first-generation migrants, of Polish or Thai origin, self-identifying as Roman Catholic or Buddhist, and able to participate in English. Religion was operationalised at the level of declared affiliation; other dimensions of religiosity (belief, practice, attendance) were explored during interviews rather than used as screening criteria. Gender balance was sought, although Polish men proved harder to recruit, resulting in ten Polish

Catholics (eight women, two men) and ten Thai Buddhists (six women, four men) from ten counties, including both urban and rural locations. The aim was not statistical representativeness, but theoretical contrast within a shared destination context.

Pseudonyms were assigned at the transcription stage to protect anonymity. To aid readability and later analysis, Catholic participants' pseudonyms begin with the letter "C", and Buddhist participants' with "B". An asterisk denotes male participants. (Table 1)

Table 1
Participant demographics and pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Religious affiliation	Age	Gender	Years in Ireland	County (current)
Celestyna	Poland	Roman Catholic	21	F	17	Galway
Cecylia	Poland	Roman Catholic	47	F	25	Offaly
Carmen	Poland	Roman Catholic	42	F	19	Waterford
Claudia	Poland	Roman Catholic	43	F	23	Galway
Celina	Poland	Roman Catholic	24	F	17	Galway
*Cyprian	Poland	Roman Catholic	45	M	18	Galway
Cezaria	Poland	Roman Catholic	23	F	18	Meath
Cyntia	Poland	Roman Catholic	43	F	23	Cork
*Cezary	Poland	Roman Catholic	47	M	17	Tipperary
Czesia	Poland	Roman Catholic	46	F	16	Kilkenny
*Boonsak	Thailand	Buddhist	26	M	23	Wexford
Benjawan	Thailand	Buddhist	37	F	10	Dublin
Boonsri	Thailand	Buddhist	34	F	3	Limerick
Benyapa	Thailand	Buddhist	23	F	2	Dublin
Benya	Thailand	Buddhist	28	F	4	Dublin
*Boonmee	Thailand	Buddhist	31	M	3	Dublin
Banjammas	Thailand	Buddhist	26	F	1	Dublin
*Boonlert	Thailand	Buddhist	22	M	21	Dublin
*Banjerd	Thailand	Buddhist	45	M	5	Dublin
Busaba	Thailand	Buddhist	38	F	16	Tipperary

Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews were conducted between late March and early May 2024, mostly online (14 via Zoom, six in person) according to participants' preferences. Each interview lasted 60–80 minutes and followed a flexible guide organised around five themes: personal details, migrant experience, culture, religion, and the relationship between religion and cultural integration. Open-ended questions and probes were used to elicit detailed narratives while allowing participants to skip any question. All interviews were audio-recorded, automatically transcribed, and then manually checked.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to interpret the data. A balanced inductive–deductive strategy combined close attention to participants' own categories with the study's theoretical interests in acculturation, super-diversity and hybridity. After familiarisation with the transcripts, the researcher manually coded semantic content and then identified latent themes, iteratively refining these into a coherent set of overarching themes presented as study findings. Multiple verbatim quotations are used in the article to demonstrate analytic claims and foreground migrants' voices.

The main limitations of the study relate to the small, non-probability sample and the inability to infer causality. The principal strength lies in the depth, diversity and reflexive quality of the narratives, which offer rich insight into migrants' acculturation journeys.

4. Findings: Negotiating cultural identities and social locations

4.1 Negotiating contrasting social norms

A first major theme is how migrants contrast social norms and everyday interactional styles in their countries of origin and in Ireland. For Polish participants, a key contrast concerns bureaucracy and informality: Ireland is often portrayed as more relaxed and trust-based than Poland's perceived procedural rigidity. Cecylia, who works in a professional role, reflects:

In Poland, we can be very bureaucratic, sorry to say. We like our paperwork and all that. Not much in Ireland. Here, you have to go with the flow, listen to what people have to say, not necessarily play by the rules. Lots of things in Ireland are very informal, and it's more about trusting the person and bonding. (Cecylia)

These comparisons are ambivalent: informality can feel liberating and support quicker relationship-building, yet migrants sometimes worry about unclear expectations or responsibilities. Several Polish interviewees also mention what they see as a more relaxed Irish attitude to punctuality and deadlines, set against a strong Polish work ethic. Claudia summarises her stereotype-laden reflection as follows:

First thing that comes to my mind when I think of Irish culture is drinking, being laid back and never being on time. Polish: hardworking, on time, but not honest. (Claudia)

Although clearly hyperbolic, such contrasts help participants articulate their own positionality. Some take pride in contributing “hard work” and “discipline” to Irish workplaces, while others note that rigid expectations learned in Poland can hinder adaptation to more flexible Irish norms.

Thai participants emphasise different cultural contrasts, particularly around hierarchy, conflict avoidance and collectivism. Thailand is portrayed as a context where respect for seniors and social superiors is deeply ingrained and open disagreement discouraged, whereas Ireland is seen as more egalitarian and individualistic, with greater emphasis on personal initiative and self-expression.

One Thai postgraduate student, *Boonmee, recalls the challenge of being asked to critique his supervisor's ideas:

*In Thailand, if the senior person, like a teacher, says something, you just agree. You don't really say, 'I think this is wrong'. But here, my supervisor wants me to share my opinion with him. At first, I found it quite hard. (*Boonmee)*

Other participants describe learning to adopt a more assertive communication style, linking this to professional development and personal growth. Busaba, who is married to an Irish man, claims that she has become "more direct and confident" in Ireland, especially in work settings.

At the same time, Thai interviewees valorise aspects of Irish social norms, particularly everyday egalitarianism in interactions with service workers or bus drivers. These reflections illustrate early stages of acculturation in Berry's sense: migrants actively evaluate Irish norms and selectively adopt them, positioning themselves in relation to dichotomies such as hierarchy/egalitarianism or collectivism/individualism, often combining elements of both.

4.2 Encountering Irish culture: From culture shock to selective adaptation

Many participants recall an initial phase of culture shock upon arrival in Ireland, especially those whose first contact was with smaller towns or rural communities.

*Here in Ireland, everyone was so positive, always smiling, always helpful. This was a shock. (*Cyprian)*

My biggest cultural shock was that people are nice here. People are actually smiling at you. (Claudia).

The view of Irish people as welcoming, open and caring is shared among most Thai and Polish participants, and is particularly emphasised by older Polish migrants who grew up during or shortly after state socialism. Thai interviewees also describe early struggles with weather, food and communication styles, including Irish humour and indirect ways of expressing discontent. Yet they stress that initial difficulties gave way to fascination and appreciation, especially regarding community spirit, music and local festivals.

Acculturation stresses such as language barriers, accent comprehension, weather and a slower pace of life are common among Thai migrants. A sense of isolation as an ethnic minority is noted by several participants. For *Boonsak, who grew up in Ireland in the early 2000s, this was compounded by racial

stereotypes: “You face some bullying and tiny bits of segregation – well, maybe not literally but people treat you differently than local kids.”

Over time, migrants develop coping strategies: attending language classes, relying on bilingual friends, and exposing themselves to Irish media. Several mention watching Irish television, listening to radio news and following GAA matches as ways of improving language skills and learning about Irish culture. This is effortful but ultimately rewarding, contributing to competence and belonging.

Overall, positive impressions of Ireland and Irish people strongly dominate. “I have fallen in love with Ireland since my first visit here” (Cecylia). Several Thai participants feel comfortable among Irish people because of perceived similarities between Irish and Thai culture, such as diversity, being laid back and a shared predilection for parties and fun. Participants of both origins particularly enjoy the Irish sense of humour, community, music and Celtic culture.

In both groups, a common pattern involves selectively adopting “Irish ways” that resonate with migrants’ values or enhance social participation, while drawing boundaries around practices seen as problematic. For Thai participants, embracing elements of Irish leisure culture – going to pubs (without necessarily drinking heavily), attending live music or following sports – is described as crucial for integration. Busaba illustrates this selective adaptation:

Through my husband I got into watching sports like hurling and GAA matches. We would go to the pub with his family to watch the All-Ireland final. I don’t drink much, but I enjoy the atmosphere and the sense of community. (Busaba)

At the same time, some migrants resist what they perceive as excessive drinking or over-reliance on pubs for socialising. Benya observes that, while living in Dublin, “to get to see friends, the only thing you can do is to drink – go to pubs, or go to clubs, and dance and drink.” Similar views are expressed about playing or watching sports as a dominant mode of socialising. Thai and Polish participants who abstain from alcohol, whether for personal or cultural reasons, note that this can restrict opportunities for deeper friendships with Irish people, especially in small towns where the pub is central to social life. This tension highlights how structural features of the receiving society can shape the feasibility of integration strategies.

4.3 Participating in home and host cultures: Hybridity in practice

A second major theme explores how migrants balance participation in Irish culture with maintaining home-country practices. Most Polish immigrants retain strong heritage ties through socialising with the Polish community (often after church), speaking Polish at home and sustaining family bonds with relatives in Poland, while also adopting Irish practices such as pub-based socialising and celebrating Irish holidays. For some, learning new skills is a key adaptation strategy:

Initially, I was surrounded mostly by Polish people. But then I started taking different craft courses and attending events in my area – in the library or the church. This gave me an opportunity to meet more Irish people. (Czesia)

Thai immigrants similarly maintain home culture by meeting other Thais (especially for Buddhist celebrations or the Thai New Year) and sharing Thai food, while to varying degrees incorporating Irish customs such as pub gatherings, long walks in nature, and St Patrick's Day and Halloween celebrations.

Beyond parallel participation, many participants describe blending Polish, Thai and Irish elements into new hybrid forms. Celestyna, a Polish mother in a relationship with an Irish man, explains that her family now celebrates Christmas in a mixed way, keeping Polish Christmas Eve traditions while joining his family for a more typically Irish Christmas Day, which she feels "strikes the right balance" for them. Similarly, Busaba describes how, through her Irish husband, she

got into watching sports like hurling and GAA matches... So we would eat Thai food and watch those sports that I didn't even know existed before I met him. And then, because of this big family culture in Ireland, I've been spending all the major festivals like Christmas and Easter with my Irish family.

Thai participants describe incorporating Irish traditions such as Halloween dressing up, Easter egg hunts and local summer festivals into their routines, while sustaining Thai New Year and Buddhist commemorations, sometimes adapting rituals to the Irish context by marking them at home with small family gestures rather than large community events.

Such blending illustrates cultural hybridity in practice: rather than choosing between "Polish" and "Irish" or "Thai" and "Irish" identities, migrants construct composite identities rooted in particular families and localities (Wang & Giovanis, 2023; Sokolowska, 2014). These domestic and community settings can be read as "third spaces" in Bhabha's (1994) sense, where inherited cultural repertoires are re-signified through everyday interaction. As Crul (2024) argues, hybrid identities crystallise in precisely these in-between zones, where migrants and their families navigate, combine and sometimes subtly contest normative expectations from both sending and receiving societies. In the present study, joint celebrations (such as Polish Christmas Eve followed by an "Irish" Christmas Day) or evenings spent eating Thai food while watching GAA matches are not merely additive combinations of practices; they are third-space arrangements that enable participants to feel "at home" in more than one cultural frame and to model that plural belonging for their children.

4.4 Intercultural relationships and cross-migrant communities

Relationships with individuals from the host society play an important role in migrants' acculturation. Several participants recall key encounters with Irish teachers, colleagues, neighbours or employers who acted as informal mentors. Carmen reminisces, "I had a wonderful Irish boss who actually had trust in me. He sent me to classes and gave me three months to speak English." Similarly, Cecylia shares, "I later

found out that it was a local [Irish] priest who gave the word about me. That's how I got the job." For *Boonsak, what made a big difference "was having good teachers who were very open to migrants. They made me feel welcome."

Such "significant others" enable integration by offering emotional support, practical guidance and access to social networks. Their presence can counterbalance exclusion or stereotyping and reinforce migrants' sense that they "have a place" in Irish society.

At the same time, participants frequently report difficulty moving from superficial friendliness to deeper relationships with Irish people. The phrase "people are very friendly but..." recurs across interviews. This is often linked to pre-existing social (especially family) circles that Irish people tend to maintain. "I find the Irish people very open, but only up to a certain point" (Czesia). "As much as Irish people are friendly and kind in general, I think it's difficult to get close to them" (Busaba). Migrants describe warm greetings, small talk and practical help, yet infrequent invitations into Irish homes or intimate social circles. Several participants connect this to the centrality of alcohol-centred socialising. Those who do not drink, or dislike noisy pub environments, feel disadvantaged in forming stronger ties. Others point to long-standing local networks – particularly in rural areas – that are hard to penetrate, with close friendships often dating back to school days.

These narratives complicate a simple picture of inclusion or exclusion: migrants often feel welcomed at a surface level but struggle to build the deep, reciprocal relationships that would fully realise integration in Berry's sense. Vertovec (2023:143–146) argues that diversification generates simultaneous experiences of threat, positive contact and a wide band of neutral "non-events", with everyday encounters in super-diverse settings often marked more by mutual indifference and ambiguity than by clear-cut inclusion or exclusion. The pattern in the study data of Irish interactions that are "friendly but not deep", the tendency of migrants to "hunker down" in cross-migrant networks, and the ambivalent role of pubs as both enabling and constraining relationship-building exemplifies this uneven, multi-layered contact.

In response, many migrants build dense networks with other migrants from varied backgrounds. Participants report greater ease bonding with people who have undergone similar migration and adaptation processes, regardless of nationality or religion. Celina shared, "There were lots of other migrant children at school like that Romanian girl who was in the exact same boat. So it was a learning journey for both of us." Similarly, *Boonsak remarked, "It's quite hard for us [Thai migrants] to develop close friendships... As a kid, I did make friends more easily with other emigrants – Lithuanian, Pakistani... easier than with Irish."

This pattern is particularly prominent in super-diverse environments where boundaries between ethnic and cultural groups are more fluid. The high "bridging social capital" (Tatarko & Berry, 2024:2) observed among Polish and Thai immigrants in Ireland highlights the importance of cross-migrant solidarity in cultural adaptation. As Matera et al. (2020:1) note, immigrants' desire for intergroup contact, regardless of culture and religion, can also promote harmonious relations with the majority. Cross-migrant

communities thus function both as a coping strategy and as a means of fostering social cohesion and integration within wider Irish society.

4.5 Cultural self-identification and acculturation strategies

When invited to position themselves culturally (mostly Polish/Thai, mostly Irish, both, neither, or something else), participants located their trajectories across Berry's spectrum of integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation. (Fig. 2) Integration was the dominant and generally most valued orientation, in line with evidence that engagement with both heritage and host cultures tends to be associated with better outcomes. Catholic and Buddhist religious–social spaces were central here: Polish Catholics often described parish life and Catholic schooling as key to feeling “like everyone else”, while Thai Buddhists highlighted house blessings and temple events that brought neighbours and Irish relatives into contact with Thai ritual and hospitality.

Yet the material also showed trajectories that drifted towards assimilation or separation. Some long-settled migrants spoke of no longer imagining a future in their country of origin and of investing heavily in Irish school, parish and leisure practices, sometimes intentionally avoiding co-ethnic networks or controversial topics such as religion to ease everyday interaction. Others, by contrast, foregrounded moral and religious commitments that limited participation in mainstream Irish social life – for example, refusing alcohol in pub-centred environments or facing such significant logistical barriers to Buddhist practice that return migration to Asia was seriously considered. A small number articulated identities that sat uneasily within nation-based categories, describing themselves primarily in human or cosmopolitan terms. While this may reflect aspirational “citizen of the world” narratives, it also, at face value, hints at experiences of marginalisation and cultural rootlessness.

Beyond these expected patterns, some of the most striking accounts point to what Crul (2024) terms “integration into diversity”, where migrants’ practices generate wider cultural cross-pollination. Parents, particularly in mixed-nationality households, described deliberately equipping children with bilingual and bi-religious repertoires so that they could express their faith and belonging in both Polish and Irish contexts, and sometimes in anticipation of unknown future spouses and locations. Everyday initiatives, such as running craft classes at home or working as childminders, unintentionally introduced Polish language and customs into Irish families and parishes, with Irish children acting as informal translators in local Polish shops and joining in Polish liturgical practices. Thai migrants similarly reported organising activities for newly arrived compatriots, while mixed Thai–Irish couples created domestic spaces where Thai and Irish students learned from one another through ordinary conversation. In a further twist, some Thai participants explicitly sought to “re-export” egalitarian interactional norms encountered in Ireland back to Thailand, for example by deciding to greet and thank lower-status workers in ways they had observed in Irish everyday life. Taken together, these outlier trajectories underline that acculturation is not only about individual adjustment to a host culture, but also about migrants actively reconfiguring familial, local and even transnational cultural landscapes.

4.6 Gender, family status and locality

The analysis reveals distinct patterns linked to gender, family status and locality.

Gendered patterns are strongest among parents. Female migrants, especially mothers, often lean towards assimilation through active engagement with the host culture. Polish women frequently prioritise children's integration into Irish society, even when this involves partial distancing from Polish networks. Claudia, for instance, deliberately kept away from the Polish community so that her children would be rooted in the local small-town context. At the same time, mothers in mixed-cultural households strive to maintain dual cultural competence. Claudia reports introducing her teenage children to Polish history through text-message quizzes, while her Irish ex-husband takes care of the Irish part of their cultural education. Similar dynamics appear in Thai narratives. Busaba, married to an Irish man, notes that her future children's religious identity will depend heavily on the cultural context in which they are raised. Another Thai participant remarks that parenthood often accelerates assimilation, as families enter Irish cultural life through children's sports, school and parish activities (*Banjerd).

Locality and community size further shape acculturation strategies. In small towns and rural villages, repeated contact with Irish neighbours through schools, parish life and local events can foster strong integration: migrants become known figures, and combining Irish networks with co-ethnic ties feels feasible. Where communities are more reserved, migrants describe being "kept at the edge", which may encourage separation within ethnic enclaves or reliance on cross-migrant networks that provide the recognition lacking locally.

Larger cities, by contrast, offer super-diverse environments with abundant cross-migrant contact and multiple routes into wider Irish society, but everyday interaction with native Irish people is often more fragmented and channelled through work or education. This produces divergent trajectories. Young Poles who move from smaller towns to Dublin or Galway to study may drift towards assimilation within cosmopolitan peer groups, less anchored by dense Polish community structures. Young Thai migrants can oscillate between assimilation and separation as they move between differently configured localities. *Boonsak recalls that growing up in Wexford, "with very few Asians around" and attending a Catholic school, meant that "in a sense, I made myself more Irish", as it became "harder for me to cultivate those values, Thai values". Later, moving to Dublin and working in a Thai restaurant enabled him to "recover" his Thai identity, "learning my own culture anew by meeting and talking to Thai people".

Such trajectories underscore that, although integration is the dominant and preferred orientation, it remains dynamic and context-dependent, shaped by specific configurations of opportunity, diversity and community in different Irish places.

5. Discussion, conclusions and policy implications

5.1 Navigating acculturation in Ireland's uneven landscapes of diversity

The findings challenge views of acculturation strategies as fixed and mutually exclusive. Participants move between integration, separation, assimilation and hybridisation across domains and over time: a Polish worker may integrate at work but separate in religious practice, while a Thai migrant may assimilate to some gender norms yet reject pub-centred leisure. Read comparatively, the material also shows that these trajectories are shaped not only by individual preference but by legal status, institutional recognition, racialised positioning and access to culturally resonant infrastructures. The study therefore supports recent calls to treat acculturation less as a question of whether integration is uniformly adaptive and more as a context-dependent, relational and multi-directional process unfolding within unequal social fields (Ward, 2024; Ward & Szabó, 2023; Benkirane & Doucerain, 2022).

Attention to super-diversity in workplaces, schools and neighbourhoods further clarifies why cross-migrant relations are central. In these contact zones, the most consequential encounters are often not simply between migrants and the majority, but among multiple migrant groups as well, producing solidarities, hierarchies and hybrid forms of belonging. The Polish–Thai comparison shows that migrants are not only recipients of national norms but also participants in reshaping local cultural repertoires through hybrid domestic practices, cross-migrant solidarities and the circulation of norms between Ireland and countries of origin. What emerges is not a linear movement towards the host society, but a more uneven and reciprocal process in which belonging is negotiated across institutions, families, neighbourhoods and transnational ties ((Crul, 2024; Murphy & Vieten, 2025; Vertovec, 2023).

5.2 Cultural integration, policy drift and migrants’ rights in Ireland

Formally, Irish policy presents integration as a “two-way” process of mutual adaptation (Gol, 2017). Yet, the Migrant Integration Strategy (2017–2021) has expired without a successor, raising concerns about drift and a gap in rights-based integration policy (ICI, 2025). Recent reforms have focused more on anti-racism and international protection than on cultural participation, while a new strategy remains pending. Instruments such as the Communities Integration Fund and the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund channel resources into local projects and larger programmes (DCEDIY, 2024; Murphy et al., 2025). Yet, MIPEX 2025 records a decline in Ireland’s score (down 5 points since 2020), citing weaker consultative bodies, the lack of an updated migrant integration strategy, lack of permanent national consultation structures for migrant communities, weaker anti-discrimination enforcement, and gaps in hate crime legislation and legal aid access (Yavçan & Gorgerino, 2025:18; Migration Policy Group, 2025).

Within this setting, participants’ acculturation practices can be read as claims to cultural rights “from below”. By combining Irish and heritage practices, questioning narrow leisure norms or building cross-migrant communities, they enact rights to participate in and reshape cultural life (UNESCO, 2001; UN-CESCR, 2009). Yet the resources enabling such practices are uneven. Polish EU citizens typically have secure labour-market access and mobility, while Thai migrants on dependent visas or in precarious work have less scope to refuse exploitative conditions or invest in community activities (Gray & Lago, 2011; McGuinness et al., 2018). Migrants overall are more likely than Irish-born residents to face high housing

costs, poverty and fear in public space, despite often high employment and education rates (Laurence et al., 2024; Wang & Giovanis, 2023). From a decolonial perspective, integration policies that focus mainly on “helping migrants adapt” risk obscuring the need for transformation in mainstream institutions and publics (Savaş & Dutt, 2023; Murphy & Vieten, 2025); accordingly, Higgins and Donnellan (2023:171) call for a more genuinely rights-based approach, grounded in greater policy coherence and more collaborative governance with migrant communities.

5.3 Supporting hybrid and cross-migrant spaces: Implications and future directions

Participants’ most positive experiences cluster around concrete sites where hybrid and cross-migrant practices are possible: inclusive workplaces, schools that value multilingualism, faith-linked events open to neighbours, community projects and informal gatherings not organised solely around alcohol. Barriers, by contrast, are associated with settings that enforce narrow norms or leave racism and stereotyping unchallenged. The findings point to the importance of strengthening local intercultural infrastructures such as community centres, libraries, sports clubs and arts initiatives; recognising migrants’ linguistic and transnational resources through heritage language support and flexible communication practices; and engaging migrant-led and faith-linked organisations as partners in social support and anti-racism (Gol, 2016; DCEDIY, 2024; Conner, 2019; Adams et al., 2025). These initiatives need to be linked to broader reforms in housing, employment rights and anti-discrimination enforcement if they are to counteract regressive trends identified in MIPEX and national monitoring reports (Laurence et al., 2024; Yavçan & Gorgerino, 2025; Migration Policy Group, 2025).

Overall, the study shows that Polish and Thai migrants in Ireland do not follow linear trajectories from “separation” to “integration” or “assimilation”. Instead, they develop context-specific, intersectional strategies: selectively adopting and resisting elements of Irish and heritage cultures; constructing hybrid practices in family life, religion and leisure; and building cross-migrant communities that complicate majority–minority distinctions. Their scope to integrate on their own terms is shaped by immigration status, class, race, gender and locality, as well as by a policy framework that combines inclusive rhetoric with tightening control measures. Supporting acculturation as a two-way, rights-based process therefore requires sustained investment in intercultural infrastructures, meaningful involvement of migrant-led and faith-linked organisations, and policy reforms that address structural inequalities.

Abbreviations

OECD

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

UN

CESCR-United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Declarations

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethics approval

This research was approved by the Atlantic Technological University (ATU), Sligo, Research Ethics Committee (Reference no. 00696). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation.

Clinical Trial Number

Not applicable.

Funding

No funding was received for this study.

Author Contribution

J.U.-N. conceived the study, designed the research, conducted the literature review, collected and analysed the data, and wrote the main manuscript text. J.U.-N. also prepared all figures and tables and reviewed the final manuscript.

Acknowledgement

My heartfelt thanks go to all the Polish and Thai migrants who made this study possible. Their openness and generosity in sharing their personal stories were fundamental to the completion of this research.

Data Availability

The qualitative interview data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy and consent of research participants, but may be available from the corresponding author on reasonable request and subject to ethical approval and applicable data protection requirements.

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Figures

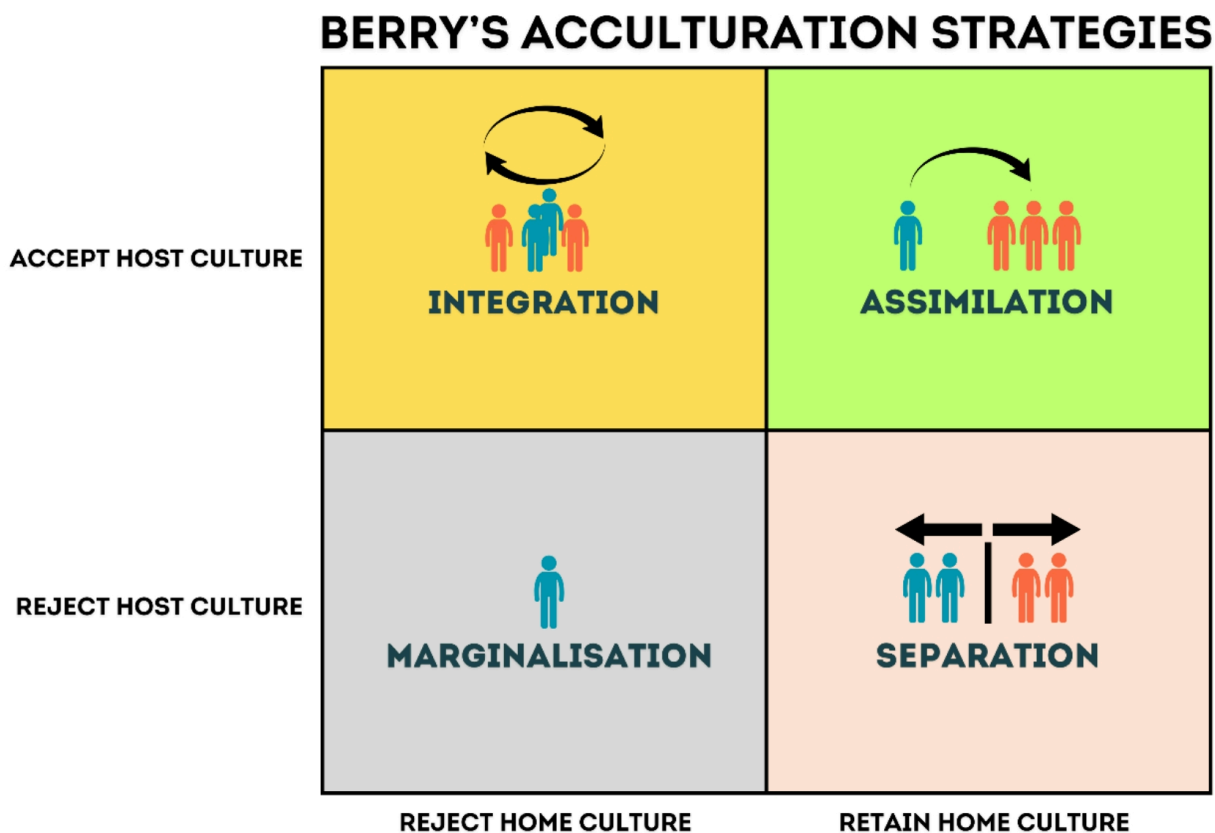


Figure 1

Berry's acculturation strategies



Figure 2

Cultural self-identification of Polish and Thai migrants in Ireland