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STRANGERS SWITCHING THEIR IDENTITIES: CULTURAL IDENTITY MANAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

A Qualitative Analysis of International Students' Intercultural (Ex)change Processes and Perceptions Regarding Their Stay in the United States and Countries of Origin

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Communication

---

by
Vivian Kretzschmar
December 2022

Accepted by
Dr. Andrew S. Pyle, Committee Chair
Dr. V. Skye Wingate
Dr. James N. Gilmore

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Abstract

In this globalized world, cross-country travel for education has been a prevalent (5.6 million students identified as international students in 2020) and ever-increasing (with a predicted increase of 250% by 2030) trend through the past decades. The sojourn impacts the students' experience of the new culture and the ensuing shocks and adaptations. The understanding of something as complicated as culture, trying to be integrated into a new culture, and its perception to individuals, of course, have their ways of distinct communication trends through social media.

The struggle of maintaining and changing one's cultural identity and adaptation across cultures has been scrutinized in literature through different lenses, especially in light of the evolution of culture, perceived through how the players behave and communicate. Analyzing the works of literature related to the theories of (inter)cultural identity, the models of culture shock, intercultural communication, and impression management while emphasizing on communication through social media, this thesis sought to understand if and how the behaviors of the sojourners change depending on the audience at home and the host institution, and whether the travelers consciously change their social media activity based on their experience of culture shock and the eventual adaptation thereafter.

A snowball sample of 14 international graduate students at Clemson University was selected to be interviewed, using semi-structured questionnaires for data collection. The raw interview data were collected and self-coded through the qualitative analysis tool MAXQDA. The respondents' answers were evaluated from three principal perspectives – their communication over social media with their family and friends back home, contact with the hosts in the United States, and how the interaction on social media changed after the initial

exposure to the cultural shock(s). The apparent quality of better education, a plethora of specific opportunities, and independent learning environments also brought in the challenges of missing the physical proximity from family and friends back home, including an intense workload, and the sense of self-sufficiency.

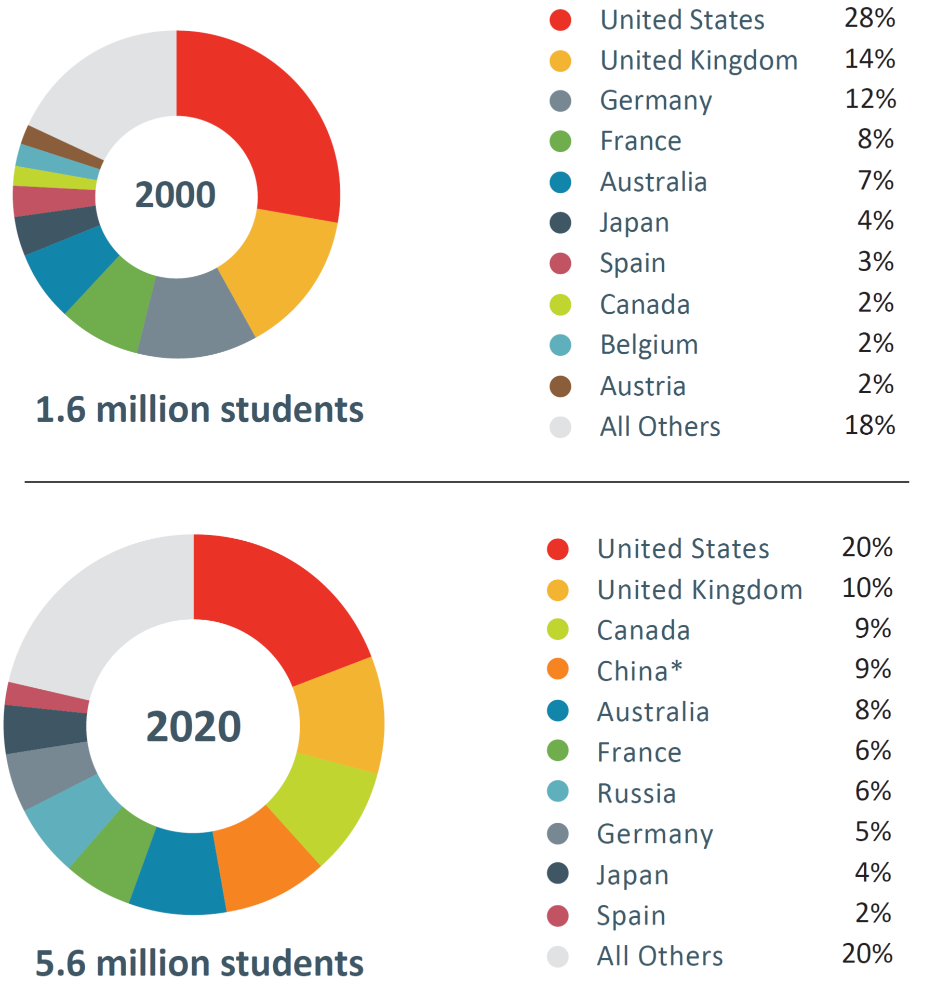
Combining everything, communication efforts through social media needed adaptation while still being in touch, at least superficially, with close family and friends; students displayed additional incentives and measures to get acquainted with the professional cultural systems in the host environment. The characteristics of front-stage communications were audience and time-dependent, whereas the backstage elements showed traits of being excluded and growing respect for personal boundaries. Although this study is only a peephole of the entire spectrum that needs to be further elaborated, spanning multiple universities around the globe with a much larger sample size, it is undeniable that these trends of social media behavior are crucial to understanding the perspectives of culture shocks and how the home cultural differences might play a role in the adaptation process.

Introduction

> *"All the world's a stage,*
> *And all the men and women merely players:*
> *They have their exits and their entrances;*
> *And one man in his time plays many parts."*
> *Shakespeare* (2015)*, As You Like It, 2/7*

We live in a fast-paced world where students, on the scale of millions, move their homes every year for educational purposes. The number of students receiving education outside their home countries has risen dramatically, especially with the proliferation of short-term *study abroad* programs (Jackson, 2008). Internationalization has changed the composition of the student population (Middleton & Jones, 2000). According to the data collected over 20 years by the Institute of International Education (2020) through Project Atlas®, 5.6 million students were identified as *International Students* in 2020 who traveled to a foreign country to pursue their education. The total number of students studying abroad increased by about 250 percent in 22 years (Figure 1). Moreover, the market intelligence report by International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF) estimates a total of 6 to 9 million enrollments of students in a foreign institution by 2030. This massive enterprise is forecasted to have spending in the order of more than $400 billion by 2030 (International Consultants for Education and Fairs, 2022). Naturally, the impact of globalization, which is demonstrated clearly through the increasing number of international students, extends well beyond the realm of business and enterprise; it affects the cultural fabric of societies and educational institutions (Jackson, 2008).

Sojourners take on the travel to a foreign land to serve as missionaries, diplomats, military personnel, other governmental and inter-governmental workers, employees of multinational corporations, and students researching or studying at foreign academic institutions, depending on their personal and professional duties and preferences (Kim, 2017c). That being said, irrespective of the purpose of migration, living in a different country inevitably impacts and changes our identity in many ways, even if we are not always immediately aware of it. A longer time abroad undoubtedly causes cognitive and behavioral changes in students. Culture, as difficult as it is to define at the fundamental level (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b) is characterized and represented by the individuals who live it.



*China total from *Project Atlas*, 2019

Source: *OECD*, 2000; *Project Atlas*, 2020; *UNESCO*, 2000 & 2020

Figure 1
Student Migration Trends by Top Host Destinations in 2000 and 2020 – from *A Quick Look at Global Mobility Trends – Project Atlas*® (Institute of International Education, 2020).

In everyday life, how an individual presents him/herself within a particular culture is their cultural identity (Hall, 2019), which, in the context of a temporary visit abroad, is the connection between one's own culture and the other cultures being interacted with (Kim, 1988). For the traveler, as the new journey brings in the prospect of interacting with different cultures in their everyday life, their cultural identity(ies) turns out to be interactive, dynamic, and variable, contingent upon interpersonal communication beyond geographical location (Belay, 2018, Kim, 2007; Serafinelli, 2018). Thus, intercultural communication is crucial for an individual visiting abroad to evaluate and manage one's cultural identity (Imahori & Cupach, 2005). Additionally, intercultural communication is meaningful since rapid globalization has increased the contact between people from different cultural backgrounds.

International students are emissaries and moderators of cultural interrelations. As Kim (2001) pointed out, globalization has made cross-cultural adaptation and intercultural transformation the "business of our time" (Kim, 2001a, p. 234). Students studying abroad can promote understanding of cultures on an international scale and foster positive international relations through experiencing, understanding, and accepting different ways of life as well as showing cultural differences between the host and home countries (Upadhyay, 2018). Going through those phases, there is an inherent adaptation process. The integrative communication theory of *cross-cultural adaptation* addresses a special case of adaptation: adaptation of individuals born and raised in one culture who move to a new and unfamiliar cultural environment (Kim, 2017a). Hence, short-term sojourners, like exchange students, must be, at least minimally, concerned with creating a relationship with the host culture that is functional in a way similar to the native population. Given sufficient time, even those with the intention of confining themselves to only superficial relationships with the host environment will find themselves having been changed (Kim, 2017a).

As mentioned earlier, culture is perceived through how the players behave and communicate with each other. Now, our behaviors and attitudes, which are cursors of a specific culture, are so deeply ingrained that people think that behaviors enacted by their own culture are the only way humans should behave. With dramatically increasing numbers of people pursuing higher education, traveling for business and pleasure, and immigrating to other countries, the probability of communicating with people from other cultures is greater than ever before (Andersen, 2012), suggesting that the preconceived notion of behaving in a culturally diverse way is also more probable. With the advancement of social media technologies, the form of interpersonal communication has been heavily reliant on social media. Inexpensive electronic communication via E-mail, Skype, or social networking sites makes international communication more likely (Andersen, 2012). Nonetheless, intercultural exchanges not only contribute to discovering students' self-awareness (Brooks & Pitts, 2016) but also impact their individual performance and management of cultural identity – offline and online.

The experience of intercultural exchange, resulting in personal growth, can be observed on various levels, specifying the explanation of many different sub-contexts, like the development of intercultural sensitivity, an increase in self-awareness, recognition of cultural integrity and, finally, development of an intercultural identity (Jackson, 2008). Therefore, this proposed study focuses on the combination of two different fundamental theories: *The culture shock* model(s) (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Kim, 1979, 1988, 2001a; Oberg, 1960) and *Impression Management* theory (Goffman, 1956, 1959).

As international students certainly bring perspectives of their own cultures, there is an exchange and at times, conflicts between their home culture and the prevalent culture in the host country. Thus, there exists consternation, simply defined as *culture shock*, that demands systematic evaluation, especially in the context of international students when the trend of foreign travel for education is on the rise.

Culture shock has been inspected from several theoretical perspectives. Kalervo Oberg introduced the culture shock model in 1960, which described the *sense of gratifying adjustment* of a traveler to a new culture (Oberg, 1960). Later on, Kim expanded the model which explained *cross-cultural adaptation process* (Kim, 1979, 1988, 1994, 2001a, 2008, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). Cumulatively, these models offer a reasonable explanation for people's in-person behavior abroad, going through phases of happiness, anxiety, confusion, loss, and many more emotions resulting from diving into a new culture and the 'temporary loss' of their home cultural standards and social rules.

In addition to the prevalent *Culture Shock* theory, there is also *Impression Management* theory, introduced by Goffman in 1956, which has not been used extensively in previous studies to examine the behavior of online communication of sojourners living in a foreign country. Since Impression Management theory (Goffman, 1956, 1959) and Culture Shock (Oberg, 1960) constitute discrete concepts, a theoretical understanding of both concepts is necessary for investigating their correlation through social media to understand how students manage their social identity online through the different stages of a culture shock.

Within Impression Management theory, Goffman, using the metaphor of theatrical performances, theorized the presentation of one's self in describing everyday social interaction. In *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959), he argued that identity, a contextually related entity, requires a socially acceptable presentation of oneself. According to him, self-presentation is a performance of oneself. Goffman compared the social world to a stage, where people take part in theatrical performances in their everyday life, performing specific roles. He compared social interaction(s) to a frontstage, whereas human life, beyond social interactions, took place backstage, where people prepared for their performances (Goffman, 1956, 1959). In this dramaturgical approach, frontstage is where people selectively present themselves to an audience, carefully choreographed to meet social expectations and cultural values. As the performers want to convey an impression that may not always be positive, they portray the curated impression leading to their objective (Goffman, 1956, 1959). In their interaction with others, they define a situation and guide the perception of others' understanding of that situation (Goffman, 1956, 1959). In contrast, as there is no audience at backstage, the performer may reveal other aspects of his personal identity not projected at the front stage.

In line with Goffman's (1959) theory, it can be extended to explain that people tend to carefully cast their presence online, where they emphasize (or mask) specific features specific to the spectators. For example, there are distinct differences in personal self-expression on social media outlets like Facebook and the professional networking website LinkedIn (Davidson & Joinson, 2021; Jin, 2015).

Having discussed these ideas, it is noteworthy that there is a need to investigate the differences between how international students perform/project their cultural identity within the host country and the home country. Furthermore, it is also intriguing to examine whether and how the performances vary at different stages of the culture shock period. As to be seen from Figure 1, the United States of America has been the most popular destination for education-related migration. Hence, this proposed study’s analyzed data answers the questions posed above from the context of international students studying in the United States. In order to do that, 14 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with international students enrolled in a graduate degree program at Clemson University, selected through snowball sampling. The recorded interviews have been transcribed, coded, and analyzed to unveil common themes. Even though Clemson University has a balanced female and male student ratio, the participant composition however was male dominant, partly due to snowball sampling.

The deep-sea of cultures – an attempt for a definition

"Culture is one of the […] most complicated words in the English language" (Williams, 2015)

Culture is generally hard to define, not at least because culture is extremely diverse and dynamic (Saint-Jacques, 2012; Samovar et al., 2012; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a; Wise, 2008), and as of now, there is no agreed universal definition of culture in the existing interdisciplinary literature on the topic. The attempt to find such a definition is probably as constant and complex as the oldest cultures on earth. Since many researchers have already examined the concept through multiple lenses throughout its history (Samovar et al., 2012) the remarks in this thesis are framed by Ting-Toomey and Chung's perspectives (2012b).

Much like Williams (2015), other researchers like Wise (2008) and Samovar et al. (2012) already noted the 'label' of culture to be simultaneously vigorous and omnipresent. Moreover, depending on the context, it is a word of ambiguous and partly contradictory meanings after all. That being said, there are many different shapes of culture that serve as the theoretical frame for this study. However, it must be noted that this notion can never be captured in its entirety but instead always remains partially defined (Wise, 2008). As for now, this study encounters the evolution of culture in two ways: from a historical-linguistic and societal point of view.

Historic-Linguistical approach

Apart from the anthropological approach, perhaps a more striking approach lies in the linguistics of the word itself, showing a constant but abstract (Williams, 1960, 2015) change in meaning and interpretation throughout the centuries and disciplines that it has been studied, reaching from its basic architecture to understanding culture as deeply value-based (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

When looking at the word stem, the noun derives from the Latin expression 'cultura' or 'cultus'[1]. Essentially, before the industrial revolutionary times in the 18th century, culture implied an activity; the tendency of the growth of natural entities, close to modern day usage – 'agriculture.' Transferred to the human level of meaning, it, of course, indicates their alteration with regards to personal development and advancements over time as a *process of cultivation*; it switched into a condition (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b; Williams, 1960; Wise, 2008).

Subsequently, this status of *culture as cultivation* emerged until the start of the 19th century. Over time, it became even more broad: a person had acquired culture as "[…] a general state of intellectual development in a society […]" (Williams, 1960, p. 18) through intense training and proper education. Cross-nationally, e.g., in Germany, culture was therefore mainly understood as a synonym for 'civilization,' pointing out the general idea of evidently becoming a desirable ideal; a 'civilized' or 'cultivated' member of the particular system by the dominant use of their cultural products like music, art, and literature. The reason being, in the first place, to acquire and internalize the societal moral standards of what is considered to be right and wrong (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b); secondly it being the prevailing process of human development overall (Williams, 1960; see also Wise, 2008). Later on, the definition of culture took turns again, directing its meaning not only to its materialism and intellectualism but also seeing it as a term that regularly aggravates either hostility or embarrassment for the affected, making individuals feel uncomfortable representing their culture publicly, e.g., because of it being portrayed through negative traits or stereotypes.

---

[1] In his work, Williams (1960, p. 51) explicitly points out that one should never speak of 'culture' as a singular, but instead always of 'culture*s*' in its plural form, both meaning "[…] the specific and variable cultures of different nations and periods, but also the specific and variable cultures of social and economic groups within a nation."

Societal approach

As derived from its historical roots, there is, of course, also a societal aspect to understanding culture(s) as the bigger picture. Above all, a culture is the outcome of a whole people (Williams, 1958). Without a doubt, when we talk about people as individuals living in society, culture always lies in the eye of the beholder. Accordingly, Wise (2008, p. 5) revealed the first point of criticism, referring to a particular class of the society's biased view of culture, which simultaneously built upon and somehow 'exploited' this perspective in the past.: "What was considered culture were the works of white men, usually from the educated classes." Long before Wise, Williams (1960) debunks and contradicts this criticism by pointing out that the totality of intellectual and imaginative creations that every generation passes on or receives as their cultural traditions and heritage (see also Kim, 1979; Samovar et al., 2012) is at all times a collectively realized achievement of many, not just of a single class. Nonetheless, it is also true that traditions will always be selective as a result of culture(s)' natural characteristic of being exposed to several changes, contraction(s), or expanse(s) over time, all elements of culture itself are invariably expanding (Williams, 1958).

With this in mind, Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012b) demonstrated that culture from a(n) (intrinsically) societal perspective arises at the fluid boundary between ingroup[2] and outgroup[3]. As we grow up, through its well-established familiar nuances and directions, it inevitably shapes our personal mind(s) (Williams, 1958) and gradually alters us, respectively our personality (Kim, 1979). Taking it all together, Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012) offer the following definition of culture:

> "[…] culture [is a] […] learned system of meanings […] that helps you [making] sense in your everyday environmental setting]. […] [It] consists of patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, meanings, and symbols that are passed on from one generation to the next and are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community" (p. 15 f.)

---

[2] Ingroups portray a shared identity, including to be emotionally attached to and creating solidarity among its members.

[3] Those are elating to groups of people who are psychologically or emotionally avoided and isolated from the ingroup.

Importantly, although by degrees, we develop ‘cultural habits,’ thereby automizing certain behaviors without necessarily thinking about them while ‘operating’ in the culture that is relevant to us (Wise, 2008), despite that every culture also extends to strive for new observations and meanings, especially on the level of personal and social experiences (Williams, 1958).

Culture as a layered system – The iceberg model

As with every common culture, one can never fully grasp it in its entirety (Williams, 1960) but instead should unfold its richness (Wise, 2008) enclosed by the social clues binding it. However, to achieve cohesion, as mentioned, the individual within must match the culture’s core values[4] and their respective norms, traditions, beliefs, symbols, meanings, and logics (Kim, 1979; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b) to some extent.[5]

To better demonstrate and frame all these values, Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012b) compare the (social) makeup of cultures to an iceberg. Essentially, in its basic form, this model consists of four layers. In the context of the investigations of this work, however, this is supplemented by additional, externally acting influences (see Figure 2) since the context of previous sections already determined that cultures cannot be seen and do not operate as static, closed systems. Due to external influences, cultures are also continuously forced to dynamically react to their environment, as well as to the interactions in between them in terms of “[…] borrowing, diversifying [and] connecting […]” (Wise, 2008, p. 27) to one another in order to change or adapt accordingly.

The model proposes that only a small part of what we perceive as a culture is visibly revealed above the water level. In contrast, the deeper layers of a culture, are buried under the surface. So, what we see is only the superficial 'obvious,' what we are supposed to actively perceive (media, monuments, artifacts, etc.) - namely the so-called 'popular culture.'

---

[4] Samovar et al. (2012) distinguish values principally into two groups, with our shared, cultural values on the one hand, providing the driving force for our unique, personal behaviors on the other.

[5] People generally don't make the effort of taking the time in order to discover the deeper layers of these needs or their intertwined connections (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b).

Furthermore, this model, which is strongly in line with Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs* (Maslow, 1943), shows that although people from different cultures naturally show dissonance with each other, they are also more similar in many aspects (especially at the deeper levels) than it might seem at first glance: they all share the common needs of respect, social contact, and security. In addition, it also trains us to be constantly aware that cultures are multi-faceted and should not be generalized based on apparent outward appearances, like the people who live in them.

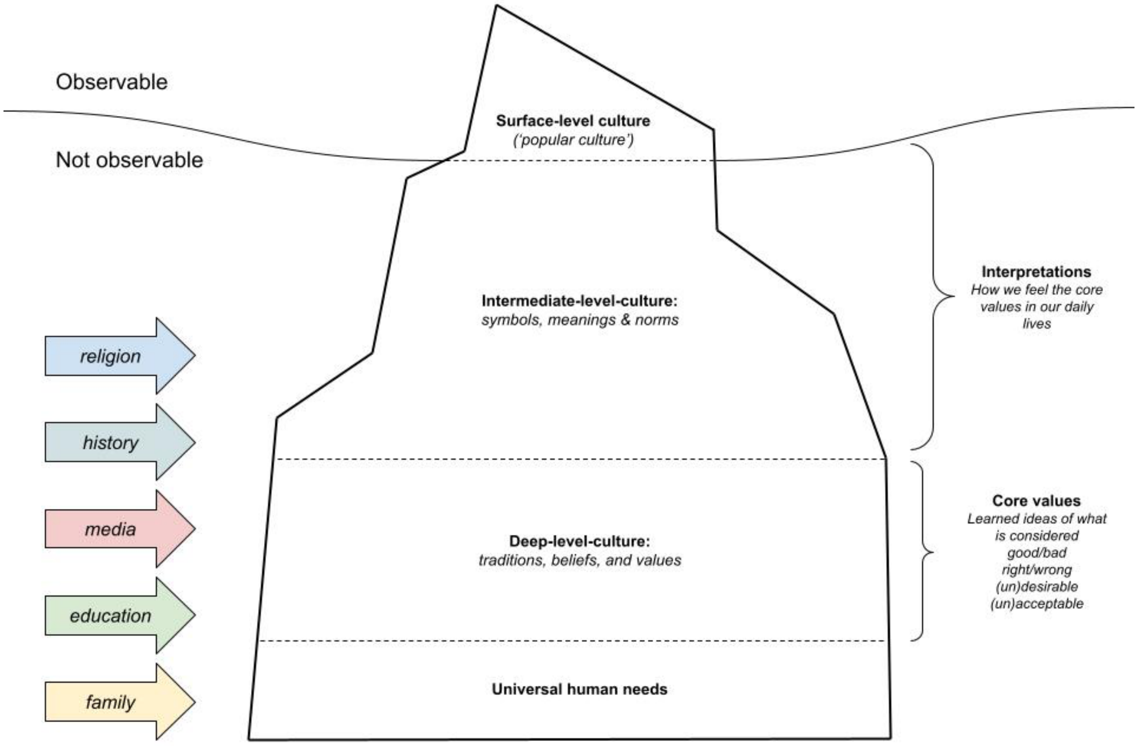

Observable
Not observable
Surface-level culture
('popular culture')
Intermediate-level-culture:
symbols, meanings & norms
Deep-level-culture:
traditions, beliefs, and values
Universal human needs
religion
history
media
education
family
Interpretations
How we feel the core values in our daily lives
Core values
Learned ideas of what is considered
good/bad
right/wrong
(un)desirable
(un)acceptable

Figure 2
The iceberg model (adapted and modulated from Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012b))

Still questionable and to be fathomed within the scope of this study, however, is if we sooner or later 'inevitably' distance ourselves from our culture within the scope of the cross-cultural adaptation process, whether we convey our own culture to people of other cultures via intercultural exchange (better or at all) and also at the same time (still) perceive it (more strongly) for ourselves. Clearly, we often learn about other cultures through the external representation of their *popular ('pop') culture* in the first place. This part of a foreign culture is clearly visible to us as the sojourner, referring to mass-appealing, pervading cultural artifacts that are consumed daily.

Moving down the iceberg, the *intermediate level*, consisting of *symbols, meanings, and norms,* is the first part of a culture that is hidden from our external perception. Symbols help the sojourner understand a culture's logic on an interpretative basis – with the shared language being the most concise system (Samovar et al., 2012). In that context, meanings are understood to be psychologically attached to a symbol (e.g., to gestures), potentially causing either positive or negative objective and subjective reactions on the 'observers' side. Lastly, norms, just like values, specify the societies' collective expectations, respective priorities of what is considered to be (im-)proper behavior, practices or (un-)fair actions within an environment in which a particular culture is practiced[6] (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b).

According to Williams (1958, 1960), this is of crucial importance since common meanings and experiences lay the groundwork for a successful establishment of any society and its culture within it as a mean of both integrity and room for interpretation to make our common experiences intelligible. In fact, Kim (1979, p. 435) also argues, that "[…] *culture* is imprinted in the individual *as a pattern of perceptions that is accepted and expected* by others in a society" (highlights added by the author for emphasis).

Last but not least, by reaching the *deep level*, a culture's *core values*, meaning traditions[7] (ceremonies, rituals, conventions, legends etc.), beliefs, and values come into sight. All of them are passed on either orally or in written form between the generations and serve the purpose of continuously fortifying ingroup solidarity, memories, cultural stability, and worldviews (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b). For the most part, all cultural aspects below the surface level of the iceberg, such as the core values, universal human needs, and the interpretational level, are also further defined, molded, and (re)shaped by external *formative factors* such as religion, history, media, education, or family.

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[6] These kinds of (inter)cultural exchanges go hand in hand with a certain degree of what Ting-Toomey & Chung call 'relationship expectation' (p.19), on the part of both the sojourner and the host. These expectations can be balanced by cultural competence skills (internalized cultural knowledge), which are acquired in the course of life in one's own culture or abroad. However, Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012b) do not point out here that these distinctions undoubtedly depend on the collective but are nevertheless subjective sensations as well as perceptions of the single individual within the society itself.

[7] For Hall (2019, p. 221), knowledge of a culture's traditions, as he calls it, forms the important constant of "the changing same." This awareness enables us as its 'subjects' to be able to 'reinvent' ourselves through our culture at any time.

The downside of culture: Ethnocentrism as an inherent threat

As we are aware - either through personal experience or through general education in the form of news consumption - different cultures and their societies naturally show multiple differences among them due to their uniqueness. However, it is precisely this individualism that also harbors the danger of *ethnocentrism*.

Fundamentally, suppose cultures don't interact 'properly', a lack of cross-cultural knowledge as the fundament for perception, understanding, and appreciation arises. Building on that, as a consequence, the (pre-) existing differences between the two cultures rather tend to increase instead of decline, with the potential development of a single-lensed worldview – that of our own culture as the center, declining other cultures around us as either insignificant or rejecting them as inferior (Samovar et al., 2012; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b).

The influence of globalization on the evolution of culture(s)

In spite of the previous findings, however, we should not assume that cultures act as autonomous, individual systems detached from one another. On the contrary, our world is more like an integrative and interdependent network of different cultures (Kim, 2015). Therefore, of course, it is also necessary to throw brighter light on the concept under the influence of globalization.

Essentially, a high degree of global integration of different societies can be very far-reaching (positively as well as negatively) in its consequences for groups and individuals within different cultures. In response of getting exposed to other dominant cultures within the process of globalization, individuals may suppress, undervalue, or ignore their cultural heritage or identity.[8] Especially if the experience of intercultural exchange is accompanied by particularly negative feelings, such as the experience of discrimination[9] (Lim & Pham, 2016), and is, additionally permanently marked by that, people tend to put themselves in a rather ‘defensive’ than the attempted ‘open-minded’ position. Hence, in the end, they will interact and identify themselves more with their own (home) rather than the host cultural community, although globalization equally leads to the phenomenon of acculturation (the growth of knowledge about the host culture) (Berry, 2008).

Cultural change in the sense of exchange, as it is to be understood here, aims to address both of the cultural groups involved. Overriding all this is the fact that acculturation is always a two-way decision and that it must be considered separately from assimilation since the latter offers only one possible outcome of the whole acculturation process (Berry, 2008).

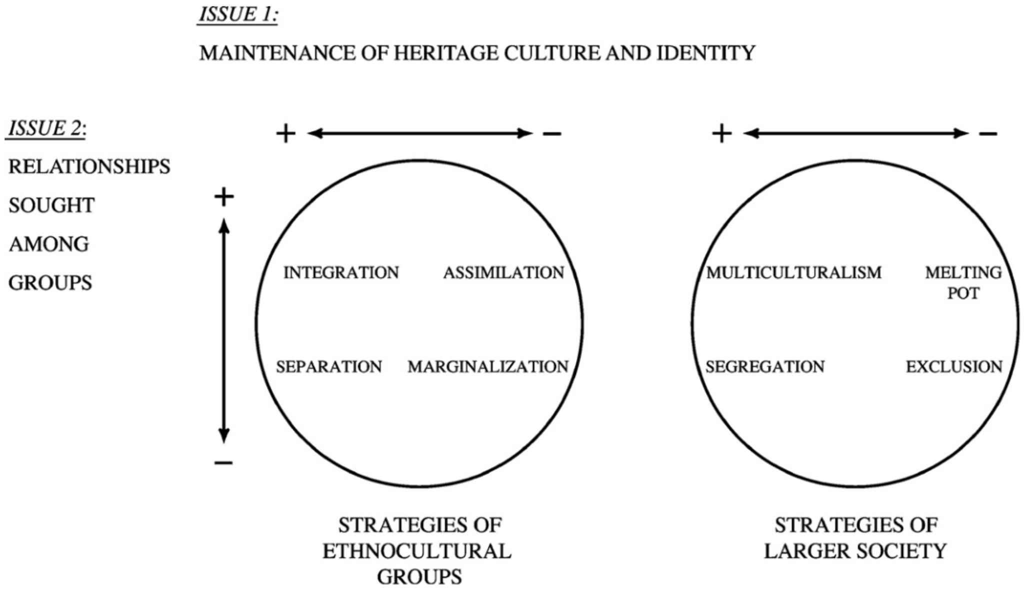
ISSUE 1:
MAINTENANCE OF HERITAGE CULTURE AND IDENTITY
ISSUE 2:
RELATIONSHIPS SOUGHT AMONG GROUPS
+
−
+
−
+
−
INTEGRATION
ASSIMILATION
SEPARATION
MARGINALIZATION
MULTICULTURALISM
MELTING POT
SEGREGATION
EXCLUSION
STRATEGIES OF ETHNOCULTURAL GROUPS
STRATEGIES OF LARGER SOCIETY

Figure 3
Intercultural strategies in ethnocultural groups and the larger society (from Berry, 2008, p. 332)

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[8] Gil has been able to observe this connection especially when an assimilation to another culture has been forced as a result of "universalist obsession" (2014, p. 474), resulting (as a worst-case-scenario) in the extinction of the different cultures.

[9] One way of expressing discrimination is through the 'performance' or 'exercise' of stereotypes. If these are used too much in the context of (inter)cultural exchange, this inevitably leads to the reinforcement or stiffening of cultural differences and possibly also the development of intolerance (Gil, 2014).

As Figure 3 depicts, *assimilation*[10] occurs as soon as someone pursues the goal of no longer retaining his own cultural identity in daily interaction with another culture. In contrast, there is also the possibility of *integration*, meaning interacting with the foreign culture while not denying one's original culture, but even (possibly) allowing it to flow (profitably) into the cross-cultural exchange (Kim, 2017c). If, on the other hand, the individual attaches importance to maintaining his or her original culture while simultaneously avoiding interaction with others, this (sub)process is called *separation*. *Marginalization* opens up as the final option. This happens when either the (external) possibility to live out one's own culture in the foreign environment is missing, or the (internally motivated) interest in contact with the national hosts (e.g., due to experiences of discrimination) is lost over time (Berry, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, the globally dominant nations, their respective societies and culture(s), exert significant influence on socialized world events. Thus, it is not surprising that, in the course of completeness, this model also takes a closer look at those processes that occur when culturally dominant groups (actively) demand specific forms of acculturation from subordinate individuals or cultural groups[11]. Indeed, integration can only be ‘freely’ chosen and successfully implemented by non-dominant groups if the dominant society is open and pluralistically receptive to foreign cultures (diversity) as a form of accommodation. This condition is reached as soon as both parties participating in the intercultural exchange have conceded the possibility to possess and live out cultural spaces independently. However, the compromise also requires that the non-dominant, ‘foreign’ culture agrees to adopt (at least in part) the fundamental social values of the prevalent one. At the same time, the host is encouraged to make effort ensuring a smooth transition into its society, providing basic needs for a sojourners’ exchange (e.g., education) (Berry, 2008).

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[10] The comprehensive state of assimilation describes the highest degree of acculturation coupled with deculturation of old traditions, norms, values, etc. that is possible in the host culture. For most people, this status is rarely achieved and pursued throughout their lives; thus, it remains an "ideal" theoretical state (Kim, 2017a).

[11] However, these will not be discussed in detail in this study.

Altogether, globalization is no optional phenomenon but rather an omnipresent reality, not only within intercultural exchange processes but also across other contexts. As people with their cultures, traditions, and values move across borders, under the influence of time, they mix, transform, and clash, trying to exert control or make space for themselves. Each change in the course of the so-called 'culture shock' thereby generates different types of stress for the individual or the collective (Kim, 2008; Kim & Bhawuk, 2008).

In summary, cultures are too complex systems ever to be understood or participated in their entirety, neither by external observers, visitors, or their own members. Following this, Williams (1960, p. 354) argues that "a culture, while it is being lived, is always in part unknown, in part unrealized." As globalization continues to evolve, research on the mechanism of cross-cultural adaptation will be just as prevailing (Kim, 2016).

(Inter)Cultural Identity

An inevitable and persistent part of our everyday life, the basis of our actions in a particular culture, and the self-presentation we maintain within is our cultural identity (Hall, 2019). Whether we are in our homeland or staying abroad – one's (inter)cultural identity[12] bridges the cognitive and emotional relation to any culture(s) we engage in (Kim, 1994; Samovar et al., 2012). Even though, several facets, respectively micro-cultures exist throughout the boundary of a defined culture, a person's identity develops in mutual dependence on their experiences[13] with and adaptation to (Kim, 1988) one or more different cultures, thereby undergoing natural changes throughout life according to specific environmental challenges. As a fundamental assumption of the field, cultural identities are much like cultures: individually distinct, multi-faceted (Wan & Chew, 2013), and in a gradual state of dynamic progress (Chen, 2017; Hall, 2019; Kim, 2007, 2015).

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[12] In her extensive research observations about intercultural adaption processes, Kim (1994, 2008) remarks that just as a single 'cultural' identity represents the connection between a person and *one* culture, it can also stand in relation to *multiple* cultures simultaneously in its extension of an 'intercultural' identity (see also Hall, 2019).

[13] At no point can we assume that people are omniscient about their culture(s) in all aspects simply because of the natural circumstance that they were born and raised within it (Wan & Chew, 2013).

With the United States being a pioneer for research on (inter)cultural identity, the discipline has taken a prominent role in social sciences groundwork like intercultural communication science[14] over recent decades (Chen, 2017; Kim, 2007, 2008; Serafinelli, 2018). Although the phenomenon by its very nature has been shaped throughout the timely social and economic history of humankind itself, initial research efforts have not started until the end of the cold war in the late 1980s. For it was precisely this point in history, characterized both by the rupture of traditional ideologies and the tensions between communism and liberalism, and by the emerging globalization of the following years, that created the perfect prelude and breeding ground for the exploration of new patterns of interpretation in the context of the now unrestricted cultural exchange between global societies (Belay, 2018; Chen, 2017). Ever since, the concept, its core components, and characteristics in their complexity (Chen, 2012a; Gil, 2014) have been analyzed, fragmented, and synthesized by various researchers, mainly from "[…] [a] societal, primarily nation-state perspective[e][15]" (Belay, 2018, p. 327). Some of these angles are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Core components and characteristics

Up to date, our present understanding of (inter)cultural identity throughout the literature suggests that the concept wraps itself in the ambiguity of different contexts from which it can be viewed and interpreted. The boundaries of its definition are fluid and abstract, after all, making it ambitious to illustrate all its various edges.

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[14] Communication views identity from a stronger social-interactive perspective, mutually emphasizing the impact human interaction has on the behavioral role somebody plays within the larger societal system and how this interaction influences its continuous maintenance and constructional process (Chen, 2017).

[15] Gil (2014) notes that national identity, or rather our homeland in that context, is a not insignificant part of our culture and therefore also our identity.

In order to narrow the scope of a (potential) definition, the literature essentially specifies five fundamental features that characterize cultural identity, namely, temporality, territoriality, contrastivity, interactivity, and multiplicity (Belay, 2018). As briefly touched upon earlier, historical events or conditions externally influence the growth or disappearance of cultural identities. *Temporality* further includes the aspect that, taking into account the momentary component, they make assumptions about the origins, historical developments, and current state of a given cultural group through both intrinsic and external observations. *Territoriality* describes the composition and extension of cultural identity through a particular (time-)space-continuum[16] (see also Chen, 2017). Even if certain cultural groups do not claim territories in the geographical sense of a country or a nation, they identify themselves in any case through a distinct space within their world view. A third defining attribute of a cultural identity represents its *contrastivity*. Logically, cultural identity does not emerge and exist autonomously in isolation but thrives on interaction with other entities. This enables both the creation of a sense of community in terms of moral obligations and collective consciousness of common origins as its basic value functions. These findings are also reflected almost one-to-one in the following characteristic, *interactivity*. Cultural identities are further developed, established, and captured in the respective moment with the help of social interactions to interpersonal relationships. However, a cultural identity never remains statically fixed but is always dynamic and variable (Kim, 2007; Serafinelli, 2018) since (self-) identification(s) can never be regarded as final. Lastly, *multiplicity* marks the trait of cultural identity being inherently complex, in the sense that the person concerned expects to have multiple identities "[…] that may be overlapping and/or competing" (Belay, 2018, p. 323; see also Gündüz, 2017; Serafinelli, 2018) instead of just one.

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[16] Consequently, cultures (re)construct their identity through multiple, selective sub-processes in which they synthesize both their collective, networked memory of (strong or loose) tie traditions and sense of cross-generational permanence (Belay, 2018; Gil, 2014), e.g. by maintaining communication with family (Hall, 2019).

In-group behavior and pluralization of (cultural) identities

Taking a look at the formation of a(n) (inter)cultural identity from an anthropological perspective, individuals indispensably depend on being part of a group - a (multi)cultural community throughout their lives (Chen, 2017; Kim, 2006, 2008), on both local and global levels (Kim, 2008). In this context, it is difficult to consider the personal and social components that together ultimately constitute a person's cultural identity separately (Kim, 2006, 2007). In order to continuously belong, we are vigorously *'labeled' as a member* of that collective, according to our function within society. Identifying oneself with a social group and integrating into their set of behaviors and rules in the best possible way reflects the basic human cognitive need to voluntarily attribute greater emotional significance to one's self-concept or self-presentation (Chen, 2017; Kim, 2007; Liu et al., 2018).

This affiliation becomes more established the more *social relationships*[17] the person builds (Wan & Chew, 2013). Cultural identity, then, is not only a demographic but rather a psychological and sociological relationship to self and others that is built on a conscious, dynamic, adaptive, and transformative group belonging that connects and integrates individual members of different cultures through shared meanings rather than viewing them as individuals acting in isolation (Chen, 2017; Kim, 2007, 2008; Wan & Chew, 2013).

In response to the many different relational exposures that affect the individual, they can, in turn, develop an identification not only with one but potentially with several cultures (Hall, 2019; Wan & Chew, 2013). This phenomenon of so-called 'pluralized identities'[18] as a reaction to the journey from the culture of origin to the 'foreign host culture' can thereby

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[17] These can prevail in both close (e.g., family, and close friends) and loose (e.g., colleagues, acquaintances, neighbors) form (Wan & Chew, 2013).

[18] If people possess an (inter)cultural identity in two or more cultures, they can either choose to let them exist separately from each other or merge them together into one multicultural identity (Wan & Chew, 2013). Rambe (2013, p. 330) and Samovar et al. (2012, p. 12) refer to this fusion between cultures as “cultural borrowing” that creates “glocalised, hybrid identities.” Especially in the age of globalization ever-evolving possibilities of electronic communication, this phenomenon represents the next stage of cultural identities: it explains that cross-cultural borrowing does not mean the abandonment of either personal or cultural integrity, but it should instead be seen as a form of respect for (inter)cultural differences, "[…] that leaves neither the lender nor the borrower deprived” (Kim, 1994, p. 8, 2008, p. 366, 2017c, p. 14).

(unfortunately) be observed not only in voluntary but also (as a reaction to the current world political situation) forced migration (Hall, 2019).

Cultural identity as a process of intercultural transformation in the age of globalization

These globalized migration processes inherently shrink the boundaries of interaction among cultures, which provides the opportunity to both individuals and communities in the process to reconstruct or renegotiate cultural identities on a larger scale constantly. Almost every society today is a composed mix of many social backgrounds, creating space for interculturality through mutual respect. Thus, identity and globalization are not contradictory but, in fact, engage in a dialogical and harmonious interdependence (Gil, 2014).

Consequently, the (trans)formation of cultural identity is also a product of the intrinsic effort to establish a permanent and mutual relationship with a cultural group environment through intercultural communication across traditional boundaries. Engaging in the loop of *cross-cultural adaptation* (Kim, 1979, 1988, 1994, 2001a, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c) or the synonymously called “self-other orientation” (Kim, 2008, p. 364, 2015, p. 6), people are experiencing the transitional phases of acculturation, deculturation and the stress-adaption-growth dynamic throughout a cultural exchange as a dynamic process. Essentially, Kim’s theory, as the thesis’ fundamental theoretical groundwork, acknowledges that the process of a sojourner’s (inter)cultural identity development starts out of the necessity to (at least partially) unroot from one’s familiar home culture as an important part of their identity (Kim, 2015), emerging into the ‘cost’ of a stressful[19], extensive, long-term involvement with the host community. The ultimately balanced mindset that changes in the process is created primarily through two key factors: *individuation,* the ability to classify oneself and others in conformity with unique personality traits, and *universalization*, the state of common humanity beyond cultural categories (Kim, 1988, 2001a, 2008, 2015, 2016), manifested by ubiquitous social needs like reciprocal respect or security (for further reference see (Maslow, 1943)).

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[19] Using this interpretation, time periods of acute stress might as well contribute to or completely undo any progress in one’s cultural identity (trans)formation (Kim, 2015).

No matter how hard we try to disguise our original cultural identity as acculturation progresses, it will never completely disappear. As mentioned earlier, the transformation process envisions the phases of deculturation (the fading of cultural habits from the home culture) and acculturation will proceed in parallel. For this, Kim (2015) presents the formula

$$A + B = A' + B' + X.$$

A' and B' mark the selective changes of original cultural behaviors (A), new cultural patterns (B), and the interconnected factors of identity transformation, individuation, and universalization (X). This basis makes it clearly recognizable that we as individuals consciously form our (inter)cultural identity in the course of the cross-cultural-adaptation process and that this identity is not, as it is often incorrectly assumed, solely developed as the result of being born into a specific culture (Chen, 2017; Hall, 2019; Kim, 1994, 2001a).

Negative impacts and critiques about cultural identity formation

Given the significant amount of research that has been done, it is not surprising that some views and definitions of cultural identity are subject to certain biases, like *positivity bias, collective self-glorification,* and *outgroup denigration*. All three are closely related to the tendency of academics to view cultural identities in an overly simplistic manner. The thesis puts forward that a person tends to identify with and feel belonging to 'only' one cultural identity. This uniform 'all-or-nothing" or 'either-or' declination as a form of understanding authenticity on the part of researchers is not only far removed from reality but also conceals the fact that people are neither categorically identical nor do they fit into a homogeneous group. This kind of generalization thereby equally excludes the possibility that individuals (could) feel connected to multiple cultural identities and prevents a more accurate understanding of all the complex processes between the individual and the cultural group itself. Even more so: the fact that a too intensive fixation on 'just' one cultural identity results in a certain inflexibility, which sooner or later can implement fears and mistrust towards other cultural groups in one's individualized cultural understanding, and thus prevents or hinders the intercultural adaptation process (Kim, 1994, 2006, 2007, 2008; Wise, 2008).

As to be seen from previous research findings, (inter)cultural identity emerges as a dynamic process of constant engagement and disengagement in the context of intercultural (ex)change. Along with differences that emerge in the process, contact with multiple cultures, such as occurs in the context of a student exchange during college, can lead not only to stress situations in regard to coping with "[…] the otherness of culturally Others […]" (Belay, 2018, p. 342) but also one's own cultural identity being questioned, more likely, to the development and question of how to handle multicultural identities at some point.

In summary, the construction of an (inter)cultural identity, the associated (enforced) relationship building, and mutual (desired) understanding often poses many challenges for the individual, as it combines both the collective knowledge and consciousness of a cultural group and the 'self' of an individual through intercultural communication (Chen, 2017). Above all, intercultural communication is the key to routing one's personal (inter)cultural identity (Imahori & Cupach, 2005).

Facing cross-cultural transition – The challenge(s) of culture shock

Our current world affairs are characterized by a rapidly advancing, hyper-technologized globalization in which uncertainty[20] and stress occupy dominant places (Kim, 2008). Nowadays, may it be either within our work or private environment, it is not only common but also frequently necessary to extend daily communicative actions beyond the bubble of one's acquainted home cultural system. It is clear that, more often than not, we are indeed required to 'think outside the box' and '(a)cross cultures' to adapt to constant cultural changes happening inside our countries and between nationalities (Kim, 2015). Therefore, it might not only be necessary to appraise the foreign culture but also to iteratively re-evaluate one's home culture (Upadhyay, 2018).

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[20] A crucial dimension that occurs in the context of cultural exchange is the so-called "uncertainty avoidance" (Hofstede, 2012, p. 23). It describes the ability of a culture to tolerate or maintain a certain level of comfort in unknown situations on the part of its members. Cultures that tend to avoid uncertainty resort to strict rules and laws and strive to minimize conflicting opinions. They also react more emotionally in principle through these tactics. The opposite type, the uncertainty-accepting cultures are more tolerant of opinions other than those they already know from their own cultural space and do not create expectations of openly expressing their emotions to their environment.

For the most part, living in an unexplored, foreign cultural surrounding is invariably accompanied by the confounding feeling of confusion[21] (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b) and distressing experiences (Lim & Pham, 2016) since it confronts us with the absence, irrelevance, and ineffectiveness (Kim, 2016) of our taken-for-granted premises and routinized social customs we came across inside our familiar home milieu (Kim, 2015). With this in mind, although every single intercultural journey differs, being incomparable and heterogeneous in itself, no sojourner can escape the transitional process of devastating uprootedness a cross-cultural experience causes, thereby also inevitably altering their identity (Kim, 2015, 2016).

Research on cross-cultural exchange[22] experiences in the field of social science first arose in the 1960s. Notably, within the subdivisions of psychology and communication, sojourners became a vital area of investigation[23] (Kim, 2016; Upadhyay, 2018). However, most researchers, especially those examining the *culture shock* phenomenon, solely focused on this concept with the connotation of being a somehow 'undesirable' encounter within an intercultural stopover (Kim, 2017b).

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[21] For this, it does not matter whether the geographically relocate stay is temporarily or permanent, but the rigor of the uncertainties depend on the size of the differences in cultural dislocation (Kim, 2017b).

[22] In this setting, it should not go unmentioned that, according to Hofstede (2012), a serious weakness of cross-cultural research is that the individual and cultural levels of investigation are often not considered with sufficient separation.

[23] In particular, researchers valued the unique aspect of sojourners journeys to be of short, temporarily duration in contrast to the long-term immigrants that had been studied more up to that point, viewing the host society and culture to be a place where they mainly pursue peripheral goals like their job or an academic degree. Thus, their involvement and commitment to the host culture is more likely to be weaker (Kim, 2016, 2017b).

Nonetheless, a number of social scientists also contrastingly emphasized the learning curve that a cultural sojourn brings with it, thereby letting one's personality grow in several ways (Adler, 1975) over time. Adler (1975) further proposed that instead of perceiving the aspect of culture shock as a "disease" (Oberg, 1960, p. 177) only to be fixed by adaptation, it rather could be seen as "[…] a transitional [learning] experience [that stimulates] a movement from a state of low self- and cultural awareness to a state of high self- and cultural awareness" (Adler, 1975, p. 15). As already noted, transnational experience dynamics occur under the influence of definite psychological, social, and emotional circumstances underlying the comparison of the perceived similarities and differences between the two cultures that simultaneously affect the individual. As well as that, a sojourn can be considered successful if both the returnee's personality and identity have been changed to a new level of consciousness regarding the foreign values, attitudes, and awareness (Adler, 1975).

Although there are many more approaches to culture shock as a theory within the extended research, this study focuses on two models: Oberg's (1960) initial model of *culture shock* (U-Curve)[24], and Kim's (1979, 1988, 1994, 2001a, 2008, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c) advancement of *cross-cultural adaptation*, incorporating the *stress-adaptation-growth dynamic* as a significant influence. Kim (1979, 1988, 1994, 2001a, 2008, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c), throughout her research, shed light on various angles of cultural exchange. Within the context of (new) cultural learning, she argued that individuals do not merely adjust to and cope with the host culture but instead go through the process of acculturation, referring to sojourners actively acquiring new cultural practices of and emotional sensibilities for the host culture (Kim, 2008).

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[24] It has to be criticized, that although the U-model displayed the ups and downs of cultural adjustment through a timely manner, it did not account for the more circumferential and incisive changes the phenomenon causes in the individuals identity (Adler, 1975). Furthermore, the theory lacks qualitative empirical support when applied across disciplines, because of its narrative character and therefore non-sufficient statistical testing (Upadhyay, 2018). However, in order to provide a sufficiently well-founded basis on its basic understanding and assumptions, this paper will first discuss these as 'fundamental' models, but of course acknowledges their weaknesses and need for further improvement.

The birth of culture shock – Oberg's U-Curve Model (1960)

When individuals - in our case, student sojourners - decide to gain experiences within another country for either academic or other personal reasons, sooner or later, they are going through a universal phenomenon among 'migrant populations.' Anthropologist Kalervo Oberg (1960, p. 177) first introduced that phenomenon as "[…] an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad" or simpler – *culture shock* (Belford, 2017; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Pasztor & Bak, 2020).

Overall, it defines the trouble, respectively social difficulties we encounter due to our lack of understanding of cultural backgrounds other than our own, ultimately resulting in disorientation (Upadhyay, 2018) and communicative performance within cross-cultural interaction (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). When we enter an unfamiliar culture, most of the psychologically impactful (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) social cues[25], signs, and symbols that we learned to use as a routine orientation point in everyday life since we grew up are removed or distorted, leaving foreigners behind with various kinds of difficulties they handle differently within their home culture (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). Oberg (1960, p. 177) refers to this situation as feeling "[…] like a fish out of water." Ever since its first 'discovery,' over time, the term has been frequently echoed and redefined by various scientists in the literature. Culture shock is not preventable; it is a normal part of successful adaptation and a (multidimensional (Mendenhall & Wiley, 1994)) adjustment within a new, intercultural environment (Kim, 2017a).

As shown in Figure 4, individuals generally go through four different stages when facing the process of cultural shock. Nonetheless, Oberg (1960) proposed that every person highly differs in how culture shock affects them (see also Belford, 2017), with some people not being able to live in another, unknown country.

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[25] Referring to Oberg (1960, p. 177), these include "[…] words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms […]".

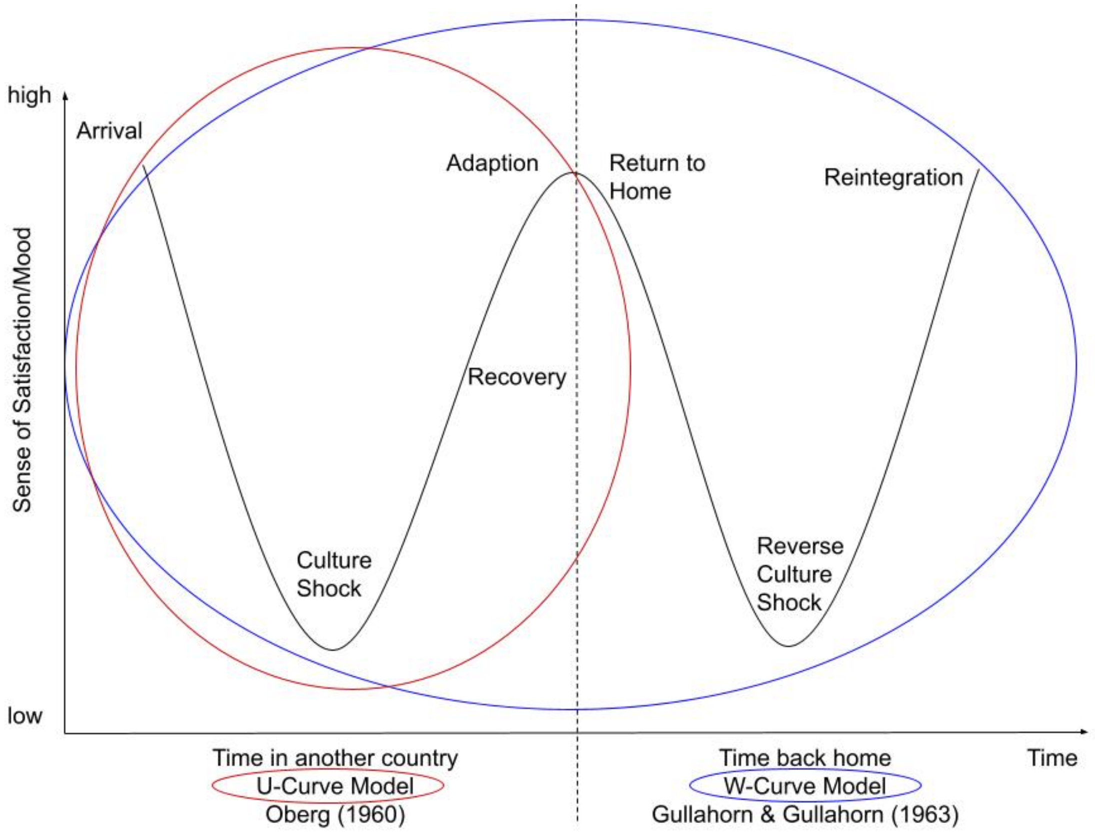
high
low
Sense of Satisfaction/Mood
Arrival
Culture Shock
Recovery
Adaption
Return to Home
Reverse Culture Shock
Reintegration
Time in another country
U-Curve Model
Oberg (1960)
Time back home
W-Curve Model
Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963)
Time

Figure 4
Oberg's (1960) initial model of culture shock (U-curve) extended by Gullahorn & Gullahorn's W-curve model (1963)

During the first stage – the *arrival* or *honeymoon phase* - which happens to be the first few weeks up to six months abroad, the person encountering is fascinated, full of optimism, excitement, and positivity by every new aspect they encounter. According to Oberg (1960), this only lasts until the point where the traveler decides to stay abroad longer, being confronted with the seriousness of real-life challenges on a daily basis.

Moving forward, the "crisis-stage" (Oberg, 1960, p. 178) slowly but steadily arises. The rejection of the environment we are surrounded by is the critical reason for our feeling of discomfort[26] and helplessness, strongly followed by frustration and anxiety as well as a potentially negative, if not to say hostile and aggressive mindset regarding the host culture. This regression point is characterized by the contrasting irrational glorification of our home culture and country, forgetting the challenges we usually struggle with but holding up only the good memories and importance we associate with it.

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[26] Discomfort in this context pertains to various forms of trouble like "[…] school trouble, language trouble, hous[ing] trouble, transportation trouble, shopping trouble […]" (Oberg, 1960, p. 178).

Oberg (1960) discussed two ways to get through this dilemma. The first includes socializing with people in our host country. He argues that (from an outside perspective) they help distract us from the actual feeling of distance between the two cultures. Still, at the same time (from our 'inside perception'), our hosts can never understand and comprehend the struggle(s) we go through to a full extent due to the circumstance of their culture(s) naturally being a routine to them. Instead, we hold them personally responsible for the discomfort we feel, as if they created these challenges on purpose.

Consequently, this discrepancy leads to a perception of the host culture as imperceptible and insensitive. It is thus not surprising that (at least during that stage; as an indicator for a change in identity performance) we instead tend to generate an attachment, respectively, a 'dependency' on people of our own culture who are simultaneously residing within the host country culture. Hence, in any case, the experiences the sojourner makes are never entirely free of emotions. By bonding with our fellow citizens through "[…] criticiz[ing] the host country, its ways, and its people […]" (Oberg, 1960, p. 178 f.), travelers are potentially emotionally engendering the host culture by assigning particularly negative stereotypes[27] to them.

Finding our way to the *recovery* stage, we initiate opening ourselves up to the idea of emerging into our new cultural environment. We start to transfer our constant criticism to a humorous basis, joking about the people, the culture, and the difficulties we face, acknowledging them while we are still holding up a 'superior' attitude towards our ‘new’ home culture.

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[27] As Gil (2014) reported, a stereotyped vision not only provides the individual with "[…] the illusion of controlling the surrounding social environment […]" (p. 469) but also supports organizing and processing large amounts of information. However, it must be noted that this can ultimately lead to the division and intolerance between two cultures.

Our initial anxiety is gone upon entering the final stage of *adjustment*, respectively *adaption*: we "[…] not only accept […] habits, and customs but actually begin to enjoy them" (Oberg, 1960, p. 179). Reaching that phase, we become full community members, having changed our attitude towards both our lives and the (former) discomforts within the 'foreign' culture. Altogether, this marks the point at which an inner sense of satisfaction and personal growth sets in.

Nonetheless, Oberg underlined that visitors to a new country will always be considered and treated as such, *playing a role* within the system. During that process, people are encouraged to develop an understanding of the other culture – as Oberg (1960, p. 182) puts it, the "[…] two patterns of behavior" without giving up their own. Looking at the total exchange experience of a sojourner, within their publication, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) further allocated Oberg's (1960) U-shaped curve to a W-model (*also known as the re-entry shock or reverse culture shock*) to apprehend and characterize both an individuals' reflections to a foreign setting as well as, at a later date, back in their 'familiar' home cultures. However, this extension is not relevant and therefore not further investigated in the scope of this thesis.

Expanding the basic model(s) of culture shock – the cross-cultural adaptation process

Although the models proposed by Oberg (1960) and Gullahorn & Gullahorn (1963) have already laid the foundation for understanding the (potential) challenge(s) of culture shock, in contrast, Kim's expanded model, the *cross-cultural adaptation process* provides an in-depth theoretical definition of the phenomenon. Kim's model systematically examined the more complex and dynamic layers of influences (namely stress, adaptation, and growth) that accompany us during our exchanges and exert a lasting impact on shaping our identity.

Essentially, much like the previous models, Kim also proposed that sojourners during their stay abroad are in a bind of making both necessary adjustments and adaptations (respectively co-evolvements) to their initially learned and accepted cultural manners via all accessible modes of communication[28] in order to build and maintain (or later on reestablish) mutually substantial psychological relationships within the host surrounding they travel to (Kim, 1979, 1988, 1994, 2001a, 2008, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

Fundamental premises

As mentioned earlier, every human is subject to the assumption of being part of an open, living system (homeostasis). In essence, the overall goal is to merge with their environment, thereby aiming for an inherent 'equilibrium.'

However, exchanging individuals undergoing a move in between environments, away from familiar surroundings, are commonly exposed to enormous psychological *stress*. Naturally, stress is considered to be a significant imbalance[29] to the equilibrium, or in other words, a direct consequence of an individual's conflict with their identity, so to say, a cause of internal deficiency ('a lack of fitness') overlapping their own capabilities with their host culture' demands and opportunities. It originates from the contrast between the eagerness to keep one's traditional habits (trying not to question them) on the one hand and the wish to adopt new ones to achieve conformity within the host culture on the other. This procedure is unstoppable and carries on as long as the individual is exposed to the engagement of conversation with, and the challenges posed by the host culture. (Kim & Kim, 2016; Kim, 1994, 2008, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

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[28] This includes but is not limited to "[…] mere observations to intense social engagements and from face-to-face and technologically mediated social encounters to public mass-mediated communication" (Kim, 2015), directly or indirectly (Kim, 2001a).

[29] Kim (2015, p. 5) indicates that some people tend to try avoiding this disequilibrium by measures such as "[…] selective attention, denial, avoidance, and withdrawal, as well as by compulsively altruistic behavior, cynicism, and hostility toward the new or changed external reality. Others may seek to regress to an earlier state of existence in the familiar "old" culture, a state in which there is no feeling of isolation, no feeling of separation."

After a considerable amount of time, the sojourner usually acclimatizes to the dynamics the disequilibrium challenges him with, resulting in adaptive changes like psychological growth (e.g., self-assurance (Kim, 2016)) and increased development of their intercultural-communicative skills in the long run (Kim, 2008, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). With their personal identity being changed, they become "bicultural, multicultural [and] cosmopolitan" (Kim, 2016, p. 7)

The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic

What essentially (forcibly) drives an individual's cross-cultural adaptation is the continuously ongoing dynamics of harmony among the factors like stress, adaptation, and growth over a certain amount of time. When considered together, all three tracks exist interdependently, for and because of each other.

With each stressful experience, a sojourner simultaneously encounters a corresponding (yet temporary) setback (a state of 'regression'). This setback, in turn, reinitiates the individual's adaptive energy to organize and simultaneously move forward in the foreign culture while re-engaging in the activities of cultural learning and inner change, inevitably leading to a new, progressive self-integration attempt and corresponding regression. Ultimately, a general state of (re)integration and personal development is the result (Kim, 2008, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

As seen from Figure 5, the process thereby does not unfold in an even, steady, and linear progression but rather underlies a dialectical, cyclical, and fluctuating pattern that leads from a step backward to a leap forward in the form of a constantly repeating loop. It can be stated that just as there was no promise of adjustment and reintegration in the initial models as the basis of culture shock, this model also shows that (depending on the individual) there is never a consistent hundred percent guarantee of overcoming the stress state. The possibility to (re)establish and maintain the inner equilibrium is only given to the extent of one's own (pre)existing internal resources.

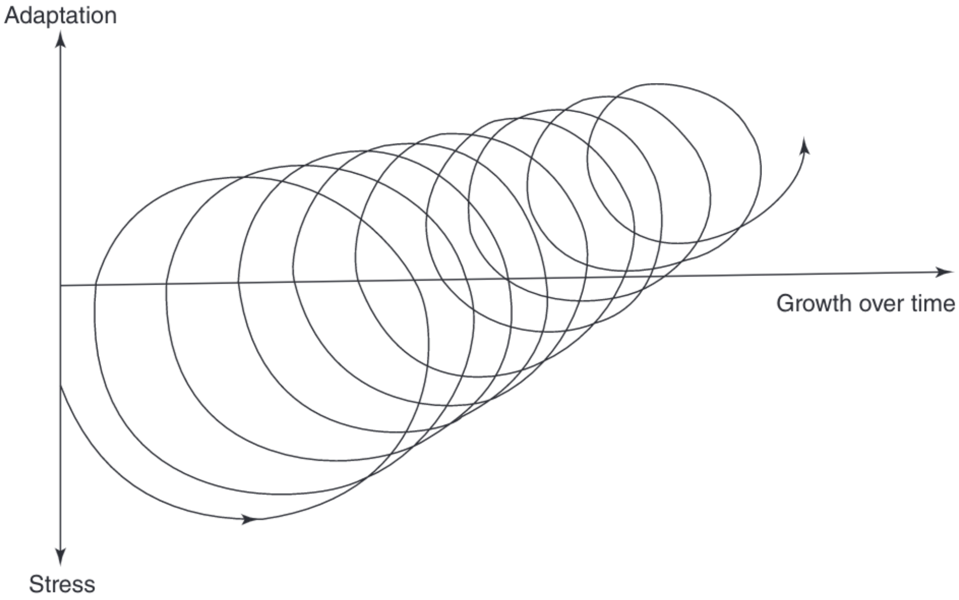

Figure 5
The stress-adaptation-growth dynamic – a process model from Kim (2001a, p. 59)

External factors influencing the process

Since the introduction of the model, within further studies, various researchers have detected a wide range of factors that impact the level of how high each individual adapts to the cross-cultural adaptation process, especially in the context of sojourners, ranging

> "[…] from demographic (e.g., age, education, gender, ethnic/cultural background, and the length of residence[30]) and psychological characteristics (e.g., empathy, flexibility, resilience) to conditions of the host environment (e.g., host receptivity, conformity pressure, ethnic group strength)" (Kim, 2016, p. 3).

In combination, these broad personality traits contribute to maximizing a successful sojourn by minimizing self-inflicted, intrinsically barriers. The most striking[31] ones are captured in Figure 6 and are examined in more detail in the following section.

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[30] However, on the contrast, Jackson (2008) critically points out that neither the length of the sojourn nor the residence guarantees automatic interculturality.

[31] While these factors undoubtedly have a positive impact on the cross-cultural adaptation process, it has to be noted that however desirable, there is no perfect sojourner after all (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004) since after

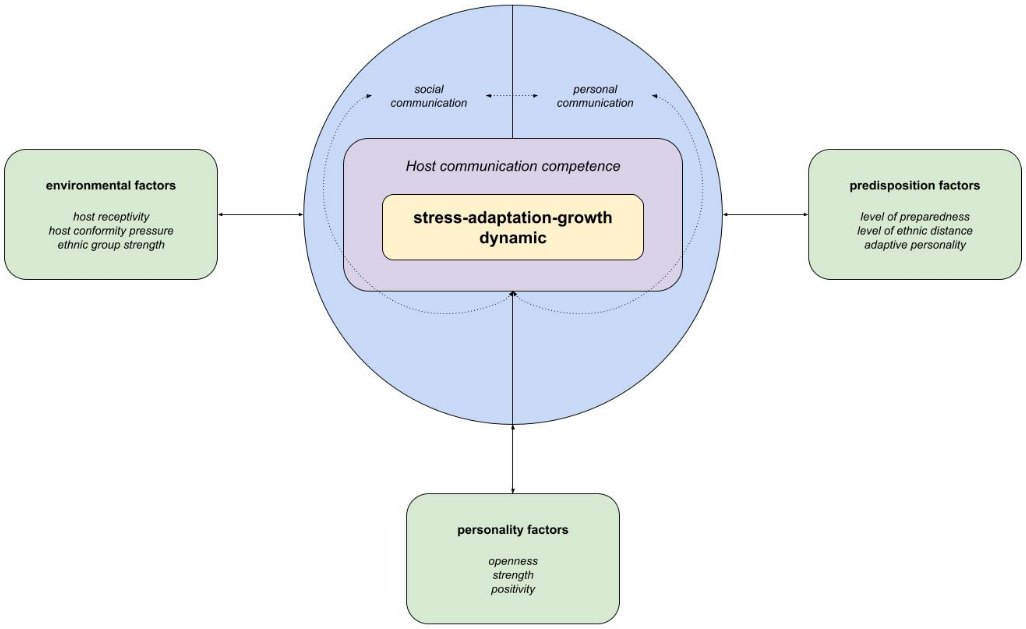
social communication
personal communication
Host communication competence
stress-adaptation-growth dynamic
environmental factors
host receptivity
host conformity pressure
ethnic group strength
predisposition factors
level of preparedness
level of ethnic distance
adaptive personality
personality factors
openness
strength
positivity

Figure 6
(External) factors influencing the stress-adaptation growth dynamic (adapted from Kim (2001a, p. 87)

This model highlights communication to be the center of the process. That being said, it proposes two reciprocal overall categories: *(intra)personal communication,* referring to intrinsic thoughts and the mental preparation to act out certain social situations (which the individual's host communication competence is an inseparable part of) and, of course, *social communication,* taking place in the form of either face-to-face or mediated interplay with others.

First and foremost, the *host communication competence*[32] is the key to driving the acculturation progress by enabling them to settle within their new surroundings (Kim 1979, 2016, 2017c). This component is both directly and conversely interconnected to all communicative actions involving native speakers of the foreign culture the sojourner is engaging in. Therefore, as this competence advances more with further stay, the higher their self-confidence rises in terms of voluntary host community engagement. Furthermore, it is of

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all, we also cannot expect them to become fully acculturated to the whole social and cultural system, regardless of the length of their stay (Kim, 1979).

[32] Kim (1979) thereby notes that although changes occur in both the exchanging individual as well as the host society because they leave their cultural imprint, the changes in the host society might stay invisible.

crucial importance to expand this factor, as communication with the locals, as a mediating variable (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004), opens up doors for a deeper insight into perception and understanding of their mindsets as well as everyday behaviors and cultural habits. Moreover, observing the behavioral and communicative patterns of the host society equips the 'exchanging stranger' with the advantage of reference points to check and evaluate their adjustment regularly.[33] All in all, there are three interrelated dimensions to this sub-area: cognitive, affective, and operational competence(s) (Kim, 2016, 2017c).

Cognitive competence indicates the individual's intellectual skill of coping with the host culture's "[…] knowledge[34] […], history, social institutions, and rules of social conduct" (Kim, 2016, p. 4). Also, *affective competencies* are strongly linked to them since they trigger our intrinsic motivational and emotional dimensions for us to carry out all novel challenges within the new local environment. Additionally, they synchronously serve the purpose of understanding and taking compassion for the host's personal emotional sensibilities, leading to an overall deeper connection on the psychological level. Lastly, *operational competence* incorporates the ability to communicate with the 'nationals' by determining the (most) proper combination of (non)verbal cues suitable for the respective social interaction.

Nonetheless, host communication competence (personal communication) is equally dependent on the host environmental milieu. Therefore, the *host receptivity* marks one of its influencing variables. It indicates the extent to which the new society is primarily open to welcoming and 'approving' the sojourner into their social circles and networks also through the provision of "[…] informational, technical, material, and emotional support" (Kim, 2017c, p. 8). As soon as the stranger gets to know the host culture better, he or she might notice the challenge of *host conformity pressure*[35], as a matter of the foreign society, in conveying their norms and cultural patterns. The third environmental factor, *ethnic group strength,* characterizes the general reputation and potential prestige of their home culture within the host culture as such.

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[33] It has to be noted though, that in order to be effective, the participation and contact within the host culture must remain of positive quality during the time of the exchange (Upadhyay, 2018).

[34] As a rule, substantial knowledge of the host’s native language(s) directly corresponds to adaptation because it facilitates people abroad with the ability to access the host culture more easily both in terms of cognitive and linguistic approaches (Kim, 1979, 2016).

This concept goes hand in hand with what Kim (2016, 2017c) refers to as the *predisposition factors,* so to say, the stranger's internal conditions and potential for a successful adaptation. Essentially, every cross-cultural sojourner enters the adaptation cycle with pre-existing settings like their initial *level of preparedness*, meaning their mental, emotional, and motivational willingness[36] to manage their new cultural environment. Contrastingly, the factor of (potential) *great ethnic distance*[37] that impedes the adaptive effort is equally influencing. Finally, an already existing *adaptive personality* supports the sojourner in coping with stressful situations through the ability to maximize their learning experience(s).

Subsequently, the individual *personality factors* (Kim, 2001b, 2016, 2017c) of *openness*, *strength*, and *positivity* mark such much-needed personality traits. *Openness* thereby accounts for the ability to approach new information and be open-minded against continuously changing circumstances in our host environment. Besides that, personality *strength* reduces the host community's external harshness or ethnocentric judgments.

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[35] This pressure is known to be significantly lower within countries that have highly diverse societies such as the United States. According to Kim (2017c, p. 9) they "[…] tend to show greater openness and acceptance of cultural and ethnic differences, thereby exerting less pressure on strangers to change their habitual ways."

[36] As Chapdelaine & Alexitch (2004) point out, this motivation to successfully adapt depends to a great extent on the duration of the exchange in the host culture: a longer stay is directly proportional to the motivation to adapt.

[37] Researchers observed this circumstance to a great extent within many different nations. As Upadhyay (2018) and Kim & Kim (2016) put it, the higher the degree of cross-cultural differences (values, attitudes, and communication styles) in between the countries of exchange is, the more 'social hold up' within the host culture will occur, ultimately resulting in both lower proportions of as well as greater difficulties with social interaction(s) amidst internationals and host members. Proof of this can be found in the basic work of Hofstede (2012), and developed further by Kim (2016) as well as Chapdelaine and Alexitch (2004) and Chen (2017). All of them, in the context of the difference between collectivist and individualist societies independently found, that there is indeed a greater likability for people from individualist cultures to interpret their independence and autonomy (rather than interdependence for collectivists) from the in-group (loose tie relationship) as a sign of maturity and uniqueness instead of disrespect as collectivist cultures would perceive it. After all, it can be said that strong-tie cultures have a tighter and more narrow set of behavioral rules than loose tie cultures (Liu et al., 2018). As an example, students from Europe (as a western cultural area) are more probable than students from Asia (as an eastern one) to interact with local people of an individualistic country such as the United States (Hofstede, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2016).

Following this, the attribute of *positivity* helps to encourage the sojourners' fundamental self-trust to face the challenges of the host environment with a sufficient level of optimism.

In conclusion, culture shock, in all its shapes, is an entirely normal process and part of a successful cross-cultural adaptation. It is a diverse experience that vastly differs in its outcome (i.e., positive or negative psychological impact), extent and magnitude among individuals (Kim, 2017a), thereby significantly depending on the remaining social contacts and personal variables of their home culture. Although it poses some challenges during the initial stages, it is also a means of substantial personal growth, an increase in self-awareness, not to mention the elaboration of accepting cultural diversity, recognition of cultural integrity and development of an intercultural identity (Kim, 1979, 1988, 1994, 2001a, 2008, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Upadhyay, 2018).

However, although these foundations have existed for a long time, there seems to be a gap in how we publicly report our impression(s) of changing habits, values, ((un)conscious) identity shift, or stress adaptation during the process of cultural adjustment, setting a particular focus on having both our familiar social contacts in our home country and our newfound ones in the host country watch us through our social media channels. Thanks to these technologies, we can interact and share intercultural experiences with both sides independent from (physical) space and time. Examining these relationships and motivations behind one's personal reasons for a distinct self-presentation are crucial in view of the rapidly evolving forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies dominating our globalized world and all communication processes within.

Intercultural Communication

No matter what area of our lives we look at, they all have one thing in common: daily interaction with other people. Due to the many technological advances of recent years, it is easier nowadays to connect physically and virtually not only with people of one's own cultural area but also interculturally within a brief time on a daily basis to build interpersonal relationships. This tendency, clearly, does not only arise in the work context, e.g., through global business relations, but also in the private sphere, especially in the form of migration, international travel, or, even more specifically, in the context of intercultural exchange of students in higher education (Lim & Pham, 2016; Samovar et al., 2012).

The changes of the inner self and of our (inter)cultural identity that we undergo in a cross-cultural adaptation process, as well as the interpersonal relationships that we build (or forfeit) within its course, thereby occur based on intercultural communication as the lynchpin of 'successful' acculturation. Simply put, without (effective) communication, any kind of human social interaction is basically impossible (Samovar et al., 2012). This connection carries even more weight within the intercultural context since both intercultural communication and culture mutually depend on and shape each other[38] (Gay, 2012; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a). Meaning, 'cultural strangers' can only inseminate, learn, and internalize the traditions, symbols, norms, beliefs, and values of the host culture through conversation (Kim, 1979, 2017a, 2017c).

Just as culture is a very elastic concept that can be viewed and interpreted from many levels of meaning, so is its communication: dynamic and versatile. The anthropological perspective on (inter)cultural communication, proposed it to be a process “[…] through which cultural difference[s] [are] expressed and constructed" (Philipsen, 2003, p. 35). Therefore, it can be said that the general intention behind intercultural communication, taking place as an “[…] *irreversible process* […]” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a, p. 26) within a social system, is to negotiate a common, harmonious understanding of (previously said or implied) distinct meanings[39] either between communities or the individuals that form it, and to diminish potential dissimilarities and problems in a 'culturally appropriate,' respectful way (Pasztor & Bak, 2020; Saint-Jacques, 2012; Samovar et al., 2012; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a). In order to convey and balance our ideas, thoughts, feelings, and actions unambiguously in the process, we resort to both verbal and nonverbal messages (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a).

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[38] Those individuals who develop a high degree of intercultural sensitivity and competence during their exchange are thus more likely to be able to recognize gaps in their communication behavior and to close them in time during the process. However, if a person exhibits predominantly ethnocentric attitudes and behaviors, this can often result in a failure to understand the foreign culture from the ground up, either in its intrinsic complexity or in the interpretation of inevitable communicative misbehavior that could prevent the establishment and expansion of cultural relationships (Jackson, 2008).

The transformation of intercultural communication through different stages

According to Ting-Toomey & Chung's (2012a) *staircase model* (Figure 7), the development of sojourners' intercultural communication competence takes place in four steps over the course of their cross-cultural adaptation in reaction to culture shock.

Starting off at the first level, the *unconscious incompetence*, as someone who just entered a new intercultural setting (comparable to Oberg's (1960) arrival/culture shock stage), we are only familiar with social cues we acquired within our host culture (ethnocentrism). Consequently, we are being completely unaware of any potential indiscretions we might have caused in the interaction process with members of our host culture due to the lack of both "[…] culture-sensitive knowledge" and the interest in developing "[…] responsive attitudes or skills" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a, p. 31).

Once we reach the second stage, after some time spent in the host culture, we gradually become *conscious of our incompetencies* through the gradual opening of ourselves. While we still look at the host culture through our strongly ethnocentric lens, having persistent knowledge as well as empathy skill deficits, we begin to question both our current worldview along with the context of previously functioning communication patterns and their 'failure' within our new environment (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a).

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[39] In his early works, Hall (1976) argues at this point that the meaning of a message is thereby inseparable from both the context and the code into which it is woven. In short, without an accurate understanding of the relevant context, the message can only be decoded incompletely or even incorrectly. Two types of communication context are distinguished here, high-context and low-context. In the case of high-context communication, most of all information is internalized either in the environment, situation or in the person(s) themselves and in return very little is transmitted as an encoded, verbal part of the message. In short, the majority of the message is implicit. A low-context message embodies the exact opposite, i.e., the majority of the information is read out as explicit verbal code which ideally needs to be "[…] detailed, unmistakable, and specific" (Andersen, 2012, p. 298). With respect to different cultures, Hall also notes in the course of various research that collectivist cultures rather tend to be high-context cultures (position-oriented), while individualistic cultures pursue low-context communication (person-oriented).

Suppose we have adapted further and reached the level of *conscious competence*, we are in a stage of "full mindfulness" (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a, p. 31), or simply put, our awareness of the inability to practice intercultural communication. To interpret and ultimately compensate for these, we actively seek new (inter)cultural knowledge in terms of attitudes and empathic skills. At this stage, we view the host culture through an ethnorelative lens for the first time (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a).

The top stage of intercultural communication is marked as reaching *unconscious competence,* meaning a natural, full adaptation to the new environment. Here, both senders and receivers of different cultures can switch smoothly between the two communication systems.

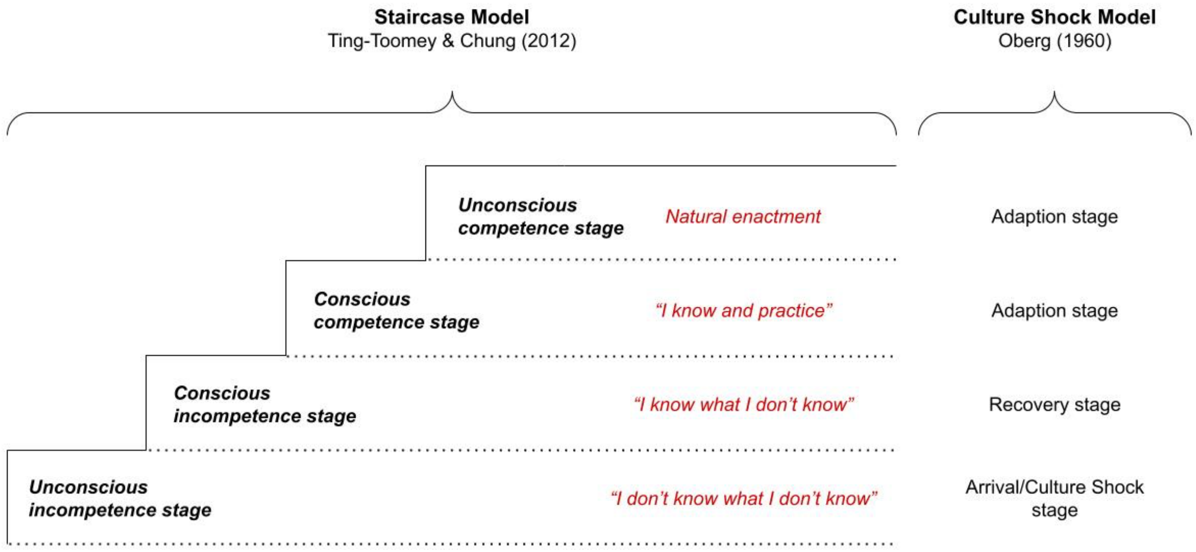
Staircase Model
Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012)
Culture Shock Model
Oberg (1960)
Unconscious competence stage
Natural enactment
Adaption stage
Conscious competence stage
"I know and practice"
Adaption stage
Conscious incompetence stage
"I know what I don't know"
Recovery stage
Unconscious incompetence stage
"I don't know what I don't know"
Arrival/Culture Shock stage

Figure 7
Intercultural communication competence: A staircase model (adapted from Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012a, p. 31) and supplemented in the context of the different phases of culture shock according to Oberg (1960))

Dangers of intercultural communication

However, no type of intercultural communication is without problems, obstacles, or dangers. Unfortunately, misunderstandings regularly occur in the context of intercultural communication due to language barriers, different, inappropriate[40] communication styles, and diverging cultural-based values or attitudes[41]. If intercultural communication does not take place flexibly, but adamant, we, instead of developing an (intended) ethnorelative attitude, do not even leave our ethnocentric way of thinking but, on the contrary, rather tend to continue and possibly intensify it. This can have a particularly significant effect as soon as we remain too long in the phase of unconscious competence, showing no respect for the host culture. In case we only maintain our own cultural mindset, including values, traditions, and routines, and communicate them in an appreciative manner, this can lead (albeit often unconsciously (Saint-Jacques, 2012)) to cultural arrogance (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a).

Intercultural communication in the age of globalization

Both the concepts of culture and communication in interdependent action are shaped and regulated by societal transformations (Saint-Jacques, 2012). These can and should never be considered separately because intercultural communication is primarily based on a common and intercultural understanding of culture(s). Globalization, however, has fundamentally changed the notion of how culture(s) should be understood by making it possible to 'dissolve' or 'shift' boundaries, both physically and virtually, and thereby allowing individuals to engage in a multicultural spectrum.

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[40] According to Ting-Toomey & Chung (2012a, p. 30), the assessment of appropriate communication behavior is the result of a common understanding of the basic "[…] values, norms, social roles, [and] expectations" of the society that the culture practices. Within the intercultural communications framework, individuals thereby typically draw on their learned and habitual cultural expectations and scripts to navigate through.

[41] The expression of individual attitude can be on two different levels, either cognitive or affective. In this regard, our cognition motivates and enables us to be open-minded and centralized in our perception of cultural commonalities, while simultaneously suppressing biased, ethnocentric urges in the context of cross-culturally occurring differences. The affective level, on the other hand, focuses on the fundamentally emotional aspect of open-minded, empathic communication between people of different cultural backgrounds in the context of intercultural exchange (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012a). Thus, if we view culture and communication within it through the cognitively or affectively 'wrong' lens, sooner or later we experience emotional frustration and, in the worst case, exclusion from the host culture.

The current era, which is very much shaped by permanently advancing globalization, has hybridized, simultaneously challenged and, to some extent, evolved hitherto occurring 'traditional' communication, its meaning, course, and social patterns across cultural boundaries through the use of social media (Chen, 2012b). Spontaneous virtual interactions, such as the unlimited sharing of a particular event in the form of posts, videos, stories, or calls on social networks, are revolutionizing not only the content and form of the information conveyed in a much more customizable frequency, but also the modality of how it is perceived and processed by an increasing number of individuals in the intra- and intercultural (individual or group level) context of relationships (Belay, 2018; Chen, 2017; Samovar et al., 2012). On a more negative note, the popular rise of social media within intercultural exchange and communication also brought two downsides. First Samovar (2012) claims that it creates a generational gap by contrasting traditional communication patterns, styles, and values with innovative, continually updating and improving features one must constantly adjust to. Secondly, he also refers to them further exacerbating the preexisting general problem of intercultural understanding in the process of communication ambiguity by contextually altering aspects such as "[…] cultural grammar [or] cultural themes […]" (Chen, 2012b, p. 4).

Impression Management Theory

In his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956, 1959), Erving Goffman outlines our identity and interactions within everyday social life as a continuous theatrical performance, following dramaturgical principles. Beyond that, he posits that the individuals actively put their performances on display for other people to benefit from. His research shows that the practices to manage impressions of oneself can be understood as us being actors who selectively plan and execute specific roles by choosing to highlight or minimize certain details of their 'self'[42] more so than others. In general, the person performing thereby often cultivates the notion that the present act they are staging is their only or at least their most essential one. Indeed, they also lean towards fostering an image of their performance being "[…] special and unique […]" (Goffman, 1956, p. 31).

However, its successful outcome certainly also depends on a number of other variables, namely the *situational context* (Pearson, 2010), which Goffman (1956) refers to as the *'setting,'* the *audience*, and our specific *personality traits* (also known as 'manner and appearance'). According to his theory, the first crucial step before a performance can even start acting out properly is to find the right *setting* or place[43] for it. Taken together, the stimuli of the situational context, and the individuals' manner[44] and appearance enable us to extract information about their social status(es). As he precisely noted, "[…] whether […] [they are] engaging in formal social activity, work, or informal recreation, […] [they are] celebrating a new phase in the season cycle or […] life-cycle" (Goffman, 1956, p. 15).

As a matter of fact, of course, none of these or any other performances take place in an isolated space without an *audience*. It is quite the contrary situation: we, as the individual, are, in fact, always visible (Serafinelli, 2018), whether ("[…] awar[e] or not […]" (Goffman, 1959, p. 75)) before a number of looking, judging, and reacting observers[45], on whom we also have an influence in return (see also Hogan, 2010). In doing so, viewers, for their part, often assume that what they get to see of the projected character is everything that constitutes the persons themselves[46] (Goffman, 1956, 1959).

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[42] Thereby, our 'self', according to Goffman (1956, 1959), must not be seen as a fixed unit within the individual but instead can be recognized as a 'social process' (see also Tseëlon, 1992, p. 115).

[43] In this regard, Goffman of course refers to a physical space due to the circumstance that his theory has been developed over 60 years ago. However, within the scope of this paper, this term will be further extended to virtual platforms for the purpose of timeliness.

[44] Manner thereby defines those (subtle) stimuli which notify us within time of the role the performer will play in the forthcoming situation (Goffman, 1956, 1959).

[45] The spectators, as a community, also form part of the 'psychological' dimension to some extent, by giving the individual a safe space to express and establish him- or herself on an affective level (Gündüz, 2017). However, it cannot be automatically assumed that the spectator also (completely) sees through the act. This can only be done best by the one who initiates it, namely the performing individual himself.

In other words, the (readily accessible and visible) region of (a) given steady self-expression, which is under continuous observation, is introduced as the '*personal front*' (Goffman, 1956, 1959). The performance within the front region can thereby be seen as an accentuated attempt to (publicly) appear[47] (Tseëlon, 1992), maintain, and embody certain (expected) external standards and norms towards the spectators[48]. Most importantly, the performer always tends to select and not create a frontstage, interacting with the audience either directly through linguistics or through gestures and facial expressions (Brooks & Pitts, 2016; Goffman, 1956, 1959).

Differing from this, it becomes clear that not only in theater but also in 'real-life,' for every front stage, there is also a 'backstage' or 'back region'. In contrast to the front, performance is treated as an intimate place (a "private reality" (Chriss, 1995, p. 561; Tseëlon, 1992, p. 116)) in this 'backstage,' where somebody is officially allowed to be 'out of character,' being able to (potentially) hide their secrets[49] and presumably expect no interference from the crowd. In this way, the perception can arise that in the backstage, the performance of the front region is completely and knowingly refuted in all its scope.

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[46] From the viewer's perspective, this allows him the greatest possible convenience. Instead of having to develop a different pattern of expectation and reaction for each different performer and each of his performances, he breaks the situations down to just this fact (subjectively true for him), which allows him to continue to maintain previous experiences and his existing stereotypical thinking. The observer then only needs to know a small, calculable measure of fronts and how to react to them in order to be able to cope with a multitude of situations at the same time (Goffman, 1956, 1959).

[47] Rosenberg & Egbert (2011) notice that the characteristic of being publicly visible drives people to manage their self-presentation with the greatest care possible.

[48] In that regard, Goffman (1956, p. 17) often assigns the frontstage to turn into a "[…] collective representation". It needs to be further noted that essentially, whenever 'actors' decides on a role, most of them already have an established front. Regardless of the decision whether the performer's choice was motivated by the desire to perform or uphold the existing front, he is obliged to fulfill both tasks. Moreover, even if the crowd does not perceive it as such, the performer is able and required to show off a "repertoire of 'faces'" (Tseëlon, 1992, p. 116) at any given time (Hogan, 2010) as a method of adaptation, each one in preparation to a situational change as a matter of the fact that both regions are considered to only exist in a "[…] time-space [manner] but a time-space-identity [manner] […]" (Hogan, 2010, p. 378).

[49] For example, as Goffman describes in his discussion of impression management techniques, the performer manages to "[…] suppress his emotional response to his private problems" (1956, p. 138).

Overall, Goffman (1956, p. 78, see also 1959) defines the essential behaviors of both states as follows:

> “Throughout our society there tends to be one informal or backstage language of behaviour, and another language of behaviour for occasions when a performance is being presented. The backstage language consists of reciprocal first-naming, co-operative decision-making, profanity, open sexual remarks, elaborate griping, smoking, rough informal dress, 'sloppy' sitting and standing posture, use of dialect or sub-standard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressivity and 'kidding,' inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor physical self-involvements such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching, and flatulence. The frontstage behaviour language can be taken as the absence (and in some sense the opposite) of this.”

From his comments, it can be seen that front and back regions are illustrated at any given place within our society, whereas in contrast to the 'unsightly' backstage, the front is usually very embellished. Indeed, while individuals present themselves before others, they occasionally emphasize and portray selected facts more dramatically not to let them be left unseen. Nonetheless, the individual will always aim to embody and represent the common values of the society that the performance takes place in stands for (Goffman, 1956, 1959).

Along with this, Goffman's theory (1956, 1959) lastly proposes that all of us are constantly engaged in the 'impression management process'[50]. It means that one strives to present or behave in a preferred and 'socially expected,' idealized way (see also Brooks & Pitts, 2016; Smith, 2006; Hogan, 2010), thereby giving meaning to themselves and the situation, helping to avoid either self-embarrassment or preventing discomfort in social interactions with others through upholding the established positively enhanced impressions[51] (Chriss, 1995; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011).

In summary, Goffman's observations on interpersonal interaction, and in particular his analysis of verbal self-representation techniques and the associated (physical) space, precisely indicate the basis of an empirical research model essential for linking theory to the study of real, practical experiences, emotions, and their expressions within the change of sojourners' cross-cultural social settings investigated in this thesis.

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[50] That being said, impression management “[…] is [by no means] a single persuasive attempt” (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011, p. 13).

[51] However, neither is the front stage thereby to be seen as a “false public” nor is the backstage to be treated as a ‘true private” (Tseëlon, 1992, p. 116).

Applications of the theory in cross-cultural and social media contexts

Admittedly, research has shown that a person spends practically no day without any sort of interpersonal interaction (Abel et al., 2021; Brooks & Pitts, 2016; Davis, 2011; Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017; Gündüz, 2017; Liu et al., 2018; Pasztor & Bak, 2020; Pearson, 2010; Serafinelli, 2018; Tufekci, 2008; Zhou et al., 2021). These are, in turn, shaping their individual perception and appearance, leading them through the very same process of self-reflective self-presentation (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011).

Just as self-presentation can take many forms, it can also take place through various channels and contexts (DeVito et al., 2018; Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017). In the age of rapid globalization we are currently facing, it is, therefore, all the more essential to consider the fact that individuals no longer just administer their impressions of one another face-to-face (Pearson, 2010) but increasingly in space and time-independent computer-mediated environments such as social media (Chen, 2012b; Zhao et al., 2013), since this area for community interaction is ever-growing. Moreover, investigating the functional processes of impression management in the online context of an 'unlimited audience' (Chen, 2012b) is crucial in order to understand how the dynamics of present-day interpersonal relationships evolve (Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011).

So far, there is a significant body of research work examining self-presentation strategies, especially in a social media context. However, there still seems to be an opportunity for growth in the examination of these strategies in light of what techniques international students use while they are experiencing the different stages of culture shock and whether their presentation of the self varies between home- and host audience(s). Undoubtedly, if there is a deficit in knowledge about the host culture's dramaturgical customs on the part of the exchanging international, this inevitably leads to the incapability of successful impression management with the hosts. As a rule, they tend to engage in the process of observing strangers' behaviors within their culture since every culture follows distinctly different rules for social interactions. Consequently, if sojourners manage to create a desirable impression by performing their role well, they can, in turn, anticipate being treated respectfully and welcomed by their hosts. In contrast, this can also harbor the risk of failure. If the host notices that sojourners are simply trying to imitate instead of expressing their role in their new environment in a genuine way, this attempt, although polite, is considered untrue, thereby creating a rather negative impression (Mendenhall & Wiley, 1994).

Let's mirror these theoretical basics in the context of social media. First and foremost, although the process of self-presentation is inherently complex, it got even more complicated with the rise of social media platforms, them promoting obscurity of both the audiences and the environment the social interaction takes place (DeVito et al., 2018). Not only in the social media sphere but also superordinately, users pursue specific self-presentation goals, following various techniques. In their studies about the use of self-presentation tactics to form folk theories, DeVito et al. (2018, p. 5) unravel immanent factors that influence the presentation of the self, such as "[…] self-monitoring, or the ability to observe cues […]" to adapt to one's surrounding(s) appropriately. In doing so, they differentiate introspection into "protective self-monitoring" (DeVito et al., 2018, p. 5), which is the recognition of given cues by others as to what behavior is considered unacceptable and ultimately detrimental to self-presentation, and "acquisitive self-monitoring" (DeVito et al., 2018, p. 5), which is about perceiving cues as to what behaviors are praised and recognized by external parties.

Among their study group, the results showed authenticity to be the overall goal for individual self-presentation. Here, participants indicated that they strive to present themselves as they actually see themselves, with a minimum of artificiality or performativity. Following this, the second objective covers the so-called 'flawless presentation.' Participants attempt the goal of creating a specific, internally consistent image. On the one hand, to maintain a desire or aesthetic that their audience positively responds to, or on the other hand, to create a new, thoroughly self-confident image of themselves that conceals any imperfections. The third target is to ‘keep the peace.’ Participants set the ambition of staying within a beneficial framework that does not cause trouble for any of their key audiences. This is solely related to staying within a range that causes as little offense as possible and avoiding controversies. Finally, the smallest proportion pursues “[…] goal-neutral self-presentation” (DeVito et al., 2018, p. 5).

On another note, Hogan (2010) further distinguishes these performances on social media. Again, social media is seen as a mediator of our role in the context of being able to think and interact not only in situations with the individual themselves but also with the content that is permanently stored on the platforms in the form of posts. Consequently, the world can be understood not only as a stage in the classical sense but also as asynchronous artifacts in "[…] participatory exhibit[s]" (Hogan, 2010, p. 377). The key difference that exists here is that the actor is performing[52] real-time for an audience that is watching it. The artifact, on the other hand, is the result of a past performance and lives on in the respective platform as ‘past data’ (Zhao et al., 2013), a carefully displayed[53] long-term self-expression for others to repetitively watch at their own speed and time frame (Hogan, 2010).

As an extension to Hogan's (2010) model, Zhao (2013) points out, that, even within the concept of an exhibition, only current content[54] is the focus of a targeted self-expression. After a while, as our publicized data on social media ‘ages’, it becomes less visible, and, in turn, of less relevancy to both the audience(s) as well as our once intended presentational goals. According to their thesis, what happens then is that as data is ‘removed’ from the audiences’ public attention, it gradually becomes part of a third, *‘personal region’* that serves as a personal space to archive social memories with particular value to the user.

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[52] Just as in Goffman's original theory, the performance region reflects the area in which performing individuals decide what kind of content to create and regulate for their current appearance based on context and audience (Zhao et al., 2013).

[53] While Hogan (2010) primarily attributes the curation of the displayed data to the (algorithm) system of the social media platforms, Zhao (2013) has uncovered another important point to this research. Essentially, the administration, selection, and arrangement of content as a form of self-expression on social media also depends significantly on the user of the platform itself. The need to constantly display content that is relevant both in terms of content and time on the profile is particularly strong.

[54] Users see in the presentation of new content the 'promise' of a more 'accurate' self-presentation. Of course, what exactly is defined as 'current' is subjective to the individual user (Zhao et al., 2013).

Social media as a tool of globalized intercultural communication and identity manifestation

Within the many stages of intercultural adaptation, sooner or later, the individual traveler not only communicates their experiences to the environment but also actively seeks its support, participation, and confirmation (Kim, 2017c). However, to maintain this, individuals must first align their communication behavior with the new culture and learn its patterns of interaction.

Today, (intercultural) communication is made possible and widely accessible primarily through the prominent use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as social media. It allows people across the world to track interactions at a new level of interconnectedness[55] and customize (relational) information in the course of diverse forms of online impression management, taking place across multiple platforms simultaneously (Brandtzaeg & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2019; Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017; Gorea, 2021; Gündüz, 2017; Pearson, 2010; Serafinelli, 2018). These new features become particularly visible and helpful in the context of cross-cultural social interactions and intercultural communication (Manago, 2015). As discussed later, social media forms the critical elements contributing to a successful adaptation process. On the other hand, social media also determines and communicates the challenges and problems in maintaining relationships across transnational distances in the home culture with audiences such as family and friends and by connecting with their peers[56] of the host culture (Alinejad, 2019; Chen, 2012b; Lim & Pham, 2016). Moreover, based on their unique characteristic of interactivity, these platforms constitute the modern foundation for public (intercultural) identity expression(s), attempting to last beyond the frequent single fleeting encounters (Gilpin, 2011; Pearson, 2010).

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[55] This new form of networking brings not only new opportunities for open networking and generous individualism, but also a natural ambivalence: "Negative posts are not liked, dark photos are not shared, and sad stories are not commented on" (Pasztor & Bak, 2020).

General characteristics of social media

In our dynamic and globalized world, it is impossible to imagine life without social media platforms as standard communication tools and personal spaces for self-expression (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Gündüz, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2010). However, since the concept of social media itself is too broad to grasp within its different areas of research, up until now, no universal definition exists across all disciplines (Pasztor & Bak, 2020). Considering that every culture and community is based on the relational exchange[57] through communication, the immense growth and popularity of new media, particularly social media platforms, as a way of creating (interpersonal online) communities while serving the purpose of increased interconnectedness beyond the boundaries of time and space came to be a crucial, revolutionary, and vital part of people's contemporary social lives (Belford, 2017; boyd, 2011; Choi et al., 2020; Choi & Sung, 2018; Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017; Jin, 2015; Liu et al., 2018; Serafinelli, 2018; Zhao et al., 2013).

Essentially, social media marks the digital place where we socialize with acquaintances, friends, or family members, creating, sharing, and consuming information[58] – shortly, watching and being watched (boyd, 2011) in a distinct context (Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017). In other words, we "showcase" ourselves (Gündüz, 2017, p. 85), making invisible, emotional information visible to a variety of audiences (Choi & Sung, 2018) based on a real-time, 24-7 availability online format (Alinejad, 2019; Hodkinson, 2017; Hogan, 2010; Pasztor & Bak, 2020) of communication, either through preserved 'permanent' or 'short-lived'[59] content (Alinejad, 2019; Choi et al., 2020; Manago, 2015). Overall, through its various affordances, social media provides us with a wide range of possibilities for our daily intense communicational and interactional experiences. At the same time, it also provides the ability to create a substantial, meaningful, and 'attractive' digital identity (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Gündüz, 2017; Manago, 2015; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Serafinelli, 2018; Veletsianos & Stewart, 2016).

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[56] On that note, both the mediated communication and the relationship to fellow nationals, is also an important anchor point to consider as they accompany us during our intercultural journey both academically and emotionally in the process of adapting to the host culture.

[57] However, most social media users do not primarily build relationships with people who are strangers to them, but with those with whom they already have a (deep) relationship that should be maintained and further developed (Jin, 2015; Serafinelli, 2018).

[58] To name only a few, this includes formats such as posts, status updates, shared content and expressions of opinion (Choi & Sung, 2018) through textual (comments), pictural, auditive, visual (i.e., video) or hybrid formats (Veletsianos & Stewart, 2016).

On another note, social media platforms have adapted to the globalization trend in their dynamism and constant change and improvement characteristics. This adaptation enables their users to shape their self-presentation in the way that the platforms *technically allow and encourage*, on the one hand, but also how they *want* to use the different platforms (Davidson & Joinson, 2021) as a necessity in terms of sharing and selective (self-)disclosure (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Liu et al., 2018; Veletsianos & Stewart, 2016) to display multiple, recognizable aspects of the self (Choi & Sung, 2018; Gorea, 2021; Manago, 2015), either completely open or rather exclusive towards their audience(s) (Serafinelli, 2018).

Interactivity & the corresponding audience as engagement factors

As social media platforms and applications such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Snapchat[60] (to name a few) grew increasingly popular over the past decades, they have expanded their possibilities for effective self-presentation, including impression management, tremendously. Prevalent features include but are not limited to the documentation of important (live) life events such as career achievements, traveling abroad, and political or personal statements, primarily through visual elements[61] like photos[62] and videos from a selfie perspective (Serafinelli, 2018). The advancements in the portability of mobile phones aid in sharing visual experiences, which justifies the construction of a self-portrayal, relating the self-image with society (Serafinelli, 2018). These carefully selected elements are a crucial part of both the 'crafting' of sojourners' online persona(s) through virtual impression management (Pearson, 2010) and the online conversation dynamic, with which they can actively interact through increasingly shorter reactions that are visible to their audience(s), such as liking, sharing, tagging or commenting[63] (Ditchfield, 2020; Gündüz, 2017; Reer et al., 2019; Serafinelli, 2018).

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[59] As social media evolved, it initially started with the ability to post purely static, 'permanent' content. Later, due to increasing popularity, some platforms, notably Snapchat and Instagram, but also Facebook and WhatsApp, introduced the option to either make content disappear immediately after receiving it, or to keep it only for a limited period of 24 hours (Choi & Sung, 2018).

[60] In contrast to primarily image-oriented platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp are often declared "mixed-use" social networks. The distinguishing criterion here is the variety of communication forms offered in addition to the visual component through which users make contact with each other, such as texts, stickers or (location) links (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015).

Within the broad social media ecology, careful preparation is required to maintain their self for the wider audience to consume, which requires efforts, albeit invisible, to foster social relationships as *followers*, *friends*, and *connections* (Duffy & Chan, 2019), and consider the feedback and approval from the abroad and host online community(ies) to be a reward sufficient to mold their self-representation (Gorea, 2021). The efforts to present oneself positively can also result from masking the users' feelings of depression and loneliness (in reference to their experiences culture shock) – sharing exciting and edited pictures on social media to derive desired outcomes and feedback is found to be a coping strategy (Pasztor &

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[61] In a comparison of the possibilities offered by different platforms, visual components in online communication via social media play the leading role (still) above all others, since, according to Gorea (2021), they lay the contextual foundation for the formation of one's own mentality and ability to interact socially in our societies today.

[62] Over time, photographs have transformed from a visual reminder to one of the fastest means of enriched communication, through which we reveal our emotions, identity(ies), in-group belongings, and shape our self-image(s) (Pearson, 2010). Especially in the context of intercultural communication, they form a stable means of social interaction, as shared profile pictures and photo albums, for example, overcome language barriers. However, it is important to always consider them in the appropriate context, otherwise a full understanding of the communicator's thoughts or feelings cannot be achieved (Gorea, 2021; Serafinelli, 2018). Platforms that rely primarily on the visual component of publishing, following the 'image first' principle, are Instagram and Snapchat, allowing the individual user to 'wrap' and project different parts of the self, according to the specific audience and situation (Choi & Sung, 2018; Zillich & Riesmeyer, 2021).

[63] Comments serve not only as a form of dialogue, but also as an expression of the social relationship between the two parties involved in the communication (boyd, 2011).

Bak, 2020). Youths are altering their past, present, and future selves based on the idealized perception of self, conforming to both offline and online lives (Gorea, 2021).

Within or across the different social media platforms, individuals sense and communicate highly vigilantly with specific but diversified audiences (Choi et al., 2020; Hodkinson, 2017; Marwick & boyd, 2010). According to boyd (2011), an audience can thereby always represent a, either actively or passively, co-present public of varying size, from individuals to communities at the local or national level.

As we transfer Goffman's (1956, 1959) descriptions, understanding one's audience[64] is essential for effective self-presentation, to be noticed, respectively, 'read' positively or as intended, even online (Pearson, 2010) in a socially appropriate and generally intelligible manner. Overall, without substantial information about the audience, the communicator lacks determination of behavioral and social cues and the ability to adjust one's self-impression strategy based on reactions (boyd, 2011).

One challenge in the social media realm is that the individual performer is often required to capture a specific context and present their own identity coherently and subtly. However, for the variety of audiences and their different backgrounds (friends vs. family vs. work environment) that they encounter in the process, the context would always have to be interpreted differently, according to the platform (Hodkinson, 2017). In reality, however, it is often the case that the individual does not serve the different target groups' per channel' by creating several identities via separate accounts, as is necessary for this, but on the contrary, communicates their identity via one single account to all their viewers, irrespective of possible overlaps occurring between them (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Nevertheless, being watched[65] by the audience(s) causes the potential pressure for shifts in attitudes and behaviors (Gündüz, 2017), often resulting in the prioritization of "superficiality over substance" (Manago, 2015, p. 2; see also Gardner & Davis, 2013), securing the projection and overexpression of positive rather than negative emotions (Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017; Liu et al., 2018) to protect the reputation towards our network (Tufekci, 2008).

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[64] If the performer does not have a precise idea or secure information about his or her audiences or online community that he or she is 'facing', he or she invokes general affordances, the structure and interaction possibilities of the social media platform itself to ‘imagine’ it as accurately as possible (Marwick & boyd, 2010). The process of imagining the audience consequently consists in adapting both one's own behavior and self-representation to the intended, 'prescribed' norms of the community (boyd, 2011)..

Impression Management – multiple identities through multiple platforms

With the ascent of social media, online communication became the 'new' norm. To target the different audiences on all social media platforms where we present ourselves, interact with them, and ultimately meet their expectations[66], the presenting user must actively monitor their self-representation (Davidson & Joinson, 2021) not only according to their demands but also based on the specificities of the online setting the interaction takes place (Marwick & boyd, 2010). As much as social networks operate as an intimate but simultaneously familiar space to negotiate one's development of online identity(ies) (Hodkinson, 2017), scholars have been observing that impression management in online environments inevitably leads to being the root for sophisticated, fluid, and selective disclosure across different social contexts (Davis, 2011; Liu et al., 2018).

Essentially, researchers proposed two ways to negotiate identity performances and engage in online impression management. We either develop a unique personality, so to say a respective identity for each platform we engage *in* or *with* (as either the *performer* or the contrasting *spectator*) (Duffy & Chan, 2019; Liu et al., 2018) or enfold a homogenous self-presentation across all of them (Davidson & Joinson, 2021; see also Hodkinson, 2017). In either case, Ditchfield (2020) and Davis (2011) point out two significant threats this 'multiplicity' of identity(ies) causes, harming either ourselves or our surroundings. First, it is difficult, both cognitively and metacognitively, to observe and control different selves and audiences simultaneously and to switch between them when necessary. On another level, the various platforms' many different designs and interaction possibilities generate the pressure to construct our quasi 'perfect self' and present it at all times. This expectation of perfecting one's self-image in the online context also represents a reduction of it in a certain way.

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[65] In response to this kind of 'social surveillance' as Marwick and boyd (2010) declare it, the individual at the center deliberately constructs certain content of their own self-representation in a controversial way and in constant repetition, expecting to generate active attention and notice from the surrounding audience(s). Indeed, Duffy and Chan's (2019) research has shown a proper indication that young people in particular feel more and more exposed to a certain digital 'surveillance' and 'obligation' cultivating their self and their community for public consumption.

[66] Zillich (2021) studied 10 adolescents with an immigration background who claimed that they were expected to adhere to their inherent culture and show their cultural background on Instagram as their identity.

Pearson (2010) and Choi & Sung (2018) have demonstrated that the strategies we thereby choose for our impression management are indeed highly influenced by the communication channel(s) we use. They examined that some outlets are more linked to 'true' self-presentation, i.e., Goffman's (1956, 1959) backstage region as a means of showing the 'hidden' self-qualities and thoughts (e.g., Snapchat) than others primarily showing the public front stage of idealizations (e.g., Instagram). Additionally, Brandtzaeg & Chaparro-Domínguez (2019) examined that a change in one's way of self-presentation can also be precipitated through a person's counterpart and their importance to the presenter in terms of relational value (see also Liu et al., 2018; Abel et al., 2021).

Hodkinson (2017) suggested the propensities of social networking sites to be the personal home grounds, specifically for youths, as they negotiate to develop their online identities. This, of course, has its fair share of complexities – as some users interact and build their identities over a single platform, while others share their personal territories through several social networking outlets (Hodkinson, 2017). Additionally, as social media networks have multiple audiences, the users must actively keep track of how they present themselves according to what the diverse group expects. Thus, a single online identity is inviable, leading to user discomfort in the context of online self-presentation (Davidson & Joinson, 2021).

Users assume different roles according to various online social contexts[67], making the identity increasingly multi-faceted and fluid (Davidson & Joinson, 2021). As little is known about how users negotiate the disparity between their assumed identities across various services and the role shared (or distinct) audiences play, one can assume that users adopt a uniform self-presentation over different mediums (Davidson & Joinson, 2021). Users presented their idealized selves strategically on social media when perpetuity of posts was an issue, but with the advent of *ephemerality,* non-strategic and intrinsically constructive self-presentation is more prevalent as users are not concerned with spectators' opinions of expressing one's true self (Choi et al., 2020).

Previous studies have conceptualized social media platforms for selective performance, depending on the context, aligned with Goffman's (1956, 1959) theatrical metaphor of 'frontstage – backstage' metaphor for enacting social roles and impression management (Zhao et al., 2013). Users present themselves in various ways contingent on the audience they engage with and the platform of that interaction (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Ditchfield (2020) argued that it's a form of reduction to perfect one's online presence, as online self-presentation is crafted carefully. It is crucial to investigate what, if any, duress is experienced to express the *perfect self* (Ditchfield, 2020). It has been shown that several users tend to clean up their old social media profiles, in line with DeVito et al.'s (2018) 'polished self-presentation,' striving for a clean history devoid of any embarrassing moments, along with a desirable social image (Brandtzaeg & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2019). In accordance with these proposed findings, this study strives to examine whether international students engage in the same practice of creating a strongly selective cultural (self-) identity depending on their audience exposure(s) in the same way.

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[67] In specific cases, online identities are very much rooted in offline contexts, so much so that the knowledge of those contexts are necessary to interpret the online identity properly (Davis, 2011). Younger generations are claimed not to make distinction between online and offline selves (Gardner & Davis, 2013) intertwining the fluidity of distinct self-images by projecting offline identities onto digital media (Manago, 2015).

'Staging' strategies through social media

Undoubtedly, social media gradually impacts the way individuals monitor their impressions, allowing people to fluidly experiment, explore, and determine various ways in which they would like to be preferably perceived (Davis, 2011; Gerhart & Sidorova, 2017; Gündüz, 2017) whereas (as proposed by Goffman (1956, 1959)) we 'furbish' (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Manago, 2015) our self-presentation according to both, our audience, and the social context (Brandtzaeg & Chaparro-Domínguez, 2019; Marwick & boyd, 2010), 'masking' any imperfections (DeVito et al., 2018). Liu et al. (2018) argued that individuals can (and do) manage online impressions to satisfy their needs and goals while conforming to social norms (Liu et al., 2018). Liu et al. (2018) also suggested that the trend of overexpressing positive identities and concealing negative emotions constitute a prevalent impression management tactic for a positive self-presentation among Facebook users (Liu et al., 2018). Saker (2017) provided a reason behind this prevalent strategy – as users have more time to construct the responses when interacting online, they have the freedom to choose which characteristics of themselves they want to project on a front stage (Saker, 2017).

This, in a way, 'self-manipulation' in our identity performance online occurs even before we launch an actual post, in the space of careful 'performance preparation,' the so-called 'pre-post dimension' (Ditchfield, 2020). Ditchfield (2020) thereby extends Goffman's (1956, 1959) concept of front- and backstage by an intermediate 'rehearsal' space[68], where social media users benefit from the platforms' constructional features[69], allowing them to draft, edit, and redraft their final favorable presentation of the self. Symbolic interactionism claims to construct the identity through collaborative interaction. This opportunity not only serves as a key influence on online identity construction and impression management but further enables to save not only the individual's but also other people's faces and their personal integrity during the online interactions. Self-censorship, as a technique, in this context, can be useful for a targeted audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

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[68] Since this space is technically just noticeable to the individual social media users themselves, it cannot be considered a stage in the traditional Goffmanesque sense where performances are taking place but is rather seen as an alternative interactional region (Ditchfield, 2020).

[69] At this point, Ditchfield (2020) specifically refers to the platform characteristic of asynchronicity.

Limits of online identity expression – Authenticity & context collapse

The expression of online identity comes with apparent limitations. As we continue to shift identities depending on the platform and the audience, the questions of *authenticity* and *context collapse* come into picture. These concepts, rather than existing independently, are often intertwined. Context collapse is the idea that a social media post is accessible to multiple unintended audiences without any change in subjectivity depending on the spectators (Tufekci, 2008). For example, Marwick and boyd (2010) explained this concept using Twitter, where they argue that this network "flattens multiple audiences into one" (p. 124), representing the most sensitive members of the onlookers. The lowest-common-denominator philosophy constrains the user to share things conceived as safe for the entire spectrum of audiences. The concern now arises of authenticity – as the spectators constitute it, a collapsed context obscures the user's ability to express their true selves at the expense of being perceived as authentic or fake. In this context, universal authenticity is non-existent; instead, being authentic is a local and temporal social construct, varying with the community (Marwick & boyd, 2010). It is, indeed, difficult to maintain distinct social contexts with the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries (boyd, 2011).

When the social media profiles are examined, it is clear that they are inherently social and often public or semi-public, which explains why users carefully craft their profiles that others see. As profiles, in addition to being sites for self-representation, are places for people to gather and converse, consequently reflecting the users' engagement with the broader audience, users often lack comprehensive control of how they project themselves through profiles. Even though profiles can have some sense of control by means of restricting who can see what (turning *truly public* to *semi-public*), they are often shared with people in close circles and peripheral ties, predetermining the potential audience (boyd, 2011). Thus, social media platforms are sites of routine context collapse, where the same digital persona is represented regardless of various social groups (Duffy & Chan, 2019). Social media, in that sense, combines the elements of broadcast media and face-to-face communication – collapsing diverse social contexts into a single entity (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Undoubtedly, in the context of their experience abroad (to maintain a stable psyche), international students must thereby primarily pay attention to the challenge of establishing a balance between the (still) existing communicative relationships remaining in the home culture as well as the identity associated with them and the establishment of new connections in the host culture. Both audiences pursue different purposes. While the 'left-behind' contacts in the home culture (such as friends and family) can give moral and emotional support, enhancing their well-being, communication with members of the (new) host community helps to break down (any existing) barriers to the foreign culture and to acculturate through self-discovery and personal growth (Lim & Pham, 2016).

Lim & Pham's (2016) studies found the distinct connection that using social media for intercultural communication across multiple platforms poses the partition trend. This trend insinuates that individuals in the cross-cultural adaptation process (may) divide their lives within the new culture into several separate social networks and use different platforms[70] to communicate with each network, depending on their purpose. Sojourners may have developed the ambivalence of either feeling partially unwelcome[71] in their host countries or generating a sense of alienation from their home countries, each of which is communicated differently.

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[70] Furthermore, Lim & Pham (2016) found that students primarily used Internet-enabled platforms to communicate with their audiences, both within the host culture and 'home' to the home culture, due to cost considerations (boyd, 2011).

[71] However, if the experiences with the host culture are particularly negative in the process, the convenient 'ease' of getting in touch with family or friends in the home country without further ado that social media offers us can also become a danger of an excessive investment of time, potentially hindering acculturation to the host culture.

Lim and Pham's (2016) findings, in alignment with Gardner & Davis' (2013), show that ICTs, especially social media platforms, play an indispensable role in developing, fostering, and maintaining social ties. This role is especially prominent in intercultural exchanges by providing an essential bridge of highly individualized 'virtual company' for the individual concerned by the geographical separation between their 'left-behind' culture (Abel et al., 2021) and the people in it and also their host culture, including new friends.

Altogether, many researchers have investigated the evolution of communication. Over the years, greater attention has been paid to investigate existing relationships in the context of online CMC via social media platforms. However, fewer studies have examined the degree and impact of sojourners' intercultural communication via social media during the non-preventable culture shock journey and stress adaptation they go through to adjust between both their home- and their host culture and how, in return, that impacts their cultural identity throughout the process. This proposed study aims to contribute to and expand existing research in this field.

International students who are exposed to diverse cultural contexts provide an ideal group to study and learn more about the challenges inherent to the cultural adaptation process that inevitably influences their (cultural) identity performance on social media.

Putting all evidence and findings from previous research together, the following research questions are presented to seek insights from sojourners:

RQ 1: *How do sojourners perform (cultural) identity on social media differently between the audience(s) in their culture of origin ('home' culture/backstage) and their 'host culture audience(s)' (frontstage) in the United States?*

RQ 2: *Do sojourners report changes in their frontstage or backstage social media performance based on their experiences of culture shock and adaptation?*

Method

Sample

The sample of this study is conducted from a large, land-grant research university on the east coast of the United States. Clemson University's latest student body data from the Fall 2022 semester provides evidence for an enrollment of 27,341 enrolled students, having an equal male and female ratio. Out of this total, 5688 students are seeking a graduate degree (Clemson University, 2022). Within this specific group, the university indicates there are 1509 internationals from 86 countries on campus, making up roughly four percent of the total student population in the 2022 Fall semester. The countries with the largest and most highly represented communities on campus among them are India, China, Iran, Bangladesh, and Nigeria (Clemson University International Services, 2022).

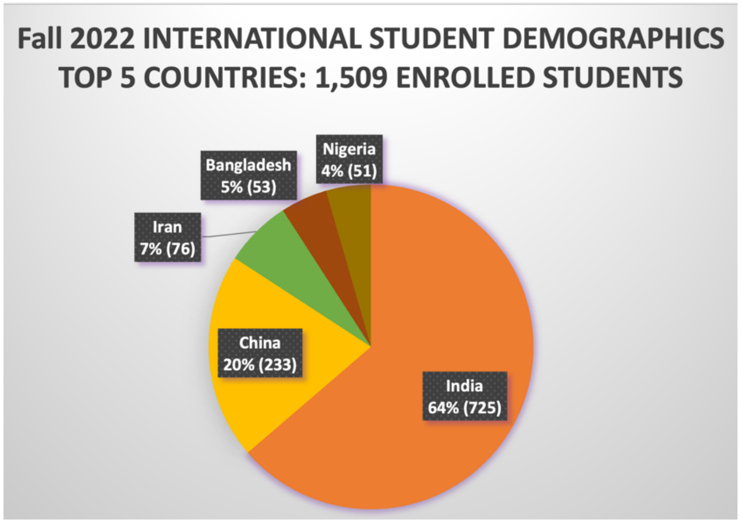


Figure 8
Fall 2022 International Student Demographics Top 5 Countries (Clemson University International Services, 2022)

Participants & participant recruitment

To qualify for the sample, individuals had to be enrolled full-time in any graduate student degree program at Clemson University during the time of the study. Furthermore, each participating student had to have an international background differing from the U.S. culture they are currently exposed to. Fourteen participants have been recruited and interviewed for this study.

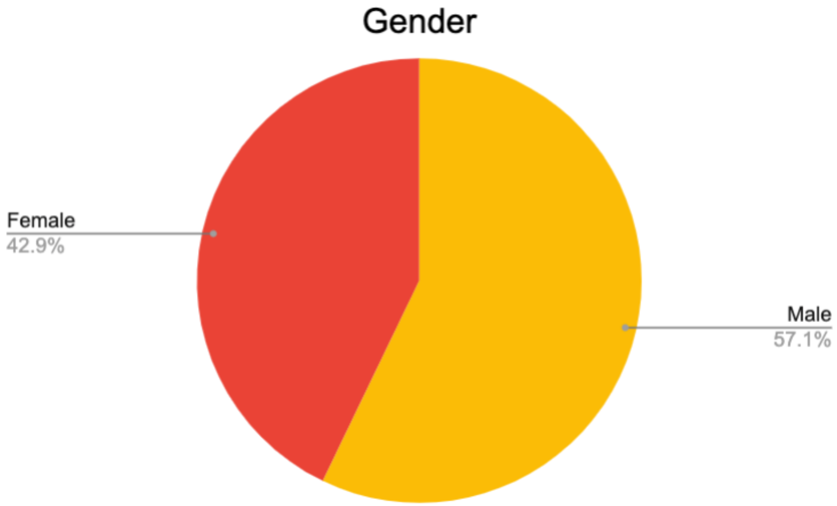


Figure 9
Participants' Gender Distribution

The gender distribution of the sample is consistent with national-level trends in study abroad behavior for international students, showing a greater likelihood of males rather than females (Pew Research Center, 2017; Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), 2021).

To maintain anonymity, participant names and other identifying information, such as the home country or, in individual cases, the study programs, have been replaced with pseudonyms and numbers. Participants ranged in age from 23-42, with an average age of 30.5 years, and self-identified as Asian (4), South Asian (1), Middle-Eastern (2), Native Costa Rican/Half-European (1), Hispanic/Latino (1), African (1), White (3) and Black (1). As the country-of-origin demographic survey (see Appendix F) within the study indicates, these accurately reflect the proportions of most strongly represented countries of origin within the overall population of international students at Clemson University.

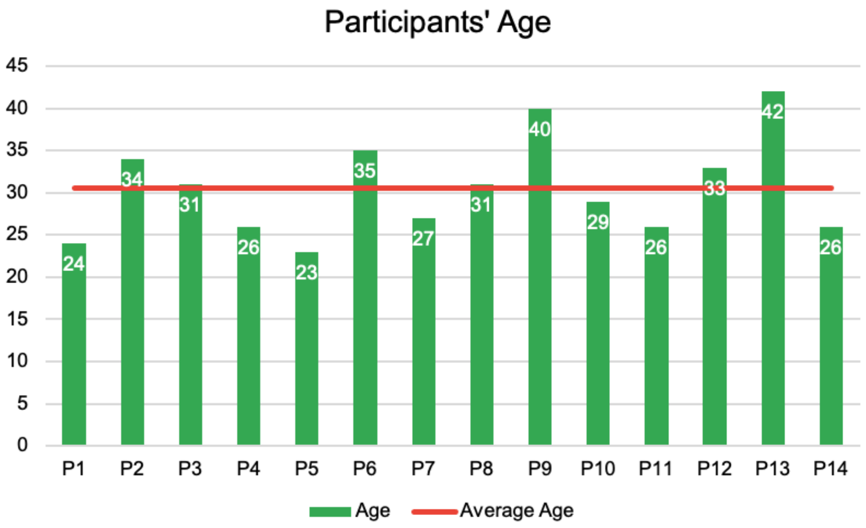
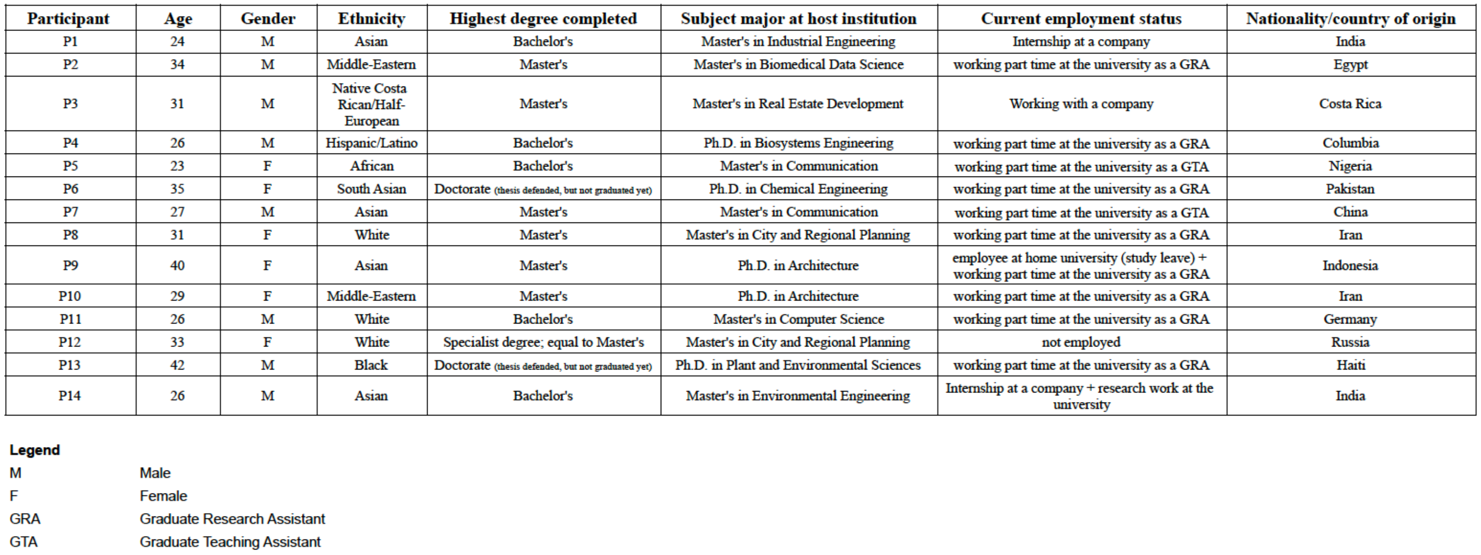


Figure 10
Participants' Age Range and Age Average

All of them have studied in their various programs (Masters and Doctoral program) at least for one semester, up to five years. At the time the interviews were conducted, nine of the interviewed participants pursued a Master's degree with previous academic experience in either a Bachelor's (35.7%) or Master's (50.0%) program whereas only five participants attempted a Ph.D.



Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Highest degree completed	Subject major at host institution	Current employment status	Nationality/country of origin
P1	24	M	Asian	Bachelor's	Master's in Industrial Engineering	Internship at a company	India
P2	34	M	Middle-Eastern	Master's	Master's in Biomedical Data Science	working part time at the university as a GRA	Egypt
P3	31	M	Native Costa Rican/Half-European	Master's	Master's in Real Estate Development	Working with a company	Costa Rica
P4	26	M	Hispanic/Latino	Bachelor's	Ph.D. in Biosystems Engineering	working part time at the university as a GRA	Columbia
P5	23	F	African	Bachelor's	Master's in Communication	working part time at the university as a GTA	Nigeria
P6	35	F	South Asian	Doctorate (thesis defended, but not graduated yet)	Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering	working part time at the university as a GRA	Pakistan
P7	27	M	Asian	Master's	Master's in Communication	working part time at the university as a GTA	China
P8	31	F	White	Master's	Master's in City and Regional Planning	working part time at the university as a GRA	Iran
P9	40	F	Asian	Master's	Ph.D. in Architecture	employee at home university (study leave) + working part time at the university as a GRA	Indonesia
P10	29	F	Middle-Eastern	Master's	Ph.D. in Architecture	working part time at the university as a GRA	Iran
P11	26	M	White	Bachelor's	Master's in Computer Science	working part time at the university as a GRA	Germany
P12	33	F	White	Specialist degree; equal to Master's	Master's in City and Regional Planning	not employed	Russia
P13	42	M	Black	Doctorate (thesis defended, but not graduated yet)	Ph.D. in Plant and Environmental Sciences	working part time at the university as a GRA	Haiti
P14	26	M	Asian	Bachelor's	Master's in Environmental Engineering	Internship at a company + research work at the university	India

Legend

M	Male
F	Female
GRA	Graduate Research Assistant
GTA	Graduate Teaching Assistant

Figure 11

Participant Overview

The sample has been gathered through a combination of a convenience sampling method combined with the network technique of snowball sampling (Frey et al., 2000). Through this approach, each interviewed individual has been asked to recommend other interview candidates within their individual networks on campus who have been contacted and included in the sample. This (continuously repeated) technique is essential because the sought population on campus is very specific and large in quantity but simultaneously not everyone uses social media platforms within their daily lives in either a personal or academic setting.

Contemporaneously, the extension to a larger network of international students from various cultural backgrounds that could not easily be encountered or accessed within the researcher's individual surroundings enhanced the credibility of the study sample. In addition, the fact that the researcher is an international student at the same university herself makes the initiation of this line of research feasible in the first place because through being part of the international community, a 'collegial and fellow-academic relationship' to build trust and a common ground to some of the participants has already been developed.

Furthermore, snowball sampling is to be the preferred method, because although the permission to interview the international students from the fellow network has been granted in advance of their realization, there was no general obligation for all internationals on campus to participate in the study. Therefore, the support of individuals who have been interviewed previously was essential in order to establish a platform of trust with future interview participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative interviews

Interviews lasted between 18 minutes and 51 minutes, with an average length of 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview schedule. This type of interview process helps to ensure that participants ‘hear the same questions in roughly the same way – although spontaneous follow-up probes are allowed to clarify remarks or to encourage elaboration’(Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.194).

The interview style, according to Stewart and Cash (2018) has been a critical incident interview. Therein, the types of questions are generally behavior-based, leading participants to provide additional clarification by sharing personal stories and anecdotes about their experiences and incidents. This type of story-telling interview process provides the opportunity for an equal understanding of mentioned themes and topics by future readers entering the world, subjective perspectives, perceptions, and the interviewees’ experiences from their point of view with the same level of openness (Foss & Griffin, 1995).

To assess both research questions, the semi-structured questions from the interview protocol have been used as a lead. Before the execution of the interviews, as part of the preparation process, participants were asked to individually reflect on and identify memorable moments they experienced in their academic as well as personal lives during their first semester at their host institution. In order to make their reflections as accurate as possible, participants were advised to use calendars, schedules, awards, or notes from their first semester as a support to trigger remembrance. This approach led to a more accurate reconstruction of their general experiences and impressions as well as to a 'wide-angle' review of their culture shock and change in social media engagement in relation to their exposure to different audiences. However, due to time constraints, this thesis did not focus on viewing and analyzing the participants’ social media posts firsthand but instead simply on accessing their observations and interpretations of their social media behavior during their intercultural exchange period and other memorable moments captured and displayed throughout.

Data management and analysis

All data has been audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the information provided by the interview participants. The recordings were then completely transcribed, yielding 99 pages of 1.15-spaced data. Data was stored on password-protected devices and available solely to the researcher. After the transcriptions were complete, audio-recordings were reviewed as the transcripts were analyzed to maintain accuracy for analysis (A. A. Berger, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Mayring, 2015). Data management has been conducted electronically through Microsoft Word to take notes on overlapping themes as well as to transcribe and anonymize the statements of the participants. In addition, MAXQDA, a software program for qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research and data, served as the tool for both the self-establishment and -organization of a code system and the qualitative themed analysis, listing a total of 1597 individual codes throughout the data set. Codes have been attributed (and continuously refined) to each section of transcribed data, filtering out overlapping themes and repetitive topics by the researcher. For example, any time a participant mentioned homesickness as a matter of missing their home country and difficult adjustment to life within the U.S. culture, initiating and reasoning for a stronger interaction and bond with their audience(s) within their home instead of their host country, the code ‘homesickness’ has been applied. Codes are then broken into themes, and categories are reduced so that the analysis can be manageable and understandable. Over the course of the analysis, 6 themes and 22 sub-themes emerged.

Data has then been analyzed and reported in rich detail by creating links among codes and categories, deciphering patterns using metaphor, relationships, and cultural understanding in order to interpret meanings within. Furthermore, this process enabled an interpretation of specific experiences made by the research subjects and to reflect on their perceived reality to determine common main themes and sub-themes across contexts. Each emerging theme is thereby directly connected to the purpose of answering (a part of) the research question(s). The prevalence of all main themes has been weighted according to the frequently mentioned individual occurrences across the entire data set, whereas each (nuanced) sub-theme has been counted at the level of the data item. The thematic analysis of these sub-themes goes beyond the semantic to a latent level, thereby trying to examine underlying ideas, motivations, societal influences and cultural rationales – just to name a few – that are theorized to shape the semantic level of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006a).

Saturation in the interview data has been detected between the 10th and the 14th interview, adding breadth, not depth to the analysis, due to repetitive patterns. These final interviews provided additional stories that enhanced the understanding of the student population, their experiences, behavioral changes both off- and online, and how to answer the questions posed in the study.

Managing subjectivity and ensuring credibility

Every research is devoted to ensuring credibility, minimizing subjectivity, and possible sources of error in qualitative studies. For this purpose, the transcripts were coded by the researcher using a deductive-inductive narrative analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006a) informed by the previously examined literature on culture, including cultural identity formation, culture shock, and intercultural communication as well as identity management, respectively *through* social media yet sensitive to emergent themes. Before coding, the researcher reflected on personal experiences, knowledge, and potential sources of bias (i.e., positionality) that could influence how the data were interpreted (Bourke, 2014).

After codes were identified, categories representing relationships across codes were developed. Finally, themes were constructed, and representative quotes were identified for each theme. After the data analysis was completed, independent audits of these materials were completed by having fellow graduate students from different departments than the researcher’s as well as an independent researcher from a different university (Akkerman et al., 2008). The audit evaluated congruence between the raw data, data reduction and analysis artifacts (i.e., codes), and data reconstruction and interpretations (i.e., constructed sub-themes and themes) (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2004). Furthermore, the audit process provided confirmation that the coder’s interpretations accurately represented the interview data. Together these trustworthiness procedures (e.g., reflexivity, audit) affirmed the trustworthiness of the data analysis process and interpretations.

Analysis

This section is devoted to the qualitative analysis and emergence of overlapping themes among study participants. This is done by looking at how they interacted with each of their audience(s) over the course of their first semester at the host university, then identifying patterns of change. In detail, their choice of platforms, forms of interaction and engagement (also in relation to their personal relationship level), purpose of communication, frequency of interaction as well as limitations within are examined.

Popularity of platforms

In their initial stages of living abroad, participants reported a wide range of platforms used to keep them in contact with their immediate as well as distant family and friends left back in their home country. As to be seen from the MAXQDA analysis of codes, WhatsApp (44 references) is the most prominent social media platform chosen, followed by Instagram (30 references) and Facebook (21 references). Furthermore, occasionally used services include Telegram, Twitter and Zoom.

Censorship

The participants' choice of platform is broadly influenced by a range of factors like their recipients' age or the (perceived general) popularity and widespread of a platform within the participants' country of origin. Even though these platforms provide a picture of sentiment, it must be taken into account that the dominance (or 'convenience') of a platform is also subject to bias, depending on which social media is restricted, respectively censored by a specific country, or not. This initial obstacle in communication, equally resulting from the necessity to accept their country-imposed censorship as well as showing mutual respect towards their host audience(s) was recalled by participant 7 as follows:

> *"We use WeChat. WeChat is the most dominant social media in my home country, and everyone uses WeChat. My parents, you know, they are in their 50s or late 40s, so they don't use FaceTime or text. But they do have WeChat; so most of the time I just contact them using WeChat and it's working. [...] Because WeChat's current coverage rate is 98% in my home country. Every person has WeChat. So it's really convenient and easier to use. Some of my friends they also use Instagram but because of the censorship in my home country they cannot use that freely like I do in the States"*

Compensation of (physical) closeness

Therefore, some platforms like Facebook with its messenger function[72], WhatsApp or Facetime show an extraordinary demand among international students, being more flexible by providing them individually preferred interaction options in diverse forms, e.g., through text, audio, and video calls as a manner of both maintaining and sustaining pre-established personal closeness as well as excitement for interaction(s) in a virtual setting as a replacement of lacking actual physical closeness (compensation of face-to-face conversation) to their home audiences[73]:

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[72] The interviews showed that participants direct their attention to mainly use this service separately from the main platform itself as a matter of security constraints they have developed out of negative experiences within their home country.

[73] Specific cases of the study indicated interviewees' preferences for connecting with their family via video whereas friends have been (down-)ranked to interact with through regular calls or texts as a form of decreasing effort for face-to-face-involvement.

> *"Me and my parents are staying 10,000 miles apart from each other, but we can connect to each other virtually within seconds. And that's one really great thing. That this social media has brought this world really closer, at least virtually." (P1)*

Another reason for seizing this level of closeness through social media video conferencing has been considered to be participants' initial lack of contact resulting in the feeling of loneliness in their personal lives at the host institution. One additional uniqueness that stood out in the course of the interviews was that platforms' demand from their users, in terms of time commitment (Instagram in particular), undeniably and consciously limited their (effective) communication with any audience. That awareness of their expected level of commitment, coupled with the unconscious, subtle external societal expectation to actively engage in producing and sharing contents, simultaneously triggered a motivational point in the participants to use these services in order to install at least a superficial form of interaction, respectively social media engagement in the first place, eventually building up to a strong social media 'relationship' at a later stage.

> *"I had Instagram when I got out of the country and at some point, I realized "Oh, I don't want it because it takes a lot of time and I get distracted." And then I stopped using it for three years. Then I was moving at that time from one country to another country. And then when I got here in the US last year, after a couple of months, I just felt that Instagram is a good way to see my friends again. I missed them somehow and people tend to share everything nowadays. And being involved in their daily experience is really something that brings me joy because then I feel I'm close to them. So that was actually a very interesting thing that happened to me because I thought I'm over Instagram and I'm not going to use it. But then I realized, no, actually I want it to be back. So I started again, and I felt, of course not close-close, but it reminded me of friends and family again; mostly friends." (P10)*

Relationship hierarchy

In comparison to the formerly discussed preference from among choices in social media platforms used by the home audience(s), there are even more definite distinctions for the services utilized by participants' in accordance with the different host audiences they are exposed to. As a rule, it can be said that international students' choices in these are subject to a certain hierarchy, thereby depending on the type of relationship, including their personal level of closeness to the specific audience members, they have.

Whereas communication with their private friend circle and acquaintances at the host institution seemed to be very casual and in demand of informal communication mediums, the interviewees' professional connections within the academic space(s) they engage in (professors, work and study colleagues (cohort)), require an increased level of formality as well as a change in types of media.

Contrary to all literature-based expectations of social media signifying our everyday communication, 'traditional' media like phone calls[74], text messages, and emails[75] dominate the professional, respectively academic communication segments instead of social media in order to keep an appropriate distance between the communicators. During their engagement, the language and style of communication is kept very formal, with a neutral connotation on any argumentations made. However, for some participants texting and calling their professors, academic advisors or cohort meant 'getting accustomed to the prevalent media' within the host country.

> *"I'll say that in my life I tried to keep a hierarchy for the type of relationship I have with people. So, for professional relationships, like with my advisor, other professors that I met on campus the communication medium most likely is E-mail. But with my advisor, sometimes we connect via text messages. Over time, as our relationship evolved, sometimes she calls me on WhatsApp to have a video chat. But mostly, with all the professors, I try to be professional with them. For example, I send an E-mail if I need to talk to them over the phone, requesting them to have a call. I try to keep it as much professional as possible." (P13)*

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[74] One exception that applies here is that urgent matters and topics are still communicated via phone call, independent from it being a medium for professional connection or informal chat with friends only.

[75] In this context, E-Mails are essentially used as a professional medium due to their characteristics of structuring communication effectively, without any potential for further distraction, e.g. due to unrelated, displayed content around.

Moreover, emailing for professional matters also showed to have another connotation, being a way to archive or document conversations, in order to guarantee a referenceable, follow-up conversation about the topics discussed, if required:

> *"So if I talk about work colleagues, I would mostly communicate with them over E-mail because it is more of a professionalism thing, more of a professional matter. When talking to colleagues or work-related stuff we always try to put them into a record so that we remember what we are talking and what track we are on, so that we can drive at any time and you know, get the updates about the same thing." (P1)*

On the whole, participants' professional content and activities are generally kept very limited and superficial, isolating them from their private content by shifting to a separate platform as a form of 'self-censorship' related to the demanding intensity of their professional fields. The most prominent one for these purposes is LinkedIn:

> *"I didn't allow my work colleagues to be in my social media. Not didn't allow. We never got to that point. For example, for Instagram they never send me an invitation and I'm not going to send them the invitation, and I prefer it that way because the work environment is already too much. I don't know how to explain it, but I have a kind of 'work relationship' which has a quality of friendship to it, too. We are friends, we share our weekend experience, we talk about different stuff, we socialize. But I never want that relationship in my personal life that much maybe. Maybe one reason is that I'm just tired of work and I don't want anything related to work that reminds me of work at the end of the day, which includes people. […] So you just want to cluster them separately and not overlap them that much. […] LinkedIn is the best thing, and we just connect through that. It just like gives me enough information about them. I hate an overload of information on social media. So I don't want to know everything about their life. I just want to know enough about work and their professional life." (P10)*

On the other hand, most of the interviewees' personal connections, e.g., with friends and members of their individual communities on campus, took place over WhatsApp. Instagram was another popular medium for sharing their experiences and following friends to stay in touch because of its user-friendliness and opportunity to engage in the display of visual media. However, touching (a closer) base, eventually fading into establishing friendships with people from their cohort versus their friends outside of academia, went comparatively much slower and more gradually due to existing cultural differences. Once the internationals broke through that barrier, social media enabled an unforeseen opportunity for closeness with their hosts:

> *"And it took me a certain amount of time to, you know, get involved with them and their Instagram accounts or things like that. It wasn't like, "Oh, can I add you to my Instagram and we start talking there?" No. That was not the way that we started.[…] But with my closest classmates, I was communicating with them mainly through text message and maybe Instagram. Because you get to know them better, so then you have access to a little bit of their private life. You can see their pictures; what they share about what he's doing because he's posting stuff about what he's doing or she's doing on Instagram. So, I would say with the closest classmates, yes, Instagram and the same thing with a lot of international students." (P3)*

Overcoming unfamiliarity

International students' interplay with the hosts and integration into the host culture significantly improved after their introduction to another popular and widespread platform in their surroundings: Snapchat. During the course of their stay abroad, participants tried to get accustomed to that service as a form of adaptation to their culture, so that they could stay up to date with their hosts:

> *"After coming here, I discovered that a lot of people use Snapchat as a social media, you know, to converse it and to share pictures of what they are doing exactly. So I started using Snapchat to stay in contact with my new friends in America. So whatever I was doing like, you know, trying something or you know, going to kayaking, I used to just post a video or photo and they used to reply, "Oh yeah, that's cool, you've been there". It was a lot of fun." (P1)*

Without a doubt, their conversations with both friends and classmates have primarily been superficial due to the generally predominant content on Snapchat itself, mostly focusing on casualties and humor:

> *"So, I use either text message or calls or WhatsApp and another really important platform is Snapchat. Americans use a lot of Snapchat. I do use a lot of Snapchat, too. […]So, on Snapchat, you have this streak thing that you want to keep your streak. That's when you daily snap each other, you start to have these flames. […] So mostly those snaps don't have any content." (P11)*

On a sidenote, their intrinsic endeavor in getting accustomed to unfamiliar platforms special to the host country also builds up an internal pressure, respectively obligation to have that platform as a necessity for staying in contact with the audience, thereby in some way conforming to their social norms and standards:

> *"When I came here to the US, I didn't have Snapchat. I used to have it, I don't know, 7 or 10 years ago when it was a thing for me, or it was a thing in my country. For several years, two or three years, people started moving to another platform like Facebook and Instagram. So I didn't have Snapchat anymore. So when I came here to the US, I realized everybody uses Snapchat, so I had to also download it and start using Snapchat again because it's not that you want to fit in, but you want to share, you don't want to feel excluded. If they were sharing funny stuff on Snapchat as a group, I would like to just be involved with them and aware about what's going on. So I did that with my classmates. And just in general for my friends at my host university town, they were also using that." (P3)*

The motivation to adapt for mutual interaction in the host country continues as a stringent pattern among the participants. Besides WhatsApp (as common ground), the host university wide specifically used social media service GroupMe were found to be effective platforms for group engagement(s) based on participants' shared interests and a perceived higher level of comfort in interaction, be it for research groups and coursework within academia or planning private events:

> *"Something that changed, or it was a little bit different for me was, well, mainly my classmates were Americans. There was one guy from Saudi Arabia. They mainly talked to each other in in groups by using GroupMe, the social platform. Because of that I had to download that application. It was something different, another platform that I was not used to use. So they were communicating about topics regarding to class like "Hey, did you remember that homework's due date?" or things like that. So we were sharing information about homework or tests or investigations that we needed to do, through that application." (P3)*
>
> *"For GroupMe, we generally have small groups. For example, a small group where we discuss the sermon. We discuss how we can serve the community. […] For example, there was a tornado that hit Seneca. I can't remember the year. So, we discussed if anyone was available to help, distribute ice, water, or even help people move debris.[…] If there is a meeting at someone's house, that type of communication happens over GroupMe, which I would say are service or church activity oriented." (P13)*

Altogether, related to the increase in use of culture-specific prominent platforms like Snapchat or GroupMe, it can be evaluated that international students tried to familiarize themselves with their new surroundings, even online – by stepping away from their usual mediums and showing proactive initiative and openness in the adaptation to previously 'unknown' platforms in order to make the hosts comfortable and contribute themselves well in group settings. Nevertheless, for some participants it required additional effort to get used to it:

> *"With most of the Americans we use GroupMe, which is still pretty weird for me, but I'm trying to be humble and use it. I mean, they prefer using that for reasons I do not know. They do not use WhatsApp. They've never been using that, normally, unless they've been working with some internationals on some projects." (P12)*

Beyond that, Facebook groups were specifically mentioned as a great way to find, connect and exchange with its members, consisting of both international students and hosts. It has been utilized for a variety of reasons, like the opportunity of networking, and seeking (emotional) support through the establishment of remote friendships even out of the participants' host university environment, nationwide:

> *"And I would say Facebook with international students too, sometimes. But it was more trying to know what they were doing because, again, I got a lot of people or a big network of international students because of my scholarship. So I was very interested to know what they were doing in other states, in other universities. That was a way to know what they were doing and to compare my experiences with them because we were in the same situation. That was a way to connect with them. I was interested to meet people from other parts of the world. I was reaching out to some other Fulbrighters, who are from Palestine or some other places. I was just interested to know someone from those countries because of the culture or even just to talk to them." (P3)*

Furthermore, it helped the international students to ask for and receive help during the initial process of settling down, finding necessities and amenities used for their individual preparation of their stay abroad, even from their home country:

> *"So, we had a Facebook Messenger group to coordinate events and meet each other, we took some trips to Atlanta. That sort of thing. I think that's how I interacted with them. They did help me settle in. The apartment that I moved into; I also got it through interacting with one of the girls from my home country, here at my host institution. That's how I actually signed the lease for that apartment." (P6)*

In one specific instance, the platform Reddit (due to its natural popularity within the host country) was also used as a medium for information and help in order to better understand new things and encounters as well as to be better integrated into the host culture:

> *"This is the only thing that I could use here more than in my home country. Reddit, because it's very famous here. My host institution has a good sub-Reddit. Sub-Reddit means group, like in Facebook. They have a good sub-Reddit, so I use it a lot to get in touch with the students here." (P2)*

Form(s) of interaction and engagement

Setting

Having the choice of platforms in mind, participants commence with family and friends from home on social media mostly takes place in a group setting, i.e., group chats, especially as an assured form of daily interaction for (close) family members (e.g., parents or siblings) or more distant friends. Interestingly, close friends, on the other hand, engage with them on a singular 1:1 basis. This trend of preferring a group over a singular setting also continues in interaction with the hosts, with an exception regarding getting personal advice from academic personnel:

> *"So for example, if I'm talking with my professor, I don't talk much about my personal life. Maybe about the major milestones or things that I've been up to, that too, once in a while, not regularly. But if I'm talking with my friends, they already know what I've been doing, what I've been up to, what I'm planning for the future, what issues I might be having, what good is happening in my life, things like that." (P14)*
>
> *"Now, with people that I know over some time and become friends, like lab mates, we have a WhatsApp group for the lab. If one of them, for example, needs help with their study, they send a message in the group saying they need some help and I interact through the WhatsApp group, saying yes, I can help you." (P13)*

Passive Consummation

The nature of communication between the audiences is primarily focused on three types of interaction: sharing[76], forwarding, or passive watching of content. Their undertaking in this sort of passive communication showed to have multiple manifestations, e.g., it being a limiting outcome of the significant time differences between their home and host country or their general intrinsic tendency to seize conversations on social media through calls so that either of the parties within the communicative exchange process would have a more beneficial, higher level of intimacy to one another:

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[76] This type of engagement is thereby in one specific case not solely related to the exchange of positive news like daily activities or experiences but also as a channel to create awareness of the audiences' natural surrounding environment, having prior exposure to natural disasters.

> "*So I've never been much of a social media person. I have accounts in a lot of websites, but I don't post much stuff, so it's kind of the same. I would scroll through my feed and try to see what's happening with people like what they're doing in their life. It has been like that and if I want to talk to my close friends, I will end up video calling them." (P14)*

Beyond this aim, experiencing this form of passive watching by some of the participants has also been a reflection on attempting to escape the daily challenges of their host cultural setting. However, during involvement with their home audiences on social media as a 'sanctuary,' participants did not constantly actively interact with them in the sense of showing off any reactions from their side of the communicative spectrum:

> *"I mean, just looking at the pictures of the friends who are not living here would give me this idea of "Hmm. There is another place and there is a world", or I can imagine myself being back in my country because I'm seeing these pictures." (P10)*

The participants' exposure to a new culture, thereby constantly assessing the differences in people's personal boundaries between both, can be assessed as an attributable reason for the majority of the students being more of a passive consumer instead of actively posting or sharing content themselves. They rather focused on being informed about their audiences back home, watching their activities, status updates or news, and limiting their own share of the story, partly because of their perception of being judged through them about their different levels of intimacy, explicitly their openness or distance according to different audiences and instances:

> *"During the first time, I posted everything. I posted, everything that I liked and that I enjoyed. But then I'm thinking after that: "Is it good for everyone to see this?" or does it become something that is not good for everyone, or particular people? I'm thinking about that. One day I'm happy and I post everything and then my friends back home say "Please think about your husband" and if you post something with your friends, it looks like I'm not a married person, you know. Happy here. Happy there. Going here, going there. Photo here, photo there. So think about your husband and then I still try to think about the other persons. And then after I realized about the different cultures. And then on social media, I have different people there and different thoughts about things. For example, maybe people here they are happy when I post about the trip, but maybe people*

> *back home, they are not happy about that. So after one year, I think, after I tried to understand the cultural differences, I tried to limit myself so that I didn't post." (P9)*

Even with time passing, provided that the individual student indeed interacted with any host audience through social media, their type of communication (similar to the behavior with their home audience(s)) gradually shifted to the development of passively watching or forwarding content instead of participating in an active conversation online:

> "*Sometimes I can see my friends posting on Instagram like the friends from the cohort. If they post something about studying in grad school, I probably will just forward their posts or stories." (P7)*

Offline meeting arrangements

Apart from this, another unique overarching theme participants reported was their usage of social media like regular text messages or WhatsApp to push in-person meetups, especially with friends (one-on-one) or groups of friends and acquaintances for both casual and religious engagements. With people from their cohort the situation is similar, although their interaction intensity on social media is even shorter in time, limited to the bare minimum, delivering the most essential information (e.g., time and place) in order to achieve 'effectiveness' in communication and not 'digress':

> *"And if I want to meet up with someone or I have a question for someone or I have questions; I just text them on WhatsApp or via text. It's mostly very short texts like "Do we have homework? What do we have to do? You got the result?", or stuff like that. When we are closer, it's just very short messages to meet up like "What are you doing Friday night? Let's go downtown", or something like that and that's it." (P11)*

> *"I don't interact a lot on social media. I'm not a big social media person. I like the face-to-face conversations more. That's how I interact with my friends, at least the ones that I could meet or see regularly in and around my host university. [...] I just generally text them and ask them if they want to meet up some time, or if they want to do this, or go to this place, etc., depending on our mutual availability. That's how we set our plan and we see each other. So pretty spontaneous - depending on the day and time. That's how it goes. Nothing is preset." (P14)*

For the most part, students favored to engage in-person – especially regarding disclosing parts of their private life – over online interaction at their host institution. This behavior, again, partly originates from the aforementioned pattern of having a general insufficiency in the amount of content to share with the host audience(s), even within interviewees' professional fields:

> *"I normally don't use social media too much because of different reasons. In my profession it's not really useful for me personally, except for some specific surveys I might do for the social parts of public engagement in urban planning. That is why I'm trying to limit social media in my life and interact with people more offline." (P12)*

Personal distance

All in all, social media was largely used as a tool for networking, filtering the amount and topic of shared information based on the audience(s), keeping their conversations with hosts on an official scale:

> *"Well, I think the only big difference which makes it so much different is that I don't feel like we are considered being friends within my cohort. I don't have this specific permission from them to be their friends. I have a specific distance. Which is fine. It is a kind of work style relationship, I would say. We have some informal stuff happening, but it's not like a friendship-friendship when you can literally call a person at any time and just ask for something. You don't feel like it's possible. That's why we communicate slightly more official with them, in terms of all the rules of our student organization." (P12)*

Purpose of communication

(seeking) Support

The prevailing motive to use social media as a valuable source of information to keep a stable, close connection to the home country is stringently reflected further in the choice of topics that the participants discuss with their audiences there, mainly privately. In this regard, the participants' engagement is not only related to being a source to seek support and a (perceived) feeling of safety (i.e., as the previously described 'escape to an alternative world') from, e.g., through pictures of friends in a familiar environmental and cultural setting to help them forget about their struggle and worries the host country. In contrast, these services are also used for reciprocal support going beyond their interest in daily life, activities, and one's overall well-being, both privately and academically, as revealed by participant 4:

> *"Sometimes I will send job postings to my friends via E-mail […] in my home country. To my brother. I will send him positions, like research positions, scholarships via E-mail or WhatsApp."*

The academic context was mostly pragmatically oriented according to the pursuit of students' academic goals and advancement regarding their work proficiency as the common ground of communication. In most cases, the positive influence and opportunity of collaborative problem solving with their peers as a result of their diverse (academic, professional and cultural) backgrounds as a valued method of mutual support and adaptation to the challenges of their exposure to an unfamiliar educational system, e.g., the overwhelming quantity of tasks or increasing intensity in their time commitment to 'relearn' and compensate for the differences in research methodologies have been emphasized as a congruent theme:

> *"Academic wise, some of the courses were quite difficult and I didn't know who to go to when I had to solve some problems. For example, sometimes I'd get really stuck. But then, over time, even during the first semester, I got to be with someone. Some of my classmates who helped me solving problems and we started doing some group studying. So that helped because then I could focus. […] I think that was helpful because we could just go through things together and then just bounce off ideas off each other." (P6)*

More importantly, this form of group encouragement through intercultural exchange was found not to be solely limited to the international students' academic field, but even more so, also stretched into their private lives:

> *"Now, when you're working as a team, it could be that your fellow members can be from the same country. But I prefer that my fellow teammates should be from different countries so that, you know, even while working academically and getting through our aim and following the results, we also get to talk and know about other nations, other cultures and share our things, share our foods on dinner, invite them to come over to our house for Chai, or snacks or some dinner." (P1)*

As to be seen, participants' private performance space towards their host cultural audiences was dominated by sharing collective experiences and common interests within their daily lives abroad, predominantly among fellow internationals. Not only did they show no hesitation towards discussing any upcoming topics (participant 1) but simultaneously supported each other on a mutual benefit basis during the initial stages of their sojourn, sharing information and advice in order to cope with upcoming differences (participant 3):

> *"I think all my fellow friends at my host institution, they're all really lovely. We can deep dive into any topics. Including talking about food, talking about your homeland, country, the geopolitics, the fun things or the activities that we do together for the upcoming weekend."*
>
> *"Compared to my family, I would say it's about common interests. Or just a situation we might share or the way that we feel. What I'm talking about is; interaction is also to chat. Let's say something as easy as getting a driver's license here in the US, right? So you start interacting with some people; asking your friend like, "Hey, I need to get a driver's license, have you gotten it, or do you know anyone here who got it? Have you experienced the pressure to get that?" What I say is trying to interact with them in the sense that if I'm going to have this experience, I would like to know if you have been through that same process so I can get the knowledge and make a plan for me. When you are in a new place or a new country, you don't know a lot of things about processes, let's say. And with my friends, I was trying to reach out to them in order to get information and advice about those kinds of processes, right?"*

However, even though social media was used as a platform for sharing sojourners' experiences, they also emphasized that social media is not a space to publicly display their challenges:

> *"I see social media differently because I just use it for sharing my experiences. When you say social media, I just see Instagram in my mind. I just share some pictures there, some of my experiences, some fun things I see. I don't reflect my challenges there." (P8)*
>
> *"[…] I think through social media, you're trying to just talk about the good things that are going on in your life. So, I think there were good things going on in my life, but there were also not so good things going on in my life. I had some issues with my personal relationship as well which were a bit challenging. But I don't think I showed it too much on my social media because obviously social media is a place for happy things and not really sad stuff." (P6)*

'Serving' the audience

Apart from that, it is noteworthy that communicational topics vary distinctly between family and friends as primary audiences. At first glance, these natural differences can be subject to many influencing factors, the most obvious being the higher degree of familiarity and natural comfort in communicating with family versus friends, but also due to the contingency of the cultural background the participants stem from. Students from individualistic cultures addressed recent happenings in both cultural environments with their families in a very relationship-oriented approach, asking about their personal and academic progress and adaptation. Concerning the relationship orientation, only nuanced differences to collectivist cultures could be found, but contrastingly, individualistic cultures ascertained the stability of their social and psychological environment, whereas collectivist cultures mainly targeted the balance on the physical and material level:

> *"Mostly parents are always worried about whether their child is eating on time, whether he's having his food on time, he's getting good food, is getting a good amount of sleep, is he alright, is he in a good condition mentally and physically as well, is he doing alright in his life, emotionally and physically. They are always concerned. They don't really care about how their child is, you know, growing professionally, but they always want to see the child you know, stable physically and mentally and to be in peace and happiness, all the time." (P1)*

Nevertheless, distinct (atypical) differences in communication have emerged among the various collectivist cultures included in the study. Although the general basis of interest regarding the topics covered is fairly similar, thereby (comparable to individualistic cultures) also concentrating on their overall wellbeing and daily activities on a superficial, distanced magnitude, their deeper care for their children's' academic life and emotional support through challenging periods of their studies abroad on a psychological extent, varies according to their personal level of empathy[77] and by gender[78].

Shifting from this aspect, the participants' mutual topics of interaction can also be differentiated according to their friends' personal broadness of cultural exchange background.

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[77] At the same time, being from the same country and culture of origin is no (stereotypical) guaranteed indicator or preset idea of the interviewees' discussing the same topics on the same level of engagement with their families.

[78] This rare distinction on the parental level has been mentioned in relation to the participants' self-awareness of their home culture being a collectivist, formally communicating system. Whereas the mother seems to concentrate and ascertain more on the superficial overall wellbeing of the child, the father in contrast interrogates feelings more carefully and to a greater degree.

Friends who have already experienced or are in the process of experiencing intercultural exchanges are generally more inclined to comprehend and expand their knowledge of the spectrum, thereby uncovering cultural differences and peculiarities about the U.S. in comparison to their current country of residence (in favor of a potential relocation). Conversely, friends who permanently stayed in their home country and culture thus far, disclosed to rather build up strong family-related expectations, thereby installing a guilty (sub-)conscience in order to externally push participants' motivation to permanently relocate back to their country of origin:

> *"Some of them traveled already but to Europe. So they are asking me how it looks like in the USA in comparison to Europe. Like what is the difference. Most of them are working in the South of Europe. So, what is the difference between USA and Malta, Italy, Greece, Spain. Like, is it much better from the weather or salaries or the quality of life, medical insurance, education, all these things. This is the most important thing they are talking about because in case you are trying to move from these countries to here; that's something they are concerned with. So, that is for my friends who are living mostly in Europe. For my friends who are living in my home country, and they don't want to travel, just because they have a happy life there. Usually, they ask me if I'm going to travel back to my home country and why not; if I said no; what is the difference; how will I leave my family alone and stay here, outside of my home country; like "How will you leave your mom? How will you leave your cousin?", and so on because I don't have brothers and sisters." (P2)*

Altogether, one overlapping theme seems to emerge out of the different contexts and audiences international students get exposed to, namely their tendency to post, respectively share content in consideration of their audiences' interests, thereby 'filtering' potential subjects to communicate on, beforehand:

> *"Just sometimes when you have a couple of minutes you think "Okay, I'll post something that would be a really good contribution to their lives." At least something that makes them interested." (P12)*

The propensity on content that is interesting to the general public further specifies depending on the platform of engagement as well as participants' influence of interests and observations related to their work profession or field of study[79]. Within that scheme, Facebook served as a platform for international involvement, the experience of uncommon things in the host countries' environment and displaying the natural atmosphere of the host university town as personal key reflections on the scenic surrounding, although Instagram's general layout and features sufficed that narrative more naturally and in greater quantity.

Location

On the other hand, the international students' professional university surroundings are synchronously brought up during their interaction with friends back home. In this context, it is particularly noticeable that the contents shared by the interviewees are oriented on their location, e.g., their host universities' facilities, social experiences, or their natural surroundings:

> *"With my friends from my home country, I would like to share some pictures with them about where I was, you know location wise, and of course the university and some facilities. I remember when I came to the US, it was in the middle of the pandemic. […] But I was still able to go to a football game at my host institution. And yeah, we were wearing masks and the capacity of the stadium was like 40% or 30%. That was […] a way different experience. But I do remember that I shared some pictures about the stadium and the campus. Just trying to share it with my friends. About where I was and my experience here in the US."* (*P3)*

Similarly to their sharing of excitement for places at the host university, participants also mentioned other locations outside of academia being particularly positively presented 'in the spotlight' amid their social media engagement with friends like their exploring travels through the host countries' different landscapes:

> *"My friends, I'm always excited to share with them that I'm in the United States. I'm in the great United States, living the American dream, visiting lots of places, working hard on weekdays and partying hard on weekends. And I always brag about my tours when I go to, like, New York or Florida. I'm telling them "You are missing all this fun; you are missing all this beauty." Beautiful land, beautiful girls, beautiful cities." (P1)*

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[79] It is important to note that while their post content is undoubtedly influenced by their professional expertise, this is not necessarily reflected as a topic within the post itself, since participants' aim for a strict separation between their private and personal life according to the specific platform, they engage in.

Politics

Along with academic issues and daily activities, another common theme among the interviewees to talk about (like the coverage with their families) was shared interests in news and updates regarding their home country. Although there seemed to be a subliminal hesitancy to address political issues or current problems that are circulating in the home country in general (as the participants also wanted to gain a certain amount of personal distance from these instances, respectively a different perspective on them through their exchange), they still regularly engaged in follow-ups with both audiences[80]:

> *"Also, like some political issues that happen right now in my home country. So, I am asking them if something new happened, because I don't want to follow these news. So that's for my family." (P2)*
>
> *"I also discuss politics with some friends that I have back home. I am also part of a WhatsApp group with most of my friends from college who graduated together. We have a WhatsApp group, where we sometimes discuss about our professional achievements, but sometimes also about things that are not going well in our country. One friend may post something, and others share their opinion about things that are not good. We also discuss about how it is being a citizen, or if there are some heartbreaking news going on or whatever we see." (P13)*

One unique style of engaging in content exchange regarding political topics with friends from their home culture that has been mentioned was the approach to communicating with them in a humorous way:

> *"Yeah, so we share memes about politics, for example, because right now the presidential election is coming up in the next year. So, everybody is interested in what is going on. So, when I see, for example, a funny meme about it, I share it with them. Also, when it is something strange about maybe a celebrity in my home country or any news just to keep us updated about what is going on back home, I share it." (P5)*

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[80] A special feature that also occurs here is the additional manipulative influence of censorship-oriented countries (as gatekeepers of the agenda setting), which makes access to political issues much more difficult for both sides. Therefore, the desire for a 'truthful' exchange of objective perspectives with the help of international media to enable an objective evaluation of these topics on the part of the public that has remained in the home country is naturally all the higher.

Relationship management

Boundary regulation

As is evident from the evaluation of the interviews, there are distinct differences and dependencies regarding the intensity of interaction and level of disclosure with both home audiences[81]. Undoubtedly, the most significant factor of influence for successful social media engagement seems to be the personal level of intimacy or distance in the relationship with the respective individual. Within their family environment, participants – in the majority of cases – managed to talk out their emotions on a neutral, free, non-restricted but still to some extent 'formal' basis which, in turn, results in the impression of an increased closeness, interestingly with their parental family members on a stronger note than with their siblings, mainly as a result of living in different time zones as a personal limit of communication:

> *"I think I'm closer to my mom now. But with my siblings, we are not so close like we used to be due to the time difference. For example, when I'm less busy, is when they are busy back home. So no, we are not really close." (P5)*

However, even though participants appear to be closer (also in relation to the frequency of their interaction(s)) to their parents instead of their siblings or distant family members, there are still no restrictions on or exclusions of topics or content between them:

> *"Well, I talk the most with my mom. With her I talk about basically everything. Like how I am, what has happened, if I have any problems. She helps me a lot, with everything. With my brother, or with my brothers it's the same but less. We talk about everything, but I usually talk more with my mom." (P4)*
>
> *"[...]I will start with my mom. She is my only family right now, so I talk to her daily. After a very long time of talking to my mom daily, you can't find anything new to talk about. So usually I just ask her "How are you doing? How is the weather right in this day? What did you eat? Did someone call you today? Did you go out to buy something?" That's it. And if I have something new, I will tell her that. That's for my mom. For my aunt, I talk to her, like, once per week, it is the same, but usually the talk takes a longer time because I only talk to her once per week, so I have a lot to speak about. For my cousins, usually I talk to them once every two or three weeks, not that much. But I ask them about their work, their families, if they are going to travel because some of them*

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[81] In this context, international students are increasingly drawing attention to the fact that they voluntarily limit social media themselves due to increased security concerns and restrictions, which are only insufficiently regulated in the host country (in contrast to the home country), e.g. by laws, and only use them when interaction is 'mandatory' or obligatory.

> *want to travel outside of my home country, some of them already are traveling inside my home country, from one city to another. So I ask them how it is going; how is their work, their families, their kids." (P2)*

Fascinatingly, when comparing expected results with actual observations, giving special attention to collectivist cultures, some international students' data showed a controversial side on the topic. Although a distanced and partly superficial relationship between family members from collectivist cultures might have been an anticipated, educated guess according to the literature, this presumption has not been found to be stringently true and generalizable.

In the first part of the interviews, the interviewees were primarily reflective about social media behavior and communication with their family members. With regard to interaction with friends, it can be determined that the tone of interaction is predominantly informal and casual. Instagram dominates as a popular platform for this:

> *"But at the same time we still keep in touch with most of my friends just using Instagram which kind of casually allows us to know what's happening in my life and in their lives. It's a very good way to communicate both verbally and non-verbally, because it's so focused on visual media." (P12)*

Just as the interaction with the home audience, the grade of engagement with the host audiences was also dictated by the stage of closeness in hierarchy, respectively the level of intimacy (comfort) and (personal) distance depending on the type of the relationship. Overall, two distinct types of relationships stood out as distinguishing overlaps: maintaining a professional/work relationship versus an informal/friend relationship. Within their friend relationships at the host institution, the international students managed to speak freely and casually, even about social taboo topics whereas the more distanced 'acquaintances', academic personnel or their classmates were subject to stronger selectivity with regard to (solely professional) content and disclosure.

> *"It depends on how close our relationships are. If we are really close, like close friends, we can talk about everything. Like, I watched Gossip Girl last night and I want to become like them. (P7)*

> *"So if there are colleagues versus there are friends, it's a bit different for me personally. If it's a professional connection, I tend to keep it that way. I don't get much personal with them, keep things related to work or the industry and things like that. Versus if they are friends, depending on the level of closeness that we have with each other, the conversations could be spanning a wide spectrum. […] So personally for me, it's a pretty clear cut. It's like a professional connection versus a friendly connection." (P14)*

As elucidated earlier, students' work-relationships have been kept professional, primarily focused on their progress within academia or industry. Therefore, communication with professors and professional peers was contingent on having restricted access, including no small talk(s) and friendly interaction proceeding only to a superficial degree. The reason for this can be explained partially by the sojourners' intrinsically motivated efforts to get accustomed to and eventually adapt to the social norms of the host culture but at the same time also (subtle) underlying 'expectations,' explicitly the influence of the host environment. Hence, as an encompassing theme, the interviewees tried to maintain appropriate boundaries towards their host audiences at all times, almost entirely through a clear sense of professional distance, thereby keeping academic versus personal life strictly separated, even using different platforms to direct their attention (for additional reference see P10). As a further characteristic, their engagement seemed to be neutral in frequency and mostly superficial but formal in style:

> *But for my studies, the other people like the cohort or the professors, I will be polite and professional because I don't want them to feel uncomfortable and I don't want them to feel like "Why are we talking about that? What are you thinking?" That kind of things. So I guess I use different boundaries according to our relationships. […] We cover lots of topics. The latest conversation with me and one of my friends here was us talking about how to become a prostitute. Our topics can be very wild and yeah, that's really crazy. This kind of conversation can never happen to the professor." (P7)*

> *"I'm not the same with my advisor as my friends. For example, if my advisor is present […], I won't do some things that I will do with my friends. Only my friends. Like funny comments or just pulling someone's hair, some things like that. So I stay a lot more professional and distant." (P4)*

The same kind of superficiality has been a dominant observation during the initial stages of involvement with hosts on a closer friendship level. In many instances, international students' conversations with hosts originated from taking the same classes or working together in the same research group at the university or sharing similar interests in their private lives. Over time, these 'naturally' developed into deeper, 'actual' relationships, up to the point where participants didn't discern a definite distinguishment between their friends from home and friends at their host institution anymore. Both audiences are treated coequally. However, within this remark, two distinct trends emerged: one group of participants developed deeper connections (participant 11) and a sense of comfort, whilst the others experienced an uncomfortable feeling of exclusion and strictness in their attempt to enter the inner circle with the hosts (participant 6):

> *"I think, here in the US there is no real difference for me between study, fellow students and friends. Mostly they start being fellow students and then become your friends. Let's say, I made the experience that my good friends here previously took the same class as I did, and we were somehow involved in the same project or something. And then because we spend a lot of time together, we occasionally talked about leisure time things or our hobbies and figured that we have something in common and then start to become friends. During my first semester, I met a lot of people that kept on taking the same classes as I did and there's actually no difference between. I talked to them in the same way as I talk to my friends." (P11)*

> *"Whereas here, I felt that the environment was a bit stiff. People were friendly, but I felt that there were a lot of cliques which were there in the department, and it seemed to be a bit hard to become friends. It seemed like people formed groups and it didn't look like there was a lot of interaction. [...]."(P6)*

Justification(s) for the internationals' sensitivity in this matter can be attributable to the hosts' existing lack of support, expressed by their (external) avoidance in communication due to already preestablished groups and perceived cultural boundaries as special challenges to already existing reticence. Consequently, if host audiences have not been open for conversation (or else only on a superficial level), a certain grade of self-isolation and self-limitation concerning the online communication with classmates was pre-programmed because of the students' perceived internal and intimidating pressure to socialize:

> *"I'm an introvert, so it takes me time to just open up to people and talk to them, and I felt like there weren't a lot of events where I really felt that I could socialize, or I felt comfortable socializing because I think the people were just not really open to talk to.*

> *[…] It felt a bit intimidating since I was the junior most student to just go up to people and start talking. I think that's sort of a thing that I felt in my first semester, and it sort of made me go into my own shell to some extent." (P6)*

Proof of this outcome can be assessed in the interviewees' feeling(s) of an external pressure overstretching the line, as well as an inner pressure of the apprehended need to adapt to customs of their host culture immediately:

> *"But around others, it's still my first year in the US, so it's almost impossible for me to understand what to say and what not to say around them. For example, I said something on the group chats for our cohort that we use on GroupMe. I said the word retard, which I didn't know was an unacceptable word in the US. And then a classmate came up to me. He was so pissed about what I said. And then he called me out in public which was embarrassing. So, it seemed like there's this cultural difference which other people are not trying to understand. Where I come from is different from what they are used to. Although I am here and trying to adapt what they do, they expected that I should have adapted immediately after I came. So, because of that, it has made me more reserved, being on my own and that is why I see them as acquaintances, and not exactly my friends." (P5)*

Looking at all these incidents together, participants' encounters of an unwelcoming group-behavioral academic environment caused an unnatural hesitancy and prudence in intercultural communication between both sides of the audience(s) in fear of not overstepping any personal or cultural boundaries, longing to be respectful and at par with the host culture , ultimately resulting in sojourners' proactive self-censorship, which to some extent manifested itself in avoiding disclosure as well as interaction of any sort:

> *"So I felt like I didn't want to ruffle people's feathers and, just try to impose my company on people who didn't really want it." (P6)*
>
> *„Well, at my host institution, I'm not really friends with that many people. I just have people who are my classmates, but they are not exactly my friends. Although we follow each other on social media, but we have no reason to talk; so, we do not talk at all. […] Another thing that was difficult, I think was understanding the culture and knowing what to say and what not to say. So, in my own country, Africans are known to be very blunt people. We don't know how to hide things. Here I learned how to hide my feelings. I learned that there are certain things that you don't say to people, even if you mean it. You just have to pretend like that is not exactly what you mean. It was really difficult to do that. I always felt like if I can't be sincere with you as a friend, I see no reason to be your friend." (P5)*

As a logical conclusion to this aversion, the interviewees developed a greater closeness to friends within their home cultural communities at their host institution. In general, these friendship circles acted as their moral support system abroad, exchanging information unconstrained, i.e., having the freedom of being 'inattentive' to sensitive wording, not potentially overstretching social or cultural norms and boundaries:

> *"With my friends from my home country, I'm very free with them. I use those kinds of words I am sure they would understand. I don't have to find some type of ways around them. I am literally myself around them." (P5)*

On the other hand, internationals who did not encounter these forms of social 'rejection' from the host side in their academic setting, still preferred to maintain a personal distance, even with friends in their private lives on campus. Sojourners refused to get too closely attached to this side of the host audience spectrum because of the friendships' temporary nature caused by internationals' constant shift in locations as students as well as their impression of a deficiency in the quality of the friendship due to prevalent cultural distance(s):

> *"So social media here for me is just having people in your network and just interact and have a social life which is a necessity and I love to socialize. So, it's just like, a 'stay connected thing' rather than to be like, "Oh, I really want to know what's going on in their life and being a part of it." (P10)*

> *"But what I feel about the social media here and the effect of social media on my life here is, I feel that I cannot ever have friends that I can count as friends, after I got out of the country. I have a lot of friends around and I like them, but it never gave me the feeling of close friends or friends-friends after I got out of the country. And after a couple of years, now I realize, that's not possible for me. I'm never going to get that kind of quality of friendship that I had in my own country because of many factors. [...]Maybe one thing is of course the cultural factor. We all went through the same things during our school time, we share a lot of memories, we have a similar context and lifestyle that we can talk about and share or whatever. That's one factor that makes you feel close to a person. One is that you share a culture. So, because I don't have it outside of my country with another potential friend, I don't feel close. One that I can say for sure is culture. The other thing is, after you move out, any people around you, mostly they are also moving around, and they are not always at the same location that you are, and you are not always at the same location that they are. So it feels like it's always like friends come and go, and I never allow myself to attach, to get attached to friends. But I tend to do it back home. I get attached and you spend a lot of time together but here, for some reason, I just stopped having that concept in my mind." (P10)*

Frequency

Concluding from the previous sections, it is arguable that the sojourners' frequency of communicating with their host audience(s) did not follow any stringent pattern but in turn eventuated on a neutral, on-demand-basis, depending on the context of a specific upcoming engagement situation. Taking everything into consideration, using social media as a platform to establish contact with the host audience(s) occurred principally for setting up meetings with friends and other members of the participants' social circle(s), apart from professors.

Intimacy

For the most part, participants' frequencies for contacting their immediate or distant family members as well as friends principally depended – in a similar way as their overall interest in getting involved with them – on the level of (preestablished) intimacy. Touching base with close family members (mothers in particular) and friends has been more prevalent and frequently than with distant ones (for reference see P2), especially during the initial stages of living abroad upon arrival. This has not only been a result of the deficiency in friends at their host institution, but likewise due to their fundamental excitement in sharing their experiences to ultimately avoid feeling solitude:

> *"Actually, most of my time is spent talking with my home; my sister and my mother, explaining what I'm doing during the day or something like that. Especially when I first got here, because I don't have that many friends here. So I did not want to feel lonely, and I was so excited to share my new experiences with them". (P8)*

Self-created distance

Looking at the other side of the spectrum, students' regularity in interaction with their home audiences is of course conjointly linked to their (learned) customs within the culture of origin. Indeed, a congruent commonality, which collectivistic and individualistic cultural groups appear to share, is their high intensity in communication frequency with their families and friends (at least) during the primary stage of their exchange. However, whereas collectivist cultures are somehow ‘expected’ to stay in a consistent daily contact (although superficial and limited in the range of topics being discussed; for reference see P2), individualistic cultures’ interaction density is therefore only punctual, followed by longer ‘desert-periods’, respectively a ‘no communication zone’, only for urgent matters and issues that do not tolerate postponement:

> *“I am in contact with my friends in my home country [...] and talk to them for like an hour or two and then I don't talk to them for probably two weeks, or even a month. I just probably text them once or twice in between if something important happened.” (P11)*

A number of reasonable explanations for this self-created distance in communication, respectively ‘withdrawal’ from their friends (over their family), can be found either in the participants’ consideration of social media being a full-scale time-commitment but also in their contemplation of developing an inner boundary, namely the fear to afflict them if their (self-perceived) intensity of disclosure gets too high:

> *“With friends, I would say, with close friends I started to talk more, but in total my interaction with friends decreased through social media. Why? I don't know. Maybe I didn't have enough time to share everything with everyone. So I chose my parents, my family, over my friends, maybe to put in that time and share my concerns. I didn't want to bombard my friends with my problems. But you know, with your family it is different. Your family would understand, support; they are family. That’s why maybe I didn't share everything with my friends, and that's how my interaction through social media decreased. But with family it increased because I needed their support. Mentally.“ (P10)*

Safe distance

However, one peculiarity emerged, which already stood out as a precarious issue in the course of the frequency analysis of the home audience, namely the overall decrease in frequency as a result of the constant assessment of navigating through the differences in cultural boundaries in fear of (disrespectfully) overstepping, resulting in internationals’ self-censorship and reservations according to different topics. Thus, the overall impression implies that they would rather engage from a safe distance, selecting content that is generally conflict-free:

> *“[…] I think, after I tried to understand the cultural differences, I tried to limit myself so that I didn't post. I don't post […] if there is something that is a sensitive issue, for example, here religion is sensitive, gender is sensitive. I don’t post anything about that to make sure I’m a safety player coming along. […]I have a student from here and I try to understand them, so I limit myself as well. Because maybe if I post something, it will hurt them. Not exactly hurt, but maybe they are not comfortable. At the end here I am posting less about something that may hurt other people. I filter. So, just because I'm happy about something I will not post it. I will not post it right now. I post it because I respect. For example, I went to Myrtle Beach with several families, so I respect them, I'm happy with them, so I share it on Facebook and other social media. I respect someone who invited me as a speaker, so I post it on Facebook. So basically, if I want to respect something, I post it. But I don’t just show I'm happy with this just because of me; maybe my family because I respect my kids, but just because of me and myself, I will not post it anymore.” (P9)*

Pre-set intentions

As a depending factor of the participants’ (original) intention to study abroad, their (pre-) set decision of extending their stay on a (more) permanent basis to either seek work experience(s) or pursue further educational degrees in the host country was also investigated to be a potential factor of influence in their social media engagement with the host audience(s). For the most part, the sojourners’ willingness (or reluctance) to dynamically adapt and interact with their specific academic or non-academic communication partners in the host country can indeed be connected to several different (intentional or unintentional) (behavioral) patterns.

Taken together, six out of the 14 participants mentioned their (initial) aim to go back to their country of origin or elsewhere abroad, after graduation. Admittedly, all of them perceived their educational period abroad as a practical matter – to gain advanced knowledge, experiences, and an understanding of their expertise area from a ‘foreign (individualistic) perspective’, namely the U.S. educational system, to project and apply the same in their home country setting. Their strict distinction of their study purpose therefore implies them having both self-imposed and/or externally imposed constraints as a potential boundary that could prevent them from developing the same level of social engagement with the hosts in comparison to the other candidates who decided to apply their learnings within their host country environment, thereby naturally intensifying social connections both off- and online.

Oftentimes the participants' mindsets and self-awareness to leave their host country and culture after finishing their degree as a limited stay and re-enter their previously known cultural environment has been made prior to their start abroad, one as an intrinsically made decision (e.g., through the forethought notion of the host country not being a constant personal comfort zone), the other one as an extrinsically pre-created one (e.g., restrictions on work opportunities due to visa issuance). Furthermore, the latter can have even more different characteristics and lasting psychological impacts in this context, e.g., in the case of participant 9, an ethical burden, imposed by the country of origin as the sponsor:

> *"[…] when I came here my mindset was: "I will go back after graduation." So, a lot of people say "Rethink again. You can pay all the contract if you broke the contract. With the salary in here you can pay." Yeah, but there is an ethic that I want to keep because I signed a contract; I signed it with myself. And if I break the contract just because of me, I don't think it's fair for many people; for my country who pays for me because my Fulbright money is not from the US, but from my country because we have a collaboration for my program, so it's not fair because they pay my tuition and my life here. […] If I break the rules, you know, I will block all my younger professors below me to go abroad; to have their chance, the opportunity. I don't want to do that." (P9)*

Contrastingly, a deficiency in freedom of speech (participant 7) as well as missing employment opportunities (participant 4) seemed to inflict other sources of conflict:

> *"When I decided to come to the States, I wasn't planning to stay here for the rest of my life because I know how hard it is. But I didn't plan to come back to my home country either because I don't feel free there. There are so many restrictions and censorships."*

> *„I hope to be here one more year and graduate if everything goes fine. And after that, yes, I would like to have work experiences. I don't know where. If I find a position in my home country that is good, I will take it. But that is difficult. The job positions in my country are very reduced. That is actually one of the problems of my country: there is no employment. So maybe that's not very possible. And then I will go anywhere, like the US or even outside the US. I would like to go to other places."*

However, they eventually led to a greater flexibility in adapting to other cultures than their own in a later state. Although these constraints might be the binding explanatory factor for the intensity and level of comfort in their social media engagement with the audiences in the host country, one distinct distinguishment between them occurred, nonetheless: their personal attitude, in particular the motivational difference in whether or not they, as the sojourner, are making the intrinsically motivated attempt of establishing long-lasting ties with the host audiences due to their conscious life choice of immersing into their culture, willing to compensate and adapt to existing cultural differences or rather ephemeral relationships as a lack of interest and commitment, if the former one does not evolve naturally.

This intrinsic desire to stay in the host country and adapt to its culture was reflected by the remaining eight participants, which predominantly also developed before the actual sojourn. However, both the starting point and temporality of the duration varies individually between the participants according to both factors that can be planned for (e.g., restrictions on work opportunities due to visa issuance) as well as unpredictable influences which are beyond any control, thus specifically referring to recent unforeseen political issues, leading to a shift of systems for certain countries. Hence, participants 10 and 12 recaptured the tendency to escape their home country as a reasonable reaction to (presumably) permanently relocate to their host instead of their home culture (as one out of many options open) due to unsafe living and working conditions (e.g., lack of autonomy) caused by the prevailing political surrounding:

> *"I don't know 100% what will happen and what I'm going to do. But maybe, at this point, what I can say is for more than 80% I'm sure I'm not going to get back to my home country to work or live long term because of, again, systematic issues that will not be solved in four years, when I will be graduated and everything. So I'm sure, I'm not going to go back there to work. [...] But maybe in the United States or another country, that I don't know. I'm seeing an opportunity here because of the job market. And the economy is great and everything, at the moment. And I'm seeing myself working here because based on my field there are a lot of opportunities, more than anywhere."*
>
> *"But specifically, everything changed after February 24th. I was planning to go back right after graduation because I already miss my family a lot and I have my colleagues with whom I've been working, and I was planning to work with them further. [...] But I feel I would prefer to do it on the international basis. Because for an urban planner it's not a safe working environment there. It was not safe when I was working there, but now it's even more unsafe, because we have to work with the governments. It's inevitable if you're working for urban planning, your work with cities, you work with governments,*

> *at least with the local governments. […]That's why I'm considering and trying to explore as much international opportunities as possible."*

Interestingly, even though professional advancement emerged as one of the main motives of the sojourners' educational stay abroad in their host country, even after academia, while transferring into professional life, the contrary simultaneously shows that participants focus on keeping their professional life (i.e., interactions with the hosts) strictly separate from their private engagement(s) (which tends to be focused more on their home culture community). Conclusively, the sojourners prioritize and rather prefer to engage and immerse in an insulated personal sphere instead of sharing transparent and open boundaries with the host culture.

Subsequently, the data showed a partially consistent connection in participants' assertions regarding their (individual potential) wish to remain in the United States being an influencing factor for their social media engagement intensity with the host community. The greater their motivation and self-awareness to adapt to and learn about the host culture as a personally preferred prerequisite was, the easier and more probable it was for the participants to integrate themselves and engage in substantial and steady interactions over social media.

Performance limitations

Timely distance

As indicated, any factors that influence the communicative engagement and performance of international students during their sojourn are subject to various limitations. First and foremost, as the most dominant form of restraint in the context of intercultural exchange stands the time difference creating an unpleasant distance and imbalance between all audience spectrums. Participants acknowledged this to be a negatively perceived impediment specifically related to students' (necessary) increase in their time commitment for getting adjusted to the new academic standards and the educational system itself. As a consequence of their environmental modifications, their communication ultimately shifted into being a scheduled, oriented system, yet ultimately still creating regrets to miss their (daily) targets for talking to their families and friends:

> *"So back in my home country even I used to stay away from my home for education and even after completing my undergraduate, I was staying away from my home because of the job situation. I was totally staying in different cities. So always I used to communicate to my parents or my friends over a call. But when I came to the United States, obviously because of the time difference, our communication became less because we only had two options, either to call in the morning or either to call in the night. […] But if sometimes I wake up late in the morning, I used to miss that chance. If sometimes I was caught up in the work late at night, I used to miss that chance. So it did happen that initially I used to talk to my parents every day making two calls but slowly, slowly, gradually as my workload increased […] those goals got skipped." (P1)*

Precisely because an intercultural exchange involves a high degree of personal responsibility on the part of the sojourner, the increase in time commitment, does not only pose additional challenges in the form of overall time constraints within academia but also on a private scale. In turn, the participants expressed their newfound sense of self-sufficiency to be both, a positive aspect but simultaneously (to some extent) also a defiance to effective communication with them ending up being more reserved towards their home audiences' due to an inadequate time-management.

Selective attention

Furthermore, the next overlapping phenomenon among the students is indirectly related to what has been previously mentioned. During the interviews, several individuals revealed selectively filtering their attention of when and what they share on their social channels, which is again, also partially influenced by their profession, precisely their area of studies:

> *"I would say, I do like to share some things sometimes on social media. (P3)*
>
> *"As it pertains to coming here, I feel like initially I was excited; I was posting pictures and I wanted people to know, but then later on I think I didn't anymore. I became more selective in what I was sharing with people in a way." (P6)*

> *"More like my perception, first of all, because I'm very cautious about beautiful spaces. It's not like I hate people who do not respect that. It's like I feel more connected with people who realize the coziness and good organization of a space. It's a very smart thing, which is worth sharing if you find something like that. […] That's why I normally share something like that because I feel like it would be useful, both for me in the future when I get back to the archives of this post and for people who just want to explore how it works abroad. So I just don't want to post something ugly or monotonous. We also have a lot of monotonous architecture back in my home country because of the Soviet legacy. I just don't normally post that because it might be depressing, and it might not really extend people's understanding about something. So I just don't know why I should do that. That's why I don't do that." (P12)*

COVID restrictions

Apart from this, although this study has been conducted post to the global COVID-19 pandemic, some of the interviewees' experiences more so than others have still been affected by its significant, but unexpected influence and aftermath, not only because they have been restricted in their social media engagement with their families and friends in terms of sharing both their prospects and challenges on-site but also due to existing knowledge gaps regarding the general opportunities and functioning of social media as a platform of interaction:

> *"I didn't post too much because I wasn't able to be out that much, you know? So because of that, I was just traveling between my home or my apartment and school. I was just back and forth, back and forth. Even during the weekend I was not traveling that much because of COVID, right? Well, I would say because I was not able to go out and visit some nice places, which is sometimes what I posted, I think it decreased a little bit because of my restrictions of being outside. You know for me, what I do is post stuff about going somewhere; not like "Oh I'm here in my kitchen studying", or stuff like that." (P3)*

> *"It was really tricky for me to keep in touch with my family because most of my family they are also not used to more remotely interaction. We didn't have a lot of COVID lockdown due to different reasons. Normally, most of the time, we still kept in touch even calling each other or just meeting each other outdoors somewhere." (P12)*

COVID-19 was thereby not only limiting their overall involvement with their home but also their host audience(s) in their private lives due to social distancing rules, driving the hosts' interaction preference(s) towards their already established social circles:

> *"What I would say is - I don't know if that's related or not - but you know, talking about the cultural shock, I was just trying to explain to them that if they were planning to do*

> *something during the weekend at that time, I would love to go with them and explore or do a hike or whatever. I was just trying to explain to them that for me, they were my world. I mean they were all my connections here in the country. There was nothing more than that. And they already had friends and girlfriends or whatever. So they were doing a lot of things during the weekend. For me, I would have liked to be more involved with them, but they didn't invite me to come. Like "Hey, I'm going to a restaurant on Saturday afternoon. Do you want to join?" So I was expecting that, right? But that didn't happen. I think it was just something cultural, I guess. It just takes time to be more involved in these kinds of things with Americans. That was maybe a little bit of a struggle. But yeah, it's part of the process, I guess. To start to adapt to a new culture. But that wasn't something that I was expecting. It wasn't that easy on me. Being involved in other activities than the school, social activities with their friends and stuff, that was a little bit difficult. Challenging. I think that's it. Expecting to be at a university with a lot of people and then realizing that because of COVID that was not the case, or it was impossible to have a real environment." (P3)*

Lack of physical proximity

Without a doubt, these challenges are not only significant to COVID-19 but even more so an additional contributor to enhance participants' personal boundaries as a limiting factor in their performance(s). In most cases, internationals disclosed a disparity regarding the perceived and actual level of intimacy, primarily in relation to friends, being automatically finite without their local physical presence. Naturally, their (partly self-initiated) shortage of interaction led to superficiality in their personal display, eventually losing touch with close friends they used to see and engage with often:

> *"When I immediately left my home country, I was in some WhatsApp groups. But I just stopped participating, right? For example, Judo. I used to practice Judo in my home country. But since I wasn't going anymore, there was no point to keep participating in those groups. At the same time I also changed my phone number, so I lost some contacts. I mean, I didn't lose them permanently. I could reach out to people if I asked other people. But yeah, I don't have their phone number anymore. It's not that I used to talk to them or something like that, but I had their contact, that possibility. And with the distance I don't talk to those people anymore, either. Because if there are people around that you could share things with and now, they are not anymore. That has to have some effect." (P4)*

> *"With some friends I have just lost contact. With others it can go for months that I don't know or hear anything about them. And then I called them, I texted them and then I know. But it's not a regular thing". (P4)*

> *"With some of the friends it's slightly more painful because they had been considered best friends, or at least very, very close friends. Sometimes when you can't get in touch*

> *with them, only like once a month, you feel like they don't care about you that much, as back there." (P12)*

As well as that, even though the international students longed for physical proximity and a sense of support from their home audience(s) on the other side, they were occasionally involuntarily deprived of it, which also has been reflected in their social media behavior in the way of spending more time online to catch up with each other.

> *"So maybe one reason that I used a lot of social media in the beginning, having a lot of challenges was like I just want to look at something or talk with someone on social media that can give me this feeling that I'm not in the United States. I'm in my own country or I'm in my friends country that I'm talking with through social media. So just* disengage *from the place and time that I'm at. In the beginning, that was the thing." (P10)*
>
> *"I guess, my first semester here I used a lot of social media. And even if I ended up using it, it was just to catch up with what people are doing back home. Not so much about what's happening around me or at my host institution in general." (P14)*

Language barrier(s)

Apart from cultural boundaries (for reference see P9 or P10), and participants' self-censorship as well as the tendency to restrict and cluster both their audiences and personal attention between academic and private life, thereby rejecting to develop any personal closeness in (intercultural) communication with people at their host institution (for reference see P10), one additional limitation to the interviewees' underestimation of the workload due to a new educational system arose in their conflict with English as the commonly spoken language in the host culture, in and outside of academia:

> *"Because at first, when I came here, I wasn't able to have an effective relationship with others because of language barriers. By passing time, I started to feel easy with that and was making friends rather than just to study and go home, you know? Especially because I had to spend more time on lessons to understand them. So I didn't think about making that many friendships. I was just focused on doing my work and keep up with my responsibilities." (P8)*
>
> *"And you are also using your second or third language to study. Reading goes really slow. I sometimes feel a little inferior compared to the US students because for them it is so easy to do that. I still remember the first semester. We had to do a presentation for our introductory class. I had to practice because that was my first presentation. And*

> *they don't have to do that. So sometimes studying in the States means you really need to put extra time and effort and resources in. And even if you do that, you probably can just do half of what the United States students are doing because that's their native language And one of the things I am struggling with right now - but it's getting better – are the cultural things. Sometimes students, you know, we are all sitting in a classroom, and they are starting to laugh. But I don't understand what's happening." (P7)*
>
> *"I was little bit struggling with the language. In my program 80% are international students, 20% are American. We came from different countries, so the language is different. The English is different. For everyone, from India and from Iran it is different and then from China it is also different, and then from the US, it is also different. The language was my barrier, a big barrier for me. […] for friends here or for daily life it's so hard because sometimes they have…what is the name? It's like, not really a joke, but we can call it a joke, a small joke or small idioms. And I couldn't understand these, you know, because I'm not really into watching movies, American movies and I don't like to watch movies so I'm not familiar with the daily language, so I'm struggling with that." (P9)*

Discussion

The accounts of the participants' intercultural experiences, as extracted through the semi-structured interviews, were analyzed from three distinct vantage points – how they interacted with their audiences back home, with the hosts at the host institution, and the extent by which their engagement on social media transformed as a reaction to being exposed to a different culture. While it is evident that the sojourners demonstrate significantly disparate participation with social media depending on both the audience and elapsed duration of first encounter to the host culture, it is conducive to reckon the background and motivation behind the sojourn.

It was undeniably prevalent that the (higher) education system was one of the most, if not the most, inspiring factors behind the decision to move to another part of the globe, even with anticipation of expected and unforeseen challenges (Kim (2016, 2017c) refers to that as the mental, emotional and motivational *level of preparedness*). In addition to the financial assistance and astounding availability of top-notch resources, several other factors contributed to the seeming better quality of the education in the United States – continuous evaluation, having a track of one's own progress, the chances of catching up by taking additional classes, more prospects of hands-on and in-depth learning, supportive environment with continuous guidance from peers and mentors, and exposure to specific specializations in courses and research were some of those highlighted repetitively by the participants. Apart from these obviously external, uncontrollable influencing variables it seems plausible that students studying abroad would seek the potential opportunity of establishing (substantial) relationships with members of the host culture, in and outside of academia.

Following these incentives to study abroad, the following two sections focus on answering the proposed research questions in greater detail.

RQ 1: How do sojourners perform (cultural) identity on social media differently between the audience(s) in their culture of origin (‘home’ culture/backstage) and their 'host culture audience(s)’ (frontstage) in the United States?

Having looked at different themes that emerged from the interviews, it is only pertinent to analyze how participants changed their behavior on social media. The following sections highlight the specific changes in the participants' online presence, to both their home and host audience, as a function of being exposed to the culture shock during their study abroad. Comparing the two cultural groups of the audience(s), it should be noted that undoubtedly both sides had their specific impact(s) on the sojourners’ experience(s), causing different behavioral changes in their individual performance(s) around them. The most prevalent theme that emerged showed that the overall social media activity has not changed much. First and foremost, social media is used as a tool to either schedule in-person communication on both sides of the spectrum or – if that is not feasible due to their physical distance – via video call with their home audience(s).

In detail, internationals’ social media engagement with family members (parents more than siblings) as well as close friends initially increased in terms of them sharing excitement for their exploration of a new environment as their main purpose of conversation:

> *"Initially, I did post a lot. I think in my first-year, I was posting about workplaces I was going to, activities I was doing, etc. I think the frequency of my social media engagement probably increased." (P6)*

However, for the majority of them, this increase occurred only up to a certain saturation point. One possible explanation can be found in participants' lack of physical proximity and – as to be seen from P10_Interview Protocol, Pos. 22 – wish for mental support to cope with unprecedented challenges abroad:

> *"When I moved here, I tend to talk with my parents more because I felt I need social support. With friends, I would say, with close friends I started to talk more, but in total my interaction with friends decreased through social media. Why? I don't know. Maybe I didn't have enough time to share everything with everyone. So I chose my parents, my family, over my friends, maybe to put in that time and share my concerns. I didn't want to bombard my friends with my problems. But you know, with your family it is different. Your family would understand, support; they are family. That's why maybe I didn't share everything with my friends, and that's how my interaction through social media decreased. But with family it increased because I needed their support. Mentally." (P10)*

As well as that, a diminishing engagement simultaneously resulted out of their compelled redirected attention in order to adjust more quickly to their new surrounding:

> *"Usually I barely text my family and friends because I'm always around them. In the beginning, I probably texted them a bit more because I missed them. Usually my mom misses me [laughs], not the other way around. And then she wants to call me all the time. Yeah, stuff like that. So it kind of got more intense and more frequent, yes. But eventually it faded out because, I guess your family is getting used to you being abroad, you have other stuff to do. You don't have the time to talk to them all the time, you know." (P11)*
>
> *"I tried to keep in touch with them daily. I made this effort, and it failed pretty soon afterwards [laughs] because it's not possible. I mean, it was not even possible to communicate with my friends daily back in my home country because we are adults, we are busy, we have different interests. But it was easier with them because at least we had some interests like which gathered us more often in real life. Here you have to schedule your call because, again, we have a lot of different stuff to do and different time zones. So, I communicate with my friends less often that I would like to […]" (P12)*

As a substitute for this 'reduction' of an audience to perform in front of, the internationals interacted primarily with their community which consisted of students from their home culture at the host institution. This circumstance was primarily motivated and promoted by a better intrinsic understanding among each other, which boils down to the reduced cultural differences and the eventual simultaneous avoidance of misunderstandings.

In a similar way to other interviewees, the performance(s) towards friends also reduced over time due to an unawareness, respectively lack of physical proximity and mutual availability towards one another. However, although these were prominent obstacles in the beginning, they gradually resolved themselves by students' adaptation to the overall circumstance, through restarting their outreach:

> *"Because if there are people around that you could share things with and now, they are not anymore. That has to have some effect. So over time, the contact decreased. I wasn't in these groups. I wasn't talking to some friends. [...] Some friends, I just didn't call them, like "Why would I call that guy?" [laughs]. Because I will see them, right? But now, I also call my friends, I am trying to. (P4)*

One unique approach to handle the internationals' various levels of inadvertent stress and prevalent daily challenges has been the increase in social media usage as a form of 'disengagement' from the host culture and physical places within, wishing to intensify one's personal awareness of happenings back in the home country in order to feel more connected and still rooted to its culture, as a different, more preferable and equally familiar place:

> *"I don't know if that's related to your question, but I would say, I used a lot of social media to distract myself from all these challenges. I used a lot of social media to just kind of redirect me from being here and feel like I'm not here. I'm in another place." (P10)*
>
> *"I would say, maybe it increased a little bit because, now that I was not close enough, I was maybe more aware of what was happening to them or what what's going on there. And also it was not like a bond, but it was like a connection with my relationships back home. Social media was a way to still feel connected to my country or to my past." (P3)*
>
> *"So, my friends were excited about the new place I was at. So, there was this consistency in the way we communicated with each other. They were always there, wanting to listen to me and just learn about America, even though they were not here. I was more engaged with them, I think, for the first two months of being here because I had no one. [...] But I was able to get social support from the community that consists of people from my home country. [...] And I noticed that when I came to the US, I was always on social media - I wanted to know what was going on in my home country [...]." (P5)*

Unlike family, participants' performances throughout their friendship circles back home have been reduced regarding their one-on-one contact. Instead, their primary goal has been fixated on their effort to keep in touch through group settings. Possible reasons for that are indeed relatable to the students' decrease in social media engagement simply resulting out of their shifted time dedication towards their 'offline' activities, with overwhelming academic and work-related commitments in their home- and host country leading the way along with contemporaneously enormous time investment for social media in general. In fact, social media services are commonly considered a waste of time. Therefore, sojourners generally started to gain a 'safe distance' to eliminate the potential danger of getting too immersed and distracted:

> *"I don't post much, but I think I mostly use the messenger for private communication and not public communication because I feel like there is a lot of posts. In my first year, I did post a lot of pictures and things because I was traveling. But later on I cut down on that because I thought I was wasting my time." (P6)*
>
> *"The only thing that changed is that I started to use social media less. Because life here is a little bit faster and you have to focus more on your career. That's why you don't have enough time to waste on social media. And even when I came here, I started to focus more on my personality, how to develop it, to read more; to read more books, to practice more support. By time you find yourself to not have any time to look into your accounts and use them." (P2)*

Consequently, a continuous trend in withdrawing attention from the performance in front of the internationals' outer circle(s) (frontstage), thereby gradually getting closer to their inner circle (consisting of best friends or close work colleagues building the backstage) could be observed as a reoccurring form of selective attention between and prioritization of audiences. Hence, the performing intensity and degree of freedom for their (personal) backstage appears to be independent from both time and place:

> *"For my friends in my inner circle. With my best friend it is all the same; with my colleagues, that are closer to me, it is the same. Because basically, we talk in a WhatsApp group, right? Even when I was in my country, we were talking through a WhatsApp group, so yeah, it's not different at all. I still get the updates from them what happened in my university and what happened in my church and back home. So basically, it's the same. Maybe it changed because we don't have any chance to meet each other. [...] Maybe I need my inner circle more than my outer circle." (P9)*

This motif also evolves further in the sense of developing concerns that the audience(s) expectational attitudes towards certain topics are not met due to a lack of interest, thereby clearly prioritizing topics that are intriguing to them, not only to the international student (for additional reference see P3):

> *"But I do not do it in a way to confuse people's understanding about my daily routine here. I just don't feel like it's very interesting to tell something about how I walk here and there in my host university town. Also because I don't feel excited about the way the spaces look like here. I mean in terms of urban setting. So that's why I'm not posting a lot about my host university town, because I'm taking pictures with my friends lately and I can post that. But I don't post anything related to things like "Oh I've been working here in my host university town" because it is just not beautiful. I mean, it's good in terms of people and community, but it's not beautiful at all. It's not interesting for architects and it's not interesting for all the people from arts which are most of my friends back in my country." (P12)*

As to be seen from their universal hesitance to expose challenges publicly, admittedly international students' front stage behavior increased while their backstage one stayed behind, thereby still not shifting into a no-posting zone.

Furthermore, it has to be noted that participants' display of content regarding their home culture has generally been a rare theme. Overall, in regard to this, two distinct purposes could be examined, firstly, their reflection of challenges within and secondly as a form to educate the host audience(s) about its characteristics:

> *"Sometimes I post about my own thoughts, about things that are going wrong in my country." (P13)*
>
> *„At some point I started to share some screenshots or some news about ancient times of my home country. People who are following me, especially from this area can read more about it. Some topics about food, my countries' food, some topics about news that are happening in the area because we are living in a very hot area." (P2)*

An inclining overall theme concerning internationals' change in their social media engagement is delineated by their propensity of filtering their level of comfort and appropriateness of discussing a topic according to specific boundaries of either culture as well as their personal (set) level of affection for their various audience(s) in order to be considered appropriate, beforehand. These insecurities in overstretching cultural insensitivities or engaging in socially unacceptable behavior towards one or the other side unavoidably leads to interviewees' personal limitation of being overly selective and formal in their communicative performance(s), especially regarding recent serious, incisively negative (world) events like wars[82]:

> *"At some point, some topics you can talk about back in my home country and some topics you can talk about here. They are different because I am dealing with two different cultures here, even though the US is a mix of different cultures. But still you have this limitations. If you want to talk about some topics that are related to my background, it would be easier for me to talk about it with my friends from my home country, but if I want to talk about some news that are happening right now, that mostly are related to Europe or the USA, it would be more appropriate to talk about it with my friends here, not with my friends back in my home country. [...] For my friends who are living in the Middle East I will not mention the war between Russia and Ukraine, but I will mention the war between Palestine and Israel because that is more close to them. But for people or who are living in Europe and the US, it would be more appropriate to talk about the war between Ukraine and Russia because Palestine and Israel – it is far away from them." (P2)*

> *"It's so challenging because we have a different culture, basically how we interact or what you talk about. That is also different sometimes. So, what can I ask, or what can I not ask? What is ethic or not ethic? What is common and not common? I asked that. I learned that so much here. For example, is it common to ask about your family status or not; if you are married or not. I think it is not ethical, right? I don't know. But yeah, for some questions that may be normal for my country, I'm questioning myself: "Is it normal here or not?" So, it limited my interaction with local people here because I don't know what I should ask or is it good to ask or not. So everything became very formal because I take the safe question. It's fairly general because I'm a little bit worried that if I ask about the personal life, it crosses the line. So because it's a different culture, I don't know exactly where the line is." (P9)*

Consequently, social media is mostly used as a medium for private communication, and not exceedingly public display, especially if the discussed matter is a sensitive subject.

Differing from the change in prioritization of audience(s) and disclosed topics among them, participants likewise reported the specific trend of gradually reducing personal social media applications, especially for non-personal connections. As a substitute, they started adapting to more professional apps in order to network, build skills, and increase their productivity in their process of adaptation to a new cultural, especially work-related environment:

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[82] However, these prevalent cultural distances being boundaries, eventually becoming a limiting factor in participants' communicative engagement on social media has mainly been reflected by collectivistic over individualistic cultures.

> *"So I believe that after starting my master's program, some categories of social media like WhatsApp or Facebook or Instagram got less. I started using them in a less amount and others, the professional social media apps like Zoom or Gmail or Yahoo Mail or Microsoft Teams or Outlook; I started using them more frequently because I made a habit that I have to check my E-mail every morning and every night before I go to bed. I started using YouTube more to learn about some new skills or, you know, watching podcasts that could, you know, help me gain knowledge of different cultures; of the world history. But overall, I feel that this thing made me more productive. The use of these social media apps to, you know, increase my skills and knowledge." (P1)*

On another note, a shift in platforms has also been detected. Before their exchange, they initially used different platforms according to their country of origin, partly due to their popularity, partly because of a limitation in availability, caused by specific country-imposed censorships. After starting their exposure to the host culture, some originally used platforms got replaced, whereas others – as a form of initiating cross-cultural adaptation and adjustment – got added.

In line with this, their frequency in social media engagement of sojourners as well as their level(s) of disclosure with both the host and the home audience increased significantly in comparison to the time before their intercultural exchange because of their liberated accessibility and grant in freedom of speech (for reference see P7):

> *Well, that changed a lot because I started using Instagram frequently. I can post the latest trends and stories about the States and about any other country because in my home country we cannot use Instagram. So barely, we are like in a cocoon. We can only expose and get access to the information in my home countries' mainland, which is not really good. But here, I just try to engage with different people; they are probably from different places, and I can make comments or respond to their stories or posts on social media, especially Instagram. So I will say there's a huge difference. […] Speaking on the frequency, I will say, it probably stayed equal. I just transfer my time I used for WeChat to Instagram right now. […] Before studying here I guess, I rarely posted my personal life on social media, especially on Instagram." (P7)*

In spite of all positive changes in the sojourners' communication (schemes) there are of course also negative aspects to it. Above all, a repetitive theme among the interviews occurred to be their tendency to discriminatorily choose and filter their public content to be desirable, thereby particularly showing off positive and enjoyable moments. This selectivity can be looked upon as a reaction to their perceived self-pressure initiated by their home audiences, expecting impeccable and socially appropriate content instead of showing off to much in their backstage region (for reference see P9 and P6).

Initially, internationals' limitations in performance have mainly been restricted by the host audience(s) since it has been described that – in addition to a general overwhelm of the environment and tasks in academia[83] – both people inside and outside of their host university environment are not as outgoing, respectively welcoming or supporting as expected. Whenever participants experienced an existing deficiency or active avoidance in receptivity on behalf of the hosts, e.g., in terms of establishing 'real' friendships (like back home), facing language barriers or offering their academic expertise to understand study materials better, sojourners generally withdrew their motivation for engagement from the hosts ('unknown'), thus immersing stronger into their ('known') home cultural group(s). Proof of this lack of support, leading to a unvoluntary lone-wolf-behavior and damaged self-esteem can be found in the impressions of participant 5 (for additional reference see P5):

> *"I think it was the fact that I was looked down on. I remember during orientation we were told if you need help, reach out to your classmates and others, ask them for help. Where I came from, the way we did research is different from the way research is being done here in America. So, I was trying to relearn about all these things. For example, in my quant class, at times after class I'll get home and break down, because I didn't understand things and when I ask people, they expected me to already know it. And in my head, I felt like if I already knew it, I wouldn't be asking. So, to some extent, people made me feel like I knew nothing. I also had to show it to them in the other classes that my apparent of not knowing nothing was because it was a quantitative class, which was new for me. Me getting into my host institution showed, to some extent, that I knew something. Things like that made me feel so bad. […] They basically looked down on me and that hurt me even till today because I felt like maybe I should have just kept it to myself and not tell them that I needed help." (P5)*

This, to some extent "no-stage" presence has also expressed itself differently in sojourners' private lives through their internal (self-) concerns and doubt of not offering the required, respectively expected level of respect in front of their home audiences (for further reference see P9_Interview Protocol, Pos. 35).

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[83] Overall, it can be said that the intensive settling down process in a foreign cultural surrounding slowed the engagement process with the hosts down, driving sojourners to control and focus their attention on both content and audience(s) in a more targeted manner.

In conclusion, interviewees showed to have a neutral attitude towards social media, initially posting more content during their early stages abroad (honeymoon phase and certain crisis/shock moments) which faded during the later points of their sojourn (adjustment phase), ultimately turning into following their audience(s) on social media to catch up on information through passively watching their posted content.

RQ 2: Do sojourners report changes in their frontstage or backstage social media performance based on their experiences of culture shock and adaptation?

Accordingly, an open and encouraging (work) environment, provided chances to have a voice. To be treated with respect and being accepted to have and express different opinions (characterized as *host communication competence;* the driving key to acculturation (Kim 1979, 2016, 2017c)) helped to build self-esteem on their frontstage (in comparison to their experience(s) of a self-esteem-diminishing educational system), even when some of the interviewees were scared of the fact that their language barrier might present a strong challenge. The professionalism in the academic enclosure of the participants were definitely reflected in the way they used professional networks or other social media platforms to connect with the contacts at the host institution – the communications were kept at a superficial over a substantial level (see Gardner & Davis, 2013; Manago, 2015), unless connections evolved to friendships over time.

Although, the educational experience has been reported as positive, the intensity and expectation to perform well also influenced the social media engagement. Participants reported increased time off screen, i.e., reduced usage of social media, to cope up with the workload. On top of that, the hosts were not receptive enough to make the sojourner feel at home from the beginning. While the independence and self-sufficiency have been lauded, the initial ‘figuring-out’ to settle in the new environment had resulted in need of emotional support (see Lim & Pham, 2016), social exclusion[84], and finding solace while interacting or passively watching the whereabouts of the family and friends back home over social media. Participants reported staying connected on a regular basis over video calls and group chats to close friends and family members, but also acknowledged reduced interactions with people from the 'outer circle.'

> *"But with my friends it is the same. We use WhatsApp, so it's not a big difference. We cannot meet in person, but we can always talk using WhatsApp or something like that. Because sometimes, I work during the night at 2:00 AM but they are still awake because there it is afternoon, so we can talk. I think nothing changed with time so much. […] For my friends in my inner circle. With my best friend it is all the same; with my colleagues, that are closer to me, it is the same. Because basically, we talk in a WhatsApp group, right? Even when I was in my country, we were talking through a WhatsApp group, so yeah, it's not different at all. I still get the updates from them what happened in my university and what happened in my church and back home. So basically, it's the same. Maybe it changed because we don't have any chance to meet each other. […] Maybe I need my inner circle more than my outer circle." (P9)*

As touched on before, the language barrier was touted to be one of the expected challenges as thought by the significant proportion of the interviewees. Contrary to their expectation, the hosts, both in and outside of the campus, were found to be accepting, which helped their overall interconnectedness and natural adaptation to the host culture.

Fascinatingly, interviewees thought the ignorance and/or the generalized stigma of the hosts not being open to or receptive (see Berry, 2008; Kim, 2017c) about other cultures ('relationship expectation' (see Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b, p.19)) limited their bonding experience in a sense. Participants, even when they expected difference in personal boundaries, learned not to overstep, and grew more passive in their social media engagement, while trying to be familiar with the social media outlets popular with the hosts – perhaps expecting smoother integration. For the students who came from a collectivist culture, where certain ways and customs were expected of them, the newfound freedom in the personal life was met with acceptance quickly, which was also reflected as they thought of getting out of their culture as an ‘upgrade’ from their lifestyle back home.

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[84] The experience of social exclusion was primarily driven by the hosts' general incapability of accommodation and receptivity. Nevertheless, both did not solely originate out of culturally different boundaries but at the same time also due to the COVID-19 pandemic as a limiting factor in (inter)cultural communication.

> *“Yeah, I really enjoyed being independent and doing things on my own schedule; being able to set my own schedule. I think culturally in my home country, our culture is more collectivist, where people do things together all the time and it's like a lot of people have a lot of saying in what you should be doing with your life. This is not the case here in the US. I felt the culture is much more individualistic. So people are just doing things on their own all the time. Even if the social interactions have rules but they don't encroach on other people's privacy, or people don't ask inappropriate questions, or questions about your personal life. So I think there is a lot of space that people give each other here. So that's the thing - if I didn't want to share certain things, people wouldn't really press me to do that. But this wasn't the case in my home country because I feel like people try to ask questions. It feels like the way the society is structured; a lot of times you feel compelled to meet people's expectations. I think this wasn't the case here. I felt much more free.” (P6)*

It is interesting to notice that the communication spectrum was very much dependent on the audience, and eventually, the change in the frequency and content of interactions through social media, were also dictated by it. The excitement of living by oneself, the beautiful outdoors in the United States, the freedom to travel, the intrinsic need to physical closeness – all influenced how participants displayed themselves on the front stages of social media. While it was a way to show-off how they were getting accustomed to the new place and all the wonderful things about it, participants often masked their feelings – going back to observing instead of actively participating. The nuances of the new culture generated the understanding of mutual respect and the sojourners tried to be aware of the personal boundaries, even when the cultural shock was expected.

> *“It's a very different world. So when I first came here, I had this mindset like “Okay, I'm going to a different world; a completely different place.” So I would need to be open enough to embrace the customs and traditions of that place. I cannot be loosed off so that I don't let myself experiment with things, learn new things, or change certain ways of living. Because what I might be like habituated to back home, maybe not acceptable or not seen the right way or something like that. So yeah, things changed, I guess, but in a good way.” (P14)*

The unexpected shocks also contributed to the self-censorship. As elaborated earlier, the stiffness and the insensitive (partially expected) prejudices of the hosts, coupled with intense time commitments to obtain self-sufficiency, and the (acquired) awareness about the prevalent cultural differences while trying to gauge the reception from the hosts – the process of embracing new social norms and surroundings was not always easy in terms of adaptative growth. It required active efforts from the participants, more so from the students who came from collectivist cultures that who came from individualistic cultures, as their expectation mismatch was not comparable to the students from Asian, African, Middle-Eastern, or South American students. Especially in those cases where the intercultural exchange has been perceived to be infused by negative feelings (see Lim & Pham, 2016) , e.g., hosts' high expectations in adjustment to (their foreign) social norms (*host conformity pressure* (see Kim, 2017c) , participants put themselves in a rather 'defensive' than 'open-minded' position.

As to be seen, even within a foreign cultural setting, individualistic societies characteristically tended to act out their individualistic attitude in close relation to the one from the United States as the host location they immersed in. Considered to be loose-tie societies, they stayed more (professionally) distant towards other cultural groups, prioritizing their family and friends from for social engagement online in the beginning of their sojourn. Over time, this attitude towards both audiences has turned 180 degrees and roles have been 'reversed'. Compellingly, collectivist cultures who experienced high pressure to engage in a socially desirable response set because of the way they were brought up (see Middleton & Jones, 2000), were expected to carry this mindset and way of a 'calculated' impression management over to their new cultural surrounding. However, the exact opposite happened in them adapting the hosts' individualistic lifestyle, in terms of feeling more free to express their opinions, needs and concerns through (inter)cultural communication, without affecting the high frequency of interaction with home audiences though.

In accordance with the literature, nonetheless it is found to be true that in the event of situations being unclear or unpredictable in the matter of cultural boundaries, internationals from collectivist societies engage stronger in the pattern of self-reflection, resulting in uncertainty avoidance(s) (see Hofstede, 2012), in contrast to exchange students from individualistic cultures who did not reflect this 'need for social approval' in the same way.

All in all, although not every of the sojourners' relationships has been uniformly positive, their acceptance and adaptation to a different lifestyle through permanent exposure to cultural differences has reflected to be a life-changing experience among all international students (see Upadhyay, 2018), not only regarding their improvement in self-awareness (see Brooks & Pitts, 2016; Jackson, 2008) but also as a valuable opportunity to (re-)evaluate and navigate through their cultural identity[85] (see Imahori & Cupach, 2005) over the cause of their change(s). Although (before the conduct of the study) it has not yet been clear whether international students eventually distance themselves from or (even) reject their culture of origin throughout their cross-cultural adaptation process (see Gil, 2014), as a matter of fact, proof has been found that the very opposite happens, namely them growing closer to their home audience(s) as a result of the experienced difficulties abroad. By the same token, individuals' did not forcibly impose their home culture on hosts but rather reflected on and cherished occurring events or traditions via social media by themselves in order to educate.

As the individual interviewees' justifiably (expectedly needed to) convey/-ed situations on social media that might not always have been quintessentially positive according to the challenges they have gone through, displaying 'curated' impressions (Goffman, 1956, 1959), specifically portraying topics that are (inter)culturally 'favored' by every audience with respect to their personal sensitivities as an 'active' guidance of the audiences' perceptions was found to be a prevalent theme consistent with the literature. Furthermore, students' monitored 'filtering' behavior within their social media performance 'preparation' (also known as the 'pre-post dimension' (see Ditchfield, 2020)) gives evidence to the iceberg model (see Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012b) proposing sojourners' general hesitance of visibly disclosing anything deeper than the superficial level of their culture(s) to the public (see Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011).

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[85] In line with Wan & Chew's (2013) proposed observation for sojourners' tendency to possess an individual identity for two or more cultures, the results of this study imply that international students keep them separate from one another instead of unifying them. However, sojourners' still preferred to enfold a uniform self-presentation across all social media platforms (Davidson & Joinson, 2021; see also Hodkinson, 2017), instead of developing unique personalities for each individually used one (Duffy & Chan, 2019; Liu et al., 2018).

Therefore, the social media behavior evolved over time – frequent contacts with family and friends in the beginning reduced with time while still maintaining a superficial communication. On the professional sphere, the engagement remained formal, but the intimacy grew with time. It can thus be inferred that the exposure to the culture shock – both expected and unexpected, required some time to be reflected in the sojourners' front and backstage behavior. While close friends were rarely made in the host environment, it provided a plethora of opportunities for professional connection and (psychological) growth as well as an increase in the development of their intercultural-communicative skills (Kim, 2008, 2015, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c) through social media whereas the superficiality of communication with family and friends at home remained somehow consistent, keeping the connections back home aloof of the sojourners‘ emotional challenges they experienced the cultural shock.

Limitations and further perspectives

As with any study, there are limitations to the research discussed. Following the thematic analysis, this chapter is devoted to evaluating potential sources of error throughout the research process, as well as identifying possible solutions to address these within future projects.

From a theoretical point of view, both Goffman's *Impression Management Theory* (1956, 1959) and Oberg's *Culture Shock Model* (1960) (as well as subsequent follow-up research) are primarily based on Northern American sampling, thereby explicitly focusing on U.S. citizens' experiences abroad. Consequently, the generalizability and the impact of cultural diversity on their findings seem to be strongly limited. To balance this challenge, future studies could benefit from enhancing the broadness of the theoretical scope by using more inclusive, contemporary communication theories, which include participants and perspectives from different cultural backgrounds.

In addition to the benefit, an overall larger sample size would ensure, prospective research in this field can benefit further from obtaining the host nationals' (U.S.-American) perspective on and perception of culture shock concerning intercultural communication and Impression Management with foreigners within the United States. This thesis shows an imbalance by focusing exclusively on intercultural exchange and the social media communication processes contained therein from the perspective of international students. Communication, however, takes place at all times on both sides of the engagement process, with the hosts of the respective exchange country and their perception of the social media interaction with internationals at the forefront.

Moreover, some objections with room for improvement continued to emerge within the interview processes themselves and the subsequent coding to highlight overlapping themes. A significant disadvantage of the interview method that has been used is the limited preparation time which in turn restricted the 'control possibility' to ensure that all participants looked detailed, respectively intensively enough at any social media content or other materials that should trigger memories of their first semester at the host institution. This drawback also comes into play if we consider the substantial deviation of the interviewees. In retrospect, the reminiscence of the initial first semester memories were underlying various difficulties depending on the time elapsed since the first semester, which was a function of the academic program the interviewee was enrolled in. Thus, the study is subject to two distortions: recency and positivity bias, which suppresses or fades both the memories and the intensity of emotions felt in the past. To approach these obstacles, it is recommended to extend the time frame for the data collection and supervise the participants' self-reflection process.

Along with that, the interviewers' (as an integrated part of the international community) personal relation to some of the interviewees might have affected the outcome and elaborateness of their answers. Although the interviewer conceptualized the interview as open-ended, leaving room for potential follow-up questions in pursuance of extricating intrinsic 'core' thoughts and feelings of the interviewee, their response intensity occasionally resulted in short answers. These discomfort issues have been addressed and eliminated through distinct levels of standardization, like a neutral tonality and the same concurring explanatory information about the purpose of the study as well as the phenomenon of culture shock.

Apart from this, the interviews can only be anonymized to a certain extent. Particular characteristics, such as social media platforms subject to restrictions like censorship in a country (although unidentifiable), are always country-specific and retraceable. Finally, the author highlights the error-proneness of the analysis. According to Mayring (2015, p. 38), the interpretation of linguistic material is incomplete at any point in time, "it always holds always the possibility of re-interpretation." Another fragility of this qualitative method is that it does not operate according to any particular technique, but rather "technical vagueness [...] is compensated for by theoretical stringency" (Mayring, 2015, p. 52).

Within the evaluation framework, the author uses different (main- and sub-) categories within the code system to record individual statements in more detail. However, not every category might be a harmonious fit due to the individualization of responses. Consequently, it is possible that, according to Rössler (2017, p. 210), "gradually different degrees of [...] miscoding" occur during the analysis. Both phenomena of 'overcoding' (Braun & Clarke, 2006b) (in too much detail) and 'overlapping of categories' (no unambiguous assignment of categories, but instead double coding) have been observed throughout the process, potentially having led to an overinterpretation of specific aspects of the material. Solutions to these can be found in the coarser merging of the applying categories and in an intensified turnus of follow-up questions.

Conclusion

Compelled from the analysis and the course of the discussion, various decisive influencing factors for the change in international students' social media engagement as well as front- and backstage behavior emerged throughout the course of their cultural exchange. The experience of intercultural exchange, resulting in personal growth and cross-cultural adaptation, can be observed on various levels. Overall, the host *communication competencies* are found to form the center of impacting aspects.

Firstly, *host* nationals *receptivity*, affected individuals in the sense of breaking down their initial language barriers to ultimately reach the point of full integration into the host culture, e.g., through a higher performance on the front stage of their social media platforms. Interestingly, sojourners language barriers were dependent on their prevailing language at home. In countries where English was not the official national language (e.g., India, Nigeria), but spoken as a first language, the language barrier was not perceived to be as significant as within other cultures. However, participants from those countries were more subject to the troubling influence of social factors, e.g., following everyday language like cultural jokes or idioms, limiting the adaptation process.

Following this, their experience(s) of *host conformity pressure* presented an additional magnitude of influence. In most cases, academia was perceived to be positively different from the interviewees' host countries. Yet, students acknowledged their feeling for academic pressure, undermined by the supplemental high expectations of prior understanding of the material and (customary) standards from the program by their peers or academic personnel. As a result, professional connections with the host audience(s) have been kept in a formal manner, thereby essentially avoiding communication over social media due to sojourners' awareness of the social hesitancy and cultural distance. As a replacement in engagement, participants preferred to rather use traditional media (e.g., phone calls, regular text messages or E-Mail) in a group setting over social media in order to provide more space for a professional basis. Only close friends or professional connections like academic personnel (e.g., advisors or professors in general) have been considered to engage with through singular one-on-one interaction(s).

Admittedly, expected (pre-defined and undefined) and unexpected cultural shocks within internationals’ academic surroundings in combination with their struggle considering the settling down process in their private life led to an increasing need for emotional support which also altered how social media was used. In terms of their audience(s), evidence showed that participants’ cognition of social media being an enormous time commitment, respectively ‘a waste of time’ among other duties, drove them to direct their attention and prioritize/select personally close connections (predominantly family) over loose-knit acquaintances or friends in either setting.

Apart from this, *personality factors*, naming openness and positivity turned out to be significant parameters. Most prevalently, exchange students from collectivist cultures thereby enjoyed both the academic as well as their private levels of freedom. It should be noted, that reflecting on the positive aspects of studying abroad encouraged sojourners to compare the differences and improvements between both their home and host country. These positive outlooks are particularly directed towards personal spaces within the host country, e.g. housing, outdoor environments like the surrounding nature or campus facilities. Focusing on posting these poses the objective of a ’flawless presentation’ to purposefully select aesthetics their audience(s) would like to see and positively respond to. Except for two out of the 14 participants, nobody engaged in sharing content to portray their home culture on social media with either of the audience(s), but rather shared experiences made within the host culture regarding travel or professional life. Potentially, this overall pattern of hesitance in sharing private content on social media can be affiliated to internationals' concerns about the interplay of social media and data/privacy handling in general due to lack of data protection regulations in the host country.

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Appendix

Semi structured interview guide

Hello […], thank you very much for taking the time to participate in my research about (inter)cultural identity performance on social media. I will be audio-recording the interview for quality purposes but within the analysis, all data will be anonymized and stored on password-protected devices. Before we start, I would like to introduce you to some basic information in order to lead us to the same understanding of the definition of culture shock.

Culture shock is a universal phenomenon every international student inevitably goes through whenever they decide to gain experiences within another country for either academic or other personal reasons. For the most part, whenever we live in an unexplored, foreign cultural surrounding, initially we feel confused and distressed since it confronts us with the absence, irrelevance, and ineffectiveness of our usual social cues, may it be signs, symbols or routines we experienced as daily orientation points inside our home country and culture.

Now, for the first part of the interview I would like to focus on your personal experiences, expectations and impressions of your move abroad in general and how you stayed in contact with both your family and friends back home as well as your newly acquired friends and work colleagues at the university – shortly, what parts of your life you shared and which you did not.

Introductory questions

- How do you interact with family and friends from home on social media?
- Why did you decide to pursue a graduate university degree in the US instead of your home country?
- How do you interact with friends at your host institution on social media?
- What did you enjoy about studying abroad when you first arrived at your host institution?
- In what ways did your social media engagement with friends or family change when you first arrived at your host institution?
- What aspects of studying abroad were difficult when you first arrived at your host institution?
- [If they share about stress during their time abroad] How did your social media activity change when you were experiencing [difficult experience]?
- How long do you intend to remain in the U.S.? Will you look for other opportunities abroad after you graduate, or look for opportunities at home?

Thank you. Before we end the interview, I would like to ask you a few more questions about yourself.

Demographic Information

- *What is your age?*

- *What gender do you identify with?*

- *Which ethnicity do you identify with?*
  - *White/Caucasian*
  - *Hispanic/Latino*
  - *Black/African American*
  - *Native American/American Indian*
  - *Asian/Pacific Islander*
  - *Other*

- *What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?*
  - *Bachelor's degree*
  - *Master's degree*
  - *Doctorate*
  - *Other*

- *Which subject did you major in?*

- *What is your current employment status?*
  - *not working/working part time at the university/graduated and employed*

- *What is your nationality/country of origin?*

Thank you very much [Name] for your participation, I appreciate your input!