

**How Do International Students in a University in the United States Relate Their Cultural
Identity to Fashion Trends**

By

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Abstract

International students who move to the United States must endure the challenge of adapting to a new culture. Understanding different aspects of how the adaptation process works is essential to create better avenues to connect with these students as they go through the acculturation process. This research focuses on how international students communicate their cultural identity through clothing choices. This study followed a qualitative method through in-depth interviews with ten participants from eight countries. Participants answered questions regarding motivation, cultural adaptation, clothing adaptation, and cultural identity and expression. Findings show that participants consider clothing communicates something about themselves and their cultural identity, as many students make active choices to preserve their customs in terms of clothing to communicate their cultural identity. Regarding the clothing adaptation that participants had to endure, most participants related to having less pressure in the United States as opposed to their countries which often have more strict cultural norms in this regard. In the same way, freedom in terms of clothing was often associated with comfortable clothing choices.

Keywords: Clothing adaptation, cultural identity, cross-cultural adaptation

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Chapter I: Introduction

People's clothes communicate a message regarding who they are (Mair, 2018, p. 56). International students face many challenges when moving from their home countries to the United States to complete their higher education. Students adapt to different sides of the host culture, and among those aspects of culture that they will have to note are fashion choices and trends occurring in their new environment. This research will examine the different elements of adaptation from international students at Liberty University and how they communicate their cultural identities by either adapting to fashion trends in the United States or adopting aspects of them.

It is important to note that international students face many challenges when they first move to the United States, not only their cultural adaptation. Among the challenges, such as financial, social, and language barriers, cross-cultural adaptation is significant for international students who choose to move abroad. When international students move to the United States, they must adjust to their new environment, a process known as cultural adaptation (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2020). For international students, cultural adaptation is one of the most relevant aspects of gaining success in their fields of study. These students need to acclimate to their new environment and grow to relate to their new surroundings.

There has been a wide variety of research done in this area. For instance, there are studies on cultural shock and the effects of cultural shock on people who come to the United States. These studies cover various groups of people regardless of the longevity of their stay in the country (Zhou et al., 2008). Studies also exist on cross-cultural adaptation overall, resulting in the creation of the theory of cultural adaptation (Young Yun Kim, 2001). This theory defines intercultural adaptation and the different aspects involved when people face a new cultural

environment for immigrants, including relationships with host nationals, such as social and personal communication (Young Yun Kim, 2001). Lastly, studies exist on different characteristics that play a role in the success of international students and their success in higher education institutions in the United States (Cruwys et al., 2020). The current study will build from findings in the different areas mentioned to further research and create a deeper understanding of intercultural adaptation and how fashion can be an avenue to communicate cultural identity for international students attending Liberty University in Virginia, United States.

Problem Statement

This study will explore whether international students at Liberty University adapt to the host country's way of dressing or adopt some aspects of the culture while still maintaining and wearing clothes tied to their cultural identities. This study will also analyze how they communicate their cultural identities through fashion trends. Furthermore, this study will compile theories regarding the challenges international students face when they move to the United States regarding cultural adaptation and fashion research related to communication and how it conveys cultural identity. It will focus on a specific group of people, namely international students within the college age, moving to a Christian University (Liberty University) in the United States.

Research Question

This research will contribute to further understanding cross-cultural communication and international students' perception through a qualitative, phenomenological study.. More specifically, this study intends to answer the following research questions.

RQ 1: Do international students at Liberty University adapt the way they dress to communicate their cultural identity or adopt their host culture's way of dressing regardless of how cultural influences are?

RQ 2: Do students adopt fashion trends by choosing to dress similarly to students native to the United States at Liberty University, or if they keep communicating their national cultural identity through their dress?

Cross-cultural Adaptation as it pertains to fashion.

According to a study of fashion psychology, people can use clothes to express cultural identity (Paulicelli & Clark, 2009, p.2). Therefore, in cross-cultural adaptation, when students change their views to fit their cultural surroundings, it can also translate to how they decide to portray themselves to others through their clothes. Moreover, cultural adaptation has different aspects that vary depending on when people intend to stay in their host culture. Cultural adaptation theory separates people who move to the United States into two groups depending on the longevity of their stay. The two groups are long-term immigrants, such as refugees, or short-term visitors, such as people who come to advance their careers for a set amount of time. The difference is the relationships people establish with the host community they are moving into (Young Yun Kim, 2001, p. 50). However, international students are in a unique position in that they must establish relationships in their host community regardless of the longevity of their stay to reach academic success. International students have the pressure to successfully establish relationships not only for their enrichment but also to accomplish goals within their set of objectives for the future.

Fashion and Culture

The standard definition for fashion is the set of styles or behaviors, including dress, hair, decoration, and behavior patterns, either in a group or individually (Mair, 2018, p. 4). Kaiser's Fashion and Cultural study (2012) states, "Fashion involves becoming collectively with others" (p. 12). In that sense, fashion relates to cultural identity, and it is crucial to highlight its relevance as a communication tool. Fashion is tightly linked to people's development of their identity and personality. Clothing choices often alter people's perceptions of each other, and therefore those choices can also play a significant role in their perception of themselves (Mair, 2018, p. 58). According to studies regarding fashion and culture, people buy and wear clothes because of the perceived message they believe them to send (Paulicelli & Clark, 2009, p. 6). In some cultures, people care more about what they wear, and cultural norms and social rules sometimes restrict them. This concept could be exemplified by the culture of the United Arab Emirates, where high fashion is highly preferred; however, modesty is a central religious principle driving decisions regarding what people wear (Lodi, 2020).

Another notable distinction in fashion is that studies have shown people want to express an authentic self that is different from others. Still, at the same time, people crave to be approved and psychologically need to have a sense of belonging within the social group they encounter (Mair, 2018, p. 55). Clothes are also related to self-perception, meaning it speaks about how people view themselves even if they do not necessarily intend to send a message to those around them. Another aspect of fashion is self-enhancement (Paulicelli & Clark, 2009, p. 4). People seek to communicate that they are part of a group identity through their clothes. That self-enhancement concerns people's cultural system and what is aesthetically attractive in that cultural environment.

The Impact of Globalization

Given that this study is based on the cross-cultural adaptation of students coming from different countries to the United States, it is essential to note that as the world advances, people are living in a more globalized environment every day. The concept of globalization has become more relevant each year, and it affects most of the aspects of everyday life. Globalization is a complex phenomenon that consists of the interconnectivity people have around the world (Reese et al., 2019). Globalization is relevant to fashion from an economic standpoint. Through fashion, the global market can predict different kinds of aesthetic trends. Fashion is often associated with wealth and sought-after lifestyles; an example of this is the high fashion industry and the association these brands have with wealth. Companies often consider style and how people from different cultures perceive them when they create marketing campaigns (Paulicelli & Clark, 2009, p. 5).

Globalization has had a significant impact on psychology and, therefore, on individual identity. Even though globalization is a prevalent subject of study, people still understand the different aspects of fashion that are particular to other nations, cultures, and people groups (Reese et al., 2019). In that sense, even though globalization dramatically impacts the world, specifics within countries seem to prevail through the globalized culture. Fashion trends now tend to be more global, which is illustrated by the rise of street style that bloggers worldwide have taken into their hands to share on different platforms and impact fashion trends globally (Luvaas, 2016). When discussing globalization as it regards this study, it is imperative to mention that there are many other factors that people consider when making choices regarding their wardrobe outside of cultural identity. For example, the financial capability to purchase

certain styles of clothing or specific brands is relevant. Another critical factor is the availability of certain types of clothes.

In some cases, clothing pieces are particular to an area or a climate. For example, in some regions of South America with a warm-weather, people dress in lighter clothes. On the other hand, people who live in North America during the winter choose clothes to protect them from the intense cold. Moreover, globalization is relevant and must be considered even though fashion worldwide has changed since people are more interconnected. The newfound connectivity does not erase the specific cultural aspects relevant to this study and studies regarding fashion to communicate cultural identity.

Understanding International Students

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 is worth noting as it affected multiple areas of people's lives. Educational endeavors by international students who desired to enroll in a university in the United States were not an exception. According to the Institute of International Education, 37,365 international students enrolled in study programs in the United States in 2020; however, the enrollment of international students in the United States decreased by 17% (IIE, 2020). The countries more heavily represented across the United States are Japan, Saudi Arabia, and China. Furthermore, the International Student Center at Liberty University states that there are 624 students enrolled at Liberty University from 85 different countries. The countries with the highest population are South Korea, Nigeria, Canada, China, and Brazil. Liberty University currently has around 15,000 students enrolled residentially. Therefore, the international population makes up a little over 4% of the students enrolled residentially. Additionally, given that universities, such as Liberty University, started offering a hybrid educational model that allowed the students to choose if they wanted to take classes online or residentially, many

decided to take advantage of that opportunity and went entirely online. Furthermore, 80% of students from countries other than the United States are taking residential courses, whereas 20% of these students chose to stay in their home countries and receive their education through online classes (IIE, 2020). Liberty University's total count of international students for fall 2021 was significantly lower than in previous years. Given that Liberty offers a wide variety of online careers, the hybrid option was also made available to students who could not travel back to the United States or wanted to avoid traveling back.

Moreover, Liberty University is one of the largest Christian universities in the world. Therefore, there are conditions unique to the culture that are not a part of the culture at other higher education institutions. The culture of Liberty University is permeated by Christian principles, such as modesty in clothing, and other cultural aspects of significance, such as the expectation for students to follow moral conduct that aligns with the code of honor and the set of norms for students and faculty alike (The Liberty Way Student Honor Code, n.d.). In the same way, students who come from other countries are also expected to abide by Christian principles. Even so, the overall culture of the country and the overall challenges of international students confronting a different cultural reality is still present and relevant at this institution.

Professional Significance and Contribution to the Field

The hope for this study is that it contributes to further the understanding of cross-cultural communication competence and promotes comprehension regarding the adaptation of international students to universities abroad. Given that students who are native to the United States do not go through the same cultural shock of moving to a different country as international students, their understanding of the way international students reflect their perceived identity in any manner is minimal. For that reason, this study looks to further awareness in those who are a

part of host communities and simultaneously deepen research in cross-cultural communication and adaptation.

Furthermore, universities in the United States could drive up enrollment from international students if they consider the different aspects they face when it comes to overcoming cultural barriers and communicating cultural identity. By expanding their knowledge, universities can cater their service to the specific needs international students have. In that sense, they can become a crucial component in the success of these students.

Research has shown that academic success is related to college diversity (IIE, 2020). Consequently, it is in the best interest of schools to provide a better experience for those coming from abroad and provide nationals with the knowledge to understand cultural differences from those students who communicate their identities differently. Therefore, gaining more knowledge on the different facets relevant to the experience of international students in colleges in the United States would help the institution better accommodate students. This research looks to understand the experience of these students further. It would also contribute to increasing the well-being and overall quality of life for those students facing all the aspects of cross-cultural adaptation.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This study will examine different areas within non-verbal communication, fashion, and cross-cultural adaptation to understand whether international students at Liberty University adopt clothing trends from their new environment or adapt clothing that is already tied to their cultural identity. For that purpose, it is essential to mention that different terms would be used throughout the chapters of this study and defined as it pertains to each area of study. This literary review will define and examine fashion, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural communication, and acculturation.

Nonverbal Communication

Regardless of cultural background, all humans require communication, which includes verbal and non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication research points to the fact that even though the need for non-verbal understanding is universal, how that develops depends mainly on the environment. The context of the situations in which communication occurs helps people make sense of the interaction. In the same way that through the use of language and verbal communication, people search for connection, non-verbal communication serves the purpose of being a mechanism that creates the organization of social systems (Ritchie, 1982). Scholarship on non-verbal communication also highlights the importance of understanding that non-verbal communication denotes conscious and unconscious messages. In many instances, messages that are communicated through non-verbal communication can be manipulated depending on the perception that wants to be communicated. Because non-verbal communication involves people connecting with others, it is linked to the type of connection or relationship the participants have (Poyatos, 2002). An example of this is how people utilize proxemics, which relates to the use of space, and speaks to the orientation in terms of the participant's behavior in

the communication process. Non-verbal communication is associated with acceptance or harmony with an environment or rejection or conflict with the environment (Mary Ritchie, 1982).

In that sense, non-verbal communication needs to be understood in terms of function. The functionality of non-verbal messages is filtered through the purpose of the message, whether it is meant to, for example, persuade or inform, and the efficiency of the message, on whether it can be easily interpreted accurately by the receiver (Eaves & Leathers, 2018, p.4) Through non-verbal aspects such as tone, and facial expressions people can understand the emotions as well and intention of the message. Non-verbal scholarship often divides non-verbal communication functions into five main areas: the regulation of interactions, the expression of intimacy, the exercise of control, and the setting for the practical completion of tasks or services. Anyone's interaction can be classified with one or more of these functions simultaneously. Non-verbal communication can, as previously mentioned, be conscious or unconscious.

Regarding function, the level of consciousness often translates to the level of effectiveness of the message. Additional non-verbal cues are one of the main ways people can strive to understand others' emotions. In the same way, metacommunication is also essential in understanding non-verbal messages because metacommunication studies conflicting messages; when the non-verbal cues and verbal messages do not seem to align, metacommunication is how people strive to understand whether deception is happening. Metacommunication refers to how people can strive to understand the motives in the interaction, which is crucial to interactions (Eaves & Leathers, 2018).

Similarly, non-verbal communication can be linked to the identity of a person. For this research specifically, the emphasis will be given to how physical appearance or how

people present in front of others is heavily related to their social identity (Eaves & Leathers, 2018, p. 165). Through physical appearance, people can communicate parts of their identity that they would not want or could not communicate verbally. How people present their physical appearance also sets boundaries for how they interact with others in terms of their interpersonal communication. According to Eaves and Leathers (2018), physical appearance often communicates responsibility and expectations that can be placed on others, a reality that might exemplify this is how people with certain professions ought to dress in specific ways, either if it is law enforcement or they have to wear a uniform, or a professional field where people are expected to dress within the limits of what is considered professional in their social environment (p.165) This specific area of non-verbal communication is denominated artifactual communication. As mentioned by Eaves & Leathers “when we use the term artifact, we do not refer to the esoteric findings that came from an archaeological dig. We refer instead to those things that humans can wear on their body, do to their bodies, or use as extensions of their bodies for purposes of exercising conscious control over their personal appearance.” (p. 182)

Different cultural groups have different expectations set in terms of aesthetics. This includes not only clothes but also any adornments, such as jewelry, piercings, or any body markings or tattoos, as well as other choices people can have over the way they present in society, such as the way they do their hair and other accessories, and what people pick between different choices. The effectiveness of the artifactual message largely relies on the rules set by society and the environment in which the situation is set. In that sense, clothing is the primary focus of artifactual communication (Eaves & Leathers, 2018).

There are four significant areas in which clothes play an essential role in people's perception of others. That is credibility, likeability, attractiveness, and dominance. Credibility has to do with the level of authority or power someone holds in society; this is particularly true for professions that require specific uniforms. In the same way, credibility is in the sense of classification as part of a specific group or branch. The function of artifactual communication is for people to communicate to others their roles, gender, age, and nationality when they are interacting with others. In the same way that it has to do with the impression people have of others, it has to do with the impression people have of themselves (Eaves & Leathers, 2018.) Artifact communication can often be related to physical attractiveness. Although this is measured differently through different cultures, people usually want to create more appealing presentations for others. On many occasions, that requires the utilization of different artifacts that would enhance features appealing to the environment.

According to Schieffer (2002), non-verbal communication is crucial to understanding others because it involves using other senses (p.33). Artifacts are a significant part of how non-verbal communication can be expressed through those modes, for example, through the textures of clothes, the colors, the scent of a specific perfume, and the sounds of heels. Clothes are particular artifacts that communicate essential aspects of people's self-identity. In some societies, ceremonial clothes are worn in specific instances for their significance. In other countries, people wear items that symbolize religious affiliations. Some artifacts reflect statuses such as marital or economic status, which can be interpreted differently depending on the culture. Another facet of this is macro-artifacts, which refers to the many activities associated with a person, such as purchasing a specific car brand or riding a bicycle instead of a car. These macro artifacts send

messages to others in a way that can have an impact on the perception people might have of a specific person (p. 52)

An Overview of Fashion

Fashion can be understood in different ways. Firstly, fashion can be filtered through the lens of individuality. From an individual point of view, fashion can be described as a way of doing things, a pattern people are recognized for; therefore, people can usually tie it to an identity (Korica & Bazin, 2019c). On the other hand, in a group sense, it is defined as a particular aesthetic tied to that specific group. In this study, fashion will refer uniquely to clothing and clothing trends, more specifically to the clothes international students choose to wear based on the challenge they face having to be confronted with a cultural setting different from their own.

Korica & Bazin claim:

Fashion is grounded in the negotiated aesthetic of a particular social group: a sense of how one should dress and what one should prefer or reject, appreciate, or feel uncomfortable with. Fashion here becomes an expression of belonging to or identifying via a tribe through the bodily practice of attire. (p. 1486)

In terms of history, fashion, as the industry people understand it to be nowadays, was born in the 19th century when high fashion gained structure and emerged into the base of what it is now. Before, clothing was a signifier of social status and boomed in the 14th century when royal courts made it possible to start moving away from the required clothes and gave more liberty in the sense of their choices (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2020). Moreover, clothing fashion is filtered through social factors that imply what items of clothing are rejected and what items are supposed to be used, and it highly depends on when and where people are. In that sense, fashion is crucial to group identity in national cultures or subcultures. Furthermore, fashion is relative to

the place where the person is located. This study also highlights that fashion is an expression of a particular community at a specific time:

We dress alone or with others and are recognized and driven by our own or others' patterns, taking shapes at different times. In other words, there is a specific fashion, but fashion also phenomenologically relates to collective identities and temporal domains (Korica & Bazin, 2019c, p.1485)

Fashion as communication

Consequently, fashion is understood as a form of communication. According to Barnard (2018b), communication can be seen as the process of creating shared meaning (p. 259-271). Fashion is a "negotiated aesthetic of a particular social group" (Barnard, 2018b). Meaning that clothing choices often follow a style that helps people be identifiable with a particular group; the group has consciously or unconsciously agreed to this shared aesthetic. Therefore, fashion is a form of communication because it involves creating shared meaning within the group (Barnard, 2018b, pp. 259-271).

Moreover, Barnard (2018b) conceptualizes that clothing has a perceived message. The theories about who are the senders or the receivers may vary; however, it is still clear that the clothing people choose to wear sends a message (p. 259-271). The sender could be the designer or the person choosing to wear it, and the receiver can be the garment buyer or the person who notices the attire or interprets it to mean something. According to Barnard's studies, an example is how the press interprets messages from what people of influence choose to wear and encodes the meaning their garments are supposed to have. The study describes clothing choices as signifiers, which are a form of communication. Fashion is a mode of language that looks to have sociological significance and a specific message that shows intellectuality, respectability, etc. As

Barnard says, "What is notified here through these intermediaries is essentially the degree of integration of the wearer concerning the society in which they live" (Barnard, 2018b p. 259-271). Ergo, clothing has value in its meaning. Even though it might be perceived as meaningless within a specific group or even when compared to historical context, its meaning flourishes.

Barthes (2006) states, "Dressing means the personal mode in which the wearer adopts the dress that is proposed to them by their social group" (p. 9). A clear illustration of this concept that also speaks to the history of fashion is women in political positions of high power specifically. Moreover, a study on fashion marketing and communication pointed out that Queen Elizabeth always wanted to show much power through her garments, illustrated in many of her portraits (Mitterfellner, 2020b). Fashion relates to how people can perceive others. Politicians and social influencers have used clothes to demonstrate their power and stance on many occasions, such as the one mentioned before with Queen Elizabeth. Even political figures, such as Michelle Obama, continue to do so, using specific wardrobes that include an underlying statement (Mitterfellner, 2020b)

Fashion and Globalism

Nowadays, a new relevant variable is how fashion is more globalized through connectivity worldwide. This variable is relevant given that this study will focus on international students moving to Virginia in the United States from different countries. However, in the modern world, it is more likely that these students have been exposed to a more globalized fashion standard and are somewhat aware of how their cultural garments differ from that of the United States. As people start getting more exposure to others, it is worth noting that comparison is inevitable. According to Festinger (1954), who wrote the social comparison theory, it is human nature to compare oneself to others in various aspects of life, including self-appearance.

Moreover, this comparison when it comes to one-on-one interactions would lead to the desire for self-improvement if the person were perceived to be better than themselves and comes from self-reflection (Festinger, 1954). However, as pointed out by Anindita in her study about the tensions between nationalism and globalism throughout history, people naturally strive to create groups. Most of the time, being part of these groups ignites a sense of loyalty (Anindita, 2019, p. 32). For example, being a part of a nation comes with particular sentiments of nationalism (Balslev, 2020). However, Balslev also points out that when the imposition of a different culture, communication happens for individuals to identify shared values. Furthermore, the tension lies between the lines of what the global standard has already become and what each nation or culture has established. What needs to change when confronted with a different culture depends on each culture (Balslev, 2020).

Another aspect of this is how technology is highly involved in the different trends in fashion. According to Hansen's anthropological study of fashion worldwide, there is a distinction between the definition of fashion in different countries and cultures. In many instances, Western scholars represent fashion evolution in terms of industrial and capitalist production. In contrast, clothing represents cultural heritage in other areas of the world (Hansen, 2004). This study done by Hansen says:

Globalization in the era of hyper-communication is creating a new "world in dress," breaking down conventional fashion boundaries. Understanding fashion as a global phenomenon is further supported by shifts in the organization of garment production globally and the vast economic significance of garment production in world trade (Hansen, 2004, p 372).

Intercultural Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Intercultural communication is the central area of study relevant to this research, given that a significant aspect of focus is how students choose to communicate their cultural identity. It is essential to define both intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication. Intercultural communication is "two dissimilar parties yet manage to interact collaboratively so that a common understanding occurs" (Suen & Suen, 2019, p.13). Meaning there is an effort from individuals with different cultural backgrounds to negotiate to mean. Whereas cross-cultural communication occurs without a foundational cultural understanding, a comparison between cultural foundations is made.

In the communication and cross-cultural adaptation theory, Kim (2001) describes adaptation as fundamental to humanity. Kim details that the growth experience when people are confronted with a new environment and realize their previous knowledge of cultural norms is no longer appropriate or valuable is unique. The social process of learning how society works within each culture heavily involves communication and how that knowledge that is crucial for the person's development is communicated to people. According to Kim (2001), communication is a pillar of enculturation, which is how people learn to relate to their cultural reality. During the learning process of enculturation, people's minds are shaped by the group's culture they are growing to be a part of.

The theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation presented by Kim expounds on the idea that people grow loyalty for the cultural identity they develop when they grow up. According to this theory:

Individuals develop selfhood connected to their cultures as they develop as they incorporate worldviews, beliefs, values and norms, and concerted communication

practices. Cultural identity, as such, refers to a self-definition and definition by others and serves as a frame of reference (Kim, 2001, p. 72)

Uncertainty may arise when people are immersed in a new environment, and the feeling of estrangement may push people experiencing cross-cultural adaptation to change their behaviors to fit their new environment. This process is called acculturation which is more specifically defined as the process of acquiring "native cultural practices, particularly in areas of direct relevance to the daily functioning of strangers - from attire and food values to behavioral norms" (Young Yun Kim, 200, p. 50-51). In the same way, there needs to be a process of "deculturation" to learn the new practices required from the new culture people face. However, Kim illustrates that the process of unlearning is mostly for superficial aspects of the culture rather than core values. According to Young Yun Kim (2001), "the person entering a new environment can change the behaviors and understand the underlying values of their new behavioral patterns but not necessarily accept those values as a natural part of themselves" (p. 50-51).

Therefore, moving to a new place when international students establish themselves in the United States goes in line with the acculturation process described by Kim. Acculturation is related to how cross-cultural communication is relevant to the situation where students confront the new ways their environment perceives norms and standards for clothing choices. According to Kim, cross-cultural adaptation happens whether the person entering the new host environment chooses it or not if there is contact with natives of the host community. Even when the contact with the host community is minimal, there is change, and it comes as the result of "conceivable communication activities," meaning people facing the natural challenges of residing in a new environment will adapt the most within the first stages of their stay and gradually go through the

process of acculturation until eventually, they are a person who is fully adapted to their new cultural environment. (Young Yun Kim, 2001, p. 72). This newfound adjustment leads to functionality within the host community. As Kim remarks:

Functionally fit individuals have a broader, more precise, more objective, and more differentiative perception of the host culture and communication patterns [...] increasing capacity to participate in the emotional and aesthetic experience of the natives (p. 72).

The relevance of these points relays in the idea that even when people are not looking to adapt to their new environment and are slowly doing so by adjusting unconsciously, it might be that the result when becoming "functionally fit individuals" within their new environment is to grow in their understanding and especially in their participation in emotional experiences, and aesthetic experiences, meaning in entering the ways of the aesthetic that the host culture values, also within their way to dress (Kim, 2001, p. 72).

It is relevant to mention the different challenges that international students in the United States experience regarding the other cultural variables they need to consider. The acculturation process creates stress for those who must go through it (Poyrazli et al., 2004). Acculturation stress is defined as "a marked deterioration of the general health status of an individual; it encompasses physiological, psychological, and social aspects that are explicitly linked to the acculturation process" (Poyrazli et al., 2004, p. 74). Stress can be exacerbated by the lack of community that individuals can experience when they are starting to establish themselves in an unfamiliar environment. Acculturation stress is most common among refugees or immigrants; however, international students frequently show signs of acculturation stress added to the natural stress that comes from academics and starting their academic endeavors in college.

Furthermore, it was shown in the study on cultural norms that people revisit their natural polite response when people are outside their range of perceived normalcy. In the study *Norms, Expectations, and Culture*, the authors emphasize that cultural norms establish what individuals perceive as correct behaviors. They separate social norms into two categories, injunctive norms and descriptive. Descriptive norms are the ones that exist according to functionality, such as greetings, and injunctive norms are more subjective to the person. They can be described as unspoken norms or expectations people have of their environment. Accordingly, they propose that when there is a breach of the normalcy expressed by injunctive or descriptive cultural norms, the responses toward non-native people tend to change (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2020). According to Spencer-Oatey and Kádár, "Through socialization and interactional engagement, people build up a sense of contextually based expected behavior and the likelihood of occurrence. This forms their "normalcy zone" (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2020). Consequently, a cultural norm established, such as appropriate attire or acceptable attire, can directly change the perspective and even the response of natives in their local environment towards people facing this new environment.

On the other hand, ethnocentrism is defined as the examination of different cultures based on the preconceptions of the native culture. People tend to think higher about themselves when they are active in a group. Ethnocentrism can often become a barrier to cross-cultural communication and negative stereotyping (Berry, 1969). According to Berry, understanding ethnocentrism and how people can default into superiority as part of the in-group would greatly benefit cross-cultural communication and integration (Berry, 1969).

Cultural Intelligence

Cross-cultural adaptation research is also often linked to cultural intelligence or CQ, defined as an individual's capability to function effectively in culturally diverse environments (Ang et al., 2007, p. 336). Research studies show that CQ needs to be understood through three dimensions. The first is cognitive, which refers to the knowledge and structures that are built around that knowledge; the motivational intelligence, which refers to the capability to focus energy into solving real situations through knowledge; and lastly, behavioral intelligence, which refers to the actual actions that are made, or the outward decisions. The measure of CQ is also valued through the amount of knowledge people have previously acquired about the culture, the motivation expressed in learning and using energy to understand and immerse in the culture, which is often an intrinsic desire, and for behavioral intelligence, CQ refers to the confidence and proficiency that can be exhibit. As proposed by Ang et al.:

Mental capabilities for cultural understanding and motivation must be complemented by the ability to exhibit appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions based on cultural values of specific settings. This includes having a wide and flexible repertoire of behaviors. Those with high behavioral CQ exhibit situationally appropriate behaviors based on their broad range of verbal and nonverbal capabilities (p. 338).

This research also shows how some personality tendencies can be more related to CQ than others (Ang et al., 2007), such as often showing the desire to have new experiences and creativity. Essentially CQ shows the ability and desires to translate and understand unfamiliar cultures effectively and act accordingly. This is backed up by research done on the effectiveness of performing in multicultural contexts (Burke et al., 2009), in which it was found that openness is directly related to better adjustment in foreign contexts. Attributes such as agreeableness,

extraversion, and emotional stability resulted in better adjustment to their new environments.

International Students in the United States

International students play a vital role in enriching diversity in the United States and enriching academic life (Yang et al., 2020). However, there are many challenges international students face when they choose to come to the United States, and facing those challenges impacts their academic and personal success and overall well-being. Among the challenges are understanding cultural norms, language barriers, learning the "socio-political histories," financial difficulties, feelings of isolation, homesickness, and sometimes discrimination (Yang et al., 2020). Added to this set of challenges is acculturative stress, given that acculturation, has to do with functional changes that must occur to interact with the host culture. Moreover, even though national students might also experience some of these challenges, they are still familiar with the overall culture of the United States. However, international students must deal with the foundational interaction required to flourish academically and personally. The best way to encourage international students is to create communities and help their communication with nationals improve (Yang et al., 2020).

As this study will be focused on international students at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, it is crucial to mention studies done in this area for this poll of people. During a study by Andrea Childs at Liberty University, the success of international students within the culture in the United States was correlated to creating relationships and communities with national and professors. According to Childs (2019), it is mutually beneficial for national and international students to learn from each other. Therefore, given the importance that international students have shown, this study seeks to contribute to further knowledge in an area of acculturation, such as clothing, as part of the cultural identity of international students. How

clothing communicates the cultural identity of international students and whether students adopt clothing trends that are part of the cultural majority they are confronted with.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research perspective

Qualitative studies are concerned with observable behavior, the meaning people attach to things, and how people act in their everyday lives (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 18). Therefore, given that the basis for the development of this research is establishing the experience of international students and how they communicate their cultural identity through their clothing choices, this study will follow a qualitative method. This research seeks to deepen the understanding of these participants' perspectives of their cultural identity and how they relate it to their clothing. The purpose is to understand better how their view has been altered by living in the United States and pursuing their studies at Liberty University.

Moreover, this study will follow through a phenomenological perspective.

Phenomenological studies see how people act and what they say based on how they see their realities (Taylor et al., 2015, p.18.) Rather than establishing only their perspective, this study will try to understand the basis of the participant's understanding of the subject of study through a phenomenological approach.

The context of the study

The collection of data occurred during the Fall of 2022. The international student center at Liberty University granted their support and collaborated to reach out to the students to contact those who are willing to cooperate with the study. The fall is the semester when more international students enroll at Liberty University; therefore, it was a more convenient time to reach out to potential participants. The study will be done with 10 participants from different classes, both males and females, originally from 8 different countries.

The participants in the study

The participants of the study are international students at Liberty University. The participants of the study were chosen through purposive sampling. Moreover, this research looked to have diversity in every aspect; therefore, students are from different countries and classes, meaning they have been in the United States for different periods of time. This study looked to have representation from freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior classes, and students in graduate school to consider the longevity of their stay in the United States as an essential aspect of their progress in perspective.

The methods and instruments to collect data

Interviews took place on Liberty University's campus; depending on the availability of the participants, they were 30-45 minutes and were recorded to complete the data analysis. Given that the interview was a conversation with the participants that sought to deepen the understanding of their perspective of reality, the questions were flexible. According to Taylor et al., during qualitative research, what most researchers have done is have some general questions in mind when they enter the field. These typically fall into two categories—substantive and formal theory (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 18). The substantive category includes questions particular to the issue in the specific context. On the other hand, the second category is mainly about the implications to the field outside of the specific context or the questions about the subject of study from a broader point of view.

Data analysis

The first step in analyzing the data was to transcribe the interviews. According to Gournelos et al. (2019), transcribing interviews effectively removes aspects of the interviewee that might create preconceived notions or bias about the analysis result (p.151). The data was

organized by thematic coding, and data saturation was established when no new themes emerged in the interviews. The selection of these themes happened after the interviews to be mindful of bias during the interviews or the imposition of ideas on the study participants. According to Weaver-Hightower, "Themes provide a way to hold onto complexity because theme titles subsume numerous instances of real-world activity" (Weaver-Hightower, 2019, p. 108).

After establishing the themes, the subsequent step was to see how participants described their understanding of those themes. The analysis codified common themes to check for commonalities and differences between the responses and motivations. It is important to note that there were pre-existing expectations of what the themes would be—at the same time, coding the data collected during the interviews. While analyzing the answers, the research considered repetition in the interview, forcefulness (the strength behind the statement), and the recurrence of that theme in the discussions.

Chapter IV: Data Analysis and Results

This chapter will discuss the research results and go in-depth into analyzing the data gathered from the participants. This chapter will also include an overview of the participants and relevant information to the research question posed at the beginning of the study. The participants for this research were from eight different countries, both male and female students. It sampled students who are in different stages of their professional careers and different stages of their adaptation process (*Table 1.0*). Each participant was asked questions that covered their overall cultural adaptation to the United States, their perception of their home culture and cultural identity, and lastly, questions about their adaptation, specifically regarding their clothing adaptation.

Table 1.0 Participant Demographic

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Student Classification</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Nationality</i>
1	Graduate	Male	Colombia
2	Graduate	Female	Rwanda
3	Senior	Female	Dominican Republic
4	Junior	Male	South Korea
5	Freshman	Female	Vietnam
6	Senior	Male	Dominican Republic
7	Graduate	Female	Cambodia
8	Graduate	Female	Colombia
9	Senior	Male	Paraguay
10	Sophomore	Female	Guatemala

The analysis of the interviews through thematic coding showed eight principal codes or themes regularly discussed among all participants. Some subthemes were periodically found among the primary themes (*Table 2.0*). These sub-themes are mentioned regularly but only by some participants. Each theme will be thoroughly examined in the following paragraphs.

Table 2.0 Themes and Subthemes

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Subthemes</i>
<i>Familiarity</i>	Perceived familiarity with culture in the U.S.
	Familiarity with their home culture
<i>Adaptation</i>	Positive perception on adaptation
	Levels of adaptation to the culture in the U.S.
<i>Clothing</i>	Preconceived about clothing in the U.S.
<i>Adaptation</i>	Desire to adapt to clothing in the U.S.
<i>Cultural</i>	Community orientated cultures
<i>Expression</i>	The impact of social norms
	Subcultures in the U.S.
	Gender norms
<i>Attire Pressure</i>	The impact of social class
	Perception on luxury
<i>Attire Freedom</i>	Standards and expectations in the U.S.
	Standards and expectations of their home culture
<i>Practical</i>	Seasons in the U.S.
<i>Considerations</i>	Tempered weathers

<i>Self-expression</i>	Cultural standards
<i>/ Identity</i>	Religious considerations
<i>Self-</i>	Career development
<i>development</i>	Personal growth

Familiarity

The first part of the study focused on exploring the participants' motivations to come to the United States as students. It was essential to understand that motivation correlates to their perspective about adjusting to the new culture in which they are immersed. The theme of familiarity was found among more than half of the participants when asked about their motivation to move from their home country to the United States. Those participants who mentioned familiarity when discussing their considerations perceived that their adaptation would be more straightforward in the United States than in other countries. Most of them had a perceived familiarity with the United States by knowing people who lived there, which gave them a positive predisposition to the culture. Participant 1 noted:

"Initially, I knew that I wanted to study abroad, mostly because I knew people here [in the United States], which is one of the main reasons you would pick a country. Whether you would have more people that can make that country seem more familiar to you."

In the same way, participant 3 also mentioned friends attending school in the United States, which played a part in choosing to move to a different country. This means these participants already felt they could have people that had to endure the same process available to them, and in that sense, they felt they were still going to be a part of a community they already knew. Other participants also related the theme of familiarity to the idea that they were already

somewhat aware of how the culture works, even if they were only aware of certain aspects of the culture. The fact that they were already fluent in the language, given that they had studied English from a young age or visited the United States at some point in their lives, was also mentioned regularly. This principle is demonstrated by Participant 8, who said she completed her education in a school that followed the United States model of education and therefore emphasized teaching about their culture. This participant said she could relate to many aspects of the culture and knew somewhat what to expect from her adaptation.

In the same way, Participant 6 mentioned that he visited the United States multiple times before moving because family members enjoy the culture of the United States and have also chosen to study at colleges outside their country. However, although participants noted familiarity with the culture and the language, they also mentioned that their adaptation was arduous. The idea of preconceived familiarity with the culture impacted the participants because the expectations they set regarding the culture informed how they decided to adjust to the new environment.

However, they cite many unforeseen aspects that were evident and became a challenging part of their experience in moving to the United States to study. Participant 1 mentioned that the familiarity felt more like a head start and that even though he perceived the culture to be similar initially, that quickly shifted. He had to make more conscious choices in terms of adjustment. This is relevant because, in the adaptation process, participants demonstrated an initial understanding of their experience but did not foresee some of the specifics that might also be relevant and can only be experienced when enduring the adaptation first-hand. Those participants who did not mention familiarity as their primary motivation to move to the United States referred to the opportunity for self-growth as the primary motivator to leave their home countries;

however, even participants who did not have relatives in the United States often mentioned familiarity related to globalism and online trends.

Self-Development

The second recurrent theme participants mentioned is the motivation to move to a second country for personal or professional growth. Participants perceived it as an excellent opportunity to further their education in ways they felt would not be available in their country. Some participants referred expressly to education in particular, either for its quality or availability. Participant 9 noted that the career path he wanted to follow was not offered in educational institutions in his home country; therefore, he needed to look for opportunities abroad. Similarly, Participant 2 mentioned that her parents' perception of education in the United States was positive. That was a primary motivator for her family to support her in moving to a different country to complete her studies. This is relevant because participants showed different levels of willingness or determination in their adaptation process throughout the study. Adaptation is perceived differently among people who are only expecting to be in a place for a short term versus those staying long term functions differently. If the primary motivator of participants is to only be in their new environment for a short period, the drive to fully adjust to the host culture is lower than someone who expects to be set in a place.

Other participants considered the growth in their personal beliefs, specifically regarding religion. Participant 7 mentioned: "We have schools but not Christian [schools] because we have only had 30 years of Christianity in Cambodia. It is very new, so I wanted a Christian-based education." Similarly, participant 5 also mentioned religion as an essential factor in the decision to come to the United States, even if it was not their initial desire to move away from their home country. This participant says she considered how religious beliefs did not usually impact her

field; however, the idea of completing a degree in an area that she was inclined to that also included aspects of her faith was a primary motivator for these two participants. In that sense, these participants who mentioned religion not only considered their career growth but their personal growth, which added a new level of expectations to what their host culture would be and how they would have to interact with those around them not only in terms of national culture but also including their religious culture. Other participants directly mentioned that learning from another culture is one of the motivators to move to the United States. Participant 8 noted: “I knew that I wanted to come and study here and gain a new perspective. I knew that if I came here, I would gain more perspective and meet people, and I loved that idea.” For this participant specifically, it was also evident that even though the adaptation to the host culture was challenging, it was understood through a positive lens of understanding.

The Adaptation Process

The theme of adaptation was the focus of the interviewing process, as it is crucial for the study. It was important not only to assess how valuable it was to the participants to adapt to their new environment but also at what point of their adaptation process they perceived they were and what they found challenging about adapting to the United States. Even participants such as Participant 6, who mentioned previous familiarity more than others, said adaptation is challenging. This participant mentioned that even though he had learned a wide range of aspects about the culture in the United States from previous visits and the perspectives of people close to him, it was different from living it the first time and long term.

When talking about their adaptation, some participants mentioned communication as one of the main obstacles they found in adapting to the United States, specifically in terms of switching from their first language to English, but also the manner of exercising dialogue.

Participant 8 said one of the primary challenges is to change from always speaking English, given that while she learned English, it was only during academic settings and not during social interactions outside of school; therefore, switching was one of the main difficulties in her adjustments. In the same way, Participant 2 went more into the specifics of how to participate in the dialogue as dictated in the culture; this participant noted in her perception that she has only adapted 60 percent to her host culture because there is more than learning the language, even though she dominates that fluently. This participant particularly mentioned dialectic styles as a significant part of her difficulties in terms of communication specifically. A common subtheme in terms of adaptation was how people express their opinions of others. Participant 2 mentioned there is a significant difference in terms of how people often speak their minds without needing to be cautious about how others can perceive comments; she mentions people in the United States are still free to express their opinions, but in a way that is different from what she was used to. Participants often mentioned that his kind of free-of-caution communication style influences the cultural norms set for appearances.

Since all participants are in different stages and have been in the states for additional periods, their perception of adaptation differs. However, most participants concurred with the idea that adaptation was not strictly linked with letting go of their home culture. This is relevant as the study focused on whether participants want to communicate their cultural identity as they still hold to their home culture as a lens system that informs their actions. In that sense, most participants concluded that their home culture is still a significant part of their identity.

Participant 5 said,

I think, for me, adaptation is being unashamed of who you really are. I do not think you should be defined by culture. You should not be defined by your background or any of

that. I feel like adaptation is when you can go to a different environment and culture and not lose a sense of yourself, like you do not feel obligated to conform.

On the other hand, most participants also noted critical moments in their experiences adjusting. Participants 10 and 4 mention anecdotes that became vital moments of their adaptation. Given that, there were things they considered daily customs or the natural order of behavior. The confrontation, even though not entirely shocking, gave them a starting point for realizing how genuinely different the culture in the United States is from the culture in their home countries and the need to adjust their perspective of even daily things. Participant 4 noted specific instances in which there was a practice that he did daily in his home culture. The participant shared how in group prayers, people in his culture often pray out loud simultaneously. However, this is not customary to that in the culture of the United States. Participant 4 noted that these slight differences that are part of details that would not initially be considered are the most challenging aspects of adjustment.

On the other hand, participant 10 mentioned that in the beginning stages of her adaptation, her perception was that the changes would not be drastic and that the main challenges would be some of the customs, such as greetings and the use of physical touch and proxemics. However, with the passing of time, she realized many more small behaviors significantly differed from what she was used to in her home country. This participant elaborates on how those small details eventually build up to more extensive considerations about how she communicated with people from the United States. She says even how she thought people perceived her changed. This participant said she went into deeper considerations about her relationships and interactions worked at its core. She came to question if she was even building any genuine relationships with people from the United States; however, she realized after some

time that the way her culture shaped her understanding of others, as well as herself, was impacting the way she viewed others in her new culture and had to shift to a new understanding. Similar ideas were expressed by the majority of the participants, which shows that cultural understanding shapes how people communicate and how much their home culture becomes imperceptibly intertwined with identity. Still, the awareness only came when that aspect of their identity was confronted with a different culture.

Contrasting what most participants mentioned regarding adapting to the culture of the United States, participant 7 highlighted the idea of also adjusting to different cultures from other international communities in the United States. This participant said another layer is added when adapting to the United States specifically, as there are many people from different countries around the world, which is only sometimes experienced in many other countries. Most participants covered the basics of adaptation. However, Participant 1 was the only participant who mentioned a change of wardrobe as part of his initial adaptation, specifically for practical considerations, as he said that he never had to consider wearing thermal clothes for different seasons as his country does not have seasonal changes in the same way the United States has.

It is also important to mention that in describing their home culture compared to the United States, all participants related the culture of the United States with independence. In contrast, the culture of their home countries was related more to the community aspects. Participant 7 said her expectation regarding the culture was different, given that her home country's culture is more relational. In the same way, participant 4 emphasizes the importance of Asian communities within the United States:

I am glad we have communities for each people group. Like the Korean Community and Chinese communities. Moreover, having those communities helps me keep my culture

and also helps others, especially those not used to live in a different country like that helps them; since we went through those experiences as well, we can help them out.

Participant 8 mentioned that the culture in the United States is very naturally individualistic. It places a lot of value on work and the betterment of the individual and excels both professionally and personally. In contrast, collectivistic cultures are family-oriented and put much importance on others. This is relevant in prefacing participants' responsibility regarding upholding cultural norms and expectations that might seem higher in the United States.

Clothing adaptation

The participants were explicitly asked about their adaptation in terms of clothes. They were asked how they perceived their manner of dress had changed. Nine of the ten participants said they adapted how they dress; they mentioned cultural motives and practical considerations for this adaptation of clothing choices. Regarding the practical consideration, Participant 1 said weather conditions were a significant part of why he believed it to be a crucial part of adaptation. He mentioned that his home country is above the tropic; therefore, the conditions are significantly different and were an initial consideration. Similarly, participant 2 said it is common in her country for people to wear clothes from other seasons all year long because practicality is not the primary motivator; instead, people care about the style and what is trending regardless of whether it is a season item. Most participants consider the difference in the season as a factor that motivated them to adapt how they dress in the United States.

Participants also mentioned cultural considerations when they moved to the United States as part of the reason for changing how they dress. Participant 5 said that she was explicitly instructed by the program guiding her through the transition to the United States to keep a small

number of clothes that she previously owned as it might be necessary for her to purchase new ones. Participant 5 said,

I said, why do I need [new] clothes in America, you know? I have perfectly good clothes here, but then that is when I learned it is so different [...] I remember that I was not embarrassed by my culture or anything at that time. It was more of, like, the transition is already hard enough, and you know, pick and choose your battle., I do not want to be the center of attention.

Pressure versus freedom

Two main sub-themes emerged among all participants when they answered questions that were explicitly about their clothing adaptation. All participants mentioned feeling more pressure to dress in a specific way in their home countries, which participants always contrasted with the idea of having less pressure or more freedom in how they dress in the United States. Most participants believed the standards of being well or appropriately dressed were different in the United States. In their countries, they felt more pressure to wear outfits that communicated social status, luxury, and overall well-being. It is important to note that these participants are from significantly different countries and contrasting cultures.

Regarding the pressure in their home countries, Participant 2 said it is common to receive negative judgment if the style of clothing she wears is not up to the standards of her community in her home country. In contrast, in the United States, she mentions that people appreciate clothing that stays within the boundaries of what is appropriate according to the occasion; for example, dressing professionally at the office is less likely to have assumptions made about personal status or finances based exclusively on looks. This goes along with an idea shared by most participants that social standards regarding luxury are more relevant to their daily life in

their home countries. Even though this does not mean that there is no high standard for luxury in the United States, how that standard is vocalized or communicated to others in these cultures is causing a higher burden for participants in their home countries.

In the same way, Participant 8 said:

I feel back home, people are way more concerned with how they dress, so they try to dress nice even to go to the store, even to go to the corner store or anything. Whereas here, people are more relaxed in that way, and they can just go out in pajamas, which is going to be fine. People are not going to look at them.

Both Participant 10 and Participant 2 mentioned social class as one of the considerations for people to have a different standard for their way of dressing in their home countries.

Participant 10 said the expectation back home is that she cares and dresses up with a lot more care and less casually because, in her community, appearances play a higher role in the status she and her family have in society. Along the same lines, participant 2 said whenever she goes back home, she feels the need to dress at her best, even for simple tasks, and that is also because that directly reflects in her social status as she is considered to be a successful person and even if she did not perceive that to be meaningful the repercussions on violating that social norm would be to receive severe judgment. This participant also contrasted this to the idea that self-expression is not the primary motivator. Instead, luxury is. She said:

Basically, back home, your style goes back to your title, to the success, to the luxury, to your level in society. Every single thing is wrapped around your level in society. Yeah, it is not wrapped in your personality. Nobody cares about your personality.

This concept of social class and expectations was mentioned by 9 out of the 10 participants. Participants said how the idea of freedom to express themselves through their

clothing or not having to focus on their clothing choices as heavily is a positive. In that sense, the idea of adapting to the new cultural norms made it easier for other aspects of their adaptation.

Therefore, it is part of why all participants said they had changed aspects of how they dress as all the aspects related to self-expression and being able to always wear more casual items. In the same way, Participant 1, Participant 5, and Participant 10 all mention thrifting, which is the practice of buying used clothes and repurposing them, as something they did not consider before coming to the U.S. given that the idea that luxury is essential in their culture, whereas in the U.S., the concept of saving and spending less is not frowned upon.

Participant 4 was the only one who mentioned the distinctions between how males explicitly perceive fashion. This participant noted that in the United States, his experience is that males do not talk about fashion or clothing styles; however, in his home country, South Korea, it is prevalent for males to discuss these topics among their peers. This participant said that coming back and forth from South Korea to the United States made him realize that he does want to keep that aspect of his Korean culture and dress in a way that would indicate others perceive his style as a positive part of his identity. This place contrast with previous ideas discussed in this analysis as it could be concluded that in terms of gender norms, countries such as South Korea have a less prominent stigma on gender when it comes to focusing on clothing and style. In contrast, in the United States, whether it is because of social norms or lesser pressure in the culture, it is not as common in the male population.

In contrast, only female participants mentioned the idea of modesty as something they perceived to be a difference between their home countries and the United States. Participant 2 says there is pressure attached to clothing fitting in a flattering way according to the body type yet still adhering to the cultural norm of modesty. This participant noted, "It is not religion; it is

more like culture and covering up more. It is modesty, but it also depends on who you are back home. It depends on your shape."

Similarly, participant 7 mentioned it was very different to see people wearing tight clothing and short pieces regardless of their body type because, in her home culture, that is not seen as much. She related this to the idea of freedom in the United States. These two participants are from two very contrasting cultures, which might allude to the notion that the United States has a more flexible standard for what is acceptable regarding modesty. Participant 6 was the only participant who said there is little difference in his perception of the pressure to dress nicely in the United States. He said in his perspective people in his home country do not emphasize their style above practicality. However, this participant also emphasized that he did not believe the standard in his host country to be any different from that of his home culture, as well as the idea that he felt that he upheld himself to the standard that requires him to care about how he dressed, hence having that pressure. It is vital to mention that this also contrasted with the answer given by Participant 3, who is also from the Dominican Republic. The difference in perception might be a result of the gender of the participants or their specific upbringings.

Participant 1 mentioned that in his home country, people dress differently depending on the region in which they reside. There is a cultural norm around the colors worn in certain areas and dressing in a way that is perceived to be more flattering to their skin color. This participant said that in the capital, people dress in muted tones as well as monochromatically, given that this city is colder and, in the mountains, the ambiance of the city makes dressing in more nude colors more acceptable; in contrast, people who live in coastal towns tend to dress with brighter colors. As previously mentioned, the second most prominent subtheme that was found was related to freedom. Most participants said that they perceived people in the United States did not hold the

same standards of judgment; therefore, they dressed in ways centered around practicality, comfort, and self-expression. Participant 1 said people do not usually wear clothes related to the comfort of activewear outside their homes. He mentioned how he often had to default to polos or muted shirts, whereas, in the United States, people in most instances have the liberty to dress in a comfortable way regardless of the occasion; he perceived it as a difference in standard and not necessarily as something that was either positive or negative. Participant 5 tied this idea to self-expression: "I feel like people here might be more out there with how they dress, so I have maybe bought some clothing items that I would not have thought of if I just lived back home."

It is important to note that nine out of the ten participants mentioned feeling free to wear comfortable clothes outside their houses. All these participants said that comfortable clothes are considered only loungewear in their home countries. These participants related this to answer whether they had adapted to the way people dress in the United States. Participant number 5 mentioned the idea of diversity as a component of why she felt less pressure in the United States regarding her clothing choices. This participant related this to the reality that the United States is a highly diverse country, and because of the exposure to different cultures, people have to learn to be more accepting of people who express their culture differently; she describes this to be different in her home culture where people are not often exposed to other cultures different than their own.

Similarly, participant 10 mentioned a specific experience related to the pressure experience regarding expectations with clothing, even with others who share her culture but are outside their home country. This participant mentioned her experience of receiving higher judgment from her friends who share a similar cultural background in an instance where she was going outside a dressing cultural norm. She expressed that her friends native to the United States

did not notice her style was off, whereas her friends with a similar background quickly pointed it out. This experience showcases the idea that students from similar cultural backgrounds still hold others like them to the same standards they are held to in their countries, which could be linked to the idea that a lot of their identity and behavior is still attached to the home culture even in the adaptation process they learn to act according to the host culture with those who are natives of the home culture.

Another relevant result is that even though all participants said they had adapted the way they dress, all participants mentioned dressing more comfortably rather than in a specific style, and when asked if there was a particular dressing trend in the United States that they were unwilling to try, all participants said they would never consider wearing specific trends from the United States. Among the most common responses were sandals with socks and clothing related to cowboy cultures, such as bootcut jeans and cowboy boots, as those were the most unfamiliar to them and they said they did not feel like something that aligned with their personal style.

Identity and Cultural Expression

The third significant theme responded to the concept of cultural expression and whether participants perceived their cultural identity was communicated through how they dressed. This concept was divided into questions that searched to understand whether participants considered how they dressed communicated something about their identity and whether it communicated something about their cultural identity. Following those questions, participants answered whether communicating their cultural identity was vital to them. To the first question, all participants said how they dressed was essential to them and expressed something about their identity. Participant 1 said his clothes are necessary because they show the world what he wants to communicate about himself. This participant expressed this reality through an analogy in which he compared

his clothes to armor. Similarly, the rest of the participants related how they dressed to the perception they wanted to give others about themselves.

Regarding their cultural identity, all participants said their culture was essential to them and that they still hold aspects of their home culture and still see parts of their identity through their national culture. Participants said they adapted, which is shown when they are around Americans; Participant 6 said,

I still consider myself fully culturally Dominican. I do not think I have changed as a person except when I am around Americans. So now that I know that Americans are used to and accustomed to a different social vibe. I know my boundaries. I know my limits. I know how to treat Americans. I make sure that they are comfortable before I hug them or do anything of that nature. When I am surrounded by my Latin American friends, I am myself, entirely Latino, 100%.

Participant 5 was notable in mentioning that she actively wears her traditional attire to show affection for her culture and teach others about her culture. This participant was eager to mention how wearing her traditional clothes became an act of empowerment, as she decided to wear her traditional Vietnamese garments when she did recitals. She said these recitals were often in front of demographics who would not usually be exposed to those clothes. It is a way in which she feels she is honoring her culture, which is related to the idea of making conscious choices to communicate cultural identity through clothes even if, in other areas of her life, she has adapted to the culture of his host country.

On the other hand, since most participants related the idea of comfort to the American style, they mentioned how they usually dressed in a style that is related to their home countries.

Still, when they want to be more comfortable, they feel they are following a more American style. This concept was emphasized by Participant 4:

I would say I still dress up every Korean-like. I just like Korean fashion [...] there are times I like to dress up. More towards American fashion. Maybe having a hoodie and sweatpants and different color sneakers. Something simple like that.

Chapter V: Discussion

The following chapter will summarize critical findings regarding adaptation, cross-cultural communication, and cultural identity related to international students attending college in the United States. Participants from eight countries were asked about their adaptation to the United States, mainly relating it to how they dress and if that communicated their cultural identity. The main themes found throughout the study were familiarity, clothing pressure and freedom, and cultural expressions that are directly linked to how they dress in the United States and their home countries.

Key Findings

The question this research aimed to answer was whether international students adapted their clothing or they dressed in a way that kept communicating their cultural identity. All participants believed they either adapted to the United States or were in the continuous process of adapting. Moreover, nine out of the ten study participants said they adapted how they dress to the cultural norms in the United States. As previously discussed, attire is a powerful tool in communicating belonging to a group or environment (Barnard, 2018b). These participants recognize the differences mostly in terms of practicality and how people perceive standards regarding what clothes are acceptable according to the place, occasion, and time. They said they make conscious choices to adjust to how they dress.

Most participants consider the adaptation process to be a complicated process to endure. Their clothing adaptation was linked to practical considerations such as seasonal changes, which are not present in their countries, and the idea of making their adjustment easier. In the same way, all participants believe they keep up with their culture as it is part of their identity, even if they have adjusted parts of it to fit in the United States. This group of participants related

clothing style in the United States to comfort and the idea that they would only judge hard for clothing choices in their home countries. An important variable is the pressure of their social status in their home countries which is not present in the United States. The concept of community-oriented cultures versus individualist cultures was also mentioned amongst participants as a primary reason for more judgment and overall sense of importance added to their cultures to how they dress. This pressure was also relevant to whether what they were wearing was either luxurious, well-presented, or well-matched. Nine out of ten participants believe their clothing choices communicate something about their cultural identity. All participants mentioned there are trends of clothing in the United States that they will never adopt for themselves, even though they note that they have adjusted some things about how they dress, such as accepting more comfortable clothes and looser attire.

Theoretical Considerations

This study considers the theory of intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication theory. It mentions how people create loyalty to their culture as they grow up and how acculturation is necessary to endure life in new environments (Kim, 2001). Through the results, it was evident that the participants did change their attire in accordance with the principles of acculturation. However, their identity was still highly defined by their home culture. On the other hand, studies of non-verbal communication concerning physical appearance say that how people dress is an expression of who people are or what they want to communicate about themselves to those around them. Fashion is a way to communicate parts of people's identity in terms of functionality and through the lens of individuality (Barnard, 2018b). This was exhibited by the change in attire the students made considering the distinct seasonal differences, as well as adjustment of the standards in terms of luxury, and communication of social class, however, still

holding on to their home cultural identity and choosing to connect and communicate that aspect of themselves through actively through style in clothing.

Throughout this study, participants showcased both principles as they mentioned how they adjusted their dress as a means of acculturation. Additionally, the perceived familiarity that participants had with the culture of the United States can be tied back to the impact of globalism since most participants mentioned the way that they had expectations of their experience based on previous knowledge; however, their adaptation process was still challenging, and they showed to have gone through self-examination as a part of their acculturation process.

Limitations

This research was conducted with a limited number of participants from the same university. Even though various countries were represented in the study, further research will benefit from adding more countries and participants in different regions of the United States from other universities. Another limitation was placed on the age range of the participants as they are all students who have not been in the United States for longer than five years or less. Therefore, they can offer a limited perspective than participants who have endured adaptation for a longer time would be able to give.

Implications

This research could be impactful in understanding international students and their adaptation process when they enroll in higher education institutions in the United States. One of the ways in which information found in this research should be applied is to include these considerations in orientation programs for faculty and staff who are taking part in the education of international students, both for awareness and considerations regarding the adaptation and the details that go into adaptation to the United States.

This study could be included in the programs for cultural competency available through the Office of Equity and Inclusion at Liberty University offered to faculty and staff. It is beneficial to further knowledge of the impact of different aspects of adaptation on international students, specifically if it is narrowed down to practical ways in which they experience this adaptation stress, such as considering their clothing choices and how that is connected to their identity. Making this available would create an environment that is both welcoming and benefits from the diversity international students bring. Other applications that could be useful to better serve the international student community at Liberty University would be to expand on this research and other implications connected to different practical areas of adaptation; the International Student Center at Liberty University could collaborate in this endeavor and in that way improve the experience of students.

Suggestions for Future Research

While this study was able to gather people from a diverse number of countries, future research could focus on a broader range of backgrounds. In the same way, further research could consider giving a higher focus to the difference in perspective between males and females, as well as expand the age range so that there is a broader perspective on what the perspectives are regarding clothing adaptation of people who choose to move to the United States. Another consideration would be to expand on the age range of participants and participants who have been in the United States for longer than the demographic of this study.

Summary

These studies seek to understand if international students who move to the United States to complete their studies change how they dress to adapt to their new environment or if they keep how they dress to communicate aspects of their cultural identity. Research showed that even

though they change key elements to fit into the culture of the United States, participants consider they still hold their culture as part of their identity. Most of them actively try to dress in a way that communicates aspects of their cultural identity, even if it is only for specific times and items. This should be considered in informing faculty and staff who interact with international students to instruct these students better.

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Appendix A

Throughout the discussions, the questions were flexible; however, the following questions were a base throughout the research:

Formal Theory Questions

- What made you decide to come to the United States?
- In what ways do you feel you have adapted to the culture of the United States?
- In what ways do you think the culture in the U.S. is different from the culture in your home country?
- Do you actively try to keep aspects of your culture?

Substantive Questions

- Do you think the way you dress reflects part of your culture?
- In what ways is the way you dress essential to you?
- How do people dress differently here than in your home country?
- What fashion trends have you adopted from the U.S.?
 - Why or why not?
- Is there a fashion trend I had not seen before coming to the United States?
- Is there a fashion trend you think you will not adopt?
 - Which one?
 - Why or why not?