

Culture Learning Theory and Globalization:

Reconceptualizing Culture Shock for Modern Cross-Cultural Sojourners

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Abstract

Culture shock has long been of great concern regarding the wellbeing and mental-health of international sojourners. Over the last three decades, the world has experienced rapid globalization and the introduction of various technologies which have been found to 'buffer' the effects of culture shock, yet the conceptualizations concerning the nature, prevalence, and effects of this phenomenon have not been explicitly modernized to suit such a contemporary social landscape. Based on an extensive literature review, particularly concerning the research conducted with international student populations, this paper offers conceptual insight on how the experience of culture shock has evolved in the present information age, and argues modern sojourner experiences are increasingly reflective of culture learning. Specifically, this paper considers exactly how technological advancements have facilitated change in the subjective experience of the psychosocial processes during a cross-cultural immersion. A foundation for future research to explore the mechanisms of culture learning theory is also contributed.

Keywords: cross-cultural psychology, transition experiences, culture shock, culture learning, sojourner, globalization.

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for Modern Cross-Cultural Sojourners

Understanding the complexities of the international sojourn has long been of great concern within the academic literature, especially in psychological and overall mental health domains. As one of the most researched travel groups, international students in particular have allowed researchers to acquire great and invaluable insights into the dynamics of cross-cultural experiences. Of particular interest is the phenomenon of *culture shock*, that is, the psychological distress often experienced by individuals who immerse themselves in novel social contexts (Elliot et al., 2015; Furnham, 2010; Oberg, 2006; Zhou et al., 2008). A seminal work by Pedersen (1995) specifically defines culture shock as ‘the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment’ (p.1); a definition which is widely retained in modern research (e.g., Goldstein & Keller, 2015; Presbitero, 2016). This phenomenon has become a staple, almost traditional, experience for international students and travellers, and is often integrated into scientific models designed to conceptualize the various mechanisms which make these intercultural sojourns unique (e.g., Warren & Rios, 2013; Yakunina et al., 2013; Zhou et al., 2008). However, at present, there is evidence which suggests the prevalence, nature, and intensity of the culture shock experienced by international students is steadily changing – and has been for some time (Adler, 1975; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2005; Zhou et al., 2008). For international students specifically, the technological advancements which have contributed to globalization and virtual culture learning, seem to have also heavily contributed to the reshaping of their cultural immersion processes. Therefore, this paper aims to present a modern reinterpretation of culture shock, as experienced by present-day international sojourners, with special consideration to the role of contemporary technology as a facilitator of change. The primary contribution of this paper will be a critical review and dialogue of extant knowledge and seminal scholarly thought concerning lived experiences of culture shock, which seeks to shift the discourse of these concepts in the scholarly literature to better align with modern experiences based on contemporary sociopsychological

insights – namely concerning the growing support for the concept of culture learning. Discussion will consider three core domains which the scholarly literature consistently and strongly argue are central in shaping culture-based immersive experiences, in conceptualizing how lived experience of culture shock have seemingly evolved to manifest in modern society as experiences of culture learning. The present article will mainly consider the affective dimensions of culture learning and the role technology has played in notable changes in these cross-cultural experiences; though some aspects of the behavioural components of sociocultural adaptation will also be acknowledged. Though many studies have acknowledged the role of technology in shifting from negative cross-cultural experiences to more positive ones, these studies often do so as an aside, and have not necessarily attempted to conceptualize how these changes have evolved the very experience itself. Further, no scholarly literature could be found which explicitly argues for the review of (relevant) seminal works in-light of the modern globalized social context, or which explicitly considers exactly how technological advancements have changed the subjective experience of the psychosocial processes during a cross-cultural immersion - and certainly not in a manner which recognizes the emphasis on culture shock in the scholarly literature ‘then’ and culture learning in the contemporary scholarly literature ‘now’. The notion that commonplace technological innovations can not only shape and reshape human social experiences but also influence the psychological wellbeing of individuals who engage with these technologies is therefore of particular interest in pursuing these aims.

Literature Review

At present, the academic literature exhibits such a vast understanding of the mechanisms which perpetuate and facilitate the experience of culture shock, that the concept has become muddled as a result (Furnham, 2010). Although there presently is no clear definition of culture shock, there are many related concepts and themes that are widely cited as being parts of this overall psychological phenomenon. This paper presents an overview of how the academic understanding of culture shock has

evolved since it's classification in the 1960s in an attempt to disentangle the intended concept of the paper from the various other conceptualizations in the literature. The subsequent review also explores the role of international student experiences in culture shock research, and presents a modern understanding of culture learning theory in light of this research.

The Conceptualization of Culture Shock

In the 1960s, Oberg first coined the term 'culture shock' in reference to the contact-induced anxiety experienced by individuals who relocate to novel environments, typically abroad, and conceptualized the experience in a series of four broadly defined stages (Oberg, 2006; See, Figure 1). The first stage was termed the 'honeymoon stage', characterized by a fascination to 'the new' and an overall enjoyable experience lasting anywhere from a few days to six months. Oberg (2006) argues the initial immersion in a novel environment is psychologically romanticized by the individual, however a transition is eventually made in to an aggressive and uncomfortable state (second stage) where the individual begins to harbour hostility towards their host environment. With time, Oberg (2006) then argues the individual may transition to a (third) stage of acculturation or acceptance of their host environment, before eventually experiencing complete adjustment and autonomy (fourth stage). It is worthy to note the idea of complete adjustment is not to say the individual has undergone a complete identity transformation and now identifies as a local, but instead posits that the individual no longer feels anxiety and social discomfort by their mere existence in the host environment; at this point the acculturative transition is 'as complete as it can be' (Oberg, 2006, p. 143). This initial conceptualization was quickly adopted as part of medical models, and contributed greatly to culture shock being regarded as a clinical illness (Furnham, 2010). Thus, early models suggest that the vast majority of individuals who immerse themselves in unfamiliar cultural environments, typically abroad, experience some degree of anxiety and distress from the immersion (often to the extent of developing a psychological disorder). Should the individuals

eventually develop a familiarity and comfort within the novel cultural context, early models suggest this comfort is a result of successfully developing through a series of stages, such as those proposed by Oberg.

Figure 1

Illustration of Oberg's (1960) Stages of Culture Shock

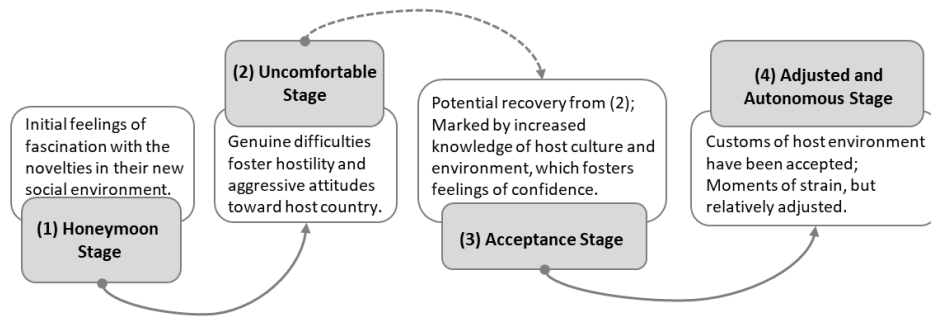


Figure illustrates the stages of culture shock as conceptualized by Oberg, K. (1960). Cultural shock: Adjustment to new cultural environments. *Practical anthropology*, (4), 177-182.

Oberg's work on culture shock is a prime example of why it is necessary to revisit foundational concepts in modern sociohistorical contexts. For instance, a mere two decades after Oberg's contribution, Adler (1975) likewise reviewed and proposed five phases of 'Transitional Experiences' (p.14): contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence. Adler (1975) argued development through each of the four latter phases (disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, independence) is greatly influenced by the individual's experience of the first phase (initial contact with the second culture). Adler (1975) suggests that this first stage is often experienced while the individual is still functionally integrated within their own culture. At this point, the sojourner has not yet begun to experience the disorientation or confusion that is often experienced when exposed to novel sociocultural material or content, despite being physically present in the host-environment. The significance of Adler's (1975) reconceptualization of Oberg's (2006) initial 1960s contribution is that it emphasizes the importance of the sojourner's experience of initial contact with the second culture, which not only is consistent with modern literature, but also posits that culture shock experiences are more of a social phenomenon than a clinical disorder (see also, Schein, 2015). To further explain, a social phenomenon is an experience or occurrence that occurs in relation to actual, imagined, or implied social interactions or presence of other; and is often used

in reference to non-problematic experiences. However, a clinical illness relates to the medically oriented observation or treatment of a problematic state of confusion, or severe disruption in normative functioning, often requiring medication to remedy or treat. Considering culture shock was initially conceptualized as a clinical illness, its evolution to being recognized as a social phenomenon (where the distress experienced is not significantly problematic in normative functioning) is noteworthy, as the implications concerning the nature and conditions of the experience has shifted from an extreme affliction (i.e., clinical illness) to a manageable and potentially commonplace social occurrence (i.e., phenomenon). Nonetheless, at the time of Adler's (1975) publication, technology and social media had not yet begun to act as a catalyst of global social integration as it does in the 21st century, and therefore lacks greater generalizability to modern experiences of cross-cultural transition. The present paper will subsequently explore and highlight the importance of this distinction.

Defining Culture Shock

Although the understanding of culture shock has shifted from a clinical-orientation to the social phenomenon it is presently regarded as, there is still little clarity around the concept in terms of which stress-inducing stimuli and experiences constitute as part of culture shock, and which are part of other transitional adjustments or natural life cycles (e.g., first time living independently, becoming self-supporting; program or course-related academic stress, etc.). Considering the relevant literature (e.g., Presbitero, 2016; Schein, 2015; Zhou et al., 2008), culture shock is ultimately understood to be a process by which individuals who experience anxiety, discomfort, and distress in novel cultural environments may eventually come to develop a sense of familiarity and ease. The specific circumstances regarding which features must precede the onset of culture shock, such as the level of cultural difference, cohort dynamics, nature or length of immersion, have yet to be quantified or defined. Due to the uncertainty and vast array of definitions, terms, and conceptualizations surrounding the precise features of culture shock, it is necessary to specify the intended dimensions of the term for the present paper. Therefore, as presented

in the introduction, this paper regards culture shock as the unexpected psychological stress an individual experiences in relation to their social and physical immersion in a novel and unfamiliar cultural environment. This understanding of what constitutes as culture shock is derived from that which is most commonly agreed upon across the literature (e.g., Furnham, 2010; Ward et al., 2005; Zhou et al., 2008), unique to cross-cultural sojourners experiences, and conceptually coherent in terms of the intended phenomenon which this paper looks to address.

The significance of the culture shock definition presently proposed lies in the unexpected nature of the stress experienced by the individual, constituting as the *shock* factor; and in the cross-cultural and social nature of the phenomenon, which supports the understanding that this experience is commonplace and often induced by mere exposure. For the purposes of this paper, culture shock does not refer to the broader intercultural adaptation process, commonly known as *acculturative stress*, as this transition often accounts for various peripheral, non-cultural stressors (e.g., financial stress, academic stress, identity conflicts; e.g., Berry, 2006, p. 294; Mahmood, 2014; Yakunina et al., 2013). It is imperative these two domains are distinguished from each other as they are often mistakenly confused as interchangeable concepts. On the one hand, acculturative stress is commonly used as an umbrella-term which refers to various processes of cross-cultural adaptation, such as culture shedding and culture conflict (Berry, 2006). According to Berry (2006), acculturative stress relates to the general individual processing of life events which are linked to the process of acculturation, including positive stressors (i.e., eustress; e.g. excitement to travel, preparing for independent living, making new friends), and where there is often potential for growth as a result of the experiences (Behl et al., 2017; Berry, 2006; Mahmood, 2014). On the other hand, culture shock is specifically concerned only with the components of the transition which relate to the cross-cultural psychosocial interaction experienced by sojourners (i.e., not general life experiences; e.g., coping with language barriers or unfamiliar social norms), particularly the initial feelings and thoughts which occur upon or shortly after (within the first year of) arrival in the novel environment. This distinction

is exemplified in the scholarly literature as studies which explicitly seek to explore acculturative stress are generally oriented to investigating a wide array of factors which influence sojourners' overall wellbeing and adjustment, with no particular focus on the psychosocial features of the process (e.g., Sirin et al., 2019; Zhon et al., 2016); whereas culture shock studies tend to be specifically oriented to exploring those integration factors which are explicitly social, psychological, and emotional - such as the processes of dealing with feelings of rejection helplessness, depression, or anxiety (e.g., AlSaleh & Moufakkir, 2019; Belford, 2017). Although these concepts may overlap greatly in their orientation to explaining the complexities of cross-cultural immersive experiences, the scope of each process is distinct (i.e., acculturative stress is broad, multifaceted; culture shock is specific) and requires clarification when used.

International Students

Although the initial conceptualization of culture shock is not oriented to international student populations specifically, much of the inter-disciplinary discussion around lived culture shock experiences is dominated by research conducted with international student subjects over the last century (e.g., Furnham, 2010; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). For students studying in a country of which they do not hold citizenship, and are therefore classified as foreign or international (Elliot et al., 2016), it is necessary to acknowledge and understand their journey in the appropriate sociohistorical context. A literature review provided by Furnham (2010) provides an in-depth analysis of the extent to which this is true by presenting research on the dynamics of culture shock amongst foreign students dating back to the 1920s. Furnham (2010) expands on the extent to which early theories of culture shock experiences were clinically oriented, often understood as a 'disorienting disease', and were commonly incorporated into medical models designed to conceptualize sojourn-related stress and anxiety. However, as the experience of culture shock became an issue of focus in the 1980s across the academic literature and popular culture, the phenomenon became steadily normalized as a routine side-effect of international travel and social immersion (Furnham, 2010; Zhou et al., 2008).

This shift was largely stimulated by the increasing outward transnational mobility of students, and the cross-cultural research conducted with international students. In other words, the growing number of international students has granted researchers the unique opportunity to explore culture shock experiences more deeply, most notably highlighting the vast prevalence of culture shock amongst sojourners, and the broad range of intensity (non-problematic to problematic). The contributions enabled by working with this cohort is especially unique, given the often temporary and intense nature of their sojourns, particularly when compared with other migrant groups which may encompass one but not both of these features (e.g., immigrants and refugees [intense, not temporary], tourists [not intense, temporary]). Research with international student populations has allowed the literature to track the complex social evolution of cross-cultural immersive experiences, while also challenging researchers to constantly reconceptualize this dynamic human experience in modern contexts based on novel insights. In this way, research with international student populations has shaped and re-shaped the literature's understanding of culture shock and is therefore the primary context of dialogue in this paper.

From Culture Shock to Culture Learning

In the contemporary scholarly literature, researchers seem to be documenting less cases of the negative shock-like stress associated with cross-cultural immersion in modern international students (including a decline in the number of individuals who self-identify as having experienced culture shock) and instead have begun to report more cases of positive intercultural contact described as *culture learning* (e.g., Belford, 2017; Furnham, 2010; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Zhou et al., 2008). Culture learning is a theory of cross-cultural adaptation that seeks to conceptualize the challenges sojourners often experience when learning to navigate their daily functioning in novel and unfamiliar cultural environments (Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Although originally conceptualized as an extension of culture shock (Furnham & Bochner, 1986), culture learning theory has developed into a core mechanism of stress models concerned with cross-cultural immersion, and is generally explored across two domains:

sociocultural adaptation and psychological adjustment (Masgoret & Ward, 2016; Ward et al., 2005; Wilson et al., 2013). Wilson and colleagues (2013) argue sociocultural adaptation is fundamentally concerned with the behavioural aspects of acculturation, whereas psychological adjustment is 'primarily affective' (p. 901) and refers to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the sojourner. Given that culture shock specifically concerns the psychosocial feature of cross-cultural immersive experiences, the present article will mainly consider the affective dimensions of culture learning in order to consider the case that experiences of the former may have evolved to manifest in modern society as the latter; however some aspects of the behavioural components of sociocultural adaptation will also be acknowledged given their relevance to culture learning theory and overall adjustment.

As this pattern of findings continues to emerge in the scholarly literature, concerning the inverse prevalence of culture shock (decreasing) and culture learning (increasing) amongst international sojourners, it is imperative that researchers investigate how these experiences have evolved, from what was once a major mental-health concern known as culture shock, to what is now regarded as a positive and enriching experience known as culture learning (Elliot, 2016). Culture learning is therefore understood to be a cultural adaptation process which does not impose major mental-health concerns in the same way experiences of culture shock have often been documented to facilitate. Instead, culture learning is an intercultural and immersive experience that takes place when the learner (i.e., sojourner) has been primed regarding the nature of their learning content, and has adopted a readiness to learn in a way which is often associated with positive outcomes (Berry, 2006; Zhou et al., 2008). The process of culture learning is also largely conceptually coherent in that the result of the experience is an acquired knowledge and familiarity with a second culture, such as their social norms, values, and beliefs (Berry, 2006; Furnham, 2010; Mahmood, 2014).

By better understanding how culture shock experiences have changed over the course of time to be seemingly replaced by a culture learning experiences, researchers may begin to develop an

understanding of how other prominent social phenomena evolve in this way; and particularly those which are altered as the result of technological advancements. The significance of understanding the mechanisms which perpetuate change on a scale of such magnitude can therefore not be overstated, but are simply further highlighted as an issue of great importance. The role of modern communication technology in facilitating and perpetuating this change has been specifically noted in many studies (e.g., Park et al., 2014; Siddharthan & Narayanan, 2018), though no particular links or conceptualizations which seek to explain this relationship seem to have been explicitly established in the literature. As previously stated, it is with the intention of addressing this gap of consideration in the scholarly literature that the present paper identifies three core domains which scholars argue are central in shaping culture-based immersive experiences: (1) the sojourner's general expectations and preparation for the various aspects of the journey ahead (Oropeza et al., 1991; Smiljanic, 2017), (2) the social network balance of the sojourner with home and host contacts (Belford, 2017; Misra et al., 2003), and (3) the sudden disconnect from one's own culture, often resulting in feelings of disorientation and isolation (Misra et al., 2003; Smiljanic, 2017). The subsequent discussion will address each of these three domains in conceptualizing how the experience of culture shock has seemingly evolved into an experience of culture learning, and the role technology has played in facilitating this change.

Technology, Culture Learning, and Modern Intercultural Experiences

'One need not sojourn outside one's own country to experience culture shock or to undergo a cross-cultural experience' (Adler, 1975, p. 1). While at the time Adler (1975) was referring to one's transitions through various intracultural social contexts (i.e. parolees leaving prison, returning veterans, divorcing couples) this notion is easily relatable to modern transitions as well, on both a micro (intranational) and macro (international) scale. The technological advancements of the 21st century has seemingly domesticated the experiences of culture shock by allowing individuals to engage with other cultures, social norms, and ways of life, at the click of a button. Exposure to other cultures and social

dynamics have become a commonplace by-product of globalization, a phenomenon which is exemplified by the evolution of the international student sojourn over the last three decades into an experience which is seemingly more representative of culture learning. Specifically, the stress and anxiety which often results from one's immersion in unfamiliar cultural contexts has become seemingly less prominent amongst international sojourners, while intercultural engagement has simultaneously become more easily facilitated through the use of popular and affordable technologies (e.g., movies, television, social media, magazines; see, Li & Chen, 2014; Zhou et al., 2008).

Globalization and Expectations: Fuel for Culture Learning?

It is incontrovertible that today's global community is much more easily accessible than it was a mere thirty years earlier. Over the last three decades the world has seen the birth of the internet, world-wide web, and smartphones; the launch of WiFi, blogging, and social media. These inventions have provided ease of access to information and people in ways that have completely revolutionized the global social landscape, where they are accessible (i.e., Siddharthan & Narayanan, 2018). It is therefore unsurprising that during this time period, the ripple effects of these developments have reshaped the reality of many human experiences for those who engage in cross-cultural practices by facilitating learning of host cultures and environments to prospective sojourners before their physical immersion.

For international students specifically, the technological advancements which have contributed to globalization and virtual culture learning, have also heavily contributed to the reshaping of their cultural immersion processes. For example, prospective international students often have access to web-based, information sharing platforms, which facilitate discussion between world-wide users on any topic of interest (e.g., Reddit, Quora, Weibo). These platforms allow prospective international students to address cultural and social barriers anticipated in their host environment by providing the space to ask questions, engage in dialogue, and raise issues previously only addressed through experiential learning (e.g., about intended host environment [weather, food, currency], the international student sojourn [academic

calendar, campus facilities, clubs and societies], etc.). Further, websites and applications accessible via smartphones, which enable users to instantly create and share content or to participate in social networking (i.e., social media; e.g., Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Snapchat), provide users the opportunity to virtually engage in immediate social learning with host-locals and other international students whose journeys mirror their own. Also, free-access language learning tools (e.g., bable, duolingo, busuu) can provide hand-held resources via mobile applications to aid in the pre-emptive confrontation of expected language barriers. Thus, the process 'whereby sojourners acquire culturally relevant social knowledge and skills in order to survive and thrive' (Ward et al., 2005, p. 51) in host societies (i.e., culture learning) is taking place virtually and long before physical contact is made. In other words, sojourners are pre-emptively exposed, or primed, to a variety of cultural, social, and even environmental characteristics of their intended host-environment - a learning exposure previously only experienced through physical contact and immersion.

The significance for international students (and other cross-cultural sojourners) lies in the reality that the *shock* once experienced by these travellers upon arrival in novel host environments, due in part to their unfamiliarity and inaccurate expectations about their new sociocultural surroundings, has arguably been stifled by the reach of globalization. A recent investigation by Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015), which explored the international student experiences of twenty-five Saudi women in the United States of America, provides support for this notion as the majority of their participants reported not having experienced any culture shock due to their previous familiarity with American culture via the internet, television programs, Hollywood movies, and social media exposures in general. In this way, the technological developments over the last three decades have seemingly reshaped the social landscape of the world to create a global community (where these technologies are accessible); and by doing so, have also seemingly facilitated a perpetual cycle of constant virtual cross-cultural engagement which ultimately serves to inform sojourner expectations. The role of technological advancements in

facilitating change in lived social experiences, whereby experiences of culture shock have seemingly evolved to manifest as experiences of culture learning, is presently discussed.

Pre-Exposure and Preparation

Traditionally, after some time in their new host-environment, most international students eventually begin to feel autonomous, independent, and accepting of their host-culture (Adler, 1975; Belford, 2017; Smiljanic, 2017). At this point, the individual is capable of engaging with the second culture and is comfortable with their role as an individual who is not quite an 'insider', but not exactly an 'outsider' anymore either. This final stage of the acculturation process (Adler, 1975; Oberg, 2006), when the individual is fully functional in their new culture, is considered to be the time when the sojourner (e.g., international student) begins to accept these changes as a part of their new, evolved, identity. In the words of Adler (1975), 'the transitional experience begins with the encounter of another culture, and evolves into the encounter with the self' (p.14). Considering the extent to which international sojourners are often knowledgeable about the environments within which they are traveling to, greatly due to the knowledge sharing of globalization and social media, the initial periods of information accumulation often associated with the initial stages of culture shock may have become outdated notions (see also, Qun et al., 2018). Instead, these initial familiarization processes may have evolved into a feature of the pre-sojourn preparatory experience. Considering contemporary research findings, it is possible many of these sojourners are essentially beginning their cultural adaptation and acclimation to their new environment autonomously and independently due to their informed expectations (e.g., Belford, 2017; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015; Mahmood, 2014). If this were indeed the case, this would suggest sojourners are experiencing the personal growth and identity development that is often a consequence of transitional and international experiences much sooner and more positively than ever before.

These positive experiences may be representative of culture learning, which has been established thus far as an experience which is facilitated through primed sojourners adopting a readiness to learn

about secondary cultures pre-contact. This primed state is likely a modern commonplace experience, given the access to information available to prospective sojourners at present. For example, considering most applications to higher education institutions are completed online and therefore via access to the internet, it is therefore reasonable to assume most international students have access to the internet. For those who do, these future international students are provided with a vast proportion of the information necessary to prepare for their sojourn, in that they can acquire information regarding cultural habits, local dialects, typical weather patterns, staple food items, common landscapes, street views of relevant communities. Although there is something to be said regarding the necessary experiential component of transitional experiences, pre-exposure to new environments before physical exposure and lived integration is undeniably a major development in the social dynamics of the modern sojourner's world. With this in mind, this paper further emphasizes that previous understandings of culture shock as a staple and tremulous feature of cross-cultural experiences should be re-evaluated and considered in light of the appropriate modern sociohistorical context.

Social Media, Networks, and Engagement

The use of instant messaging (IM) platforms are well documented (e.g., Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014; Guo, Li, & Ito, 2014; Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim, & Larose, 2011) as a resource often utilized by international students to communicate with home-contacts, such as friends and family. The ability for these communication platforms to act as psychologically protective mechanisms (that which protects from, or reduces, the potential to experience anxiety) concerning the sojourner's wellbeing, is often underappreciated and overlooked. The method of IM acting as a protective feature is essentially twofold, in that social media not only provides the obvious social-connection between the sojourner and their loved ones, thus maintaining connection with their home-*contacts*, but it also acts as a platform whereby the sojourner can engage with their home-*culture*. This is ultimately unsurprising considering the psychological and international student literatures both widely acknowledge social support networks,

especially those which include family and close friends from home-nations, are amongst the strongest moderators of international student stress (Chen & Ross, 2015; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Gomes et al., 2014). In regards to the latter point, that which concerns the connection between the sojourner and their home-culture, it is important to note that a well-documented contributor to international student stress is lack of engagement with one's own culture (e.g., use of one's own language, discussion of common interests, etc.; e.g., Oropeza et al., 1991; Sherry et al., 2009; Ward et al., 2005). The sudden disconnect from home-culture international sojourners often experience in host-environments is typically sudden and intense, and has been linked to severe mental-health issues associated with feelings of isolation, disorientation, and helplessness (e.g., Behl et al., 2017; Brown & Brown, 2013; Furnham, 2010). However, due to modernization and the age of technological advancement within which the world is currently experiencing, communication with home-contacts via instant messaging platforms often meet these needs by not only facilitating text-based conversation, but also allowing video and audio communication features (e.g., via Whatsapp, Facebook Messenger, Viber). A recent study conducted by Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) further emphasizes this notion in their investigation of the use of social network sites (SNSs) amongst Chinese international students in the United States of America. Their investigation included two of the most popular SNSs indigenous to China: RenRen and Weibo. Despite some previous literature which suggested the use of ethnic SNSs may be positively associated with transitional stress (i.e., Park et al., 2014), Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) found support for the notion that social support via social media technology often has a 'buffering effect' on the stress associated with cultural immersion experiences. In this way, the engagement with home-contacts facilitated through the use of instant messaging technology, provides the opportunity for individuals to routinely engage with their own familiar and often comforting culture, while also contributing to the maintenance of vital social support networks comprised of home-contacts. Though this study is merely one example of how modern sojourners may be inherently less susceptible to the risk of negative culture

shock experiences, the relationship between SNSs use and positive mental-health effects across international student populations is well-documented (e.g., Chen & Ross, 2015; Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Lin et al., 2011). It is also worthy to note that connection with home-contacts has not been found to hinder the cross-cultural immersion process for sojourners explicitly; instead, the findings of some studies (e.g., Chang & Gomes, 2017; Li & Chen, 2014; Ng et al., 2018) suggest that the social support provided by pre-existing relationships may set the stage for the culture learning process, having protected the individual from some of the significant threats of culture shock (e.g., isolation, helplessness, low self-esteem, etc.).

The Need for Reconceptualization

It has thus far been demonstrated that the term *culture shock* is widely regarded in the modern academic literature as a controversial, harmful, and an overall inaccurate term (see also, Berry, 2006; Ward et al., 2005). Many academics, psychologists, educators, and sojourners also tend to associate this term with negative features of the general cross-cultural immersion experience, even if only as temporary ailments, and less with the benefits of these experiences. Before the modern technological advancements that have aided in the evolution of culture shock to culture learning, Alder (1975) likewise stated that the term needed to be reconceptualized by suggesting that, 'although culture shock is most often associated with negative consequences, it can be an important aspect of cultural learning, self-development and personal growth' (p. 14). The negative connotations associated with culture shock arguably stem from the literature's focus on the stress experienced by individuals when they encounter psychological conflicts (e.g., cognitive dissonance, disassociation, helplessness) during their acclimation to their new environment. Such discomfort is typically due to a hyperawareness of one's own values, beliefs, or attitudes aroused by an individual's exposures to unfamiliar sociocultural customs during their transitional experience (Belford, 2017; Oropeza et al., 1991; Ward et al., 2005). However, contemporary research suggests the cognitive dissonance and disorientation which has often been perceived as a staple feature

of international experiences is steadily becoming a phenomenon of the past, as sojourners are increasingly more knowledgeable regarding various features of their prospective host environments (e.g., Gomes et al., 2014; Lefeldahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015).

Moreover, culture shock is often conflated with notions similar to that of Adler's (1975) disintegration and reintegration phases of the transnational experiences, which theorize the more negative processes of cross-cultural immersion. To further explain, *disintegration* is marked by 'a period of confusion and disorientation... and individuals begin to experience bewilderment, isolation, and helplessness within their new cultural environment' (p.16). While, *reintegration* is ultimately characterized by a 'strong rejection of the second culture, typically through stereotyping, generalization, evaluation and judgemental behavior and attitudes' (p. 16-17). Adler (1975) argues, the sojourner (i.e., international student) is often faced with the choice of accepting integration into their new environment, regression in to their hyperaware state of their given culture, or the choice to return home and remove themselves from the transitional situation. While this may very well have been a prominent problem before the 21st century technological advancements and commonplace exposure to differing cultures and ways of life, it is arguably less likely for students to be facing the extreme psychological dilemmas proposed by Adler (1975). For example, given the evidence hereby explored, it is not likely that international students sojourning from China or Saudi Arabia are completely unaware of the extreme cultural and social differences within 'Western' nations such as Canada, the United Kingdom, or Australia, given the high rates of outward and inward mobility between such nations (e.g., tourists, students, businesspeople). It is stereotypical, and borderline dismissive, to assume international students and other sojourning individuals have not had exposure to other (e.g., Western) cultures through the media, travel, or independent research made possible via the internet; and that they would feel subject to adopting one of Adler's (1975) proposed responses when experiencing such cross-cultural transitions. That is not to suggest that sojourners, particularly international students, are therefore immune to feeling homesick,

uncomfortable, and possibly vulnerable upon arrival and over time spent in their host nations; the argument is simply that individuals who choose to embark on cross-cultural journeys are not as naïve to the diverse experiential components of their sojourn as they may have been previously, and therefore may not be subject to such extreme reactions which were previously commonplace.

Overall, globalization and technological advancements (e.g., communication technology, smartphones, world-wide web) seem to be gradually increasing the extent to which individuals are prematurely exposed to ways of life different from their own. The information age of the 21st century allows individuals to accumulate vast amounts of knowledge and familiarity regarding any area of general interest, such as the ways of life in other countries, the social norms of other religions, and the cultural practices of out-groups as a whole. Exposure may also not necessarily be sought out specifically by the sojourner, but may also be a general knowledge held by their society shared through television programs, social media engagements, or previous travel experiences. In this way, international students and other groups of sojourners often can prematurely gather information about their host nations, cities, and even local communities, potentially buffering some of the culture shock experiences typically encountered upon arrival in unfamiliar environments. The ability for these technologies to facilitate a maintenance of contact with sojourners home culture is also worthy of recognition, as this function acts as a preserver of positive mental health and culture learning theory is a conceptualization of this domain.

Conclusion

The conceptualization and reality of culture shock has evolved extensively over the last three decades. Research with international student populations continues to be invaluable in the exploration and understanding of cross-cultural experiences, and in particular, has recently begun to provide evidence suggesting modern cultural acclimation experiences are more representative of culture learning than culture shock. In support of this notion, the benefits of the international sojourn concerning cross-cultural engagements have recently been documented as greater than the costs. This paper argues that the

extreme adverse experiences once lived by international sojourners seems to have steadily become moderated and buffered, namely through the refinement of expectations to better align with the reality of host environments (facilitated through technological advances). This pre-exposure, and the ease of access to information for prospective international travellers, seems to have meaningfully altered the experience of culture shock, a phenomenon which was once a significant mental-health epidemic, to an experience which is more reflective of culture learning. The most notable difference between these two experiences is culture learning's positive orientation, as this paper has also noted that culture learning has been found to foster psychologically beneficial periods of growth and identity development.

Despite the incredibly positive outlook the emergence of culture learning presents to not only the sojourners themselves, but for those also concerned with mental-health and wellbeing in general, there has been little research or theoretical enquiry regarding the evolution or nature of this concept. This paper calls for discussion on culture learning, and future research would do well to investigate the mechanisms of this mostly novel phenomena in international student populations. Also, communicative technology, developed to ease the emotional and psychological discomfort often stimulated by one's physical distance from all that is familiar, has demonstrated its effectiveness in buffering many of the stress effects of intercultural adaptation (i.e., Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2016; Li & Chen, 2014). The ability to easily connect with loved ones and other social network contacts (in home and host) is an extremely effective psychologically protective resource for international sojourners which also needs to be more widely promoted and researched. Overall, the priming effects offered by globalization and the ease of access to information is of great interest in understanding the mechanisms and extent to which pre-exposure facilitates culture learning.

Limitations

While it is with great enthusiasm that the present paper proposes the notion that the psychologically negative features of cross-cultural immersion typically associated with culture shock seem

to be buffered in contemporary society through the many resources provided by modern technology, this notion is not without its limitations. Firstly, it is openly acknowledged that while social networking sites may offer some pre-exposure to novel cultures and ways of life, digital media is limited in its ability to representatively familiarize users with local etiquette, non-verbal communication, body language, gestures, forms of address or rules of conventions (e.g., gaze, individualistic societal norms, collectivistic societal norms). Although many of these domains are researchable, half of the challenge for sojourners is developing an awareness of their unawareness, while the other half is the necessity for experiential learning. For example, Forbush and Foucault-Welles (2016) stress the importance of *preparedness* on positive international student adaptation experiences, however many prospective sojourners may not necessarily know to prepare for less commercialized features of their host environments such as social class distinctions, regional accents, and even food availability. Also, many of these feature may not be aspects of a transcultural experience which one *can* prepare, even if the individual is well informed. Secondly, this paper heavily relies on access to media and technology in order to experience pre-exposure to the unfamiliar. While many international sojourners, especially students, may have access to these resources, not all travellers do. For example, this paper in no way suggests the experience of culture shock for (e.g.,) involuntary migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, or migrants who do not speak the host language, is in any way less of a mental-health concern in these populations than the literature widely suggests it is (i.e., Ward et al., 2005, pp. 193–242). Also, this paper has majorly considered the case of international students, and has not extensively considered the implications for other sojourner or migrant groups; future research in culture learning would do well to expand this discussion.

Implications and Future Research

Culture shock may be majorly attributable to how different an environment is than it was expected to be. However, sojourners who embark knowing the environment which they are about to migrate to is vastly different from their own, and who are pre-exposed to the mechanisms by which the

new environment differs, have been found to experience less culture shock (e.g., Gomes et al., 2014; Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). Exposure to host-cultures and social life often facilitated through modern technology (e.g., social media, IM, SNSs, television, film) has extended the reach of globalization, and is emerging as a protective practice to buffer the adverse reactions of cross-cultural immersion. Although the mechanisms by which priming prospective sojourners can act as a protective feature of their experience is presently unclear, familiarizing sojourners with the various characteristics and realities of their prospective host environments is clearly indicated by the evidence hereby presented as a vital practice for a positive cross-cultural transitions. Furthermore, considering some stress has come to be understood as a natural part of uprooting oneself from home to host, medical models no longer suit the average case of sojourn related stress. For higher educational institutions which host international students, this will mean a shift in the pedagogical structuring of the hidden-curriculum (i.e., Elliot, Baumfield, Reid, & Makara, 2016), or non-academic side of students' careers; especially as the literature's understanding of culture learning continues to develop. Higher education institutions are fundamentally aware of the need to place less emphasis on treating cross-cultural transitions as a clinical ailment for which students can be medicated, and to instead contribute resources to implementing preventative and protective measures in the non-formal social fabrics of their institutional communities in order to efficiently maximize student success and wellbeing, and facilitate positive culture learning.

The present paper acknowledges the need for further exploration in two core domains: the further conceptualization of culture learning theory, and a broader investigation on how technology plays a role in facilitating and changing fundamentally social experiences. In terms of the former, culture learning theory needs both empirical investigation, and conceptual development. At present, culture learning is mostly regarded as a sub-process of acculturative stress (Masgoret & Ward, 2016). However, culture learning may play an important role in shaping modern transcultural experiences. Thus, the literature could greatly benefit from clarity, awareness, and agreement, of the specific mechanisms by

which this process occurs. In terms of the domains relating to the role of technology, future research would do well to not only explore the extent to which preparatory information seeking by prospective sojourners takes place, but also the nature of the information sought, and the influence of such pre-exposure on acculturation amongst various sojourning groups (e.g., voluntary [students, immigrant], involuntary [refugees, asylum seekers, youth]). Consideration of those in regions of the world which are subject to internet censorship (e.g., Vietnam, China, Cuba) should also be explored. Finally, the literature would benefit further by conducting investigations which explore the extent to which culture learning can be facilitated through the use of technology, and how virtual culture learning then compares to physical experiential learning.

The evolution of prominent social phenomena is arguably a sign of society changing; and when the phenomena that are evolving are a global occurrence, the changing society is thus the global community. The previous and seminal works that explore the phenomenon of culture shock lack the modern social context of the 21st century, and therefore cannot accurately inform the field concerning significant aspects of the modern international sojourn (for students or others). The significance for international students specifically lies in the fact that, the 'shock' once experienced by international students upon arrival in novel host environments has, in many ways, been buffered by the reach of globalization. As globalization continues to develop, the popularity and use of media continues to grow, and ease of access to information becomes more widely available, culture learning may continue to become an increasingly commonplace occurrence; a development which could significantly alter the nature of transcultural experiences boundlessly.

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