
Culture Shock: Challenges of International Students

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Abstract

In the globalized landscape of higher education, the number of students seeking academic opportunities abroad has surged. This literature review investigates the cultural shock experienced by international students, examining its scale and impact globally and within Asia. The method used the PRISMA checklist and flowchart for selection and review of journals, consisting of three stages: identification from databases (n = 3,874,770), screening (n = 157), and inclusion (n = 10). Additionally, information was sought from books, dissertations, unpublished materials, and personal experiences as a teacher of international students. The review identified three themes regarding cultural shock. The first theme, Cultural Shock Syndromes, reveals that students generally experience homesickness, a desire to escape their new environment, and distress. The second theme, Aspects of Culture Shock Experienced by Students, includes language barriers, daily schedules, non-verbal communication, homesickness, loneliness, seasons and weather, and food. The third theme, Effects of Culture Shock on Students' Lives during their Study, focuses on academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being. The conclusion is that cultural shock significantly affects international students as they navigate new academic and social environments, encompassing challenges such as homesickness, social exclusion, identity confusion, and cultural dissonance. These factors collectively contribute to heightened stress and anxiety, negatively impacting students' academic performance and overall well-being. Understanding the specific complaints and challenges associated with cultural shock highlights the critical need for comprehensive support systems.

Keyword: Cultural, Academic, Shock, Student, International

INTRODUCTION

In the increasingly globalized landscape of higher education, the number of students seeking academic opportunities abroad has surged dramatically (Anjalina et al., 2017). This trend has brought to light the significant issue of cultural shock, a common experience among international students who must adjust to new cultural and academic environments. Cultural shock encompasses the feelings of disorientation, anxiety, and stress that arise when students encounter unfamiliar cultural norms, languages, and social behaviors in their host countries.

The prevalence of cultural shock is a global phenomenon, affecting international students across continents. Studies indicate that this issue is particularly pronounced in Asia, where cultural differences can be stark for students coming from Western countries or other distinct cultural backgrounds. The scale of cultural shock experienced by students varies, but its impact on their psychological well-being and academic performance is universally acknowledged. (Elliot, 2023)

Cultural shock typically unfolds in several stages, beginning with the initial honeymoon phase where the new environment seems exciting and fascinating. This is followed by the crisis phase, characterized by frustration and confusion as students confront the realities of their new cultural setting. Subsequent stages include adjustment, where coping mechanisms develop, and finally, adaptation, where students begin to feel more comfortable and integrated into their new surroundings. Key causes of cultural shock include language barriers, differences in educational systems, social customs, and daily living conditions. (Ernofalina, 2017)

Addressing cultural shock requires a multifaceted approach. Solutions range from pre-departure orientation and language training to ongoing support services such as counseling, peer mentoring, and cultural exchange programs. Higher education institutions play a crucial role in

facilitating these interventions, helping students to navigate their new environments and ultimately achieve academic success.

This literature review aims to find cultural shock experienced by international students, examining the scale and impact of this phenomenon globally and within Asia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article conducted a review of English-language articles to find full-text journal, using keywords "cultural shock," "academic shock," and "student." This review spans the period from 2003 to 2023 and includes databases Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, Using the PRISMA checklist and PRISMA flowchart for selection and review of journals, the literature review process consists of three stages. The first stage is identification from databases (n = 3,874,770), comprising several online databases including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and PubMed. The second stage is screening, where journals are screened, excluded, and retrieved, resulting in 157 eligible reports. The third stage is inclusion, where from the 157 eligible reports, further exclusions are made by removing reports that are non-full-text, non-open access, and lack substantive studies, resulting in 10 journals being reviewed.

Additionally, we sought information from books, dissertations, unpublished materials, and personal experiences as a teacher of international students. Our selection criteria were stringent, The literature review process is summarized in the figure below.

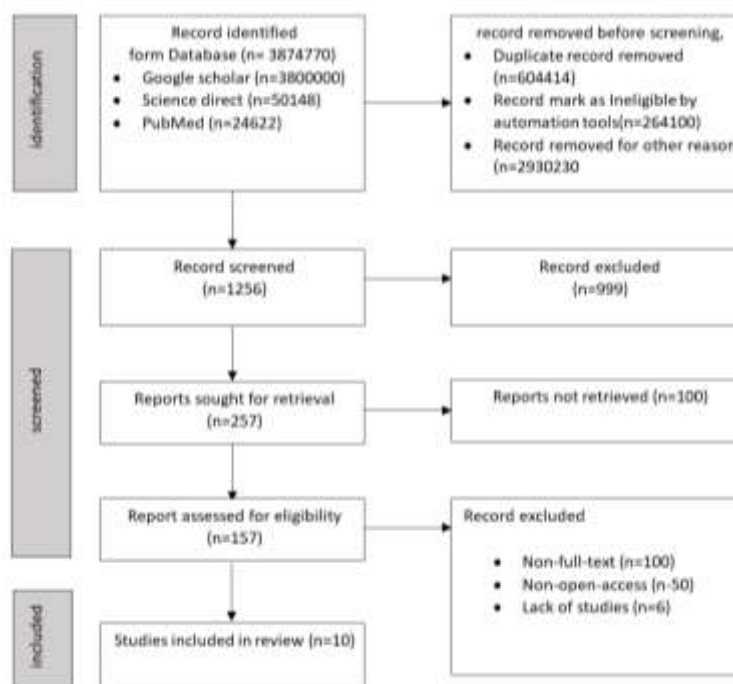


Figure 1. Prisma flowchart

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural shock syndromes

Cultural shock is a widely recognized phenomenon that international students often experience as they transition to new academic and social environments. This process involves significant psychological and emotional adjustments as students encounter and adapt to unfamiliar cultural norms, languages, and social behaviours. The complaints associated with cultural shock: Students frequently report intense feelings of homesickness, expressing a profound longing for family and friends back home. This sense of isolation can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and alienation in the new environment. Many students feel that they are not fully accepted by the local population. This perceived social exclusion can hinder their ability to integrate and feel a sense of belonging in the host culture, leading to further emotional distress. Some students express a strong desire to escape from their new environment. This indicates a high level of distress and discomfort, often stemming from the cumulative stress of cultural differences and adaptation challenges. The process of adapting to a new culture can lead to confusion about one's role and identity. Students may struggle to reconcile their own cultural identity with the expectations and norms of the host culture, causing significant internal conflict and confusion. Students often encounter practices or behaviors in the new culture that they find shocking or offensive. These reactions can be rooted in deep-seated cultural differences and can lead to feelings of repulsion or cultural dissonance. The challenges of navigating a new cultural landscape can leave students feeling helpless or powerless. The inability to effectively cope with and adapt to these new conditions can result in significant stress and anxiety, impacting their overall well-being and academic performance. Understanding these specific complaints provides valuable insight into the multifaceted nature of cultural shock. It highlights the importance of providing comprehensive support systems, including counseling, peer mentoring, and cultural orientation programs, to help international students manage and overcome these challenges effectively. (Saylag, 2014)

Aspects of Culture Shock Experienced by Students

Cultural shock encompasses various dimensions that affect international students' adaptation to their new environment. These aspects include language barriers, daily schedules, non-verbal communication, homesickness and loneliness, seasons and weather, and food. Each of these factors can significantly impact the students' psychological well-being and academic performance.

Language proficiency is a critical factor in the cultural adjustment process. Many international students encounter difficulties understanding and using the local language, which can impede their academic progress and social interactions. These challenges often manifest in classroom settings where students struggle to follow lectures, participate in discussions, and comprehend academic materials. Outside the classroom, language barriers can lead to miscommunication and social isolation, exacerbating feelings of anxiety and frustration.

Adjusting to a new daily schedule can be a significant source of stress for international students. Academic timetables, study routines, and daily activities may differ markedly from what they are accustomed to in their home countries. For instance, variations in class timings, the structure of the academic year, and expectations for independent study can disrupt students' accustomed routines and require considerable adaptation. This disruption can lead to difficulties in time management and increased stress levels.

Non-verbal communication varies significantly across cultures, and international students often find it challenging to interpret and respond to these cues correctly. Gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, and body language that are common in one culture may have different meanings in another. Misinterpretations can lead to misunderstandings and social awkwardness, making it harder for students to form connections and integrate into the local community. (Elliot, 2023)

Homesickness is a common experience among international students, characterized by a deep sense of longing for home, family, and familiar surroundings. This emotional state can be intensified by loneliness, especially if students find it difficult to make friends or build a support network in the new environment. Persistent homesickness and loneliness can lead to depression, anxiety, and a decreased ability to cope with academic and social challenges. (Sirin et al., 2019)

The climate of the host country can significantly affect international students' comfort and well-being. Students coming from tropical or temperate climates may struggle to adapt to extreme cold or heat, seasonal changes, and different weather patterns. These environmental factors can influence their mood, energy levels, and overall health. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), for example, can occur in students unaccustomed to long winters with limited daylight. (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015)

Food is a crucial aspect of cultural adjustment, and changes in diet can be particularly challenging for international students. Differences in cuisine, eating habits, and meal schedules can affect students' nutritional intake and health. Students may find it difficult to find familiar foods or adapt to new dietary practices, leading to issues such as digestive problems or nutritional deficiencies. Moreover, the emotional comfort associated with familiar foods can be lost, contributing to feelings of homesickness. (Ernofalina, 2017)

Effects of culture shock on students' life during their study

Cultural shock can have profound and multifaceted effects on international students' academic and social lives. These effects can hinder their academic performance, social integration, and overall well-being. Below are detailed explanations of how culture shock impacts various aspects of students' lives.

Cultural shock often leads to a lack of confidence in class participation. Students may feel intimidated by unfamiliar teaching styles, language barriers, and different classroom dynamics. This can result in reduced engagement, reluctance to ask questions, and a passive learning attitude. Over time, this lack of participation can hinder their understanding of the material and negatively impact their academic performance. (Schein, 2015)

Interacting with lecturers can be daunting for international students experiencing culture shock. Differences in educational culture, such as the level of formality and expectations in student-lecturer relationships, can create uncertainty and anxiety. Students might avoid seeking help or clarification, leading to misunderstandings and missed opportunities for academic support.

Culture shock can cause significant confusion in understanding and completing academic assignments. Differences in academic expectations, citation styles, and writing conventions can bewilder students. They may struggle to grasp the nuances of assignment guidelines and the standards for academic integrity, which can lead to unintentional plagiarism or poor-quality work. (Furnham, 2010)

Adjusting to a new academic schedule and the stress of culture shock can impair students' ability to manage their time effectively. This can result in missed deadlines and the submission of incomplete or substandard work. The pressure of adapting to a new academic system can also exacerbate procrastination and time management issues.

The cumulative effect of the challenges associated with culture shock often leads to unsatisfying academic results. Difficulty in understanding course material, reluctance to seek help, and time management problems can all contribute to lower grades. Poor academic performance can further diminish students' confidence and motivation, creating a cycle of academic struggle. (Pacheco, 2020)

Social interactions with host nationals can be particularly challenging for students experiencing culture shock. Language barriers, fear of making cultural faux pas, and unfamiliarity with social norms can reduce students' confidence in engaging with locals. This can lead to social isolation and missed opportunities for cultural exchange and support. (Belford, 2017)

Frustration with the challenges of adapting to a new culture can sometimes manifest as criticism of the host people and their customs.(Mehra, 2023) This critical attitude can further isolate students from their peers and hinder their ability to integrate into the local community. It can also perpetuate negative stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings.(Jackson, 2015)

To cope with the stress of cultural adjustment, international students often gravitate towards fellow nationals. While this can provide a sense of comfort and support, it may also limit their exposure to the host culture and language, slowing their overall adaptation process. This tendency can create insular social circles, reducing opportunities for broader cultural engagement.(Behl et al., 2017)

The stress associated with culture shock can manifest in various physical disorders. Symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal issues, sleep disturbances, and changes in appetite are common. The physical toll of stress can further impact students' ability to perform academically and socially.(Qun et al., 2018)

Culture shock can lead to pervasive feelings of insecurity, suspicion, worries, and frustration. Students may constantly worry about their academic performance, social interactions, and future prospects. This heightened anxiety can create a sense of insecurity and suspicion towards others, including peers and educators, undermining their mental health and overall well-being.(Shieh, 2014)

CONCLUSION

Cultural shock is a multifaceted phenomenon that significantly affects international students as they navigate new academic and social environments. The psychological and emotional adjustments required during this transition are substantial, encompassing challenges such as homesickness, social exclusion, identity confusion, and cultural dissonance. These factors collectively contribute to heightened stress and anxiety, which can negatively impact students' academic performance and overall well-being. Understanding the specific complaints and challenges associated with cultural shock highlights the critical need for comprehensive support systems.

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