

International Students' Cultural Identity Construction in the USA Context

¹Dr. Sukanto Roy, ²Dr. Said Rashid Al Harthy

Corresponding Author: ¹Dr. Sukanto Roy, Assistant Professor, Department of English & Modern Languages, North South University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

²Dr. Said Rashid Al Harthy, Senior English Supervisor, Ministry of Education, Muscat, Oman

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ABSTRACT

International students (IS) who travel abroad for studies could be affected by various factors such as academic and social aspects that may influence the construction of their cultural identities. This study explored a group of international students' cultural identity construction in the environment of an American university. A focus group discussion investigated how the IUP (Indiana University of Pennsylvania) learning context influences international students' cultural identity construction. The data revealed that the major influential factors in the construction of international students' cultural identities were initial challenges and their life experiences. The data also indicated that this process of identity construction went through the stages of the acculturation model.

Keywords: international students, identity construction, USA context

Introduction

Identity construction has been an active area for research within the last two decades. The interest in understating the international students' (IS) cultural identity attracted many researchers to investigate the process of identity construction. There are many factors that influence the cultural identity of international students, particularly the academic and social aspects of the particular learning context.

What is Identity

Identity is the conception, qualities, beliefs, and expressions that make a person. Norton (2010) views identity as a person's understanding of their "relationship to the world, how this relationship is constructed in time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 5). According to Rummens (2003), identity may be defined as the distinctive character belonging to any given individual or shared by all members of a particular social category or group. The term comes from the French word "identity," which has its linguistic roots in the Latin idem (same), from which we also get "identical." Therefore, the term is comparative in nature, as it emphasises the sharing of a degree of sameness or oneness with others of a particular characteristic or on a given point (Rummens, 2003). According to Lawler (2008), it is not possible to provide a single, overarching definition of what identity is, how it

is developed and how it works. There are various ways of theorising the concept, each of which develops different kinds of definitions. She argues that another aspect of identity suggests people's uniqueness, their difference from others. According to Deckert (2010), "identity is not a static, homogeneous quality that can be attributed to individuals but instead is fluid, multifaceted, and contextual" (p. 188). Sociolinguists have identified different types of identity from different perspectives, such as individual identity, social identity, cultural identity, group identity, gender identity, etc. However, here our focus is mainly on cultural identity, which is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception. It is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality, or any social group with its own distinct culture (Hall, 1990).

Cultural identity construction

Studies show that IS leaves their countries for English-speaking countries mainly to improve their English language, which is considered an open gate to achieve their aims. For instance, Al Rhyami (2014) states that IS learn English to "gain experience in living and interacting in English speaking countries and to obtain professional skills" (p. 65). Woodward, cited in KOÇ (2006), argues that "language operates as a representational system and helps us represent to other people our concepts, feelings, and ideas." (p. 2). Kim, Siong, Ya'acob, and Fei (2010) point out that becoming proficient in the English language "facilitates a more reflective and critical attitude towards one's own culture." (p.235). For that, in a new society with multicultural aspects for the number of students coming from different countries it helps to understand others and learn about their cultures. In a recent academic community such as colleges, the communities of practice of students in classes, students' associations outside categories, and the surrounding community play an essential role in scaffolding IS to construct their different types of identities such as cultural identities. The identity construction of IS has been found a sophisticated process and requires teachers' support in shaping and reshaping students' identities, as was revealed by Pellegrino-Aveni's (2005) study. Hall, cited in Neumann (2012), defines cultural identity as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being.' [...] [Cultural identities] are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power" (p. 15). Neumann indicates that cultural identities include language, religion, values, or norms. These elements present to the students the verbal and non-verbal codes of the new society to learn, understand and consider when dealing with others. At this point, the ISs start to compare and contrast the original values and beliefs they learned in their culture and the new oriented values and beliefs in the other culture, which develop cultures' negotiation process within individuals. Norton and Toohey (2011) find a solid relationship between students' investment in learning a language and their motivation. They describe investment in second language acquisition as students devoting their time and effort to learning a target language in a specific context to increase their knowledge and skills that "value their cultural capital" (p. 420). Norton and Toohey (2011) refer the cultural capital as the "knowledge, credentials, and modes of thoughts that characterise different classes and groups" (p. 420). This investment can be seen as a link between students' desire to learn the target language, their commitments to learn the language, and their identity changes. Students' motivation inside the class depends on their positions, teachers' roles, and peers' influence, which can be referred to as the power of relationships. If teachers practice their authority in the classroom without considering students' abilities and interests, students' will be demotivated regardless of their investment. Studies show that IS

encounter struggling and “being stuck in-between” (Ortactepe, 2013, p. 220) between their already constructed identity and the construction of the novice identity in the new context. The conflict between the two identities is a typical situation a newcomer may meet.

However, the level of conflict depends on many factors such as students’ age, level of education, student background, ability of resilience, and status of socialisation.

Learning an additional language through living in its society as a newcomer has always been a challenge for IS. The reason for that is the multifunction and complex process the students encounter. Students have to, for instance, learn the target language, adapt to the social norms of the society, the feeling of being accepted by others, studies requirements, and live the struggle between two identities. These expected roles in students’ processes indicate that it is not just a matter of learning a language but also a complex social process of identity construction. It is a sophisticated process of seeing oneself in a new context, indigenous people, and people from other cultures. As a result, constructing a different cultural identity is not an easy task. It is considered a different identity because students have already built their first cultural identity based on their home values, beliefs, and norms. Newfield (2012) points out that such identity is constituted of “religious affiliations, political views, economic backgrounds, sexual orientations, fashion preferences, culinary habits, or any other social artefacts to which a person has an affinity” (p. 60).

Humans’ cultural identity construction is a non-stop process that depends on various social, cultural, economic factors. KOÇ (2006) explains that identity is either “a naturalistic and static formation that could always be sustained” or a changeable process “never completed and logged in contingency” (p. 1) within three factors “historical, social and cultural development” (p. 2). Identity is shifting one’s personality from being static to becoming a flexible persona in a changeable world. Identity stability is a controversial point among two parties of sociologists. One part claims that identity is fixed and unchangeable, whereas the second part state that identity is changeable based on the surrounding environment and variables (KOÇ, 2006). Norton and Toohey (2011) claim that identities are not fixed because “personalities, learning styles, and motivation” (p. 419) are changeable factors. KOÇ (2006) distinguishes three types of identities that are a person may construct: legitimising identity, resistance identity, and project identity (p. 2). KOÇ claims that the last type is “a new identity produced by social actors to redefine their position in the society based on whatever cultural materials are available to them.” (p. 2). Marcia, cited in Severino, Messina, and Llorent (2014), states that adolescents construct their identities through two main “psychological processes of exploration and commitment” (p. 90) taken in account their personal and social factors such as values and beliefs. The more exploration and experience adolescents gain, the more committed they become to their identities. Though Arnett and Taber, cited in Severino, Messina, and Llorent (2014), state that the identity transformation from the adolescence stage to young adult is a process that may take years. This may occur faster when people change their living context temporarily or permanently.

Moving from the first home environment after living there for at least 18 years to complete a higher degree in a new context that differs entirely from the home country led to what is called the 1970s culture shock. Richards and Schmidt (2010) define culture shock as a “strong feeling of discomfort, fear, or insecurity which a person may have when they enter another culture” (p. 151). They state that this shock may end when the newcomers “become familiar with the new culture” (p. 151). Later, the term culture shock was replaced by Zheng

and Berry with “acculturative stress” (p. 92), as cited by Severino et al. (2014). Berry (2006) defines acculturative stress as “the reactions to intercultural contact or the cultural adaptation process” Richards and Schmidt (2010) describe culture as “the set of practices, codes, and values that mark a particular nation or group” (p. 151).

Theoretical Framework

Noyongoyo (2011) defines Cultural Identity as “Identity is a cognitive process that allows an individual to know, to accept, and to identify with a specific group” (p. 6). It is a process of forming new cultural elements from contemporary society to existing cultural identity elements acquired from the original society. This formation was visualised by Ybema et al. (2009) as a “bridge between personality and society, between —internal strivings and external prescriptions, between self-presentation and labelling others, between achievement and ascription and between regulation and resistance (p. 301).

The socialisation of newcomers in academic discourse is challenging because of the differences in educational systems among countries. Moreover, the struggle may occur due to “resources, conflicts and negotiations between differing viewpoints arising from differing degrees of experience and expertise, and transformations of a given academic community’s practices as well as of the participants’ identities” (Morita, 2000, p. 577), according to Al-Rhyami (2014) IS in a new context can be categorised into two groups, a group that may be able to adjust to the new environment due to their socialisation skills and positive attitude. The second group may encounter hard times accepting the new context for the differences between their existing cultural, religious, and beliefs and the new one, which may lead to withdrawal from their colleague. In both cases, IS needs to develop their awareness of acculturation to adapt to the new context through assimilation. Wintergerst, McVeigh, and Brown (2011) see assimilation as “when the new culture and its beliefs and values replace those of the original culture, either fully or partially and either by choice or by necessity” (p. 101). Berry (2006) defines acculturation as “is the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their members.” (p. 698). Though this concept was initiated to relate migrants to other societies and the adaptation process (Smith & Khawaja, 2011) that may take place through different lengths of time that may take generations or centuries, this acculturation could be used for IS a host society (Berry, 2006). This acculturation leads to individual and group social and psychological changes; as Berry expressed, “Acculturation is a process of cultural and psychological changes that involve various forms of mutual accommodation, leading to some longer-term psychological and sociocultural adaptations between both groups” (p. 699).

Kalvero Oberg cited in Wintergerst, McVeigh, and Brown (2011) that acculturation is a process that is achieved through four stages: honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment stage, and recovery stage. The first stage includes the excitement that individuals feel when they are introduced to something new, such as the idea of getting the opportunity to travel abroad to pursue an academic degree. The second stage is the first impression that is encountered by students when arriving in the host country and the notice of the differences between the new country’s beliefs, cultural norms, and people’s attitudes compared to arrivals’ countries in the same variables. The third stage represents the techniques students start to perform to adjust to the new context’s norms. These techniques should help the students deal with others in the host countries from native people who should not conflict with students’ culture and beliefs. The

fourth stage is “the acceptance of the new culture and develops [ing] a bicultural identity” (p. 101)

Based on this framework, the current study explores the construction of the cultural identity of the IS after moving into the IUP community according to their integration with others through language as a medium for academic and social interaction. That cultural identity can be seen as the ISs’ acceptance or rejection of being a part of the IUP community by adding or applying the new cultural norms to their existing ones, whether implicitly or explicitly. Implicitly through practising new cultural concepts in their daily life, such as being open to accepting new ideas or explicitly thorough practising some behavioural actions that did not exist previously, such as changing their outfits. This acceptance or rejection occurs as a result of sophisticated struggling and negotiation within the IS personalities between their existing cultural elements and the new cultural elements recognised and accepted in the contemporary context.

Methodology

Purpose of the Study

Though the cultural identity construction of IS has been investigated extensively during the last two decades, it is still considered one of the actives areas for many researchers. This study aims to explore the cultural identity construction of eight IS at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania campus.

Research Question

This study aims to answer the following research question:

1. How does the IUP (Indiana University of Pennsylvania) learning context influence the international students’ (IS) cultural identity construction?

Research Design

To collect the data for this study, a focus group discussion was conducted with a sample of eight IS. The selection of qualitative design was decided because of the importance of the ethnography method in understanding the process of students’ identity construction and how they adjusted to the new context from their perceptions (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As an advantage of this method, it assisted the researchers in investigating “unexpected issues as they arise in the discussion” to gather “face validity” (p. 149) results. To collect the data for this study, two types of instruments were used to record the discussion: two tape recorders and the audacity program.

Participants

Eight international graduate students participated in this study. All of them were selected through the snowballing method that “identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell, 2013, p. 158). The selection of the IS was based on criteria such as a) graduate students, b) international students, and c) has been at IUP for at least a semester.

Ethical Consideration

Protecting sample identities and rights was a fundamental issue for conducting this focus group discussion. The participants were informed of the discussion topic, and their consent was taken for both participation and audiotaping. Since the data collection was obtained through face-to-face discussion, they were informed of their rights to leave the discussion or withdraw their data at any time they wished. They have also reported the benefits of the study and the non-risk probabilities of joining the discussion.

Data Analysis

The data underwent thematic analysis and content analysis through the Concordance software program. For the theme analysis, the discussion was transcribed and coded for topics. The topics were clustered, turned into themes, and then interpreted to answer the main question. Regarding the content analysis, the researchers uploaded the transcription to the Concordance for getting the frequency of the word. The words were categorised and set into themes compared to the themes obtained from the theme analysis to check their consistency.

Findings

Pre-departure Feelings

In response to the interview question, *“What was your feeling when you first came to know that you got the chance to study in the USA?”* the IS expressed different feelings. Three of them showed excitement to join IUP in the USA, whereas; four participants expressed mixed feelings of excitement and anxiety. One participant stated feelings of sadness about leaving her country. For example, Rina said her excitement: *“I was quite excited and happy. It was a great prestige for me to be selected to come to the USA for higher study with a scholarship provided by the Government.”* Eman shared this feeling with Rina and stated, *“I was happy.”*

Similarly, Wan said, *“I always wanted to come here. For me, it was like a dream comes true.”* Naila expressed her mixed feelings: *“at first I was excited, but when I got real admission, I was terrified because I am leaving my country.”* Alaa shared his feelings sillier to Naila and said, *“I was very excited and scared at the same time. I was sad to leave my parents.”* A similar tone was noticed when Nadia said, *“I was afraid of the weather. Other than this, I had no tears. I was so excited.”* Jamila expressed her sadness and said, *“I didn’t want to leave my country, so I cried a lot.”* Therefore, it was a feeling of joy for all the participants when they first got the news of their chance to study in the USA. Of course, they were sad to leave their own countries and families. Despite the feeling of sadness, they were excited to have the chance to study in the USA.

Preparations

In response to the interview question, *how did you prepare yourself for coming and adapting yourself to a new culture that differs from your own culture?* All the IS had some preparation before leaving their countries for the USA. According to the IS, the practice varied from one to another. The data showed that they had read and used social networking sites such as Facebook to familiarise themselves with some of the country’s aspects like the culture, lifestyle, weather, university program, and the places where they will stay in the USA. For instance, Naila said, *“.... Before coming to this country, I read a lot about Penn State, the*

requirements, the admission procedures, and the weather to prepare myself for proper clothing. I read about the living expenses. I read about cultures and everything.”

Analogous expression was found in Jamila’s statement: *“I read about the USA’s lifestyle and culture before coming here. I had mental preparation to adapt to this culture.”* Wan used a different approach to know more about the U.S culture as she said, *“Before coming here, I was curious to know this culture. I was trying to make friends on Facebook. I was preparing to overcome the new challenges that I might face.”* Wing emphasised being self-reliant: *“I knew that I did not have the experience of living in a different country. So, I was thinking a lot about it, and I thought to be self-reliant.”* Alaa focused his readings on the academic aspects: *“I read about the program. I read about the living place. I also read about the academic atmosphere.”* So, six participants made some preparations before coming to the USA. However, two of them were not so serious about it. For example, Eman said, *“I did not prepare like that way. I just read about the culture and the place.”* Rina said, *“To be honest, I did not take a lot of preparation. I just tried to settle myself.”* Therefore, each of the IS had preparation to different degrees. Some of them had more preparations than others.

Influence of initial challenges

To understand the process of cultural identity, it was essential to explore the initial challenges the IS have encountered since they started preparing for their study in the US. In this theme, the researchers will consider two types of challenges before and after the travel and start interacting with people in the new context: the IUP campus. The samples’ comments answer the second interview question, *“What was your feeling when you knew that you got the chance to study abroad in the USA?”*

Six out of eight IS expressed that their initial challenge was leaving their countries and families. The strong social ties that these eastern students have at their homes were clear through their feelings about missing their parents and country. They are missing from their country could be understood as missing their relatives, friends, and colleagues at work. For instance, Naila said, *“I was terrified because I am leaving my country, leaving my family behind.”* Jamila said, *“I didn’t want to leave my country, so I cried a lot. I wanted to go back”.* Alaa stated that he was sad *“to leave [his] parents.”*

The second initial challenge in the IUP campus can be divided into two types: academic and social. According to six out of eight, academic challenges were perceived in the change in the educational system they used to have and the new one at IUP. For instance, Alaa, who lived in Indiana for eight years and was a student at its school when he was young, found it challenging to be a student at a higher studies level: *“I was shocked to see the pressure of the study.”* Nadia expressed her learning experience, saying: *“for our cohort, it was very stressful. I cannot even describe how stressful it was.”* Wing shared her experience, stating: *“My first semester was full of study; I had to plan for time and prioritise things to manage.”* Eman thought the same as she declared: *“first semester was not good for me; everything was new for me.”* According to the IS, the social challenges they encountered related to the new context were varied. Five out of eight IS faced social challenges. For example, Wing expressed her challenges as she said, *“at home, I never cooked, I didn’t do my household chores. But after coming here, I lived with two other Chinese girls, and I had to do everything myself.”* Rina expressed her shock when she came to the U.S because she said, *“I left my family.”* Eman and Rina had difficulties being in a new context, people and the lack of technical support for their

devices compared to their home. Nadia thought that her challenges were with the people in Indiana and how they dealt with her as a Muslim woman and that some people have not been thankful even.

The perceptions of the IS regarding the initial academic and social challenges varied and differed from one another. As has been noticed from the extracts, the challenges started with participants leaving their countries and coming to the U.S. later. They met academic challenges, including a load of courses and the change in the educational system which they used to have in their countries. However, they had positive experiences in their department that enabled them to overcome these difficulties. The participants expressed that examples of social challenges were the change in the environment, lack of social networks, and in some cases dealing with some people in the society.

The influence of life experience

As newcomers to the IUP community and the US context, the IS are expected to face challenges, and it is assumed that they will be able to overcome those after a while. In response to the interview question *“How do you describe your experiences in the first semester in the new context?”* three IS expressed their satisfaction, and five IS said it was stressful for them. However, their experiences had an essential role in adapting themselves to the new context for all the IS. The positive attitudes and support of professors and colleagues played a positive role in helping those three IS to demolish their worries and challenges in the first semester. For instance, Naila said, *“The first semester was very much better than any other semester because I came with too excitement and enthusiasm.”* Alaa expressed his satisfaction regarding his relationship with the faculty in the department: *“I feel comfortable here; most of our professors are nice our cohort is helpful.”* Nadia supported Alaa’s attitude towards the department faculty: *“I feel like I learned a lot for this university. That is why I am in love with the department professors; I learned a lot from them.”*

From a social perspective, four of the IS found the people at the IUP campus are helpful. They expressed their gratitude toward the IUP community. Naila found the people at Indiana have been friendly and supportive compared to her previous university: *“I find people were harder on me in my previous university, but here in Indiana, people are so friendly with me ... even my neighbours are super awesome. They keep inviting me to their place.”* According to those four participants, the most crucial factor that has helped them overcome the challenges is the cultural awareness of the faculty and colleagues at the campus to accept the IS culturally. Alaa explained how his American friends have changed and gave an example: *“yes, exactly, even when they cook, so they know we don’t eat pork or ham.”* Naila added from her experience dealing with the Americans: *“they are willing to go for maximum change.”* Nadia agreed with other IS that even the faculty have shown understanding and respect towards Muslims’ culture: *“the same happened with us one of the professors she asked us she took us out to a restaurant and she tried to make food and order food that is suitable for us so we can eat she asked us all that was nice.”*

Discussion

To answer the main research question of this study, two types of analysis were applied. First, the data were coded, and thematic analysis was done. Second, two software programs were used to find out the frequencies of the keywords using the Concordance program. The

researchers used this program to count all the words in the data set and know the words' rank and frequencies. According to Joffe & Yardly (2004) concordance program enables researchers "note patterns in the data and divide up the data to give greater clarity regarding their detailed content" (p. 59). The NVivo program helped the researchers to organise and analyse the non-numerical data. It assisted in sorting, organising the data and finding the relationship between the topics and the themes. Further, it helped show the percentage of coverage of each theme compared to the actual data. As a result of the thematic analysis, four themes were developed:

1. Pre-departure Feelings,
2. Preparation,
3. Influence of initial challenges.
4. Influence of life experience to answer the research question, "*How does the IUP learning context influence the IS cultural identity construction?*"

Pre-departure Feelings

The findings of the thematic analysis showed that the IS had two types of feelings prior to their departure from their home countries. Most of them were excited to get the opportunity to study in the USA. The excitement of most of the IS may be attributed to the successful attainment of their long-cherished desire to pursue higher education in the USA; as Wan stated, "*it was like a dream comes true*". The second group of students had mixed feelings of excitement and anxiety. This could be due to their long lineage connection to their homelands and dependence on their families. That means they will be independent and responsible for their own life. Another factor is their anxiety and worries about the results of the psychological conflict between their previous cultural identity and the new one they may construct in the USA. Moreover, three of the participants expressed their feeling of loneliness in the contemporary context.

Preparation

Based on the thematic analysis of the data of this study, the IS had the desire to cope with the cultural norms of the USA. They developed an accepting attitude towards constructing a new cultural identity that they will embrace in the USA. This notion of acceptance was enhanced by familiarising themselves with US cultural aspects, the places they expected to live in, and the program they would join at IUP. According to the IS, they tried to prepare themselves mentally as Jameela stated, "*I had mental preparation to adapt to this culture*". Another reason was to fill the curiosity to know about the US culture in advance to accommodate the situation later; as Wan said, "*I was curious to know more about this culture*". This step of readings indicated participants' awareness of the differences they would face when they reach the US.

Influence of initial challenges

The data revealed that the IS had two types of initial difficulties: one related to their academic issues and the second related to their social relationships. Their difficulties started before they arrived in the USA. They felt sad to leave their countries and social networks and start living in a new context where they did not know anybody. They thought about starting a new life where they had to depend on themselves in a foreign country. Academically, they were shocked by the different educational systems; they were not squinted. For instance, the load of

the course and the number of reading and studies they had to work in, especially in the first semester; as Wan explained, *“first semester was a hard-a lot of work. Everything was new for me. I didn’t have prior experience of living here, and so it was very difficult for me. I didn’t know who to ask for help”*.

Influence of life experience

Life experience is meant to be the type of involvement IS obtained from interacting with faculty and colleagues on campus. Part of this experience is students’ social experience with different people, such as their friends or others within the campus or in the city. The IS encountered positive experiences dealing with their professors and colleagues in the cohorts based on the data. That could be attributed to Americans’ awareness of students’ other IS and other cultures. At the same time, the IS had already started to cope with the educational system, adjusted to the new culture, and began to accept it.

Socially, they noticed the acceptance of their cultures by people on campus and off-campus, which encouraged some of the IS to have intimacy with the US culture. For instance, some of the IS narrated that their professors and colleges offered them food with which they had no religious restrictions. Outside the campus, Ala narrated that the waiter warned him to avoid eating a type of food that is not suitable for Muslims in a restaurant. Further, he offered him to make another food that had no religious restriction. On the other hand, Nadia reported her experience of discrimination for being a Muslim and for wearing a hijab outside the campus.

Based on the data analysis and the discussion of the themes in this section, it is obvious that the IUP learning context has influenced the IS cultural identity construction. That occurred through the students’ support from the faculty and colleagues in the departments. This can be noticed from the fast adjustment that the IS had during the first semester. Moreover, the strong relationship between the IS and their American friends is another testimony to this fact. Some IS have mentioned that the IUP has become their second home. They feel a sense of belonging to this university. Naila has asserted that she misses the university and the city whenever she travels out, even to Pittsburgh, which is only 59 miles away from Indiana.

Another aspect of the cultural identity that IS has noticed is their acquisition and application of new cultural identity through their perception and practice in everyday life. For instance, as they have mentioned, they are now familiar with some cultural concepts such as thanking others, holding the door for others, and maintaining reasonable space between people at the ATM booth during the transaction. These practices were not followed in their home countries; however, they have to apply them here. They have adapted to these practices being here at the IUP community. The second social aspect is the existence of a boyfriend and girlfriend relationship, which is practised in the IUP community does not exist in Muslim countries. This practice was observed by the researchers while conducting the focus group. For instance, it was clear that Alaa had a girlfriend who was not accepted in Muslim culture.

Another example was Nalia, who has Americanized her way of clothing, which is not accepted in Muslim culture. Those two examples show that some of their original cultural beliefs have been replaced by American cultural norms. These changes indicate that the IUP learning context has influenced the IS cultural identity construction.

The results of the study showed that the IS constructed their cultural identity after they underwent the four stages of acculturation (Wintergerst, McVeigh, and Brown, 2011). They

Table 1: Four themes with examples of the words and frequencies

Theme	Word and frequency
Pre-departure feeling	Excited 12
Preparation	Country 8, department 7, preparation 7
Influence of initial challenges	Time 24, country 22, semester 17, experience 13, living 12, stressful 6
Influence of life experience	People 49, friends 32, American 20, feel 19, professors 12, belonging 6

started in the honeymoon stage, where they were excited to start their higher studies in the USA. In the second stage, culture shock, they were shocked by some differences between educational and social aspects between their countries and the US represented at the IUP society. Later, after they realised they had to live in the US, they had to accept the new culture and adapt to it. Finally, they started constructing their cultural identity by accepting some cultural concepts and practising others in their daily life. Based on the frequencies of the words in the data through a concordance, it is clear that initial challenges and life experiences have more influence in constructing the cultural identity of IS at the IUP campus. The following Table 1 illustrates the frequency of the data words according to the Concordance program.

Table 2 displays the frequency of some keywords, their rank, and the frequency of each word in the data. These words were categorized into four major themes as shown in table 1.

Table 2: Frequency of words in Concordance

Word	Rank	Frequency
People	25	49
Friends	39	32
Time	53	24
Country	57	22
Culture	63	21
American	68	20
Feel	73	19
Semester	82	17
Experience	96	13
Excited	104	12
Professor	109	12
Living	119	11
Community	155	8
Department	178	7
Preparation	168	7
Shock	188	7
Belonging	197	6
Stressful	211	6
Cultures	219	5

The thematic analyses of the data through the NVivo program based on the four themes are shown in table 3.

Table 3: Four themes with examples of the words and frequencies

Theme	References
Pre-departure feeling	14
Preparation	8
Influence of initial challenges	9
Influence of life experience	71

According to the thematic analysis using the NVivo program, the primary factor that influenced the IS cultural identity was the influence of life experience. The factor of pre-departure feeling followed this factor. The Concordance and NVivo show some differences in the influence of the major themes on IS cultural identity compared to the manual thematic analysis. However, the concordance shares the manual thematic analysis of the importance of two main factors- the influence of initial challenges and the influence of life experiences. On the other hand, NVivo shares the manual thematic analysis regarding the importance of the influence of life experience in constructing the IS cultural identity.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study investigated the influence of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) learning environment on constructing international students' (IS) cultural identity. The data analysis revealed that the most important factors that influenced the construction of the international students' cultural identities were life experiences and initial challenges. The international students went through the stages of the acculturation model to construct their cultural identities. The challenges that hinder international students' cultural identity construction should be investigated for further research.

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