

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERCULTURAL FRIENDSHIP NETWORKS AND
HOMESICKNESS LEVEL
OF INTERNATIONAL DEGREE STUDENTS
AT A FINNISH UNIVERSITY

Master's Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>An increasing number of international students are coming to Finland due to a high quality and tuition free education. International students form the second biggest group of immigrants in Finland. Universities see international students as important for establishing international contacts and developing the country's economy and, therefore, are concerned about their well-being. The current thesis explores the relationship between intercultural friendship and homesickness levels among international degree students at a Finnish university.</p> <p>The thesis consists of two parts: a monograph on cross-cultural adaptation of international students and a research article exploring the relationship between intercultural friendship and homesickness levels of international degree students at a Finnish university. The study uses a culture shock model as the conceptual background since homesickness is one of the components of culture shock. The aim of the study is achieved through a quantitative method. To collect the data, online surveys were distributed among international degree students at a Finnish university.</p> <p>The findings of the study are useful for university educators and foreign students' advisors. The results demonstrate a significant relationship between intercultural friendships and homesickness levels of international degree students. The study supports the idea that the intercultural ties of international students play an essential role in decreasing their level of homesickness.</p>	
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APPENDIX: INTERCULTURAL FRIENDSHIP AND HOMESICKNESS SURVEY

1. INTRODUCTION

The reduction of migration barriers entails people's mobility. The proportion of people moving from their home country has increased both within and outside of Europe. Finland is considered a welfare state. This fact partially explains why the number of foreigners moving to Finland grows annually. During 2013, the population of Finland increased by 24 596 people according to Statistics Finland (Tilastokeskus, 2014). At the end of the 2013 the official population was 5 451 270, of whom 2 680 364 were men and 2 770 906 were women (Tilastokeskus, 2014). The foreign language speaking population grew by 22 119 people, which was 90 percent of the total population growth.

Finland is one of the top-countries in terms of the quality of education. Moreover, Finnish universities provide education in English by offering more than 300 degree programs (Faktaa. Facts and Figures, 2013). "As in many countries, internationalization and interculturality have become two key concepts in Finnish higher education" (Dervin & Layne, 2012, p. 2). As a result, higher education institutions are encouraged to enroll more foreign students. The goal of the Strategy for Internationalization of Finnish Higher Institutions, planned by The Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland, is to increase the number of international degree students to 20 000 by 2015 (Faktaa. Facts and Figures, 2013). This goal has already been reached. One of the attractive factors for foreign students in Finland is tuition fee free education. However, in October 2014 the Finnish government suggested to introduce tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students starting from 2016. Finnish student organisations were ardent opponents of the tuition fees introduction. They argued that collecting tuition fees from international students would be a preliminary to tuition fees for national students (Välimala, 2015). The Finnish Broadcasting company¹ reported (2014) teachers and researchers are also against tuition fees for foreigners, because they fear it will

¹ Yleisradio (Finnish) or the Finnish Broadcasting Company (English) is Finland's national public-broadcasting company, founded in 1926.

provoke the reduction of the number of international students in Finnish universities. Moreover, there is a fear that tuition fees could hinder the establishment of international contacts between universities, which is seen as necessary to improve the quality of Finnish diplomas. International students could benefit the economy of Finland: students staying in the country pay taxes to the state. In addition to that, international graduates can become highly qualified professionals for Finnish companies (Yle Uutiset, 2014). Although the Finnish government has abandoned the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students for now, the debate on this issue might continue in the future (Study in Finland, 2015).

The number of university students in Finland in 2012 was 307 407, 10% of whom were foreigners (Faktaa. Facts and Figures, 2013). Yle reported (2012) an increasing numbers of foreign students were coming to study in Finland. In the past 10 years, the number of Russian students caught up with the number of Chinese students and became the largest group of international students studying in Finnish universities. According to Statistics Finland, in 2011 there were 2,129 Chinese students studying in Finnish universities, while the number of Russian students increased to 2,107. Other main foreign student groups by nationality in 2011 were Nepalese students (976), Nigerians (938), and Vietnamese (904). The most popular fields of study for international students are technology, communication and transport; social sciences, and business and administration (Faktaa. Facts and Figures, 2013).

The well-being of international students is an important concern for universities. Students undertake a life-changing endeavour that has both benefits and challenges. Students encounter a new environment, a new educational system, and a new culture. During cross-cultural adaptation students may experience psychological problems like feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and culture shock. Up to 30% of international students can feel homesick (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002, 2003). Homesickness has serious negative effects on

adaptation process, academic performance and social involvement (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Therefore, it is important for educators and students' advisors to know how to help students cope with stress and homesickness feelings.

Research findings showed cross-cultural adaptation positively relates to social support (Lian & Tsang, 2010). Consequently, social support is significant in students' life abroad. This support can come from friends, for instance. Friendship is one of the most essential aspects in personal life, since it satisfies personal and emotional needs. Friendship is always voluntary; a person chooses friends, unlike family members. Allan (1996) argued friendships are not only freely chosen, but the choice is influenced by a person's social environment, work situation, and domestic circumstances. These factors affect the opportunities for individuals to meet people and form friendships (Allan, 1996). Friendship formation plays a great role in the study abroad experience. Friends help to cope with stress, contribute to social support networks, and assist in hard times. Research illustrates the formation of friendships may help students adapt better, reduce the level of homesickness, and make their experience abroad more fruitful (Hendrickson et al., 2010). Friendships influence people's lives in different cultures, though, the expectations from a friend vary among cultures (Beebe et al., 2011).

There are a number of studies conducted concerning friendship network formation among international students (Church, 1982; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Hendrickson et al., 2010). According to Bochner et al. (1977), international students form co-national, host national, and multinational friendships. The studies on friendships were mainly done in the US. The results showed international students often have more friends from their home country; however, research also demonstrated a relationship between the number of host country friends and the level of satisfaction, contentment, homesickness, and social connectedness. No research has been found exploring the relationship between the number of international friends and the

level of homesickness among international students in the context of a Finnish university. Moreover, research done in the US cannot be assumed to be effective in Finland without taking into account socio-economic factors and various cultural aspects. For instance, the population of Finland is small and much more homogeneous than in the United States. Another important aspect is the official language of the country. Students coming to the United States study in English – the state language, but students in Finland should learn the official language of the country to feel more comfortable in social life to make the most of their life abroad experience. According to Kim (2001), the cultural environment plays a great role in sojourners' adaptation process. Therefore, international students in the US and Finland may have various experiences due to differences between the countries.

International students form the second biggest group of immigrants moving to Finland (Leinonen, 2014). Thus, it is worth investigating their experiences during their studies in Finland so Finnish universities can benefit from this study by finding out how to improve their student life system. Since there is no clear consensus within the literature on the relationships between homesickness and intercultural friendships, the current study intends to look at the relationship between intercultural friendship networks and the homesickness level of international degree students at a Finnish university. This study provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of international students' experiences by investigating the role of intercultural friendship in their life abroad.

This thesis consists of two parts: a monograph on cross-cultural adaptation and an article exploring the relationship between intercultural friendship and homesickness levels of international degree students at a Finnish university. My thesis advisor has significantly contributed to the monograph by helping me link the relevant concepts of the study and directing my attention to the appropriate theory. The monograph examines existing approaches to cross-cultural adaptation and culture shock. The third section of the monograph

is the reflections on this study. The theoretical grounding for the article is divided into four sections. The first section describes homesickness, the second – presents studies conducted on friendships, the third – examines studies on intercultural friendships, and the fourth section discusses strong and weak ties. The method section of the article includes a description of the sample and instrument. The results of the study are reported after the method part. The results section is followed by the discussion part, including the summary of the results, implications, limitations, and directions for future research. The final part is the conclusion of the study.

The following section examines existing approaches to cross-cultural adaptation and culture shock. Moreover, previous studies regarding international students' adaptation process to an unfamiliar environment are presented.

2. CROSS-CULTURAL ADAPTATION

2.1. Approaches to cross-cultural adaptation

In modern society, due to technological developments and changes in legal regulations, the ability for people to move across national boundaries has increased (Sumer, 2009). Different reasons explain people's movement to a new country: studies, work, family ties, etc. There are two types of migrant groups: voluntary migrants and involuntary migrants (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Voluntary migration means that a person moves to a new country of own will searching for a better life, for example. In contrast, involuntary migration is a forced relocation due to unstable socio-political situation in a previous country of residence. In addition, migration can be short or long term. International students are referred to as voluntary and short-term sojourners, because they move into a new cultural environment for a certain period of time and a specific purpose – to study. Thus, international degree students form a special group of sojourners (Bochner, 1977). To succeed, these sojourners have to adapt to a new environment rapidly, having only 2-4 years of studies. It is suggested

international degree students experience more mental and physical health problems, as well as academic problems, than local students do (Lewthwaite, 1997). Some studies (Church, 1982; Dyal & Chan, 1985) showed foreign students report more stress-related symptoms than locals do.

A large and growing body of literature has investigated cross-cultural adaptation. Cross-cultural adaptation is a complex process of adjusting to a new environment by learning culture rules and norms (Kim, 2001). Sojourners, such as international students, immigrants, and refugees experience the process of cross-cultural adaptation differently. Kim (2001, p. 71) argued, “some strangers make smooth and speedy transitions, whereas others suffer from prolonged inability to find ways to overcome their cross-cultural predicaments.” For example, some people just resist to change or are not ready to change their original cultural habits that causes psychological problems during the adaptation process to a new environment (Kim, 2001).

There are three approaches to cultural adaptation: social science approach, critical approach, and interpretive approach (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). All of them will be discussed in the next paragraphs. The first approach to cultural adaptation – the social science approach – focuses on individual’s background and characteristics in the adaptation process and includes three models: the anxiety and uncertainty management model developed by Gudykunst (1998), the transition model suggested by Bennett (1998), and the integrative model introduced by Kim in 2001 (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Fritz et al. (2008) applied Gudykunst’s theory to their study on anxiety and social adjustment of international and US students at an ethnically diverse community college in Southern California. The research found no significant difference between these two groups with respect to their anxiety level (Fritz et al., 2008). However, the study showed that though many international students share a lot of common problems during their adaptation process, the differences between cultural

groups should be also taken into consideration. According to Fritz et al. (2008), it is important to assess cultural groups separately in order to get in-depth understanding of international students' adaptation experiences. The results from Fritz et al.'s (2008) study showed that for Asian students it is more difficult to cope with the new language and find friends, they feel significantly more anxious than European students. However, European students find it harder to be away from family and friends back home (Fritz et al., 2008).

The transition model, developed by Bennett (1998), suggests the adaptation process is nothing but the "transition", which involves different changes, losses, and gains. Based on Bennett's model psychologists distinguish two approaches immigrants choose to deal with unfamiliar environment: flight and fight approach (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Flight approach implies "a strategy to cope with a new situation, being hesitant or withdrawn from the new environment" (Martin & Nakayama, 2007, p. 306). Small periods of flight approach might help to cope with challenges of cross-cultural adaptation. However, for a longer period, this approach could be harmful for successful adaptation. For instance, if international students spend all of their time with co-nationals, this might result in poor intercultural learning (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Fight approach means active participation in a new environment, trying new things, making mistakes. This approach can be unproductive in a way, that migrants will most likely criticize the norms of a new environment (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). It is not reasonable to say if one or another approach is right or wrong, many things depend on an individual.

The discussed above models focus on a person's feelings during cross-cultural adaptation. In turn, Kim (2001) emphasizes the role of communication during cross-cultural adaptation. According to Kim (2001), communication plays a crucial role in the success of adaptation. This idea was supported by the research on the US students' adjustment in France (Pitts, 2009). The findings emphasized, "the essential role everyday talk plays in helping

short-term sojourners adjust to their new context” (Pitts, 2009, p. 458). Everyday conversations serve as a way of sharing feelings and thoughts about a new environment, thus helping reduce stress by listening to others and getting support.

Kim’s (2001) structural model of cross-cultural adaptation is multidimensional and shows the inseparable and interactive relationship between an individual and a new environment. It consists of five dimensions: host communication competence, host social communication, ethnic social communication, environment, and predisposition. All these dimensions influence and are influenced by the changes that lead to intercultural transformation – internal changes to forming an intercultural identity, properly functioning in a host environment.

According to Kim (2001), sojourners’ communication activities are divided into two inseparable dimensions: personal and social communication. Personal communication means an individual’s mental activities that prepare them to act in different social situations. Personal communication is strongly connected to social communication – interaction between two or more individuals. Personal communication of individuals determines their ability to develop the ways of understanding, responding, and hearing in a new environment more effectively. The sojourners have to learn symbols, codes, and meanings of the host environment, so they become more competent in host communication system, and can better see the similarities and differences between their home culture and host culture, and be able to interact with a new environment properly.

Social communication occurs on a macro and micro level (Kim, 2001). Kim grouped these levels into two categories: interpersonal communication and mass communication. Interpersonal communication is direct, face-to-face interaction with people in a social environment. Mass communication involves experiences by means of mediated channels of communication: radio, television programs, newspaper articles, movies, etc. Interpersonal

relationships are crucial for the sojourners, as through formal and informal contacts they find social support and the opportunity to learn new languages and cultures. However, along with host interpersonal communication host mass communication helps sojourners adapt more easily. Host mass communication is vital for culture and language learning. In addition to host interpersonal and mass communication, sojourners' communication includes communication activities with co-nationals that could limit their social communication activities with the host environment and lead to psychological instability in communication with locals (Kim, 2001). On the contrary, the research demonstrated (Pitts, 2009) co-national support is helpful and effective for adaptation in the short-term sojourn. Therefore, the length of stay in a new environment should be always taken into consideration (Pitts, 2009).

The second approach to cross-cultural adaptation – critical approach – points out the context has a great impact on cultural adaptation (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). “The relative status and power of sojourners and host groups also influence adaptation” (Martin & Nakayama, 2007, p. 319). Martin and Nakayama (2007) claimed that according to previous studies, African students due to racism and discrimination experience more difficulties in adaptation in the USA compared to Scandinavians. This finding is consistent with another study done in an American university, which found that students' race predicts level of discrimination: European students experience less discrimination than non-European students do (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). According to Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), this happens because non-European students form a more visible racial group that can be a subject to discrimination.

The third approach to cross-cultural adaptation – interpretive approach – is used to describe the adaptation process using in-depth analysis of migrants' experiences. The U-curve model based on Lysgaard research (1955), W-curve model proposed by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), and phenomenological model developed by Chen (2000) are employed in

this approach (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). The U-curve model and W-curve model will be discussed in the next subchapter.

Chen (2000), using the phenomenological approach, interviewed Chinese students in the US to learn about their experiences during the adaptation process. The findings of the study showed students went through two phases: the first phase - realization that their assumptions about a new environment were wrong, the second – making sense of new patterns through communication mostly with the host nationals. The results emphasized the role of intervention with the members of host country during adaptation process.

The aim of this study is to look at international students' friendship networks and homesickness levels during adaptation process. Since homesickness is one of the components of culture shock (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), the conceptual backdrop for this study will use culture shock model. In the following section culture shock is described, as well as the findings of studies on culture shock are presented.

2.2. Defining culture shock

During cross-cultural adaptation almost everyone experiences culture shock (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Oberg introduced the term *culture shock* in the late 1950s. He defined it as “a disease” of individuals living in a new cultural environment. The reason for culture shock is the lack of knowledge about social rules and values of a new country. The term *culture shock* was redefined in the literature (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). Despite this, researchers agreed culture shock relates to individuals' adjustment to another culture on social, emotional, physiological, and behavioral levels (Befus 1988; Brislin et al., 1986; Searle & Ward, 1990).

Pedersen (1995, p. 1) concluded, “culture shock is the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment”. In a multicultural context, culture shock happens when individuals are not aware of what is expected from them and what they should expect from a

new environment (Pedersen, 1995). This unawareness causes a lot of stress, which is a negative symptom of culture shock. The results of the study on acculturative stress among international students in Malaysia supported Oberg's theory of negative symptom of culture shock (Rajab et al., 2014). The findings also pointed to the aspect of stress due to culture shock, which is followed by homesickness of international students (Rajab et al., 2014).

Culture shock involves multiple stages. Lysgaard developed the well-known U-curve model of culture shock in 1955. The U-curve was one of the first models of cultural adaptation, which includes four steps: honeymoon, culture shock, recovery, and adjustment. The honeymoon stage implies excitement and elation about a new culture. Then comes the second stage – culture shock, when a person feels disappointed, stressed, and challenged coping with new norms and values. The third stage – recovery, when a person starts to learn how to behave in a new environment. The final stage – adjustment, when a person communicates and behaves effectively in a new environment. Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) altered the initial U-curve to the W-curve, which has five stages: honeymoon, culture shock, initial adjustment, mental isolation, and acceptance and integration. The scholars pointed out how the adjustment process on returning home resembles the adjustment process in a foreign country. Another model of culture shock was described as a five-stage process of learning and developing (Adler, 1975). The initial stage is “a honeymoon stage”, when a person is excited about a new culture. The second stage is disintegration, when a person is overwhelmed with the standards of a new culture. The third stage is reintegration, when a new culture is rejected and a person feels irritated about new norms and values. The fourth stage is self-assuredness of autonomy, when cross-cultural situations can be handled with relative ease. The fifth stage is creativity of independence, when choice and responsibility accompany a deep respect for individual's own and others' cultures. However, the duration

and degree of each stage depends on the individual. Culture shock is subjective and every person experiences it differently (Pedersen, 1995).

Researchers critically refer to the U-curve model: it is believed to be outdated, and cannot be applied to every sojourner. The study on living and learning of international students in the UK questioned the U-curve model (Busher et al., 2014). Even though the research proved the existence of culture shock stages and adjustment, several students never had some of the stages (Busher et al., 2014). Another study on psychological and sociocultural adjustment of Japanese students in New Zealand found no evidence for the “honeymoon stage” (Ward et al., 1998). Students experienced psychological distress and social difficulty, but not euphoria. The findings of the previous research paper are consistent with the results of the study on the initial stage of international sojourn done in the South of England (Brown & Holloway, 2008). The findings showed the initial stage of the international sojourn was not characterized as the “honeymoon stage”. On the contrary, it was found international students felt stressed, depressed, and lonely in the beginning of their stay (Brown & Holloway, 2008). The research done in a Swedish university supported the idea that not everyone experiences culture shock in the same way and that the culture shock effect on academic progress varies among individuals. The participants of the study – PhD students, were describing their experiences. In this study 54% of the interviewees reported homesickness and frustration influenced their academic performance to some extent, 23% were sure culture shock had no effect on their studies, 23% were sure culture shock strongly influenced their studies (Hosseini, 2014). Moreover, not all the students went through the “honeymoon stage”; moreover, the period of this stage was different among the ones who had it. The outcome might be so dissimilar due to students’ different language skills, previous experience, and culture backgrounds.

The causation of culture shock has been explained using four approaches that offer phenomenological, behavioral, cognitive, and sociopsychological explanations of culture shock (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). The phenomenological approach explains culture shock as a transition from a stage of low self- and culture-awareness to a stage of high self- and culture-awareness (Bennett, 1986). According to this approach, individuals cannot use knowledge of their own culture in a new cultural environment. The behavioral approach sees culture shock as a reason of not knowing by the individuals the rules of verbal and nonverbal behavior of a new culture (Anderson, 1994). According to the cognitive approach to culture shock, cross-cultural adjustment depends on the ability of individuals to judge norms, beliefs, rules of a new culture under a new society (Triandis, 1990). Finally, according to the sociopsychological approach (Searle & Ward, 1990), culture shock can be understood in terms of psychological and social adjustment. Psychological adjustment refers to an individual's well-being and social adjustment – an individual's ability to interact with local members.

According to this theory, the psychological dimension of culture shock can be understood in terms of cultural dissimilarities and of feelings of loneliness in the host country. The social dimension of culture shock can be explained in terms of (a) individuals lacking the appropriate cultural knowledge about the host country and (b) individuals having strong cultural identities that would make them less likely to adapt to the host culture. (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, p. 169)

Despite all the criticism researchers continue using the concept of culture shock. Culture shock has both positive and negative implications (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). According to researchers, the positive side of culture shock is the opportunity for individuals to learn and experience ideas, norms, and rules of a new environment. In such a way, newcomers enhance their emotional richness and competence in social interaction, flexibility, and tolerance for ambiguity. The negative side of culture shock includes feelings of loneliness, depression, mood swings, inability to interact with others, and even headaches and

stomachaches (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Moreover, people manage their culture shock differently due to different motivational orientations, personal expectations, psychological and sociocultural adjustment, cultural distance, communication competence, and personality attributes (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

Sojourners' motivational orientations greatly influence their culture shock experience. People who move to a new country voluntarily experience culture shock more effectively, than those who involuntarily migrate (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Personal expectations are crucial in the experience of culture shock (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Realistic expectations prepare individuals to encounter adaptation problems. Moreover, sojourners with positive expectations tend to deal with stressful adaptation more smoothly. Most international students have positive expectations about a new culture (Sias et al., 2008).

Psychological adjustment during cross-cultural adaptation has a direct effect on feelings of well-being and satisfaction (Ward et al., 2001). Sojourners use different strategies to cope with stress. For instance, social support is very important in dealing with stress (Rajab et al., 2014). International students report lower levels of depression and loneliness the more they feel socially connected (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Social networks of international students include co-national, host national, and multinational ties (Bochner et al., 1977). Each network has its own purposes.

Sociocultural adjustment is the ability to interact appropriately and effectively in a new environment (Ward et al., 2001). A host culture's receptivity to new arrivals plays a great role in sojourners' sociocultural adjustment. An open host environment facilitates individuals' adjustment process (Kim, 2001). Moreover, ethnic proximity influences strangers' adaptation; it determines a level of similarity or difference between host ethnicity and sojourner's ethnicity. The more different the ethnicity of a sojourner, the harder the

adaptation process might be. For instance, skin color and facial features may add psychological distance between strangers and locals (Kim, 2001).

Cultural distance factors like cultural values, language, verbal styles, religion, economic system, etc. also influence individual's cross-cultural adaptation (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). Culture contact is an important part of students' study abroad experience. Lack of information about a new culture may cause a lot of stress. Yang and Clum (1994) suggested the level of stress depends on the level of dissimilarities between the cultures.

The study on cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Canada demonstrated the importance of language self-confidence (Yang et al., 2005). The results showed comfort in using the language of the host country helps in everyday needs that predict better adjustment. Contrary to this, the study done in Norway (Sam, 2001) did not find any contribution of language proficiency, both English and Norwegian, to international students' life. Based on the research done by Sam (2001), this finding might be unique to Norway, because the language is not an issue there. Students have to prove their English language proficiency before entering the university. Moreover, English is widely spoken in Norway. Students do not have problems when using it in their everyday activities (Sam, 2001).

Along with the above-mentioned conditions, sojourners themselves have an impact on culture shock experience. Sojourners come to a new environment with different level of preparedness for change and accepting the challenges of a new environment. Communication competence, which includes an individual's skills to interact in a new culture, plays a great role during adaptation process. Moreover, researchers emphasize that personality attributes like high tolerance for ambiguity, internal locus of control, mastery, mindfulness, cross-cultural empathy, culture knowledge, and personal flexibility facilitate good adjustment and positive psychological well-being (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012).

In the following section I will share my experience on doing this research, including motivation and challenges I have faced. After the reflections part the research article on exploring the relationship between intercultural friendship and homesickness levels of international degree students at a Finnish university is attached.

3. REFLECTIONS

The idea of writing my thesis on relationship between intercultural friendship networks and homesickness level of international degree students at a Finnish university came to my mind during the second semester of my studies in Finland. First of all, I had a personal interest in conducting this study. I am an international student myself, who experienced homesickness and felt lonely in the very beginning, though it was not my first time living abroad. Social support from my international friends helped me cope with stress and finally start enjoying life in this country. Based on the study done in the UK, international students had similar experiences: multinational ties were found to be important in students' life abroad due to their function as a sense of commonality – “a stranger in a strange land” (Schartner, 2014). Everyday talk with people from other cultures helped me not feel alone in a new environment. It was interesting to share our experiences, because everyone saw life in Finland through his own culture lens. During the whole period of studies I was always only among other international students. International ties have predominated over my co-national and host national ties. The reason for this might be the accessibility of international contacts. I should admit it was not easy to make friends with host nationals. As for co-national ties, I just tried to avoid them. My aim was to learn about other cultures and other international students' experiences in Finland.

Every person's experience is truly individual. I wanted to know whether international degree students had the same feelings as me. Therefore, I started to read research articles on international students' experiences during their studies abroad and found the majority of them

were done in US universities. The research done in one country can not be generalizable to other countries due to various cultural aspects and socio-economic factors. I also found some master's theses on international students' friendships and living experiences in Finland. But I wanted to focus not only on friendships, but also link intercultural friendship and one of the psychological problems of students' cross-cultural adaptation – homesickness. I would like to thank Kristen Cvancara, the visiting Fullbright professor from the US, who actually helped me clarify my thesis topic and find a focus. She is a quantitative scholar, and after her lectures on research methods in communication studies I decided I would like to do a quantitative project. She gave me suggestions on how I could apply a quantitative method to my thesis. Qualitative research intends to interpret or describe, and does not assume concepts can be measured in an empirical way, but quantitative research seeks to describe, explain, or predict, which requires an explanation of ways to measure the concepts of interest (Cvancara, 2012). The aim of my study was to explore the relationship between two variables - intercultural friendship and homesickness. Therefore, the use of a survey was appropriate for my work.

After I had chosen the topic and method for the thesis, I started to do the literature review. The first challenge I faced was to link all the relevant concepts of the study. Nevertheless, my thesis supervisor directed my attention to the appropriate theory. The literature on cross-cultural adaptation is vast. However, culture shock theory was chosen as the conceptual backdrop, since international students stay in a host country for a certain period of time and usually their aim is not to adapt, but to be in a country temporarily. Moreover, homesickness is considered as one of the aspects of culture shock. Previous studies reported that social support reduces international students' stress and homesickness level (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Rajab et al., 2014; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Friends are the ones who help and support in hard times. According to Bochner et al. (1977), international students form co-national, host national and multi-national friendships. I decided to focus on

the role intercultural friendships play in international students' experiences. I found studies examined co-national and host national networks, but there were only a few investigating the importance of intercultural friendships. Moreover, there is no clear agreement on the relationship between homesickness, demographics, and intercultural friendships. Thus, I thought my study would add its value to communication research.

After I had read the relevant literature and decided on my research questions, I designed a survey with appropriate questions to get the information from international students in order to clarify the issues of interest. I used a Google form for my survey; it is free and has a user-friendly interface. The answers are saved in Excel file that makes it easy to transfer them to SPSS file for analysis. Therefore, I would strongly recommend other students conducting surveys to use Google forms.

The most exciting part was data collection, which was not easy. Though answering my survey took only 10 minutes, it was hard to motivate international students to do that. When I found out Facebook groups and student' mailing lists did not help that much in getting the answers, I turned for help to the International Office staff. I asked them for international degree students' personal e-mails. The Foreign Student Advisor suggested me to refer to the Student Affairs and Services for obtaining international students' personal information. After having filled in all the required forms, I got the list of all registered international degree students with their personal e-mails. I wrote an e-mail explaining my research topic and asking for help to each of the 502 registered international degree students. Moreover, I had to do it several times. Thus, the data collection took more than a month. In the end, I managed to get 196 international degree students to answer my survey. I had to exclude 37 students from the study, because they did not answer all the questions or gave information not relevant to this study. During an e-mailing process with the students, I got quite many interesting replies and feedbacks. For instance, many European students were

captious and critical about an online survey. They were concerned about their anonymity. Even though they believed nobody would know their answers and that I would report only group results, they were saying they just did not trust Google; they did not want to share their personal information with it. Other discontents concerned the questions. The students refused to complete the survey, because according to them I asked too personal information. Some students found it difficult to report about their international friends. A lot of them had either co-national or host national friends. Contrary to all the criticism, I got a lot of positive feedback. I was really pleased to know that some of the international degree students were very interested in my study. A lot of students asked me to send them my thesis to read when it is done. Some students wrote me long e-mails sharing their living experience. It seemed I tugged at their heartstrings by means of survey questions.

The next step was data analysis. All the students' answers were put into the SPSS program file. The variables were determined according to my research questions: homesickness served as a dependent variable; age, sex, region (participant's nationality), living abroad duration, a love relationship and friendship network diversity – as predictor variables. Before conducting an actual data analysis, my supervisor and me had to code the variables. There is the number of tests one can do with the data. A simple regression test was chosen, because the essence of regression analysis is “to predict values of the dependent variable (DV) from one or more independent variables (IVs)” (Field, 2009, p. 198). Since the focus of the current research is on the relationship of the dependent variable (homesickness) and predictor variables (age, sex, region, living abroad duration, a love relationship and friendship network diversity), the regression analysis helps understand how the value of the dependent variable changes when an independent variable varies, thus answering the research questions.

The findings of the study were surprising to me. Some of the results were found to be contradictory to previous research. However, for my main research question about the relationship between intercultural friendships and homesickness levels I got the answer I expected. All in all, my study supports the previous research on social networks of international students and has practical implications.

To sum up, the whole thesis writing process was a valuable learning experience. I learned a lot about my thesis topic. After having studied all the theories on cross-cultural adaptation, I learned about their practical implications by reading the articles and conducting my own research. In addition, I learned about the peculiarities of online surveys. I am thankful to my thesis supervisor for teaching me how to use the SPSS program to analyze the data. I believe the skill of using the SPSS program might be beneficial for me in the future.

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Relationship between intercultural friendship networks and homesickness level of international degree students at a Finnish university

Anna Kuchma, Stephen M. Croucher

Abstract

Finland is attractive for international students in terms of its welfare, and for a high quality and tuition free education. These facts partially explain the increasing numbers of students moving to Finland annually. International students form the second biggest group of immigrants in Finland. Well-being of international students is a major concern of the universities since they are important for establishing international contacts and the country's economy. There is no clear consensus within previous research on the relationships between homesickness, demographics, and intercultural friendships. Thus, the study explored the relationship between intercultural friendship and homesickness levels among international degree students at a Finnish university. One hundred and ninety six international students completed an online survey examining intercultural friendship networks and homesickness levels. Contrary to prior research, the study found no relationship between demographics variables and homesickness. However, the study revealed a significant effect of friendships diversity on homesickness. Furthermore, the research emphasized the essential role of social support of international degree students during their studies abroad.

Keywords: international degree students, social ties, networks, friendship, intercultural friendship, homesickness, Finland

Introduction

Finland is a European welfare state and largely considered to be one of the top-countries in terms of quality of education. Moreover, Finnish universities provide education in English by offering more than 300 degree programs (Faktaa. Facts and Figures, 2013). The number of university students in Finland in 2012 was 307 407, 10% of whom were foreigners (Faktaa. Facts and Figures, 2013). According to Statistics Finland, the main foreign students groups by nationality in 2011 were Russians, Chinese, Nepalese, Nigerians, and Vietnamese. One of the attractive factors for foreign students in Finland is tuition fee free education. However, in October 2014 the Finnish government suggested to introduce tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students starting from 2016. Finnish student organisations, teachers and researchers were ardent opponents of the tuition fees introduction. Local students argued that collecting tuition fees from international students would be a preliminary to tuition fees for national students (Välilmaa, 2015). Universities teachers and researchers are against tuition fees for foreigners, because they fear it will provoke the reduction of the number of international students in Finland and hinder the establishment of international contacts between universities (Yle Uutiset, 2014). The Finnish government has abandoned the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students for now, but the debate on this issue might continue in the future (Study in Finland, 2015).

Universities are concerned about international students' well-being. During cross-cultural adaptation students may experience psychological problems like feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and culture shock. Up to 30% of international students can feel homesick (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002, 2003). Homesickness can hamper adaptation process, academic progress and social involvement (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Research findings show that social support is significant in students' life abroad (Lian & Tsang, 2010). This support can come from friends, for instance. Friends help to cope with stress, contribute to

social support networks, and assist in hard times. Research illustrates the formation of friendships may help students adapt better, reduce the level of homesickness, and make their experience abroad more fruitful (Hendrickson et al., 2010).

A number of studies have investigated friendship network formation of international students (Church, 1982; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Hendrickson et al., 2010). According to Bochner et al. (1977), international students form co-national, host national, and multinational friendships. The previous studies on friendships were mainly done in US universities. The results showed international students often have more friends from their home country; however, research also demonstrated a relationship between the number of host country friends and the level of satisfaction, contentment, homesickness, and social connectedness. No research has been found exploring the relationship between the number of multinational friends and the level of homesickness among international students in the Finnish context. Moreover, research done in the US cannot be generalized to Finland without taking into account socio-economic factors and various cultural aspects. For instance, the population of Finland is small and much more homogeneous than in the United States. According to Kim (2001), the cultural environment plays a great role in sojourners' adaptation process. Another important issue is the official language of a host country. Students coming to the US study in English – the state language, but in Finland, though international students get education in English, they need to learn Finnish to get the most of their life abroad experience by participating in social life of the country. “A number of studies from English-speaking host countries has suggested that international students' overall ability in English is closely related to their academic success and overall adaptation” (Sam, 2001, p. 319). The same situation is with a good command of the other host languages: the better one speaks a host language, the easier he adapts to a new environment (Schumann, 1986). However, the results of the study in Norway indicated that neither English nor Norwegian language proficiency came out as

significant for students' life (Sam, 2001). Sam (2001) suggested these findings might be unique to Norway, because English is widely spoken in the country.

It is worthwhile to study international students' experiences at a Finnish university, since they are the second biggest group of immigrants in Finland (Leinonen, 2014). Finnish universities can benefit from this study by finding out how to improve their student life system. The current study intends to look at the relationship between intercultural friendship networks and the homesickness level of international degree students at a Finnish university. Moreover, the research aims to explore the relationship between demographics and homesickness, as there is no a clear consensus in the literature on this topic. This study provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of international students' experiences by investigating the role of intercultural friendship in their life abroad.

The literature review for this research article is divided into four sections. The first section describes homesickness. The second section presents literature on friendships, the third – previous works regarding intercultural friendship formation, the fourth – discusses strong and weak ties. The method section explains the sample and instrument. The results of the study are then reported. The results section is followed by discussion part, including a summary of the results, implications, limitations, and directions for future research. The final part is the conclusion of the study.

Homesickness

Moving to a new country may cause a lot of stress that involves culture shock. One of the main aspects of culture shock is homesickness. Homesickness refers to the commonly experienced state of distress among those who have left home and find themselves in a new environment (Van Tilburg et al., 1997). The effects of homesickness are negative: feelings of loneliness, sadness, and adaptation difficulties (Constantine et al., 2005). *Nostalgia* (*homesickness*) is from the Greek *nostos* meaning return to one's own country and *algos*

meaning pain and suffering (Bolaffi et al, 2003). The term *nostalgia* “refers to a feeling of homesickness or longing for people, things or situations which are far away in space (for example one’s family, home or country) or even time (a lost love, youth or, generally, the past)” (Bolaffi et al., 2003, p. 209). The term was introduced by Hofer in 1678, in his study on the sickness many young people from Switzerland suffered while working as mercenaries in foreign armies (Bolaffi et al., 2003). Hofer considered that people, who left their homes and families to study or work abroad, suffered so much from a disease with such symptoms as irritability, loss of appetite, and physical decline. He lacked a medical term for this disease. Therefore, the term *nostalgia* soon was indicating feeling of “sadness caused by leaving one’s country and the desire to return to it” (Bolaffi et al., 2003, p. 209). First, the researchers studied nostalgia as a disease having physical causes like unhealthy environment. Later, the studies of nostalgia started to focus on psychological, social, and cultural causes, among which were feelings of loneliness and challenges experienced in a new environment. During the romantic era, starting from the second half of 19th century until the First World War, researchers had enough material to study nostalgia due to forced exile of patriots. After the Second World War, due to internal and international emigration in Europe, the phenomenon of nostalgia attracted more attention. It was determined depression and loneliness were caused by distance from family, home, and difficulties during adaptation to a new environment (Bolaffi et al., 2003). These days homesickness, as a component of culture shock, is one problem international students face (Tognoli, 2003). Researchers claim up to 30% of international students may experience homesickness (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002, 2003). The effects of homesickness include loneliness, sadness, adjustment difficulties, social alienation, and poor studying skills (Messina, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007).

Researchers distinguish five aspects of homesickness: missing family, missing friends, home ruminations, feeling lonely, and adjustment problems (Willis et al., 2003).

Homesickness has been studied as one of the acculturative stress factors in cross-cultural adaptation (Wei et al., 2007). Duru and Poyrazli (2007) suggested a new culture experience causes mental and physical discomfort – acculturative stress. Lack of social support and missing important people are integral parts of acculturative stress. This idea was supported by a study on acculturative stress among international students in Malaysia (Rajab et al., 2014). The results revealed international students experience homesickness when they are away from family, friends and familiar environment. Another study showed students who left their love partners back home, “were intensely nostalgic about the family role they had inhabited at home” (Brown & Holloway, 2008, p. 43). The situation can get even worse, if the students do not want to share their feelings and emotions. Social isolation leads to homesickness (Rajab et al., 2014).

People of all cultures and all ages experience homesickness (Van Tilburg et al., 1996). However, it is difficult to estimate the prevalence of homesickness, as it depends on the situation. Therefore, specific contexts could be holidays, university, school, army, etc. (Van Tilburg et al., 1996). Generally, homesickness is not experienced continuously; however, in some cases feelings of homesickness are ongoing. Moreover, they occur during mental activity and passive activity, contrary to physical and active tasks (Fisher, 1989). Fisher argued 50-75 % of the general population, at least once, have experienced homesickness, whereas serious forms of homesickness have been experienced by 10-15% of the population.

There are four factors that affect levels of homesickness (Kegel, 2009): intrapersonal factors, interpersonal factors, environmental effects, and cultural differences.

Intrapersonal factors. Many researchers support the idea that the age and gender of international students affect their level of homesickness (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Younger individuals are more likely to experience homesickness than older individuals (Kazantzis & Flett, 1998). Moreover, women are more susceptible to

homesickness than men (Stroebe et al., 2002). Nevertheless, the relationship between age and the level of homesickness is not linear (Eureling-Bontekoe et al., 2000).

Language proficiency significantly predicts international students' homesickness (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Research conducted in Malaysia is consistent with this finding (Rajab et al., 2014). The results showed language barriers could cause homesickness. English language skills might be stressors in acculturative experience. McCormack (1998) found limited language fluency resulted in self-segregation. However, a study done in a Norwegian university reported unexpected results on language proficiency, both English and Norwegian, of international students (Sam, 2001). The researcher found that "while language proficiency may be an important alleviating factor when it comes to maladaptation, it may be unimportant when it comes to enhancing positive adaptation" (Sam, 2001, p. 332). Sam argued this finding was unique to Norway, because international students in this country have to prove their English language proficiency, otherwise, they cannot be accepted to universities. Moreover, in Norway English is widely spoken and understood by a lot of people. This fact facilitates students' in their everyday social activities (Sam, 2001). Sam (2001) suggested the study should be undertaken in another country to ascertain the results.

Research has illustrated how personality variables influence levels of homesickness (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007). More flexible and open-minded students are less likely to experience homesickness. Kegel (2009) suggested emotional intelligence might also play a role in the experience of homesickness. International students' ability to regulate emotion predicts their experience of homesickness after approximately a year and a half of studies (Yoo et al., 2006).

Interpersonal factors. Studies reported social acceptance plays a significant role in international students' adjustment, and students, who are satisfied with their social network, feel less homesick (Constantine et al., 2005; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002, 2003). Quality but

not quantity of interpersonal relationships matters in the experience of homesickness among international students (Kegel, 2009). Homesickness positively relates to the loss of a social support network. Some previous studies reported individuals who manage to regain more social support felt less homesick (Duru & Poyrazli, 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Mori (2000) asserted co-national support is essential for international students. On the other hand, Ward and Kennedy's study (1993) showed greater amount of host national interaction to be negatively correlated with homesickness. Moreover, greater interaction with co-nationals led to greater levels of homesickness.

Environmental effects. Successful or unsuccessful adjustment to a new university environment may help and/or hinder coping with homesickness (Kegel, 2009). Academic demands may increase homesickness (Lu, 1990). The requirements for studying are different in different countries. Therefore, students, who are not used to certain tasks, are more vulnerable to acculturative stress. The length of stay also influences acculturative stress. However, researchers have different results. Some studies (Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Ying, 2005) showed the longer students stay in a foreign country, the less stress they feel. Contrary to this, Greenland and Brown (2005) claimed international students' acculturative stress increased between two weeks and eight months of their stay. Messina (2007) suggested homesickness is experienced mostly by first-year students. Moreover, other studies (Wei et al., 2007; Ye, 2005) reported no correlation between length of time in the new country and homesickness.

Cultural Differences. Ye (2005) found the greater the difference between international students' home culture and host culture, the more they experience homesickness and stress. Moreover, the data showed Asian international students reported more acculturative stress than European international students when studying in the United States (Poyrazli et al., 2004; Wei et al., 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003). This finding is consistent with

another study on acculturation and adjustment of international and Northern American students in the US (Fritz et al., 2008). The results showed Asian students find it more difficult to cope with the new language and find friends. However, Asian international students are not the group most at risk of homesickness. Fritz et al. (2008) found European students find it more stressful to be away from family and friends. Orr and MacLachlan's results (2000) support this finding, reporting southern Europeans feel more homesick than other international students. Other research conducted at an American university showed African international students experience more homesickness than the students from Asian countries (Constantine et al., 2004). Based on this research, Constantine et al. (2005) suggested the African culture is different from American culture in terms of interpersonal relationships: African international students put more value on close interpersonal relationships than American students. However, both American and African culture are vast and it may not be appropriate to generalize the findings of the research done by Constantine et al. (2005). Africa is diverse, and each country has its own norms and values.

Homesickness has a negative effect on the academic progress of international degree students (Willis et al., 2003), and it causes physical problems: headaches, eating disorders, sleeping problems, and lack of energy (Ye, 2005). Homesick students have poor decision-making skills, studying problems, and do not enjoy social activities (Messina, 2007). Moreover, numerous studies have found a correlation between homesickness and depression (Constantine et al., 2004, Wei et al. 2007, Ying. 2005).

Many studies have shown social support is very important in international students' adaptation (Hendrickson et al., 2010; Hosseini, 2014; Rajab et.al, 2014). Therefore, it is crucial to help international students find friends in a foreign country. The following section discusses the importance of friendships in international students' experiences abroad.

Friendship

There is a body of research describing the role of friendship formation of international students during their studies in foreign universities (Bochner et al., 1985; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Ying, 2002). Friendship is an essential type of interpersonal relationship and one of the important factors of acculturation, social support, and success for international students.

Allan (1989) argued there is no criterion for someone to be chosen as a friend. Friendship can be defined as an interpersonal relationship characterized by mutual positive respect (Devito, 1992). In Wright's (1984) definition, friends are responsible for mutual emotional support, providing assistance, and responding to one another as unique irreplaceable individuals. It is unclear if this definition is universal. Davies (2011) questioned the idea that friendship is so simply defined and always a positive kind of relationship. Friendship is complex and diverse (Davies, 2011).

It is interesting to find out how a friend is defined, especially in contemporary Western society. In today's post-industrial society due to socio-cultural and demographic changes (high divorce rate, childbirth postponement) people conduct their personal relationships differently: choices have become more significant (Davies, 2011). Friendship is usually described as an ideal, positive, and beneficial relationship (Davies, 2011). However, a friendship could have negative practices being cloying or annoying, but sociological studies also focus on positive sides of friendship (Davies, 2011). Davies (2011) pointed out another important issue about modern friendships – the impact of new technologies on development of friendships. Social networking and gaming websites make it possible to form friendships without face-to-face contact (Davies, 2011). However, research showed the Internet enhances existing friendship ties that still involve face-to-face contacts (Wellman & Hogan, 2004).

Allan (1996) argued friendships are not truly voluntary, but also governed by social factors. An individual's social environment: work situation, domestic circumstances, existing

relationships influence friendship choice. Moreover, the voluntaristic nature of friendship is limited by our tendency to be friends with people who are socially similar to us (Davies, 2011). Therefore, there is something behind the ancient Greek playwright and poet Euripides's saying – “birds of a feather flock together”.

There are different types of friendships: “associate friends”, who share one common activity, “fun friends”, who meet just for parties, “comforter friends” providing emotional support for each other and “soulmates”, who support and trust each other, help and have fun together (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). All these types of friendships range from simple (“associate friends”, “fun friends”) to complex (“comforter friends”, “soulmates”) (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Moreover, there can be intracultural and intercultural friendships. Intracultural or co-cultural friendship – relationship between people sharing the same cultural background. Intercultural friendship is a special kind of friendship between people of different cultural backgrounds. The following section focuses on the peculiarities of intercultural friendship development and formation.

Intercultural friendship

When international students arrive in a new country, they begin the search for new relationships (Kim, 2001). According to Bochner et al. (1977), international students form co-national, host national, and multi-national friendships. The idea of those three types of friendships was supported by the findings of the study on international students' social ties at a British University (Schartner, 2014). Co-national friends give students an opportunity to discuss the new culture with people who have the same emotions and feelings. These co-national networks may reduce the stress students are experiencing during their studies abroad (Kim, 2001). A study on social ties of international students in the UK found co-national contacts play an essential role in reducing feelings of homesickness and loneliness during first months of students' sojourn (Schartner, 2014). However, “over time co-national contact

emerged as a secondary network” (Schartner, 2014, p.14). Despite providing emotional support, strong co-national friendship might decrease students’ willingness to adapt to a new environment (Ward & Searle, 1991). According to Kim (2001), the greater the co-national interpersonal communication, the lesser the intercultural transformation, which prevents cross-cultural adaptation. Therefore, Kim (2001) claimed host national friendship is beneficial and important for adaptation. Klineberg and Hull (1979) in their study on adaptation and coping included in the sample 2,536 students from 124 countries and 11 host countries (Brazil, Canada, France, Hong Kong, West Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, India, Iran, Japan, Kenya). The results indicated students who had more contacts with local students reported higher satisfaction with their academic and non-academic experiences.

There is indication that international students prefer to make host national friends (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Those who have more host national friends in their network report lower level of homesickness (Church, 1982). Ward and Kennedy (1993) argued international students who interacted more with host nationals, adapted to a host environment better, and improved communication competence. Interaction with host nationals contributes to an individual’s host communication competence (Kim, 2001). Students begin to interpret people’s behaviour and communication style more readily (Hendrickson et al., 2010). Even though international students have a strong desire to contact with host nationals to learn more about their culture, it is still problematic to establish friendship with host nationals (Schartner, 2014). There are several factors explaining this (Sam, 2001). The first reason is language skills. If international students have a poor command of the host language it makes it difficult for them to make host national friends (Yamazaki et al., 1997). The English language proficiency influences individuals’ communication skills (Gudykunst et al., 1991; Kudo & Simkin, 2003). The second reason is discrimination. Some individuals may hold

racial prejudices in the host environment (Kim, 1994). The third reason, according to Woolf (2007), is already established local friendship networks. Therefore, locals are not that open to new friendships.

Many international students form friendships with other international students (Hendrickson et al., 2010). International students' multi-national ties are made quickly and overwhelmingly (Schartner, 2014). The study done in Australia suggested that the more international ties the students develop, the better they were adjusted psychologically (Kashima & Loh, 2006). According to Hendrickson et al. (2010), forming friendships with multi-nationals is an advantage. First, multi-national friendships make an individual broad-minded (Yum, 2001). Second, a person has an opportunity to broaden his/her outlook by learning about not only the host culture, but other cultures (Hendrickson et al., 2010). Third, a sense of commonality – “a stranger in a strange land” not feeling alone in a new environment (Hendrickson et al., 2010). Fourth, according to Yeh and Inose (2003), many international students feel bad about their accents when they speak a foreign language. Thus, talking to other multi-nationals helps reduce embarrassment about language skills.

In this study, intercultural friendship is identified as a multinational friendship. Culture is a complex concept and it has a huge variety of definitions. Some definitions focus on the functions of culture, while others focus on the structure of culture. For the purpose of this study, the concept of culture used by West and Turner (2009) was found to be the most relevant. They affirm that culture is shared by one nation, the representatives of which inherit certain values, beliefs, and norms through socialization. To answer the research questions, a questionnaire was designed for international students to answer. One of the questions asks about their nationality. Thus, in this paper, culture means national culture. For example, the friendship between a Russian student and an American student is considered intercultural.

The development and formation of intercultural friendship is more difficult than the development and formation of co-cultural or intracultural friendships due to cultural differences and language proficiency (Smith, 1999; Zhang & Rentz, 1996). According to Adams et al. (2000), age, gender, religion, and cultural background influence the concept of friendship. Studies suggest culture has an impact on the perception of friendship. People from different cultural backgrounds have different understandings of friendship. Li (2010) found in her research on intercultural friendships between Chinese and American students that friendship form, function, and character are determined by culture. She reported similarities and differences between Chinese and American friendship perception. For the Chinese, friendship means some social obligation, help, and support, whereas for Americans – social activities and having fun. Argyle and Henderson (1984) tested the assumption that different cultures have similar sets of rules for friendship. They offered a list of friendship rules for participants to evaluate according to the rules of friendship in their home countries. The results of their study indicated significant cultural differences, like in personal and relational costs, in perceiving friendship.

Sias et al. (2008) argued that although intercultural friends share some similarities, they have to communicate them through cultural differences. This emphasizes the unique role of communication in intercultural friendship formation. Friendship values and expectations differ among cultures (Beebe et al., 2011). Hall (2011) proposed four dimensions of friendship expectations: symmetrical reciprocity, communion, solidarity, and agency. “Symmetrical reciprocity” describes mutual trustworthiness, support and authenticity, “communion” – emotional self-disclosure and availability, “agency” – gaining benefits from a friend, “solidarity” – sharing common activities, which was not supported in Hall’s (2012) multi-study investigation on structure of ideal friendship expectations. Therefore, these expectations are different in each culture. According to Beebe et al. (2011), there are four

factors affecting the development of intercultural friendships: cultural similarities across cultures (having common ground in something); cultural differences that might raise interest in the other person; prior intercultural experiences that might reduce the uncertainty about developing friendship with people from different cultures; and targeted socializing, when individuals socialize during special cultural or intercultural event. Nevertheless, generalities may not be appropriate for each member of an ethnic group. In developing intercultural friendships, it might be the time when friends are not aware of cultural differences; they develop a unique friendship (Beebe et al., 2011).

In friendship networks the strength of ties is important (Kim, 2001). The following section discusses strong and weak ties of international students in their friendship networks development.

Strong and weak ties

Social support plays a significant role in international students' contentment, homesickness level, and social connectedness during their studies abroad (Hendrickson et al., 2010). Ward et al. (2001) emphasized the quantity and quality of international friendships' networks. International students form friendships with host nationals, co-national, and multinationals. These relationships can be strong, of a good quality, or not so strong, and having certain benefits (Granovetter, 1983). The researchers examined international students' friendship networks with co-nationals and host nationals. Searle and Ward (1990) found in their study in New Zealand that students having good quality friendships reported higher level of satisfaction and enhanced psychological adjustment. Quality of relationships is more important than quantity in the realm of mental health (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000).

According to Sam's findings (2001), the quantity of friends is important for students from developing countries, and for students from developed countries it is not an issue. Ward and Kennedy (1993) found quantity of interaction with host nationals is more important for

sociocultural adjustment. Kim (2001) pointed out that the stronger the ties are with host nationals, the better students will adapt to a new environment. Moreover, weak ties with host nationals are also important for adaptation, due to their function as a source of information about the host culture (Kim, 2001).

Weak ties serve as bridges to different resources, giving the access to other networks (Hendrickson et al., 2010), while strong ties give a sense of mutuality and support in relationships, when partners wish to spend time together as much as possible for many years (Wellman, 1998). Neri and Ville (2008) in their study done in Australia considered new friendship network building as a renewal of social capital in a new environment. The researchers explained co-national friendships as bonding social capital, but host national and multi-national friendships as bridging social capital. They found weak ties with host nationals are important due to their function of diversifying the network. They also found students with more co-national friends in their network were happier than those who had less of them. Contrary to this finding, the study conducted in Norway reported “having host national friend did not appear to enhance one’s life satisfaction” (Sam, 2001, p. 331).

The current study aims to investigate the aspects of intercultural friendship formation to understand international degree students’ experience abroad. The purpose of the research is to explore the relationship between intercultural friendship and homesickness levels among international degree students at a Finnish University. As there is no clear consensus within the literature on the relationships between homesickness, demographics, and intercultural friendships, the following questions are put forth to further clarify these issues:

RQ1: How do age, sex, nationality, and living abroad duration affect homesickness level?

RQ2: To what extent does being in a love relationship affect homesickness level?

RQ3: How does diversity of students’ friendship network affect homesickness level?

Method

Sample

One hundred and ninety six international degree students at a Finnish university participated in this study. The participants were recruited by means of Facebook, mailing lists, and e-mailing directly to every international student on campus. After checking all the answers, 37 respondents were excluded from the sample due to not answering all the questions and giving information not relevant to the study. In the end, the answers of 159 international students were analyzed. The students came from 83 countries. The average age of the participants was 28.11 ($SD = 4.78$). Men made up 48.4% ($n = 77$) and women made up 51.6% ($n = 82$) of the sample. For comparison purposes, the participants were divided into 6 geographic regions: Europe ($n = 71, 44.7\%$), Asia ($n = 47, 25.8\%$), Africa ($n = 22, 13.8\%$), North and South America ($n = 17, 10.7\%$), the Middle East ($n = 6, 3.8\%$), and Australia ($n = 2, 1.3\%$).

Instrument

Participants completed online surveys that included demographic questions, questions about love relationships, questions about their friendship network, and the Homesickness and Contentment Scale (Shin & Abell, 1999). Demographic questions included: age, sex, nationality, academic program, how long they have lived abroad, and how long they have lived in the current city. Research demonstrates how long an individual lives abroad affects homesickness (Ying, 2005), so this question was included to assess its effect on homesickness. To assess the effect of a love relationship on homesickness, participants were asked if they were in a love relationship or not. These questions were included because being in a love relationship has been shown to affect homesickness levels: secure attachment was negatively associated with homesickness (Shal et al., 2011).

Questions about friendship network asked participants to list their five closest international friends (friends from countries other than that of the participants). Participants were then asked how long they had been friends with each international friend, how close they are with each international friend, how much time do they spend together, and what kinds of activities do they do together.

Shin and Abell's (1999) Homesickness and Contentment Scale was used to measure homesickness. The 20-item scale has 10 items that measure homesickness. Sample items include: "I want to go back to my home country" and "I am very interested in current situations in my country." Responses range from 1 *fully agree* to 5 *fully disagree*. In previous studies the alpha reliability for this study was $\alpha = .76$ (Hendrickson et al., 2010). In the current study, item 5 was found to be unreliable, and was dropped from the analysis, thus, $\alpha = .76$ ($M = 2.60$, $SD = .80$).

Results

To answer *RQ1* and *RQ2* a simple regression was conducted with age, sex, region where the participant was from (nationality), how long they have lived abroad, and whether or not they are in a love relationship as predictor variables. Being in a love relationship was dummy coded with being in a love relationship as the reference group. Homesickness served as the dependent variable. The results showed these predictor variables did not significantly predict homesickness: $R^2_{adj} = .01$, $p = .91$, $F = .30$; age ($b = -.07$, $p = .56$), sex ($b = -.11$, $p = .30$), region ($b = .06$, $p = .62$), time living abroad $b = .01$, $p = .90$), and love relationship ($b = -.01$, $p = .96$).

To answer *RQ3* a simple regression was conducted exploring the effect of friendship network diversity on homesickness. This analysis was separate from the previous analysis to tap the unique relationship between homesickness and the diversity of the friendship network.

The regression revealed friendship diversity networks had a significant effect on homesickness: $R^2_{adj} = .03$, $p = .02$, $F = 5.68$; $b = -.18$.

Discussion

The present study was designed to explore the relationship between intercultural friendship, demographics, and homesickness levels among international degree students at a Finnish University. In addition, the purpose of the research was to determine the relationship between demographics and homesickness, since there is no clear agreement on that in the literature. The results of this study are now compared to the findings of previous works.

The first research question aimed to find out how age, sex, nationality, and duration of time living abroad affected homesickness level. Contrary to expectations, this study found none of these demographic variables significantly predicted homesickness. However, previous research showed the age and gender of international students affected the level of homesickness (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007; Yeh & Inose, 2003). According to Kazantzis and Flett (1998), the younger an individual is, the more likely he will feel homesick. A possible explanation for the results of the current study might be the participants' average age is relatively high – 28 years of age. Older students can cope with homesickness more easily due to their longer life experience and level of independence.

Contrary to previous research, in which women experienced homesickness more often than men (Stroebe et al., 2002), this study found no effect for sex on level of homesickness. It is difficult to explain this result, but it might be related to the fact that in this sample the European students form the biggest demographic group (44.7%). European women are believed to be independent and self-confident, relying only on their own strength. There is, however, another possible explanation. It might be that Stroebe et al.'s study sample was very different from the sample of the current research.

In contrast to earlier findings, no effect of nationality on homesickness was detected. The findings of previous studies reported that for European students it is more difficult to be away from home and family members than for Asian students (Fritz et al., 2008; Orr & MacLachlan, 2000). African students are most likely to feel homesick, but Asian international students are not the group most experiencing homesickness (Constantine et al., 2004; Fritz et al., 2008). The reason for this result may have something to do with this study's sample. It seems possible the participants in the study are mature and independent; they were prepared for changes. Another possible explanation is the university organizes well-planned intervention programs, so the students feel socially connected. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind the context has an effect on the results of previous studies. The further physically and culturally a person is away from his home country, the more likely he will experience homesickness. The majority of students in the current setting are from European countries that might explain the unexpected results. One more explanation might refer to people's preparedness for life in Finland. There are a lot of prejudices about Finland, so students coming here might have been well informed and knew what to expect.

This study was unable to demonstrate that duration of time living abroad affected homesickness level in contrast to previous studies (Wilton & Constantine, 2003; Ying, 2005). However, the present study finding on living abroad duration is consistent with other studies (Wei et al., 2007; Ye, 2005) that reported no relationship between length of time in the new country and homesickness. This discrepancy could be attributed to host environment peculiarities. The host environment influences the sojourners' adaptation (Kim, 2001). According to Kim (2001), host receptivity and conformity pressure is the extent to which the host environment forces strangers to accept its culture and communication system. Openness and hospitality varies among countries.

The second research question sought to determine to what extent being in a love relationship affected homesickness. Surprisingly, it was found that being in a love relationship does not affect homesickness significantly. This result does not support the findings of other studies, in which a love relationship had a significant effect on students' feelings of missing home (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Shal et al., 2011). This result may be explained by the fact that this sample is diverse in its love relationships: students have partners from the host country, from their own country, and from other countries. The quantity of those who have partners living with them during their studies is almost equal to those who do not. These two factors could influence the results.

The third research question explored the effect of friendship diversity networks on homesickness. The results of the study indicated a significant effect of friendship diversity networks on homesickness. According to the results, international students who have formed multi-national ties have lower levels of homesickness. This important finding is consistent with previous research on international students' social ties (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Schartner, 2014). Previous research has demonstrated "international ties fulfilled an important support function based on shared 'foreignness' and a sense of commonality that helped to alleviate the more distressing aspects of a sojourn abroad" (Schartner, 2014, p. 10).

Though some of the results were unexpected and surprising, the study found a significant relationship between intercultural friendships and homesickness levels of international degree students.

Implications

The present study confirms previous findings and contributes additional evidence that social support plays a significant role in international students' experiences abroad. Social support that comes from friends assists in the adaptation process of students (Glass et al., 2014). The role of intercultural friendships of international students in decreasing their level

of homesickness emphasizes the importance of different social programs through which international students can meet and form friendships. Earlier research has illustrated that the intercultural ties can remain constant through the whole study period for the majority of students (Schartner, 2014). Moreover, international ties might compensate the lack of contacts with host nationals and loss of family support with international friends (Schartner, 2014).

The findings are useful for university educators, foreign students' advisors, international students' tutors and researchers interested in intercultural relationships. Finnish language teachers and teachers in international environment should encourage students to participate in international activities outside the classroom. International students' tutors and foreign students' advisors from International Office should organize their work in such a way that to give students more opportunities to meet each other, especially, at the very beginning of their stay, since they are the very first people new students meet in a new country.

This is the first study to investigate the effect of intercultural friendship on homesickness level in the Finnish context. Intercultural friendships have got limited attention from communication scholars. Thus, the findings raise intriguing questions regarding the nature of intercultural friendship and homesickness, thus make it interesting to conduct a further research.

Limitations and directions for future research

Two limitations should be addressed in this study. First, the sample was relatively small compared to the number of students available. To motivate students to participate in any study is a big issue. Second, online surveys sometimes have technical difficulties. Thus, while students were completing the survey, some of the questions were not answered due to technical reasons. In addition, several students refused to complete the survey because they did not trust the anonymity of a Google form survey.

Future studies on the current topic are therefore recommended. A further study should focus not only on intercultural friendships, but also on co-national and host national friendships to see the broader picture of international students' networks. It is advisable to do in-depth interviews with the students to learn more about their feelings and experiences, since during the data collection many e-mails were received with students' stories. A further study with more focus on the satisfaction level of international students in Finland is therefore suggested. In future investigations, it might be possible to do a longitudinal study to see how friendships are formed. It would be beneficial also to study each cultural group separately. Though international students share common challenges, their cultural differences should be addressed as well (Fritz, 2008). A love relationship is also an important issue for future research. Therefore, it is suggested to explore further how the location of a love partner influences the level of homesickness.

Conclusion

The present study explored the relationship between homesickness, demographics and intercultural friendships of international degree students at a Finnish university. The findings of the study emphasize the essential role of social support in international students' experiences abroad. A significant effect of intercultural friendship on homesickness level was found. Students with diverse friendship network reported reduced levels of homesickness. The current research has provided an important opportunity for Finnish universities to understand international students' experiences to advance the students' intervention programs.

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APPENDIX: INTERCULTURAL FRIENDSHIP AND HOMESICKNESS SURVEY

The following questionnaire is designed to gather information to explore the relationship between the feeling of homesickness and intercultural friendship among international degree students. This study concerns you, thus, the results might be interesting for you. The findings may show how you can make your stay in Finland more fruitful.

The questionnaire should only take about 10 minutes to complete. It has three parts: Your personal information, a friendship network scale, and a measure of your level of homesickness. Your responses are completely anonymous; only grouped results will be reported and no one will know how you answer the items in the questionnaire. No personal information identifying you with the study will be retained.

If you have any questions or are interested in the outcomes of this study, please contact me at ankuchma@student.jyu.fi. If you have additional questions, you may contact my thesis supervisor: Professor Stephen M. Croucher (stephen.m.croucher@jyu.fi).

Thank you in advance for participating in this study! I really appreciate your cooperation with me! Your answers are very important!

Part 1. Your personal information

1. Please write in your age:
2. Please write in your sex:
3. Please write in your nationality:
4. Are you in a love relationship? (if the answer is No, please skip questions 5 and 6)
5. Where is your partner/spouse from?
6. Is your partner/spouse living in Jyväskylä?
7. Have you ever lived abroad before coming to Jyväskylä?
8. For how long did you live abroad?
9. How long have you been staying in Jyväskylä?

10. Which International Master's Degree programme are you a student of?

Part 2. A friendship network scale

The following chart will help to map your relationship with your friends. Please list the initials of your 5 closest friends here at Jyväskylä who are not from your home country, or from Finland. The following questions will ask you to report on information that pertains to your relationship with your friends.

Initials	What is the nationality of your friend?	How long have you been friends?	On a scale from 1-5, rank how close you are with each friend of yours: 1 = not close at all, 2 = some closeness, 3 = moderate closeness, 4 = very close, 5 = extremely close	How often do you spend time together? 1 = everyday 2 = more than once a week 3 = weekly	What kind of activities do you have together?
			1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
			1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
			1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	

			1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	
			1 2 3 4 5	1 2 3	

Part 3. A measure of your level of homesickness

Please read each item carefully and circle the number that best reflects your response,

WHERE: 1 = *fully agree*; 2 = *somewhat agree*; 3 = *don't know*; 4 = *somewhat disagree*; 5 = *fully disagree*.

1. I want to go back to my home country.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I write letters to my family and friends back home.

1 2 3 4 5

3. I am very interested in current situations in my country.

1 2 3 4 5

4. I remember birthdays of my family back home.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I forget my country's national holidays.

1 2 3 4 5

6. I think about what I would do if I were back home.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I remember special occasions happening back home.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I feel homesick.

1 2 3 4 5

9. I miss my friends and family back home.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I wish I had a friend with whom I could do many things.

1 2 3 4 5

11. I feel left alone in this world.

1 2 3 4 5

12. I feel that nobody understands me.

1 2 3 4 5

13. I feel lonely.

1 2 3 4 5

14. I feel that I am not close to anyone.

1 2 3 4 5

15. I feel excluded by others.

1 2 3 4 5

16. I feel that my situation is hopeless.

1 2 3 4 5

17. I am unhappy with myself.

1 2 3 4 5

18. I feel depressed.

1 2 3 4 5

19. I feel overwhelmed and defeated.

1 2 3 4 5

20. I get upset very easily.

1 2 3 4 5