

# Travelling back home and becoming a stranger

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**Abstract** | This present study investigated the phenomenon of reverse culture shock experienced by Thai youths upon their return to Thailand. It adopted an interpretive paradigm utilising a qualitative research method. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 25 Thai youths who had completed an exchange study abroad programme in a European country. When experiencing their own home culture again, all the returnees encountered the effects of reverse culture shock in terms of changes in their identities, behaviours, cognitions and emotions. These effects could be categorised into five main dimensions, namely: personal growth, cultural distance, social distance, moral distance, and emotional aspects. Although the negative effects of returning home were largely addressed by these students, positive consequences were also noted. The findings of this study have informed the development of a framework that serves as a guide for investigating the experience of reverse culture shock among overseas students.

**Keywords** | Reverse culture shock, Thai students, European countries, short-term study abroad, re-adaptation

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## 1. Introduction

The participation of students in study abroad programmes, ranging from a few weeks to one year in duration, has witnessed a steady increase over the past decades (Barkin, 2018; Talawanich, Jivanvittayakit, & Wattanacharoensil, 2019). This form of travel is widely recognized as a distinct, prominent, and growing sector within educational tourism (Carneiro & Malta, 2007). Multiple factors have contributed to the growth of this phenomenon including the declining costs of transportation and communication, the perceived value associated with studying overseas, the rising number of universities offering short-term programs for international students (Education GPS, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021), the perceived advantages students and/or their parents associate with this form of study, such as educational benefits, affordability, and shorter time commitments (Huguan, Chen, & Ruangkanjanases, 2020; Pitts, 2016), and the reputation and strong image of specific cities and universities abroad (Balaban & Kovács, 2023).

Numerous studies have reported positive educational outcomes associated with students' participation in educational tourism (Stone & Petrick, 2013). These benefits encompass a deeper understanding of specific course topics (Sachau, Brasher, & Fee, 2010), improved academic performance (Ruth, Brewis, Blasco, & Wutich, 2019), higher academic interest (Ruth et al., 2019), expanded worldview (Ruth et al., 2019), improved language proficiency (Liu, 2010), and personal growth (e.g. a greater sense of global citizenship and an expanded worldview) (Ruth et al., 2019; Stone & Petrick, 2013; Stoner, Tarrant, Perry, Stoner, Wearing & Lyons, 2014). Other benefits reported in the existing literature include greater career advancement and social acceptance (Huguan et al., 2020), enhanced self-awareness, increased independence (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Watson, Siska, & Wolfel, 2013), and increased confidence

(Sachau et al., 2010).

However, a number of studies (e.g. Brown & Holloway, 2008; Dailey-Strand, Collins, & Callaghan 2021; Iorga, Soponaru, Muraru, Socolov, & Petrariu, 2020; Shan, Hussain, & Sargani, 2020) also report that studying and living in another country, whether for a short or long period of time, has posed dilemmas to the students as they usually encounter an unpleasant psychological phenomenon ('culture shock') while living in a new country. Many returning travellers also face homesickness and adjustment problems (Dailey-Strand et al., 2021; Iorga et al., 2020; Shan et al., 2020). Once they complete the study programme and return to their home country, they then undergo a displeasing experience known as 'reverse culture shock', caused by the challenges of re-adjusting to their home culture (Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020; Fanari, Liu, & Foerster, 2021; Le & LaCost, 2017; Talawanich et al., 2019).

As mentioned, these young travellers will be equipped with good knowledge, skills and qualifications, and are likely to become active members of the country who can contribute economically and socially to their nation (World Bank Group, 2022). Therefore, the impacts of reverse culture shock should not be overlooked as they can cause negative impacts to the physical and mental health of sojourners and limit their ability to contribute to the development of their home country. Moreover, if these returnees cannot deal with the effects of the reverse culture shock, a problem of brain drain will occur as these returnees may decide to return to their country of study (Labrianidis & Vogiatzis, 2012).

While reverse culture shock has been extensively studied among international returnees, the existing literature primarily focuses on other groups of sojourners, such as college or university students who have studied abroad for more than a year (e.g. Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020; Fanari et al., 2021; Le & LaCost, 2017; Winkel, Strachan, & Amir, 2021), students on expeditions (e.g. Allison,

Davis-Berman, & Berman, 2011; Tomlin, Miller, Schellhase, New, Karwa, & Ouma, 2014), returning migrants (e.g. Adeniyi & Onyeukwu, 2021; Potter, 2005), and missionary children (e.g. Fray, 1988; Huff, 2001). Furthermore, these studies typically examine returnees from countries other than Thailand. Despite the increasing demand among Thai youths to participate in short-term study abroad programmes, research on reverse culture shock among Thai youths is limited. To date, the only published studies on this topic are those conducted by Talawanich et al. (2019) and Wattanacharoensil, Talawanich, & Jianvittayakit (2020), which use the W-Curve framework to explore changes in perceptions and emotions during the re-entry process. However, this framework may have limitations in uncovering all dimensions of reverse culture shock faced by Thai overseas returnees.

Therefore, this study aims to provide empirical evidence of the effects of reverse culture shock among Thai youths and fill the gap in the literature on Thai youths studying abroad by shedding light on previously unexplored facets of this phenomenon as experienced by young students from a developing country studying in a developed country. The Homecomer Culture Shock Scale introduced by Fray (1988), which includes four dimensions (cultural distance, interpersonal distance, moral distance, and grief), was utilised as a framework to understand this phenomenon, as these dimensions seem to encompass the experiences of reverse culture shock reported in existing literature and offer a holistic understanding of the phenomenon, covering affective, behavioural, and cognitive aspects of individuals' attitudes.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Culture Shock

When individuals relocate to a new environment, they usually face psychological challenges

during the initial period, while they try to adjust themselves to the culture and social norms of a new place (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Hakak & Anton, 2020). This psychological tension is usually defined by anxiety and stress and known as 'culture shock' (Adler, 1975; Oberg, 1960). The term 'culture shock' was first coined by Oberg in 1960, described as "the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg, 1960, p.177). Researchers (Adler, 1975; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Oberg, 1960) argue that cultural shock is common and inevitable for sojourners moving to a new culture. It can be temporary or long-lasting, depending on the pace of adjustment (Adeniyi & Onyeukwu, 2021).

Oberg (1960) introduced the stage theory of culture shock, subsequently refined by scholars such as Pedersen, Smalley, and Eckermann (Narouz, 2018) who added valuable insights into the stages' terminology. According to this theory, individuals go through four primary stages of culture shock. The initial phase, known as the honeymoon stage, occurs when individuals immerse themselves in a new culture, finding excitement in novel experiences. During this phase, everything unfamiliar is viewed as positive, intriguing and enjoyable. This stage can span from a few days or weeks to approximately six months. The second stage, labelled the disintegration stage, marks the commencement of culture shock as the initial novelty diminishes and the disparities between the familiar home culture and the new one emerges more distinctly. This phase is typified by the challenges of adjusting to the new environment, as individuals contend with difficulties and become disoriented, concerned about their unfamiliar surroundings. Feelings of confusion, depression, and stress may become prominent, leading into the third stage of recovery or adjustment. Here, individuals embark on the process of adapting to the new culture by developing a deeper understanding of, and fostering relationships within, the host culture. They actively figure out how to handle the challenges they

encountered and learn to value cultural differences. The final stage, denoted as the adaptation or mastery stage, signifies the culmination of the journey. Sojourners have effectively integrated themselves into the host culture, manifesting a sense of ease and competence in navigating daily life, fostering effective communication, and comprehending cultural norms and values (Oberg, 1960).

Building upon Oberg's stage theory, Lysgaard (1995) developed the 'U-curve' hypothesis, in which the phenomenon of culture shock is described using a U-shape graph to represent the process of adjustment. The U-shape graph represents the process of adjustment of a sojourner starting from the honeymoon stage (represented by the high beginning point of the U-curve), the culture shock or rejection stage (described by the low point between the two high points at the beginning and the end of the U-curve), and the adjustment or effective functioning stage (characterised by the high end point of the U-curve) (Lysgaard, 1995).

## 2.2. Reverse culture shock

After spending various lengths of time in a new country and working hard to fit into a new environment, individuals then undergo another round of cultural adaptation when they return home (Akhtar, Kamal, Hayee, & Imtiaz, 2018; Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020; Talawanich et al., 2019). This time, they need to undergo a process of re-adaptation into their own culture (Gaw, 2000), known as reverse culture shock or re-entry shock.

The underlying concept of reverse culture shock is similar to that of culture shock (Adeniyi & Onyeukwu, 2021). Gaw (2000) summarises both phenomena by stating that culture shock represents the initial shock of new environment and culture, whereas reverse culture shock is associated with the shock and re-adaptation to one's own environment and culture after spending time overseas. Many scholars have attempted to define

reverse culture shock. For example, Young (2014, p.59) defines this phenomenon as a second, stronger round of culture shock characterised by "physical, psychological, linguistic, and socio-cultural difficulties experienced after an extended stay in a foreign country", and Akhtar et al. (2018, p.258) describe it as a "feeling of not belonging to the native culture after spending [a] substantial amount of time abroad".

Although those returnees have spent almost their entire life in their home country and relatively shorter periods overseas, the process of re-adjusting to their native country appears to be more problematic and challenging than the initial adjustment they underwent in their host country (Adler, 1981; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963; Le & LaCost, 2017). Storti (2007, p.16) describes the more severe effects of re-entry shock, observing that "the strangeness of home is bound to be more alarming than the strangeness overseas." This is because, first, returnees usually do not anticipate any difficulty in re-entering their original culture (Butcher, 2002; Le & LaCost, 2017; Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015; Mooradian, 2004). Secondly, they usually have unrealistic expectations (Chang, 2009; Szkudlarek, 2010) that their family, friends and home culture will remain the same while they were away, when in reality these people and things may move on (Mooradian, 2004; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010). Third, these individuals have been accustomed to life in a host country and do not find things which they get used to in their home country (Adeniyi & Onyeukwu, 2021). Fourth, changes in worldviews, perception and lifestyle as a result of living abroad may make it difficult for returnees to fit back into their old lives in their home country and they are prone to frustration with things they used to consider normal (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Le & LaCost, 2017; Pritchard, 2011). Fifth, returnees often lack the support of people around them during the process of re-adjustment, who may (for example) show little interest in their stories about life overseas (Fanari

et al., 2021). Finally, returning visitors often lack coping skills necessary for re-adjustment (Arthur, 2003). For all these reasons, returning sojourners are likely to find that “a place once lived becomes uncomfortable and sometimes unacceptable as a place to be in” (Adeniyi & Onyeukwu, 2021, p.34).

The effects are said to be temporary and to vary by individual (Fanari et al., 2021). Some people are able to re-adapt within a few weeks, while others might feel alienated for months (Fanari et al., 2021). Additionally, returnees tend to differ greatly in the degree to which reverse culture shock affects them (Neuliep, 2018). Some have few concerns, while other may face severe difficulties (Akhtar et al., 2018). Certain factors are found to contribute to the degree of the impacts of reverse culture shock on returning visitors. Akhtar et al. (2018) and Pitts (2016) each argue that the difference in culture between the host country and the home country plays an important role in the intensity of the reverse culture shock experience: the larger the cultural difference, the more severe the reverse cultural shock. Sussman (1986) attests that individuals’ ability to adjust in the host cultures has a reverse relationship with their ability to re-adjust to their home cultures, which means that the more successful sojourners are in blending themselves into a host culture, the more likely they are to find it difficult to re-adjust when they return home.

Fray (1988) is considered a pioneering researcher on the phenomenon of reverse culture shock. He conducted a study on 438 American children who were missionaries and had returned home to enter college. Fray utilised the Homecomer Culture Shock Scales (HCSS), a measurement tool he developed in 1986, to assess the reverse culture shock experienced by these children. The HCSS consists of four main aspects, namely cultural distance, interpersonal distance, grief, and moral distance, each of which comprises related behavioural items. The framework of the Home-

comer Culture Shock Scales (HCSS) has been widely employed by researchers to investigate the phenomenon of reverse culture shock in various contexts. For instance, Huff (2001) examined the differences in reverse culture shock and other related aspects between missionary children and non-missionary children. Fanari et al. (2021) explored the experience of reverse culture shock among international college students upon their return to their home country. Additionally, Tohyama (2008) investigated the relationships between reverse culture shock, relationship change, gender, and study abroad duration among college students. In these studies, the concept of each dimension of the HCSS has been refined to encompass additional related aspects. For instance, in Fanari et al.’s (2021) study, the cultural distance dimension included language difficulties, which was not originally included in this dimension in the original version of the HCSS. These researchers utilised the four dimensions of the HCSS model and the re-defined meanings of these dimensions based on a thorough review of the literature as a framework for their studies. The following are the explanations of these dimensions:

Cultural distance refers to an individual’s inability to reconnect to one’s home culture and encompasses language difficulties (e.g. forgetting specific words, failing to understand local slang), professional difficulties (e.g. being unable to find a job that matches qualifications, or being unappreciated by supervisors and/or co-workers), academic difficulties (e.g. being unable to understand the education system in one’s own country), and environmental difficulties (e.g. being confused by urban configurations or similar) (Butcher, 2002; Fanari et al., 2021; Fray, 1988). Pitts (2016) adds that cultural distance is likely to occur when the host country is different from one’s home country geographically and climatically.

Interpersonal distance is defined as disconnection with the people in one’s home country including family, friends, and romantic partners (Fray,

1988). As a result of significant changes in perception and worldviews, many overseas returnees experience a sense of isolation (Welsh, 2015) and disconnection from their parents and/or other relatives (Winkel et al., 2021) and find it difficult to live with them again (Butcher, 2002; Fanari et al., 2021). Existing literature (Le & LaCost, 2017; Winkel et al., 2021) also reveals that returnees sense a gap between them and their friends and/or romantic partners, and struggle to relate to these people in the same way as they did before leaving to study overseas.

Moral distance refers to difficulties adjusting to social norms or culturally dominant values (e.g. appropriate behaviours, local customs, ways of thinking and social taboos) in one's home country as a result of being exposed to different standards and values in a host country (Fray, 1988; Winkel et al., 2021). Finally, grief refers to unpleasant feelings experienced by returnees (Fray, 1988). For example, Butcher (2002) conceptualised the re-entry process of overseas returnees as a grieving process in which the returnees may face various unpleasant feelings, including anger, guilt, sadness, loneliness, homesickness, and numbness. Other unpleasant feelings highlighted in previous studies include depression (Akhtar, Kamal, Imtiaz, & Hayee, 2022; Talawanich et al., 2019), frustration (Nielsen, 2022; Talawanich et al., 2019); anxiety (Akhtar et al., 2022); and alienation (Akhtar et al., 2018). Such feelings can have negative impacts on returnees' psychological wellbeing (Gaw, 2000).

Although the re-entry experiences of overseas returning visitors are largely highlighted as negative in existing studies, many scholars also report its positive consequences to these sojourners, such as greater appreciation of the host culture (Pritchard, 2011), improved relationships with parents (Butcher, 2002; Le & LaCost, 2017), personal growth and development (e.g. becoming more mature and independent, more confident, more open-minded, and less judgmental) (Talawanich et

al., 2019; Tracy-Ventura, Dewaele, Köylü, & McManus, 2016) and greater awareness and acceptance of cultural differences (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Watson et al., 2013). Moreover, a new sense of identity, improved skills, characteristics and worldviews influenced by the host cultures as well as higher education and overseas experiences (e.g. language proficiency, confidence, appearance, fashion, and manners) can serve as long-term assets for returnees in their future education and career (Allison et al., 2011; Mooradian, 2004).

Similar to the phenomenon of culture shock, which is described as a changing pattern consisting of multiple stages identifying the ability of individuals to adjust to a new environment, reverse culture shock is also viewed as a changing mental state comprising several stages. The U-curve used to explain the structure of culture shock was expanded by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), who added a second U-shape to create a pattern like the English letter 'W'. According to Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), the added U-curve explains the reverse culture shock experienced by sojourners when they return to their native culture. The three stages, used to describe the nature of individual's initial adjustment in a foreign culture in the first U-shape, are also used to explain the experience of returning visitors.

### 3. Methodology

This study is based on an interpretive paradigm, wherein knowledge is socially constructed and based on interactions and interrelations between individuals (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2020), and therefore, it can be understood and interpreted only from the point of view of those individuals who possess knowledge and related experiences (Goodson & Phillimore, 2004). This approach is deemed appropriate for this study because its main objective was to gain rich and in-

depth understanding of how Thai youths completing an exchange study programme in a European country constructed and interpreted the meaning of their reverse culture shock on returning to Thailand. Semi-structured interviews were utilised as the main data collection technique. This technique not only enabled the researcher to capture the complex reality of the graduate returnees' reverse culture shock, but also to clarify questions and answers (Jennings, 2011). In addition, it also allowed respondents to freely describe their experiences (Carey, 2013).

The participants of this research were undergraduates and master's degree students who completed exchange programmes, ranging from four to twelve months in duration, at partner institutions located in European countries. These students earned credits from the respective institutions, which were transferable to their home institution's academic transcript. The exchange programmes undertaken by the respondents differed in terms of the field of study, programme level (i.e., undergraduate or master's degree), and duration. The reason that the exchange programmes in European countries was one of the selection criteria lies in the belief that cultural and geographical differences between Thailand, which is a developing Eastern country, and developed Europe countries could provide an interesting insight on the issue of reverse culture shock. In addition, only the respondents who returned to Thailand less than five years after completing the programme were selected based on the belief that this period of year was still recent, so the respondents were still able to recall their experiences of returning home.

As a result, a total of twenty-five respondents were selected. This total number of respondents was determined by the saturation point of the data, which was when the responses of the interviewees became repetitive and indicated no new information (Patten & Newhart, 2018). These participants were reached via a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. At first, purpo-

sive sampling was used to recruit the participants through the researchers' personal and professional connections, which generated ten participants. Purposive sampling was very useful as it allowed the researcher to reach participants who had direct experiences and could yield rich insights (Patton, 2014). Then, the researcher employed snowball sampling by asking the first set of the participants to nominate other people whose qualifications met the selection criteria and might be willing to participate (Emmel, 2013). This sampling technique proved effective and generated the remaining fifteen respondents. Of twenty-five respondents, eighteen were female and seven male, aged between nineteen and twenty-six years. Fourteen participants completed a study programme in the UK, five in France, four in Germany and two in Spain. Participants' detailed demographics are reported in Table 1.

The interview guide was formulated based on the literature review. It served as a tool to ensure that all the necessary topics were covered (Carey, 2013) and consisted of questions about the participant's experiences during their stay abroad, their adjustment in a host country, their returning experiences, changes that occurred in them as a result of studying abroad, and both positive and negative consequences they had encountered back home.

Before commencing the main study, a pilot study was carried out with four respondents to ensure the effectiveness of the interview guide in capturing the data needed to fulfill the research objective, as well as the clarity of the questions (Jennings, 2011). The main study was conducted between June and August 2021. Although all the interviewees were fluent in English, they opted to use Thai language in the interviews because they felt more comfortable to communicate in their mother tongue. Each interview lasted 50-90 minutes and was audio recorded upon gaining consent from the interviewees, for the convenience of data analysis. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Participants were also ensured of the ano-

Table 1 | Profile of the respondents

ID	Age	Gender	Host country	Months in host country	Years back in Thailand
S1	22	Female	UK	4	1
S2	21	Male	UK	4.5	1
S3	19	Female	Spain	4.5	1.5
S4	24	Female	UK	6	2
S5	21	Male	UK	6	2.5
S6	23	Male	Spain	8	1.5
S7	22	Female	Germany	12	2
S8	25	Female	UK	9	1.5
S9	24	Female	Germany	12	1
S10	19	Female	France	5	3
S11	23	Female	France	6.5	2
S12	25	Male	Germany	12	3.5
S13	25	Male	UK	7	2
S14	19	Female	UK	8	3
S15	20	Male	Germany	12	2
S16	21	Female	France	12	3.5
S17	24	Female	UK	4.5	2
S18	22	Male	UK	6	3
S19	26	Female	UK	6	3
S20	20	Female	France	4	3
S21	23	Female	UK	4	3
S22	19	Female	UK	8	2
S23	22	Female	UK	12	2
S24	23	Female	France	9	1.5
S25	20	Female	UK	8	2

nymity and confidentiality of their information, as pseudonyms would be used in the publication, and the information they shared would be used only for the purpose of research and education. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the research. As the interviews were conducted in Thai, they were first transcribed in Thai and translated into English later by the researcher. To ensure accuracy, the translation was verified by a native English-speaker who is a lecturer in a Thai university and is fluent in Thai.

The data were analysed with thematic analysis. The effectiveness of this technique lies in its flexibility, allowing themes to emerge freely from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analytical steps followed the suggestions of Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher became fami-

liar with the data by reading the transcripts thoroughly. Then, she interpreted the data, searched for meaning and patterns and created initial codes based on the main ideas and common meanings recurring throughout the data. The relevant data extracts were collated together within each code. Then, the identified codes were reviewed and grouped into themes. These themes were developed and named based on the meaning of the collated data extracts or the story they tell. All identified themes were then reviewed, together with the codes and collated data extracts, to ensure that they accurately and thoroughly met the research objective.

In summary, to effectively address the primary objective of this study, which was to gain a comprehensive and profound insight into the reverse



culture shock experiences of Thai students pursuing education overseas, an interpretive paradigm was adopted. Employing a qualitative research approach, data were acquired through semi-structured interviews and subsequently subjected to thematic analysis.

#### 4. Findings

Thematic analysis yielded five main themes that reflected the reverse culture shock experiences of Thai students completing an exchange study abroad programme in a European country. Th-

ree of these were consistent with Fray’s (1988) Homecomer Culture Shock Scale, namely cultural distance, interpersonal distance and moral distance. The interpersonal distance was renamed ‘social distance’ to better describe the nature of this aspect, and the grief dimension of this model was renamed ‘emotional aspects’ because both positive and negative feelings were detected, which were not captured by the term ‘grief’. An additional theme beyond these four dimensions was also identified from the data, named ‘personal growth’. All participants identified their experiences under all five themes, but the emphasis on each theme varied among them, reflecting the complex nature of reverse culture shock.

Table 2 | Summary of the findings

Main themes	Explanation	Examples of respondents’ phrasing
1. Personal growth	A range of advantages, both in terms of educational outcomes and positive shifts in personality that prove beneficial for future study/career and daily life	<i>"Living and studying abroad has improved my language proficiency significantly."</i> (S9) <i>"Learning in a foreign context has taught me to be flexible and open-minded."</i> (S21)
2. Cultural distance	Challenges related to reconnection with the home country were faced, particularly pertaining to climate, transportation, and language.	<i>"Returning to Thailand's heat was a bit overwhelming."</i> (S13) <i>"Getting around Thailand was a struggle after years in a place with efficient public transportation."</i> (S10) <i>"After being away for a while, I struggled to catch up with the Thai slang and internet language that had evolved. It felt like everyone was speaking a different language online."</i> (S4)
3. Social distance	Disconnection with social networks (i.e., parents, friends, lovers) were experienced.	<i>"Coming back after years abroad was bittersweet. While I was excited to reunite with my family, I realized we had grown distant."</i> (S23) <i>"I had a problem to reconnect with my old friends. The shared experiences we once had seemed distant."</i> (S11)
4. Moral distance	The contrast in the perception of the seriousness of plagiarism and copyright issues between themselves and people in Thailand was recognized.	<i>"The perception of plagiarism and copyright breaches was markedly different between my experiences abroad and back home."</i> (S4)
5. Emotional aspects	A mix of feelings and three main changing patterns of emotions were experienced. (i) Pleasant feelings, followed by unpleasant feelings and neutral feelings (ii) Pleasant feelings, followed by unpleasant feelings and a combination of neutral and negative feelings (iii) Pleasant feelings, followed by persistent negative feelings	<i>"I was really happy and excited about the thought of seeing my parents and friends again."</i> (S1) <i>"The climate used to bother me, but after readjusting to life in Thailand, it's just one of those things that doesn't bother me anymore."</i> (S3) <i>"I was frustrated to see how outdated and congested Thailand's traffic and public transport had remained."</i> (S2)

##### 4.1. Personal growth

Personal growth was highlighted by all participants when asked to describe their re-entry experiences. All of them perceived that, in addition to educational outcomes including acquiring new academic knowledge, improving English proficiency, enhancing skills in second languages (e.g., German, French, and Spanish), and developing a heightened interest in academics (e.g., pursuing

tion to educational outcomes including acquiring new academic knowledge, improving English proficiency, enhancing skills in second languages (e.g., German, French, and Spanish), and developing a heightened interest in academics (e.g., pursuing

Master's or doctoral degrees), they had also significantly changed in terms of personality. For example, S13 and S20 noted that:

[w]hile I was in the UK, I learned a bunch of really useful stuff, especially about business and marketing ideas from the Western point of view. Plus, my English got better during that time. Back before I went to the UK, my English was pretty basic, but after some time there, I was more confident to speak English with my friends and teachers. (S13)

Living and studying in France, even for a few months, has inspired me to pursue a master's degree in hotel management in France because I had learnt from my teachers in France about a very well-known hotel school there. Therefore, after coming back from France, I prepared myself and went back to do a master's degree there. (S20)

They viewed such educational outcomes and changes as positive and beneficial for their future study/career and daily life. The majority of them considered such changes as 'personal development and growth or 'positively life-changing'. These changes in terms of personality included more confidence, more independence, more maturity and a greater ability to take responsibility and adapt to other people. According to the participants, the realisation of such changes did not immediately occur upon returning home but had gradually arisen. For example, S5 stated that:

I was more mature and independent. Before I went to the UK, I had to ask for advice from my parents on almost everything because I wasn't confident that my own decision[-making]

was good... After coming back home, I was more confident to make decisions on my career without asking an opinion from my parents. I could do things on my own, live alone, and no longer needed help from my parents.

Some respondents admitted that they could not help feel superior to those around them who did not have an opportunity to study and live in a developed country. According to these respondents, such worldviews can only be adopted only when people spend time in a developed nation. This point was clearly illustrated by S19, who stated that

I couldn't help but feel somewhat superior to my colleagues in Thailand who graduated in the country. I sense that I've improved significantly in terms of knowledge in my field and English communication. Consequently, I believe I deserve greater recognition and a higher salary than those studying in Thailand, given my experience of living and studying in a more developed country.

## 4.2. Cultural distance

This theme encompasses three main aspects in Thailand, which the respondents had difficulty reconnecting with, including climate, transportation, and language. Among these aspects, difficulties concerning climate and transportation were cited by all respondents.

Regarding climate, many respondents said that hot weather, extreme sunlight, and heavy rain appeared unbearable for them during the first few weeks after returning home. Some participants added that, although they had lived with this kind of climate in Thailand almost all their lives, they

were still shocked when facing this climate again after spending time abroad. Many people said they had to stay in an air-conditioned room almost all the time during the initial period of re-adjustment. This point was clearly explained by S15:

In the initial weeks after returning to Thailand, dealing with the hot weather and intense sun was quite a struggle. I pretty much needed to stay in air-conditioned places all the time. I know it might sound strange, given that I've lived in Thailand for so long, but it's the truth. It actually took me months to readjust to the weather and the heavy rain in Thailand.

As for transportation-related problems, four main difficulties were identified by the respondents. The first concerned travelling to certain places. Many respondents said that they did not remember how to go to some places because changes to travel routes and surrounding environments. The second difficulty was limited to those returning from the countries which use right-hand traffic because in Thailand, drivers drive on the left side of the road. However, the respondents who addressed this difficulty uniformly said that they learned to cope with this difficulty within a very short time. The third difficulty was related to traffic conditions in Thailand. There is a huge amount of traffic on roads in Bangkok, poor roads and poor driving discipline. The respondents stated that although these were common problems in Thailand that they were aware of before going abroad, they still found it very difficult to face them when coming home. Finally, the poor public transportation system in the country was discussed. S8 was very disappointed to see that public transportation in Thailand was inefficient and inconvenient, compared to that of the UK. Similarly, S7 said that she wished to see some development or changes of public transportation in Thailand, but was disappointed to see that it was the same as before she went abroad. The

followings are the opinions of both respondents on these issues.

I'm really let down by the transportation system in Thailand ... I found that getting around to different places in Bangkok and other provinces using public transportation like [a] bus or train is a real hassle...the train system in Thailand is seriously outdated compared to that in the UK. (S8)

I expected some improvement in the public transportation in Thailand while I was in Germany, but it was a letdown to find out it's pretty much unchanged. Public transportation still doesn't cover the entire area in Bangkok, and the condition of the trains is still the same as it was before I went abroad. (S7)

A problem concerning language was mentioned by S9 who had been in Germany for 12 months. She explained about her difficulty in understanding some slang words used in social media by saying that:

When I read comments of people in Facebook, I didn't understand many words people used. There were so many new slang words created and used in social media during the time I was not here [in Thailand]. I felt so left behind.

Some respondents added that they were misunderstood by other people when having difficulty in using Thai language (both speaking and writing) and felt that other people thought that they were pretentious and wanted to show off they had studied in a Western country. However, all the respondents noted they did not suffer language problems for long.

### 4.3. Social distance

Ten respondents addressed difficulties or disconnection with their social networks (i.e. parents, friends, lovers). Five of these respondents stated that they felt uncomfortable living with their parents and decided to move out because they realised that they were more mature and independent and no longer wanted to be taken care of by their parents. Two respondents felt that they could not enjoy privacy while staying with their parents, as illustrated by S23:

Around two or three weeks after I returned home, I felt very uncomfortable living with my mum. I was very frustrated when she cleaned my room and washed my clothes because I felt she treated me just like I was still a little kid.

S6 explained that the distance he felt from his parents after coming home mainly came from changes in his worldview regarding relationships among and responsibilities of different family members. Before going to Spain, he was accustomed to a family system in which children are reliant emotionally, socially and often financially on their parents throughout their parents' lives, and parents think that it is their responsibility to direct their children's lives, even after their children become adults. However, after he had learnt about the more independent family system of European countries, he found that it made more sense to him. This was why he decided to be independent from his parents by moving out and making decisions without asking advice from his parents. He also added that such actions upset his parents a lot and created conflict between him and his parents.

Six respondents stated that they felt disconnection with their old friends, mainly because of their lack of shared experiences while studying abroad and changes that had occurred to them. For example, S7 said, *"I always felt left out by my friends*

*during get together events because I didn't understand what they were talking about", and S11 stated that, "I feel alienated from my old friends. I think because I have changed quite a lot from living abroad. I feel more mature than them...I felt that my friends and I didn't have the same interests"*.

Two respondents, S20 and S24 revealed that they had difficulty reconnecting with their lovers, and as a result they decided to end these relationships shortly after coming home. Both went to study abroad alone while their lovers remained in Thailand. S20 felt that both she and her boyfriend missed important incidents in each other's lives during the time she spent abroad, and she found it hard to make her boyfriend understand what she had undergone during those periods. S24 felt that she had grown up, and that made her realise that she and her boyfriend were quite different to one another in terms of interests and lifestyle.

### 4.4. Moral distance

This dimension of reverse culture shock was noted by the respondents and encompassed two main moral issues: plagiarism and copyright. The first issue was addressed by three respondents, all of whom were students in a Thai university at the time of conducting the interviews. They found that many Thai students and academic staff were not aware of the seriousness of plagiarism. Copying texts from various data sources without providing appropriate citations was found to be a common practice. S12 said that he was shocked to find that many of his classmates handed in assignments containing copied passages from different Internet sources, and no references were provided. When he confronted them, he found that his classmates did not seem to feel guilty nor had any idea that they were cheating. The same story was shared by two other respondents. S4 also compared awareness of the seriousness of plagiarism between students in

the UK and Thailand:

While I was studying in the UK, I had learnt that students there were taught to respect other persons' works and avoid plagiarism as it was a very serious academic offence which could lead them to be severely punished, and its consequences could affect their future life. But I found that the students in Thailand were not taught the same thing. They had no idea at all about how serious it is to copy other people's work.

Another issue related to moral distance is the infringement of copyright, which was noted by five respondents. Like plagiarism, they were shocked during the initial period of their return to find that their acquaintances downloaded music, movies and software through the Internet and/or photocopied books for personal use, and these people thought that such actions were common and correct. When the respondents explained to these people that such actions were illegal, they seemed to not pay attention and replied that many other people in Thailand behaved in this way. The respondents also added that if these actions were revealed in their host countries, these people would definitely face serious legal penalties. For example, S14 said,

I was taken aback when a friend of mine showed me a bunch of photocopied books she had. They included textbooks and fiction books. I felt quite perplexed since I couldn't understand why my friend wasn't aware that copying copyrighted books was not a good idea – in fact, it's considered illegal.

#### 4.5. Emotional aspect

Overall, returning students expressed a mix of feelings when talking about their arrival experiences. The data also showed significant changes in their feelings at different stages of their homecoming. Three main changing patterns of emotions were found, each of which could be divided into three main stages: (1) a short time before returning home until arriving and spending the initial period of time with family and friends (lasting around few hours to two or three weeks); (2) a longer stage, beginning approximately two or three weeks after the return and lasting for four to six months; and (3) a final, more variable stage. The variance of emotion among the respondents at this stage determined the differences in the changing patterns of emotions. The three changing patterns of emotions were similar at the first and second stages, but differed in the third stage.

During the first stage, the term 'excitement' was overwhelmingly used by all the respondents to describe their feelings about this initial stage of homecoming. Expressions associated with their excitement included 'excitement to meet beloved people again' (i.e. parents, other family members, relatives, friends, lovers etc.); 'excitement to talk about the success of studying and experiences abroad with others'; 'excitement to eat Thai food with real Thai taste'; and 'excitement to start a new chapter of life'. Other emotions expressed by the respondents included being proud of the graduation, being glad to be warmly welcomed by family and friends, being touched and happy to be reunited loved ones, and being happy to know that many people were waiting for their return. However, it was very interesting to hear three respondents revealed that they had considerable concerns during the first stage as well: S25 was worried that, as her physical appearance had been changed a lot due to high stress during the study (i.e. having a lot of acne on her face and a bigger body), and she would be criticised by her cousins and friends; S18

was worried about finding a job in Thailand because his academic result was not good; and S19 was worried that her parents would force her to stay with them while she wanted to be independent.

The second stage was clearly marked by 'unpleasant feelings'. Negative feelings shared by the respondents were mostly towards things or actions or issues that they perceived to be normal or common before going abroad, but the experiences gained by studying and living in a European country changed their perceptions. Various negative feelings expressed by the respondents included alienation, frustration, confusion, shock, irritation, anxiety, regret and loneliness. A majority of the respondents also indicated that they missed the time spent abroad and some added that they longed to go back to their host countries.

As mentioned above, the analysis of the data revealed three distinct patterns of emotions during the third stage. The first pattern involved participants expressing neutral or indifferent emotions towards a certain issue or aspect. The second pattern was characterised by participants exhibiting a combination of neutral emotions towards some things while still experiencing negative feelings towards a few specific things. The third pattern involved participants expressing strong and persistent negative emotions towards a particular thing. Thirteen returning students (the majority) followed the first pattern; nine respondents had the second pattern; and the remaining three respondents the third pattern. The first group stated that time helped them to deal with their negative feelings and disconnection with people, environments and other issues in Thailand. Finally, they realised that they did not have any negative feelings towards things that they mentioned during the second stage. All the respondents in the second group similarly said that although they became accustomed to almost all the things towards which they used to have negative feelings, they still got frustrated or irritated by some aspects, such as

plagiarism, traffic problems in Bangkok and inconvenient public transportation.

The emotions in the third stage of the third group of respondents showed the opposite pattern to those of the second group. While the respondents in the second group were neutral and got used to almost all the things they used to feel negative about, the negative feelings of the respondents in the third group towards certain aspects had become more developed. Two respondents in this group returned to Thailand more than three years ago, but they revealed that they still could not get used to certain things, because they found that these things were part of Thailand which they could not change. The main issues mentioned by these respondents were traffic problems, hot weather and inefficient public transportation. The terms used by the three respondents to express their feelings included irritated, frustrated and angry. They further explained that they realised that their negative feelings were stronger. For example, S12 remarked that, *"Every morning when I travelled to my university, I had to face terrible traffic jams. I got very irritated and angry. I will never get used to it."* S16 stated that, *"I really can't stand hot weather. I knew that it sounds unbelievable because I was born and grew up here. But it is true. I had to stay in an air-conditioned room almost all the time."* These two respondents added that having negative feelings on a daily basis could be very harmful to their physical and mental health, so they were planning to leave Thailand to work abroad. They found that they were not fitting into Thai society but were a better fit with the host country.

## 5. Discussion

As a result of experiencing their own home culture again after studying and living in a European country for some time, all the returning

Thai students encountered reverse culture shock in changes in their identities, behaviours, cognitions and emotions. These effects could be categorised into five main dimensions: personal growth, cultural distance, social distance, moral distance, and emotional aspects. These dimensions are partly consistent with those in Fray's (1988) HCSS Model, in that cultural distance, social distance and moral distance conform to this model. The findings in terms of emotions of the returnees do not support the dimension of grief as introduced by Fray (1988) because positive, neutral and negative feelings were found among the respondents. Furthermore, this study also found one additional dimension of reverse culture shock, termed 'personal growth'. This dimension was found to be very significant in the returnee's re-entry experiences. Each of these dimensions are discussed as follows:

In terms of personal growth, this study echoes the findings of other research (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Talawanich et al., 2019; Tracy-Ventura et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2013) which argue that studying and living in an overseas country assists returning students to become aware of positive changes in their personalities and worldviews. The aspects of personal growth found in this study were consistent with those reported by existing research on education tourism. These include educational benefits (e.g. the acquisition of new academic knowledge, improvement in English proficiency, higher academic interest) (Liu, 2010; Ruth et al., 2019; Sachau et al., 2010; Stone & Petrick, 2013; Stoner et al., 2014) and other benefits (i.e. confidence, independence, more maturity, having greater ability to take responsibility, being able adapt to other people) (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2013; Sachau et al., 2010; Watson et al., 2013). This study also found that for some students, benefits in terms of personal growth led them to feel superior to other people around them who did not have an opportunity to study and live in a developed country.

For the dimension of cultural distance, this study is also in agreement with previous studies

(Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015; Le & LaCost, 2017; Pritchard, 2011) which point out that overseas returnees are likely to have difficulties with issues/aspects that they perceived as normal before going abroad. In the current study, challenges faced by returning students upon returning home revealed three main aspects: climate, transportation, and language. Among these aspects, language was frequently cited in existing literature (Fanari et al., 2021; Winkel et al., 2021), while difficulties related to climate and transportation were found to be underrepresented, with reports from returning sojourners. These findings highlight significant cultural and environmental differences between the host country and the home country, which contribute to the occurrence of reverse culture shock.

With respect to the dimension of social distance, the notion of sojourners experiencing disconnection with their parents, friends, and lovers align with the existing literature (e.g. (Butcher, 2002; Fanari et al., 2021; Le & LaCost, 2017; Winkel et al., 2021)). This phenomenon, frequently reported among overseas returnees, was attributed to changes in returnees' personalities and worldviews, and lack of shared experiences.

The present study offers novel insights into the moral distance dimension in the context of reverse culture shock among returning students. In contrast to the other dimensions of this framework, the dimension of moral distance has received relatively limited attention in existing literature. However, the findings of this study reveal that issues related to plagiarism and copyright infringement emerged as significant moral factors causing shock among returning students. These findings suggest that differences in awareness of moral aspects related to education, particularly in the context of plagiarism and copyright, between the host country and the home country of the students can contribute to the experience of reverse culture shock.

Regarding the effects on emotions, a mix of feelings was observed among the returnees. Analysis

revealed three primary changing patterns of emotions that contribute to the W-curve model proposed by Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), which illustrates the three stages of up, down and up again as explained in terms of the honeymoon or happy stage, rejection or reverse culture shock stage, and re-adaptation stage. To briefly reiterate, the three emotional patterns found in this study indicated shifts in feelings during different stages of returning home: firstly, in the period immediately before and directly following the return; secondly, spanning several weeks to several months subsequent to re-entry; and lastly, a period of time following the second phase. The first pattern started with positive feelings when the returnees first came back, then turned into negative feelings in the next stage, and finally became neutral or indifferent emotions. The second and third patterns followed the same emotional shifts in the first two stages. In the second pattern, returnees felt neutral about certain things, but still hold onto negative feelings towards a few specific things, while the third pattern involved individuals consistently experiencing negative feelings towards a particular thing. All three emotional patterns observed in this study partially align with the second U-curve of the W-curve model. Specifically, they match the first two stages: the honeymoon or happy phase, and the rejection or reverse culture shock phase. However, they did not show the emotions related to the final re-adaptation stage. This is because some participants experienced neutral or negative emotions during this stage, reflecting persistent difficulties in readjusting to their home country.

When comparing the findings of this study with previous research that looked at the experiences of students from Eastern countries studying in the West (i.e., Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020; Le & LaCost, 2017; Winkel et al., 2021), notable similarities were identified. Students in those studies went through almost the same kinds of reverse culture shock experiences. These included feeling frustrated about things that used to seem normal, fee-

ling disconnected from family, friends, and social networks, encountering challenges with the native language, a pervasive sense of not fitting in, and undergoing personal growth from the experience.

However, there were also some differences between this study and others. This study uncovered some things that were unexplored, like concerns about plagiarism and copyright issues. On the other hand, there were some aspects that were mentioned in other studies but didn't show up in this study. These included problems with fitting into the working environment back in their home country, especially when faced with strict bureaucracy (Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020; Le & LaCost, 2017). Some students also struggled with meeting the expectations of people in their home country (Le & LaCost, 2017) and dealing with financial pressures like housing expenses and children's school fees (Alkubaidi & Alzhrani, 2020).

## 6. Conclusion

In this study, an investigation was conducted to explore the phenomenon of reverse culture shock among Thai youths who participated in exchange study programmes lasting four to twelve months in European countries. The findings indicate that all the participants experienced reverse culture shock upon returning to Thailand. This reverse culture shock can be categorized into five main aspects including personal growth, cultural distances, social distance, moral distance, and emotional aspects. A framework was developed, to provide a multifaceted lens for examining reverse culture shock in the context of students returning from a study abroad experience (Figure 1). The proposed framework has the potential to significantly contribute to the existing literature by offering a novel approach to understanding the phenomenon of reverse culture shock faced by students who have studied abroad for less than a year. The inclusion



of personal growth in the framework allows for a holistic perspective that acknowledges both positive and negative effects of reverse culture shock, going beyond solely identifying challenges and dif-

ficulties. This can lead to a deeper comprehension of the complexities and nuances of reverse culture shock and its effects on individuals.

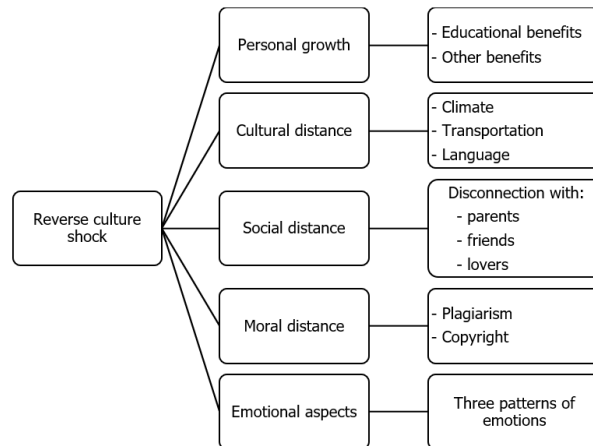


Figure 1 | A framework for exploring reverse culture shock

These findings from these five aspects demonstrate that while these students faced unpleasant feelings and difficulties in re-adjusting into Thai culture and social norms and re-connecting with their family, friends, and lovers, they also gained positive consequences in terms of personal development and growth and changes in worldview. Specifically, negative impacts of the reverse culture shock were mostly found in the dimensions of cultural distance, social distance and moral distance, whereas the positive changes were outstanding in the dimension of personal growth. For the effects on emotions, returnees experienced significant changes in emotions at different phases of their return. Moreover, the findings also revealed that the outcomes of reverse culture shock, either positive or negative, were the results of the participants' perceptions that some things in their host countries were much better than in their home country, because the host countries were developed countries while Thailand was not.

The findings of this study reinforce the knowledge on reverse culture shock experiences of

overseas returnees by adding empirical evidence to existing literature in the context of Thai youths who participated in educational tourism. Three arguments are offered by this study. First, the effects of the reverse culture shock are not necessary negative, but can also be beneficial for returnees as well. This study observes that, for some respondents, the experiences they faced during the re-entry process enabled them to realise their true self and re-evaluate their identities to better decide which society suited them best.

Secondly, the findings of this study indicate that the consequences of reverse culture shock experiences, encompassing both positive and negative aspects, were largely shaped by the returnees' perception that their host country offered superior conditions compared to Thailand in various aspects, such as weather and transportation. This altered perspective leads them to perceive once familiar occurrences as irritating or frustrating. Importantly, this finding sheds light on the students' perceptions regarding the differences in culture and geography between the developed host

country and the developing home country, as well as disparities in terms of infrastructure and facilities. Lastly, this study offers empirical evidence that reverse culture shock is a longitudinal process. For some overseas returnees in this study, the effects of reverse culture shock seemed to be long-term and could not possibly be healed whilst living in a home country. Two participants revealed that they were still suffering from negative emotions towards some aspects of Thailand although they had returned to Thailand more than three years earlier, and they believed that they would never become accustomed to these aspects. However, more empirical evidence on this issue is required.

This study also has some important practical implications. First, the findings can be useful for individuals and those who are about to join education tourism in a form of an exchange study abroad programme as well as other people surrounding them, as they can be aware of negative and positive impacts likely to occur upon returning home. This study can help these students as well as their family, friends and partners in terms of what to expect so that they can prepare effectively. As mentioned earlier in the literature review section, the major causes of negative experiences of reverse culture shock are lack of anticipation and unpreparedness, so these findings can serve as guidelines in this regard and can facilitate smoother re-entry for the returnees. In addition, existing literature supports (e.g. Fanari et al., 2021; Talawanich et al., 2019; Winkel et al., 2021) the notion that receiving support from relevant stakeholders during the initial stage of returning home can be an effective strategy to minimise the effects of reverse culture shock. To facilitate the integration of returning students into their home country, student service organisations, schools, universities, and government authorities should establish dedicated units that provide assistance to these individuals. These units should organise student support service programmes or activities, such as counselling sessions led by psychologists, sharing sessions where retur-

ning students can discuss their re-entry experiences, and training sessions to equip students with the necessary skills to cope with challenges and difficulties. Moreover, these units and their support services should be actively promoted among overseas returnees and their social networks.

This study is not without its limitations. Two main limitations were observed. The first limitation was associated with the nature of a qualitative approach used by this study. As the findings were based on non-probability sampling, they have limitations in terms of generalisability. However, this study did not aim to extend the findings to all overseas students but sought to gain rich and in-depth findings related to reverse culture shock in a specific context. However, an alternative concept of transferability was adopted to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. Empirical evidence including the respondents' profiles, how the interviews were carried out and data were analysed were provided to warrant that the findings can be applicable to other, similar situations. The second limitation of this study pertains to the characteristics of the respondents, which may not be adequately diverse. Specifically, the majority of the respondents of this study were female students who returned from UK. This limited diversity in the respondents may have resulted in a lack of data that could have been obtained with a more heterogeneous group of respondents.

As mentioned previously, the study of reverse culture shock in the context of education tourism, as well as other contexts in Thailand, is still in its early stages, with limited research conducted so far. This leaves several aspects of this phenomenon unexplored, necessitating further investigation. Firstly, future studies should examine the factors that contribute to negative feelings among students upon returning to their home country and explore the coping strategies employed by these students to deal with such difficulties. Secondly, to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of reverse culture shock, it is recommended to in-

investigate this phenomenon among other groups of sojourners, including Thai migrants living overseas who visit Thailand for short periods of time. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that the findings of the current study may have limitations and could benefit from additional insights derived from a more diverse range of participants in future research endeavours.

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