NAVIGATING THE STAGES OF CULTURE SHOCK: ASIAN ERASMUS+ STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF STUDYING ABROAD IN EUROPE

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Abstract: *International student mobility has become a central feature of higher education internationalization, offering opportunities for intercultural learning while also exposing students to cultural challenges. This study explores how Asian Erasmus+ students experience and navigate culture shock during their study abroad experience in Europe. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with Asian exchange students who participated in Erasmus+ mobility programs across various European host countries. Data were analyzed thematically using a stages of culture shockframework, encompassing honeymoon, disintegration, reintegration, adjustment, and adaptation. The findings reveal that culture shock among Asian Erasmus+ students unfolds as a dynamic and non-linear process rather than a fixed sequence of stages. Initial enthusiasm and idealized expectations during the honeymoon stage gradually give way to confusion related to academic autonomy, communication norms, and everyday social practices. This is followed by cultural frustration and identity negotiation, as students critically compare host and home cultures. Over time, participants develop coping strategies that support adjustment and autonomy, leading to functional adaptation and intercultural competence. Importantly, adaptation is found to be context-dependent and pragmatic, reflecting the time-limited nature of short-term exchange programs rather than complete cultural assimilation. This study contributes to intercultural communication and international education literature by reaffirming the relevance of the culture shock framework while highlighting its flexibility in short-term mobility contexts. The findings underscore the need for stage-sensitive institutional support and culturally responsive academic practices to enhance international students' study abroad experiences. The study offers practical implications for universities and mobility program coordinators seeking to foster inclusive and supportive international learning environments*

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, globalization has fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of human interaction by accelerating the circulation of ideas, cultures, and values across national borders. Rapid advances in digital communication, transportation technologies, and transnational networks have intensified global interconnectedness, rendering cross-cultural encounters not only frequent but inevitable. In the post-pandemic era, this interconnectedness has become even more pronounced, as academic collaboration, virtual communication, and international mobility increasingly intersect. Within this context, intercultural competence—the ability to communicate, collaborate, and build meaningful relationships across cultural differences—has emerged as a critical skill for navigating globalized academic and professional environments (Pacheco, 2020).

Higher education institutions play a pivotal role in cultivating such competence. Universities are no longer viewed solely as sites of knowledge production, but also as arenas for developing global citizenship, social responsibility, and intercultural sensitivity. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development defines the internationalization of higher education as the integration of global and intercultural dimensions into curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional practices, with the aim of preparing graduates to function effectively in culturally diverse contexts (OECD, 2020). Through this process, universities contribute not only to students' academic development but also to their capacity for empathy, adaptability, and ethical engagement in international environments.

One of the most tangible manifestations of higher education internationalization is student mobility. Study abroad programs provide students with immersive exposure to different educational systems, cultural norms, and social practices, thereby enhancing linguistic proficiency, intercultural awareness, and global perspectives. Previous studies indicate that international mobility contributes to personal growth, adaptability, and improved employability in increasingly competitive and transnational labor markets (Evans, 2015). Beyond academic outcomes, mobility experiences foster intercultural dialogue and reduce ethnocentric perspectives by enabling young people from different nations to engage directly with cultural difference.

In Indonesia, international student mobility has gained increasing prominence as part of broader higher education reform. The Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA), initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, enables undergraduate students to study abroad for one or two semesters at selected partner universities. This initiative reflects Indonesia's strategic effort to align its higher education system with global standards while enhancing students' intercultural exposure, academic competitiveness, and global outlook (Kemendikbud, 2024). IISMA underscores the growing importance of outward mobility as a mechanism for developing globally competent graduates.

At the global level, the Erasmus+ program stands as one of the most influential frameworks for international student mobility. Supported by the European Union, Erasmus+ functions not only as an academic exchange scheme but also as an instrument of educational cooperation and cultural diplomacy. The program connects more than 900 higher education institutions across 37 participating countries, creating a shared academic space that transcends national boundaries (European Commission, 2023). Since its establishment in

1987, Erasmus+ has evolved into one of the world's largest mobility programs, enabling over 300,000 students annually to study, train, or volunteer abroad. Through these experiences, participants develop transversal skills such as adaptability, independence, problem-solving, and global awareness—competencies increasingly valued in international academic and professional contexts (European Commission, 2023).

The scope of Erasmus+ has expanded beyond Europe through initiatives such as International Credit Mobility and Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees, allowing students from Asia, Africa, and Latin America—including Indonesia—to participate in European higher education. These programs bridge European and non-European institutions, aligning with broader goals of inclusive academic exchange, sustainable development, and global cultural diplomacy (European Commission, 2023). For Asian students, Erasmus+ offers access to diverse pedagogical traditions, multicultural learning environments, and internationally recognized academic ecosystems.

Nevertheless, international mobility does not occur in a sociocultural vacuum. Over the past decade, Europe has experienced increasing migration flows, intensifying cultural diversity and public discourse surrounding integration, identity, and social cohesion. The European Migration Network reports that the presence of non-European migrants, refugees, and international students has reshaped social dynamics across many EU countries, influencing everyday interactions, institutional practices, and public attitudes toward cultural difference (European Migration Network, 2023). These broader structural conditions form the backdrop against which Erasmus+ students navigate their study abroad experiences.

METHOD
Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the stages of culture shock experienced by Asian students participating in the Erasmus+ study abroad program in Europe. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks to understand students' lived experiences, perceptions, emotions, and meaning-making processes as they navigate cultural transition. Rather than measuring variables or testing hypotheses, this study focuses on capturing the complexity of cultural adaptation as it unfolds in real-life contexts.

Qualitative descriptive research allows researchers to present participants' experiences in a manner that stays close to the data while remaining analytically grounded. As noted by Lambert and Lambert, this approach is particularly suitable for studies that aim to describe phenomena in everyday language while maintaining methodological rigor (Lambert & Lambert, 2013). In the context of this research, such an approach enables an in-depth examination of how students experience each stage of culture shock during their temporary residence abroad.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study based on in-depth interviews with Asian students who participated in the Erasmus+ study abroad program in Europe. Drawing on participants' lived experiences, the findings are organized around the stages of

culture shock, namely honeymoon, disintegration, reintegration, adjustment, and adaptation. These stages are not treated as rigid or strictly linear categories; rather, they are used as an analytical framework to capture the dynamic and evolving nature of students' cultural transition.

The presentation of findings focuses on how students experience, interpret, and navigate each stage throughout their study abroad period. Particular attention is given to the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of culture shock, as well as the strategies students employ to cope with cultural differences in academic and everyday life. By foregrounding participants' narratives, this chapter aims to illustrate how culture shock unfolds as a process shaped by individual backgrounds, host-country contexts, and institutional environments.

The chapter is structured thematically, with each section corresponding to one stage of culture shock. This structure allows for a systematic exploration of patterns and variations across participants' experiences while maintaining sensitivity to individual differences. The findings presented in this chapter provide the empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion, where these experiences are interpreted in relation to established theories of culture shock, acculturation, and intercultural communication.

Stage 1: Honeymoon / Initial Euphoria

The initial phase of cultural transition among Asian students participating in the Erasmus+ program is characterized by a *honeymoon* or *initial euphoria* stage, marked by excitement, curiosity, and optimistic expectations toward the host environment. During this phase, cultural differences are largely perceived as attractive and enriching rather than problematic. Students tend to approach the study abroad experience with a sense of anticipation, viewing mobility as a personal achievement and a gateway to global exposure.

Interview data indicate that participants entered the host country with strong motivational narratives centered on exploration and self-development. An Indonesian student (ID-1) described joining the Erasmus+ program as an opportunity "to finally experience Europe and see how people live and study differently," reflecting an idealized expectation of international education. Similarly, a Thai participant (TH-1) expressed enthusiasm about "being able to live independently and meet people from many countries," suggesting that the early phase was dominated by positive imagination rather than realistic anticipation of cultural challenges.

At this stage, unfamiliar cultural elements were commonly framed as novel and exciting. Differences in academic systems, social interaction styles, and everyday practices were interpreted as part of the adventure of studying abroad. A Malaysian student (MY-1) noted that during the first weeks, "everything felt interesting, even things that were confusing, because it was new." This perception illustrates how novelty functions as a cognitive lens that temporarily reframes potential stressors as stimulating experiences.

The honeymoon phase was also closely tied to students' identity positioning. Participants frequently portrayed themselves as open-minded, adaptable, and capable of handling cross-cultural encounters. A Vietnamese-American student (VN-US-1) reflected that at the beginning, they felt confident because "this is what I wanted, to challenge myself and grow." Such self-perceptions functioned as psychological resources that allowed students to approach early interactions with tolerance and emotional readiness.

Social dynamics during the early stage further reinforced this sense of euphoria. Many participants described orientation activities, international gatherings, and initial friendships with fellow exchange students as highly supportive. An Indonesian student (ID-2) emphasized that "being surrounded by other international students made me feel safe and excited," indicating that early socialization occurred primarily within multicultural peer groups rather than deep engagement with local communities. This international student bubble helped sustain positive emotions while buffering students from immediate exposure to deeper cultural dissonance.

Despite its positive nature, the honeymoon stage was not a stable or enduring condition. The data suggest that initial euphoria functioned as a temporary emotional cushion rather than a resolution of cultural difference. While participants did not yet articulate overt frustration, subtle indications of cognitive effort and adjustment demands began to surface. A Thai student (TH-2) noted that although the experience was still exciting, "I started to realize that studying here is very different from what I imagined." Such reflections indicate the gradual erosion of idealized expectations as students moved closer to everyday academic realities.

Overall, the honeymoon stage among Asian Erasmus+ students can be understood as an emotionally elevated but transitional phase. It is characterized by optimism, selective perception of cultural differences, and strong identity affirmation as global learners. While this stage plays a crucial role in facilitating initial engagement with the host culture, it does not eliminate the challenges of cross-cultural adaptation. Instead, it delays the full emotional impact of cultural difference, which becomes more apparent as students transition into subsequent stages of culture shock.

Stage 2: Disintegration / Cultural Confusion

Following the initial period of enthusiasm, participants gradually entered a phase of *disintegration* or *cultural confusion*, where differences between the host culture and their home culture became increasingly salient. During this stage, the novelty that initially framed cultural differences as exciting began to fade, giving way to feelings of uncertainty, confusion, and emotional fatigue. Students started to realize that adaptation required continuous cognitive and emotional effort, particularly in navigating unfamiliar academic expectations and social norms.

Academic culture emerged as one of the earliest sources of confusion. Several participants described difficulties adjusting to the European learning system, which emphasized independence, self-direction, and minimal guidance from lecturers. An Indonesian student (ID-1) explained that they felt disoriented by the expectation to "figure things out on your own," contrasting sharply with the more structured and instructor-led system they were accustomed to. This lack of explicit instruction generated anxiety, as students questioned whether they were meeting academic standards despite limited feedback.

Communication norms further intensified this sense of disintegration. Participants reported confusion over informal communication styles, particularly the expectation to address lecturers by their first names and engage in open classroom discussions. A Thai student (TH-1) described feeling uncomfortable and hesitant to speak, noting that "it felt strange and even disrespectful at first," revealing how deeply ingrained cultural norms

shaped their initial reactions. Such moments illustrate how cultural scripts from home contexts continued to influence behavior, even when they conflicted with host expectations.

Everyday life also became a significant source of cultural strain. Students struggled with practical matters such as navigating public services, understanding local signage, managing food differences, and adapting to climate conditions. A Malaysian participant (MY-1) described daily routines as mentally exhausting, stating that "simple things like buying groceries or understanding instructions took a lot of energy." These experiences reflect the cumulative burden of constant cultural decoding, which gradually eroded the emotional buffer provided by the honeymoon stage.

Social integration posed additional challenges during this phase. While students initially relied on international peer networks, deeper engagement with local communities proved more difficult than anticipated. A Vietnamese-American student (VN-US-1) expressed frustration about feeling socially distant from local students, explaining that "people are friendly, but it's hard to really connect." This perceived social gap contributed to feelings of isolation and reinforced the sense of being an outsider, even within an ostensibly inclusive academic environment.

Emotionally, the disintegration stage was marked by heightened homesickness and self-doubt. Several participants described questioning their decision to study abroad and experiencing moments of emotional vulnerability. An Indonesian student (ID-2) reflected that during this phase, "I started missing home more than I expected," indicating how emotional strain intensified once initial excitement subsided. These feelings were not necessarily constant but appeared intermittently, often triggered by academic pressure or social misunderstandings.

Importantly, the confusion experienced during this stage was not limited to external cultural differences but extended to internal identity negotiation. Students began to reassess their self-perceptions as independent and adaptable individuals, confronting moments where they felt inadequate or culturally unprepared. A Thai participant (TH-2) noted that they felt "less confident than at the beginning," suggesting that disintegration involved a temporary disruption of self-efficacy as students struggled to reconcile expectations with lived reality.

Overall, the disintegration stage represents a critical turning point in the culture shock process. For Asian Erasmus+ students, this phase exposed the limits of initial optimism and highlighted the complexity of cross-cultural adaptation. Cultural differences were no longer abstract or exciting but embedded in daily academic and social interactions, demanding sustained effort to interpret, adjust, and cope. While emotionally challenging, this stage laid the groundwork for subsequent learning and adjustment, as students gradually began to develop strategies to manage cultural confusion and regain a sense of control in the host environment.

Stage 3: Reintegration / Cultural Frustration

As students progressed beyond the phase of cultural confusion, many entered a stage of *reintegration*, characterized by growing frustration and emotional resistance toward the host culture. At this point, cultural differences were no longer perceived merely as confusing but increasingly as burdensome or emotionally draining. Participants began to evaluate the

host environment more critically, often through comparison with their home cultures, which marked a shift from internal self-doubt toward external attribution of discomfort.

Academic practices continued to be a prominent source of frustration during this stage. Several students expressed dissatisfaction with what they perceived as a lack of guidance, structure, or emotional engagement from lecturers. An Indonesian participant (ID-1) noted that while independence was emphasized, "sometimes it feels like they don't really care whether you understand or not." This perception illustrates how differences in pedagogical culture—particularly expectations of autonomy versus instructional support—can lead students to interpret the host system as unsupportive rather than merely different.

Communication styles further intensified feelings of irritation. Participants reported discomfort with what they perceived as overly direct or emotionally distant interactions in both academic and social settings. A Thai student (TH-1) described feeling that conversations were "too straightforward and cold," contrasting this with the more relational and indirect communication norms of their home culture. Such comparisons reflect a common feature of the reintegration stage, where individuals reassert their own cultural values as a way to protect their sense of identity.

Social withdrawal also became more apparent during this phase. While students continued to interact with international peers, several reported a reduced desire to engage with local students or institutions. A Malaysian participant (MY-1) explained that they felt more comfortable spending time with fellow Asian or international students because "they understand the struggle without explaining too much." This tendency indicates a selective narrowing of social networks, functioning as an emotional coping strategy amid sustained cultural strain.

Emotionally, the reintegration stage was marked by heightened irritability, fatigue, and occasional resentment. Participants described moments of questioning whether the exchange experience was worth the emotional effort it demanded. A Vietnamese-American student (VN-US-1) reflected that during this period, "I started to feel tired of always adjusting," suggesting a sense of imbalance between effort and perceived reward. These sentiments highlight how prolonged adaptation demands can trigger emotional pushback against the host culture.

Importantly, frustration during this stage did not necessarily manifest as overt conflict but often appeared as internalized dissatisfaction or silent comparison. Students frequently evaluated daily practices—such as time management, social etiquette, or academic expectations—through a binary lens of "here" versus "home." A Thai participant (TH-2) remarked that "things back home make more sense to me now," indicating a temporary idealization of the home culture as a psychological refuge during adaptation stress.

Despite its challenging nature, the reintegration stage served a critical function in the overall adaptation process. By articulating frustration and reasserting cultural identity, students began to clarify their own values and boundaries. Although this phase involved emotional resistance, it also marked the beginning of deeper reflection on cultural difference, setting the conditions for more balanced understanding in subsequent stages.

Overall, the reintegration stage represents a period of emotional negotiation in which Asian Erasmus+ students confront the limits of their tolerance and adaptability. Cultural frustration, social withdrawal, and critical comparison with the host environment

characterize this phase. While often uncomfortable, reintegration plays an essential role in the development of intercultural awareness, as it forces students to move beyond surface-level acceptance toward a more conscious engagement with cultural difference.

Stage 4: Adjustment / Autonomy

After navigating periods of confusion and frustration, participants gradually entered a stage of *adjustment* or *autonomy*, marked by increasing familiarity with the host culture and the development of practical coping strategies. At this stage, students began to regain a sense of control over their daily lives and academic responsibilities. Cultural differences were no longer perceived primarily as threats or burdens, but as contextual realities that could be managed through learning, planning, and selective adaptation.

A key feature of this stage was the emergence of intentional coping behaviors. Several participants described actively modifying their routines and expectations to better align with the host environment. An Indonesian student (ID-1) explained that they learned to "plan everything earlier and not wait for instructions," indicating a shift toward self-regulation and autonomy in academic tasks. This adjustment reflects a growing internalization of host academic norms rather than passive compliance.

Communication competence also improved during this phase. Participants reported becoming more comfortable with informal interaction styles and open classroom discussions. A Thai student (TH-1) noted that although speaking up initially felt uncomfortable, over time "it became normal to share opinions, even if they were different." This suggests that increased exposure and practice enabled students to reinterpret communication norms, reducing anxiety and enhancing participation.

Social relationships during the adjustment stage became more selective but also more meaningful. While students continued to rely on international peer networks, some began to establish deeper connections with local students or faculty. A Malaysian participant (MY-1) described feeling more confident initiating conversations, stating that "now I know how people usually respond, so I'm not as afraid of saying the wrong thing." This growing confidence illustrates how familiarity with cultural patterns reduces perceived social risk.

Emotionally, the adjustment stage was associated with reduced stress and increased emotional stability. Participants reported fewer intense emotional swings and a greater ability to contextualize challenges without internalizing them as personal failures. A Vietnamese-American student (VN-US-1) reflected that they no longer felt overwhelmed by differences, explaining that "I don't take things personally anymore; I just see them as cultural." This reframing marks an important psychological shift toward intercultural maturity.

Importantly, the adjustment process did not imply complete assimilation into the host culture. Instead, students demonstrated selective adaptation, choosing which cultural practices to adopt and which to maintain from their home culture. A Thai participant (TH-2) emphasized that while they adapted academically, they continued to preserve familiar social habits that provided emotional comfort. This balance highlights autonomy not as conformity, but as the ability to navigate between cultural systems with greater agency.

Overall, the adjustment or autonomy stage represents a phase of recovery and competence-building in the culture shock process. Asian Erasmus+ students at this stage exhibited increased self-efficacy, communication confidence, and emotional regulation.

While cultural differences remained present, they were no longer experienced as overwhelming. Instead, students approached intercultural interaction with a sense of realism and adaptability, laying the foundation for deeper integration and long-term intercultural learning in the final stage of adaptation.

Stage 5: Adaptation / Integration

The final stage of the culture shock process among Asian Erasmus+ students is *adaptation* or *integration*, characterized by a sense of psychological balance, cultural competence, and functional comfort within the host environment. At this stage, participants demonstrated the ability to navigate academic and social contexts with greater ease, no longer perceiving cultural differences as sources of stress but as integrated elements of daily life. Adaptation did not imply the disappearance of cultural difference; rather, it reflected students' capacity to coexist with difference without emotional disruption.

Participants described this stage as a moment of normalization, in which previously challenging practices became routine. An Indonesian student (ID-1) reflected that "this is my normal now," indicating that adaptation involved the internalization of host cultural patterns into everyday behavior. Similarly, a Malaysian participant (MY-1) noted that activities once perceived as confusing no longer required conscious effort, suggesting a reduction in cognitive load associated with intercultural interaction.

A defining feature of the integration stage was the development of intercultural identity. Students demonstrated an increased ability to move flexibly between cultural frameworks, drawing from both home and host cultures depending on context. A Vietnamese-American participant (VN-US-1) explained that they felt comfortable "switching" behaviors and communication styles, illustrating how integration involved cultural fluidity rather than cultural replacement. This capacity reflects a shift toward bicultural or intercultural competence.

Social relationships during this stage were characterized by greater confidence and reciprocity. Participants reported feeling more accepted within the host environment and less anxious about initiating interactions. A Thai student (TH-1) shared that they no longer worried about making mistakes in communication, explaining that "people understand, and I understand them better too." This mutual understanding contributed to a stronger sense of belonging and emotional security.

Emotionally, the adaptation stage was associated with increased self-awareness and personal growth. Students reflected on their experiences with a sense of accomplishment, recognizing the challenges they had overcome. An Indonesian participant (ID-2) described feeling "more independent and resilient" as a result of the exchange experience. Such reflections indicate that adaptation involved not only cultural adjustment but also identity development and increased self-efficacy.

Importantly, not all participants reached full integration at the same pace or to the same extent. Some described adaptation as a functional rather than emotional process, where they were able to operate effectively within the host culture without fully internalizing a sense of belonging. A Thai participant (TH-2) noted that while they could manage daily life confidently, they still felt more emotionally connected to their home culture. This variation highlights that adaptation is not a uniform endpoint but a spectrum of intercultural functioning shaped by time, personality, and contextual factors.

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Overall, the adaptation or integration stage represents the culmination of the culture shock process, where students achieve a working balance between cultural maintenance and cultural learning. For Asian Erasmus+ students, this stage reflects the emergence of intercultural competence, emotional stability, and reflective understanding of cultural difference. Rather than signaling the end of cultural negotiation, integration marks a new capacity to engage with diversity in a sustainable and meaningful way, carrying forward the learning outcomes of international mobility into future academic and professional contexts.

Discussion

This study explores the lived experiences of Asian Erasmus+ students through the lens of culture shock stages, revealing that cultural adaptation unfolds as a dynamic and emotionally layered process rather than a linear progression. The findings support classical models of culture shock while also extending them by highlighting how short-term academic mobility, cultural distance, and institutional context shape students' adaptation trajectories. By examining each stage in relation to established theoretical frameworks, this discussion situates the empirical findings within broader intercultural and acculturation scholarship.

The honeymoon stage observed among participants aligns closely with Oberg's early conceptualization of culture shock, which frames initial exposure to a new culture as a period of excitement and idealization. Students' enthusiasm, optimism, and selective attention to positive aspects of the host culture reflect what Oberg describes as the temporary emotional uplift that precedes deeper cultural confrontation. At this stage, intercultural encounters are filtered through expectations of growth and adventure, supporting Pedersen's view that early adaptation often involves emotional buffering rather than genuine cultural understanding. The findings suggest that for Erasmus+ students, this phase is reinforced by the symbolic value of international mobility and identity positioning as "global learners."

As students transitioned into the disintegration stage, the findings strongly resonate with Pedersen's interpretation of culture shock as a process of cognitive and emotional overload. Participants' confusion regarding academic autonomy, communication styles, and everyday practices illustrates how unfamiliar cultural scripts disrupt previously internalized norms. This stage also reflects Kim's stress–adaptation–growth model, where stress emerges as a necessary condition for intercultural learning. The sustained cognitive effort required to interpret unspoken rules and navigate ambiguity demonstrates how cultural stress functions as a catalyst for adaptation rather than merely a negative outcome.

The reintegration stage further underscores the relevance of acculturation theory, particularly Berry's framework of cultural negotiation. During this phase, students' frustration and critical comparison between home and host cultures indicate a defensive reassertion of original cultural identity. This response aligns with Berry's notion that individuals may temporarily favor separation as a coping strategy when adaptation demands exceed emotional resources. Importantly, the findings show that reintegration does not signify failure but represents a critical moment of identity clarification, where students articulate personal and cultural boundaries in response to sustained cultural strain.

Movement into the adjustment or autonomy stage reflects a shift toward adaptive coping and increased intercultural competence. Consistent with Kim's model, participants demonstrated gradual growth through intentional strategy development, such as improved planning, communication adjustment, and emotional reframing. This stage illustrates how

adaptation is achieved through learning-by-doing, as students internalize host norms selectively while maintaining aspects of their home culture. The findings also support Deardorff's process model of intercultural competence, which emphasizes attitudes of openness, skills development, and internal outcomes such as flexibility and empathy.

Finally, the adaptation or integration stage observed in this study aligns with Berry's concept of integration, where individuals maintain their original cultural identity while effectively engaging with the host culture. Students' ability to navigate multiple cultural frameworks and demonstrate intercultural fluidity reflects the development of bicultural or intercultural identity. However, the findings also reveal variation in the depth of integration, suggesting that adaptation among short-term Erasmus+ participants is often functional rather than fully affective. This nuance extends existing theory by illustrating that successful adaptation does not require complete cultural immersion or emotional assimilation, particularly within time-limited mobility contexts.

Taken together, the findings affirm that culture shock among Asian Erasmus+ students is a non-linear, context-dependent process shaped by cultural distance, academic norms, and social support structures. The five-stage framework remains analytically robust but must be understood as flexible rather than prescriptive. The study contributes to intercultural communication literature by demonstrating how short-term exchange students actively negotiate identity, autonomy, and belonging across stages of cultural transition. These insights underscore the importance of institutional support mechanisms that acknowledge emotional fluctuation as an integral part of intercultural learning rather than a sign of maladjustment.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Asian Erasmus+ students experience and navigate culture shock during their study abroad experience in Europe by focusing on five stages of cultural transition: honeymoon, disintegration, reintegration, adjustment, and adaptation. Drawing on qualitative accounts of students' lived experiences, the findings demonstrate that culture shock unfolds as a dynamic, non-linear, and emotionally layered process shaped by cultural distance, academic norms, and sociocultural context.

The study finds that the honeymoon stage is characterized by excitement, optimism, and idealized expectations of international mobility. During this phase, students tend to frame cultural differences as stimulating rather than challenging, supported by strong identity positioning as global learners. However, this emotional uplift functions as a temporary buffer rather than a resolution of cultural difference, gradually giving way to deeper cognitive and emotional demands.

As students move into the disintegration stage, cultural differences become more salient and cognitively taxing. Participants experienced confusion related to academic autonomy, communication styles, and everyday social practices, reflecting the disruption of previously internalized cultural norms. This stage represents a critical turning point where cultural novelty transforms into sustained adjustment pressure, highlighting the role of stress as a catalyst for intercultural learning.

The reintegration stage reveals heightened cultural frustration and identity negotiation. Students often responded to prolonged adaptation demands by critically

comparing the host culture with their home culture and selectively withdrawing into familiar social networks. Rather than indicating maladjustment, this phase functions as an important process of identity clarification, allowing students to articulate cultural boundaries and reassess personal values in response to cultural strain.

Progression into the adjustment stage marks the development of adaptive strategies and increased autonomy. Students gradually regained functional control over academic and social life through intentional coping mechanisms, such as improved planning, communication adaptation, and emotional reframing. This stage reflects growing intercultural competence, as students begin to interpret cultural differences contextually rather than emotionally.

Finally, the adaptation stage demonstrates that successful cultural adjustment does not necessarily entail complete assimilation. Instead, students achieved functional integration by balancing cultural maintenance with effective participation in the host environment. The findings indicate variation in the depth of integration, suggesting that adaptation among short-term exchange students is often pragmatic and situational rather than fully affective. Nevertheless, this stage reflects meaningful intercultural learning, increased self-efficacy, and the emergence of intercultural or bicultural identity.

Overall, this study confirms that the five-stage culture shock framework remains analytically robust for understanding international student mobility, while also emphasizing its flexibility in short-term exchange contexts. By foregrounding the voices of Asian Erasmus+ students, the research contributes to intercultural communication scholarship by demonstrating how culture shock operates as both a challenge and a developmental process. The findings underscore the importance of recognizing emotional fluctuation as an integral component of intercultural learning and highlight the need for culturally responsive support systems within international mobility programs.

Implications
Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to intercultural communication and international education literature by reaffirming the relevance of the five-stage culture shock framework in contemporary short-term student mobility contexts. While classical theories often assume a linear progression toward full integration, the findings demonstrate that adaptation among Erasmus+ exchange students is dynamic, non-linear, and context-dependent. The experience of Asian students illustrates that successful adaptation does not always culminate in deep emotional assimilation but may instead result in functional integration, where students are able to operate effectively across cultural settings while maintaining their original cultural identity.

Furthermore, the study extends acculturation theory by highlighting how time-limited mobility programs shape adaptation outcomes. Unlike long-term migrants or full-degree international students, Erasmus+ participants experience compressed adaptation cycles, intensifying emotional transitions while simultaneously limiting opportunities for deep cultural immersion. This finding suggests that existing acculturation models should more explicitly account for duration of stay and program structure as key variables influencing intercultural adjustment.

The findings also reinforce the importance of viewing culture shock not merely as an obstacle but as a developmental mechanism through which intercultural competence is cultivated. Emotional fluctuation, frustration, and temporary withdrawal emerge as integral components of learning rather than indicators of failure, supporting developmental interpretations proposed by Pedersen and Kim.

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings have important implications for universities, international offices, and Erasmus+ program coordinators. First, student support mechanisms should move beyond one-time orientation sessions and adopt a stage-sensitive approach to intercultural adjustment. While pre-departure briefings often address logistical preparation, students require ongoing support that aligns with different stages of culture shock, particularly during the disintegration and reintegration phases when emotional strain is most pronounced.

Second, host institutions should recognize that academic culture itself constitutes a major source of culture shock. Differences in teaching styles, assessment methods, and communication norms can create confusion and frustration for Asian students accustomed to more structured educational systems. Providing clearer academic expectations, mentorship schemes, and culturally responsive pedagogy can help reduce unnecessary stress and facilitate smoother adjustment.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of peer networks and social spaces in supporting adaptation. International student communities often function as emotional safety nets during early stages of adjustment. Institutions can strengthen this function by designing inclusive intercultural activities that encourage meaningful interaction between local and international students, rather than isolating exchange students within international-only circles.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the quality of international mobility experiences for Asian Erasmus+ students:

1. Stage-Based Student Support Programs Universities should design intercultural support initiatives that correspond to different stages of culture shock, offering targeted interventions such as mentoring, reflection sessions, and peer discussion groups throughout the exchange period.
2. Enhanced Academic Induction and Mentoring Clear communication regarding academic expectations, assessment criteria, and classroom norms should be provided early and reinforced continuously. Faculty members should be encouraged to adopt inclusive teaching practices that acknowledge cultural diversity in learning styles.
3. Intercultural Competence Training for Staff and Students Training programs focusing on intercultural awareness and communication should be extended not only to incoming students but also to lecturers, administrative staff, and local students to foster mutual understanding and reduce cultural misinterpretation.
4. Strengthening Peer and Buddy Systems Structured buddy or mentoring programs pairing international students with trained local peers can help bridge social gaps, promote cultural exchange, and reduce feelings of isolation during critical stages of adjustment.

5. Policy Alignment with Short-Term Mobility Realities Policymakers and program designers should acknowledge that short-term exchange students experience adaptation differently from long-term international students. Support frameworks should be tailored to reflect the intensity and time constraints of exchange mobility.

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