



# International Students' Cross-Cultural Experiences in The Philippines: A Netnographic Study

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## Abstract

The international higher education sector is characterized by the mobility of international students, who undergo transitions in unfamiliar cultural environments that may negatively affect their academic experiences and overall well-being. Culture shock often arises from insufficient knowledge of, and limited understanding about, the norms of the host culture, as well as cultural gaps between international students and the host country. Drawing on a netnographic study of YouTube vlogs by a purposive sample of international students in the Philippines, this paper examines their experiences of culture shock. The findings indicate that international students act as active agents in adapting to these experiences. The study recommends further research adopting nuanced phenomenological perspectives on international students' cross-cultural experiences to inform the design of responsive interventions that promote cross-cultural adaptation. This recommendation is grounded in scholarly arguments that successful cross-cultural adaptation among international students enhances their overall satisfaction

in the host country as well as their academic performance—outcomes that are particularly critical for emerging players in the global higher education market, including the Philippines.

**Keywords:** culture shock, culture learning, international students, netnography, Philippines.

## 1 Introduction

Globalization has facilitated the internationalization of higher education characterized largely by a high number of students moving abroad to study. An international student refers to "individuals who have physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective of participating in educational activities in the country of destination, where the country of destination is different from their country of origin" [1]. Trends report the number of internationally mobile students more than doubled from 1.1 million in 1985, to 4.1 million in 2013 to 4.6 in 2015 [2]. Estimates indicate that the mobility of international students will have surpassed over 7 million by 2025, up from the 6.9 million recorded in 2024, and projected to grow to more than 10 million by 2030 [3]. Higher education institution, and countries, often perceive international



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students as significant sources of revenue through fees and local taxes, as contributors to labor markets, and catalysts for local economic growth, while also contributing to enriching cultural diversity and tolerance, and enhancing educational and research experiences relevant for global ranking. In this regard, Hernandez-Torrano et al. [4] argue that “the notable increase in international student mobility (ISM) as one of the most important indicators of the internationalization of higher education and its substantial impact on individuals’ lives have been associated with scholars’ recognition of the importance of understanding what actually happens during stays abroad” (p. 1). This argument sets the ground for this paper which explores experiences of culture shock among international students in the Philippines.

Kuroda et al. [5] argues that Asia is a region that hosts a concentration of international students, mostly in China, although Malaysia, South Korea and Thailand are “emerging as hot spots for international students” (p. 5). The Philippines has emerged as a key player in the internationalization of higher education market in the Southeast Asian region. Estimates indicate that there are approximately 24,520 international students in the country with students from India (17,242) comprising the majority followed by Chinese students (4491) [6, 7]. There are as well students from other nationalities from the Asian region including Nepal, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, Malaysia, and from Africa. For the latter, majority are Nigerians, Kenyans, and Sudanese [8]. There has been a significant increase in international students to the Philippines post-COVID-19 pandemic, rising from 7,522 in 2020 to 24,520 in 2023 [7]. According to Ramirez [9], the known key pull-factors for international student mobility to the Philippines include English as the medium of instruction, affordable tuition fees, relatively low cost of living, and the hospitality and friendliness of the local people.

The discourse on international students in the Philippines point toward challenges of acculturation. For instance, a study by Pinamang et al. [10] revealed very high acculturative stress among international students in the Philippines attributed to low social support. A study by Lee et al. [11] found depression to be common among this demographic attributed to financial instability and low levels of closeness with parents and with peers. A study by Aclan et al. [12] attribute acculturation challenges among international students to problematic visa processing services, poor communication and information dissemination,

and culture shock. A phenomenological study by Maguddayao [14] among international students enrolled in the medical program at Cagayan State University (CSU), Philippines, revealed several challenges in their education experience and living in the country including the weather and food while also expressing various coping strategies notably adapting to ‘Filipino way of life’, and keeping company with other students. On the former, reference is made to “becoming Filipinized” in regard to eating Filipino food, pronouncing in Filipino accent and language style, and learning Tagalog.

International students tend to employ various forms of coping strategies identified by Spitzberg et al. [15] including relationship cultivation by affiliating with locals, awareness to host culture through interpersonal communication competency, and cross-cultural effectiveness by associating with peers of the same nationality or co-foreign students, if not opting for self-isolation. However, Wa-Baleka et al. [16] note that culture shock experiences among international students in the Philippines is attributed to “the lack of cultural understanding in both Filipino and international students seem to play an important role in the isolation of international students” (p. 21). Culture shock, according to Carley [13] refers to “the transition period and the accompanying feelings of stress and anxiety a person experiences during the early period upon entering a new culture” (p.159). The study by Aclan et al. [12] identifies several factors of culture shock among international students in the Philippines including pollution and littering, racial discrimination, language barriers, and acceptance of LGBTQ+ members, and peculiar local norms.

Despite experiencing culture shock Maguddayao [14] argues that international students show an ability in culturally adapting and adjusting in their lived experience, though the study did not specifically discuss such adaptations in regard to the various dimensions of culture shock, that is affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions, manifesting through the various stages of immigration notably, honeymoon, frustration, adjustment, and adaptation stages. Maguddayao [14] however looks at culture shock in a negative perspective noting this being a “stage characterized by frustration and hostility towards the host nation and its people” (p. 25), in alignment with one of Berry’s [17] acculturation strategies, in his model of acculturation, including maintaining one’s heritage culture rather engaging with the host culture. This paper counters this

argument by noting culture shock experiences, particularly those deemed less distressing, serve as pathways towards adaptation in the host culture.

A phenomenological study by Kato et al. [18] among four international students from Colombia, Nigeria, Madagascar and Myanmar studying in the Philippines on their acculturation experiences argue that transitioning into a new environment requires “optimism, a flexible mindset, acceptance, and a teachable spirit” (p. 12). This argument is grounded on the fact that international students should first be cognizant of the “presence of different cultural heritage in foreign lands” (p. 12), and develop the determination to initiate change and be flexible in adapting to certain values and traditions as essential coping strategies to acculturation. To deal with culture shock experiences, therefore, immigrants adopt culture learning strategies, which Berry [19], defines as “the relatively stable changes that take place in an individual or group in response to environmental demands” (p. 48) is associated with the ability of students playing an active role on their adaptation. The question this paper explores is “How do international students in the Philippines adapt culture learning strategies to mitigate against experiences of culture shock?”

This study adds to nascent studies on international students’ cross-cultural experiences in the Philippines through an exploration of experiences of culture shock and culture learning practices. The rationale of the study is grounded in the empirical literature which acknowledges the fact that culture shock experiences are subjective and based on the heterogeneity of international students who come with a range of motivations and abilities in their cross-cultural experiences [19–21]. The key contribution of this study is rationalized on the argument of Shafaei et al. [22] that successful cross-cultural adaptation among international students can lead to overall satisfaction with their social experience in the host country and academic performance. Such positive experiences are critical for new players in the global higher education market, including the Philippines, which according to Shafaei et al. [22] “can ultimately result in positive word of mouth in promoting host country’s educational institutions to others” (p. 712).

## 2 Review of the Related Literature

Temporary migration to a foreign country brings potential challenges to international student’s experiences related to cross-cultural education

systems, a new cultural environment, and psychological and social situations [23]. Challenges to successful adjustment tend to be affected by felt prejudice and bias, cross-cultural self-efficacy, academic and life stress, and cultural differences [24]. Scholars acknowledge that culture shock experiences of international students may impact on their adjustments and academic work [19, 25]. The causes, according to Yang et al. [26], are attributed to insufficient knowledge and lack of understanding about the values and norms of the new culture coupled by cultural gaps between international students and those of the host country.

### 2.1 Culture shock and culture learning

Culture is generally conceptualized as a set of shared values, beliefs, and norms which manifest themselves in the behavior and other artefacts of a given group [27]. Culture shock, according to Pacheco [28] is understood as “a process by which individuals who experience anxiety, discomfort, and distress in novel cultural environments may eventually come to develop a sense of familiarity and ease” (p. 3). In this regard, the literature and research on culture shock tend orient around exploring factors which are explicitly social, psychological, and emotional, such as the processes of dealing with feelings such as anxiety [29]. As cultural issues abound, international students experience a separation from the social patterns and cultural norms which they are used to in their home countries [30]. In addition, students attending schools in a culture different from their own have to contend with social and educational organizations, behaviors and expectations, as well as dealing with the problems of adjustment common to students in general [28]. In this regard, Furnham [31] notes that the research on culture shock experiences among sojourners have become steadily normalized as a routine side-effect of international travel and social immersion.

Majority of studies on international students’ experiences of culture shock in the Philippines however tend to lack a critical analysis of the contextual nature of such shocks in consideration of the heterogeneity in the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of students. In this regard, understanding international students’ contextual experiences is necessary on the rationale that these are at the heart of intercultural understanding. This paper fills an additional gap by highlighting the essence of culture learning practices in agreement with Lopez’s [32] argument for a re-consideration

of studies of international student's transitional experiences "which does not necessarily encapsulate the experience abroad as a shock or presupposes a passive agency on the international student's behalf" (p. 174). The active role of international students to make the best of their circumstance abroad, Madison [20] argues, therefore necessitates nuanced understanding of their culture learning practices which this study explores based on YouTube content posted by international students in vlogs. Vlogs (video blogs) are a form of user generated content in participatory digital media where users can share content online using Web 2.0 technology via the production of news and entertainment. Web 2.0 describes the shift in online technologies where content and applications are continuously modified by users in a collaborative manner [33].

### 3 Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach which is deemed useful for investigating online spaces since it can capture the richness of the audience's reactions to a narrative, and their meaning making processes [34]. Vlogging is, according to Kitinur [35], a rich site for discovery and as a space for cultural negotiation through narrative process of storytelling about cultural transition, adaptation, and transformation. According to Liu [36], vlogging is highly thematic and a storytelling narrative technique that involves strategies of curiosity in "staring at the world of others and the desire to pry into others' behind-the-scenes behaviors" (p. 203).

According to Kennedy [37], "vlogging has become a global phenomenon where ordinary individuals share their everyday lives online and, in doing so, build connection and community with others" (p. 1). Migrants, in particular, use vlogging to negotiate, invite, and engage with audiences in order to transform adaptations into forms of social and cultural capital [35], an aspect relevant to exploring narratives by international students on their adaptation and coping with culture shock experiences.

#### 3.1 Sampling

Sampling involved purposively selecting vlogs from a heterogeneous group of international students in the Philippines specifically in terms of their nationality. Critical case sampling strategy was employed to select these vlogs which, according to Paton [38] "yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (p. 276). Boolean

search operators using the following key words were used to sample vlogs: 'culture shock', 'international students', and 'Philippines'. The search for vlogs using these operators was done using the in-built application programming interface (API) on YouTube. According to Billing et al. [39], APIs transforms into a closed system where one may access information through the specific media platform rather than through open searches through a Web browser. A further filtering of the YouTube vlogs sought to identify those specifically posted by to international students rather than by tourists.

The selected vlogs were uploaded on YouTube in 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic period when vlogging became a major form of social communication globally [40]. While there are many other social media platforms where vloggers can upload their content, YouTube was selected as it is a publicly accessible social media networking site and one which, according to Kitinur [35] "enables people [through storytelling] to narrate their experiences of adaptation, displacement, and belonging. In the digital age, this process is increasingly visible on platforms such as YouTube" (p. 1). Some vlogs had two individuals engaging in the discussion while some of the engaged individuals were not necessarily owners of the vlog site, rather these belonged to a fellow student of a different nationality. A total of 25 vlogs were sampled with 11 vlogs selected for their richness in content relevant for analysis purposes (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Sampled YouTube vlogs.

Nationality	Sex	Date of upload	Views as of Jan 6, 2022
India*	Male	June 5, 2021	14,892
Japan	Female	Jul 24, 2020	179,415
Kenya (2)	Females 1 2	Jan 22, 2021	11,890
Korea	Female	Aug 28, 2021	25,710
Nepal*	Male	April, 2, 2021	13,608
Nigeria	Male	Jun 9, 2021	6,818
Nigeria	Female 1 2	May 12, 2021	2,332
Nigeria	Female 3	Mar 3, 2021	27,548
Saudi*	Male	June 30, 2021	2,680
USA	Female	Oct 4, 2020	12,184
Yemen*	Male	June 30, 2021	2,680

\*Engaged by the owner of vlog site who was a Nigerian student.

#### 3.2 Data Collection

Data for the study was in the form of vlogs derived from content posted on YouTube by international students still studying in various institutions of higher learning in the Philippines. In Kozinets' [41] argument, a significant amount of data collection "originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the

internet" (p. 79). The links to the selected YouTube videos are listed after the list of references for validity purposes.

Data from the videos were filtered for their relevance to answering the research question for approximately two months as these were viewed by both authors before deciding which ones to include in this study. In the argument of Liu [36], "vlog uses a full of personalized expressions to convey the true and non-fictional content of the story, and has its own unique and self-evident audience attraction" (p. 207). In this regard, content that yielded rich information in answering the research question were selected following peer debriefing between the two authors. As Leech et al. [42] note, peer debriefing with another researcher can create a shared space of investigation that can help researchers enhance understanding of a phenomenon, including moving beyond surface level meanings. The approach to ensure rigor of the study was further undertaken in the data analysis through intercoder reliability in order to ensure consistency in the findings [43].

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis informed by adaptation of Netnography which, according to Wiles et al. [44], is a qualitative methodology situated in a broader methodological content of virtual ethnography "which comprise approaches for conducting ethnographic studies of online communities and groups" (p. 20). As a qualitative research methodology, Netnography views the cultures of online communities as constructed by members invested in their development essentially through user-generated content, defined by van Dijk [45] as content from participative and creative producers and co-creators which is publicly made available online. In this regard, a qualitative approach suffices in exploring unique subjective experiences of cross-cultural transition experiences.

Reid et al. [46] note that Netnography belongs to the ethnographic branch of digital research methodologies which uses naturalistic analysis techniques that are immersive and non-intrusive thereby allowing the researcher to "empathetically enter the (consumers') online conversations" (p. 266). Along the qualitative principle of naturalistic inquiry, this study employed adopted non-participatory Netnography in assessing the sampled vlogs. Non-participatory Netnography, according to Burgess [47], refers to "a flexible, low-cost, and low-risk qualitative approach for both

the researcher and research participant that allows for organic exploration of online communities and their conversations" (p. 1). This approach to analysis allows the researcher to observe participants, without undue influence, and an unobstructive method allowing access to naturalistic online data.

The qualitative methodology using Netnography followed the four stages procedure outlined by Kozinets [41]: *entrée* in which there is a formulation of research question and identification of an appropriate online community for a study (in this case the international students in the Philippines posting vlogs on YouTube); data collection and observations of the community posts; interactions and meanings drawn from the posts; and lastly, analysis and interpretation in which classification, coding and contextualization of practice takes place. Assessing the subjective experiences on culture shock narrated in the students' vlogs therefore involved data collected utilizing critical case sampling, after which the sampled videos were carefully watched and those deemed appropriate for inclusion in this study were selected based on their rich content in answering the research question.

The analytical task, according to Salmons [49], requires a re-reading of extant data, in reference to the "collection of posts of text, images, media or other user-generated content in which the material is created independent of any intervention, influence or prompts by the researcher" (p. 183), in order to thematically organize the finding and inductively draw meanings. The analysis of the vlogs was limited to semantic analysis, in reference to what Braun et al. [48] refer to as the identification of themes at the "surface meanings of data where the analyst is not looking for anything beyond what a participant has said or what has been written" (p. 84). Semantic analysis focuses on what respondents said that aides in organizing data into clear categories for purposes of further insights.

A specific qualitative research software, such as NVivo or Leximancer, was not utilized in the study due to lack of access to a licensed software. Due to the relatively small sample of vlogs, data was therefore manually analyzed and interpreted by both researchers by listening and watching the videos intently in order to fully understand and flesh out the data from the students' narratives. Intercoder validity was employed in coding the data by first undertaking this independently between the authors and then comparison made to ensure consistency in the thematic findings. As O'Connor et al. [50]

**Table 2.** Domains of culture shock.

Domains	Description	Key Findings
<b>Affective</b>	Emotional and psychological response to unfamiliar environment that may lead to feelings of anxiety, stress, confusion, homesickness, and irritability	Poor infrastructure Being observed (staring) Cat-calling Stereotyping Being mimicked Uncomfortable and unpredictable weather
<b>Behavioral</b>	Practical challenges of learning and navigating new cultural ways of life in order to act properly.	Causal lifestyle deemed inappropriate Lack of cleanliness and poor sanitation Indiscipline Pushing and overcrowding whilst using a poor public transport system Poor hygiene
<b>Cognitive</b>	Lacking in interpretive competence of manifest in understanding unfamiliar cultural practices and social cues.	'Strange' food culture Attitudes and behaviors deemed as lacking in civility and decorum

contend, while some scholars note that complete agreement is not always necessary in qualitative research, especially in reflexive thematic analysis, the process of discussing discrepancies can deepen the analysis and enhance its credibility. The interpretation of the findings was undertaken by the researchers through reflexive interpretation drawing on the first author's positionality as international student in the Philippines during his doctorate studies, and the second author's positionality as a Filipino who is well versed with the local culture. As Guillemin et al. [51]note, "through reflexivity, the researcher critically reflects on the kind of knowledge produced from the research, and how that knowledge is generated" (p. 274) in making meaning of a social phenomenon.

## 4 Results

Cultural adaptation among migrants, Bochner [52] notes, is said to be associated with mitigating the affective, behavioral and cognitive dimension of culture shock, in regard to "how people feel, behave, think and perceive when exposed to second-culture influences" (p. 7). Employing a semantic analysis, the initial findings highlight several aspects experienced by international students associated with culture shock across affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions (Table 2).

The thematic findings were further analyzed by compressing the various experiences of culture shock into two overarching themes; positive cultural experiences and negative cultural experiences. Positive cultural experiences can be described as a reaction to unfamiliarity that marks the beginning of adapting to a new environment. The thematic analysis categorized positive experiences into the following: Respect for human and animal rights; Casual lifestyle; Close-knit

family and community relations; and feelings of personal safety.

Negative cultural experiences, on the other hand, may refer to circumstances that may cause emotional, psychological and physical distress from adapting to an unfamiliar culture. The thematic findings reveal the following aspects related to this theme: attitudes and behaviors deemed as lacking in civility and decorum; stressful causal lifestyles; 'strange' food culture; and environmental issues including the weather, lack of cleanliness and poor sanitation, and poor infrastructure (Figure 1). These experiences intersect in the everyday adaptations of international students in the Philippines.

### 4.1 Positive culture shock experiences

#### 4.1.1 Casual lifestyle

The casual nature among Filipinos is a perceived as a positive cultural experience of culture shock among international students. This lifestyle is complemented by a survey which ranked the Philippines as the second happiest country in Southeast Asia [54]. The nature of the positive cultural experience among international students are exemplified in the following quote:

- Filipinos can be mild mannered and generally casual and friendly. They say Africans talk loudly and seem confrontational. They say we seem like we are fighting when we talk among Africans. This is how we talk. When I went back to Nigeria, I developed the same causal habit–Nigeria female 1.

The implication of the causal lifestyle among Filipinos has a positive effect in the academic experiences of international students as expressed in the following quotes:

- My professor comments on my Facebook page. In

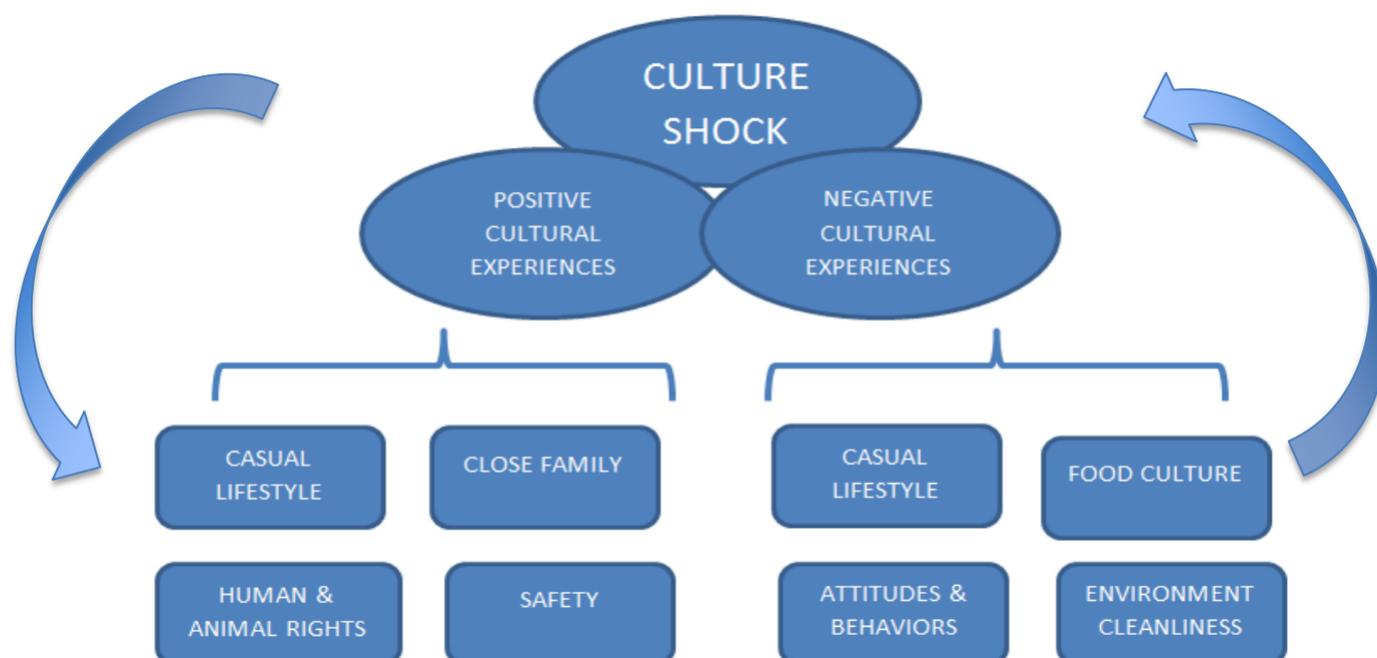


Figure 1. Themes and sub-themes on culture shock among international students in the Philippines.

Nigeria, professors tell you off and you feel bad. In the Philippines, even if professors can be strict with you, they still interact with you, seat with us. They greet you and there is no feeling of fear. It is encouraging-Nigeria female 2.

- Japanese are strict on time. One has to always go earlier than that. Everything is serious. Studies, work, eating is serious. In Japanese culture, seriousness is the focus when doing things and thinking. It is more cheerful and happy in the Philippines. You guys always say, 'kamusta ka?'. In the Philippines, time is taken for granted. They always say, 'am on my way... trapik jam'. I was one day late for a meeting and I felt so sorry and guilty. But I was told 'okay lang'. Appearance is also important in Japan. Always have to look kawai (beautiful). It is however casual in the Philippines. No much make-up needed. No pressure to be kawai. In Japan, cuteness is demanded over being sexy. In Japan I buy cute clothes but, in the Philippines, I buy sexy clothes. My thinking has really changed a lot to do this. Japan is stressful. When I go to the Philippines, my stress is gone. Walking speed is fast in Japan but in the Philippines, walking and singing all the time. So casual. I feel freer in the Philippines. This would not be accepted to my dad if I was in Japan-Japanese female student.

#### 4.1.2 Close family and community relations

A major cultural trait among Filipinos is the nature of close family relations. Culturally, Filipinos are known to be family-centered, and maintain close ties characterized by reciprocity [53]. This trait is acknowledged as a positive experience among international students as noted in the following quotes:

- Filipinos have so many families and friends. In Japan, it is small family. It is a serious problem in Japan. I hear Filipino people care about family. It is so nice. [The] Average age in the Philippines is so young which I think is a good thing. That is why in the Philippines there is so much energy-Japanese female student.
- Social drinking with parents is accepted. Even smoking. In Kenya, one cannot drink [alcohol] in the presence of their parents. It is not allowed to drink with children around. Unlike in the Philippines, the father can drink with the child, if smoking, they smoke together. The Filipinos have this sweet culture that is open which is good-Kenyan female 1.

Common cultural experiences between the Philippines and societies from where international students come from provides a good balance in the latter's academic and adaptation experiences which may reduce anxieties and acculturation related challenges. This is well reflected in the following quotes from both Kenyan and Indian students.

- In the Philippines, grandparents look forward to having grandchildren and taking care of them. Even if one gets a child young, they are welcoming and want to assist taking care of the child while you go about your life.-Kenyan female 2.

#### 4.1.3 Human and animal rights

Filipinos are generally respectful, tolerant and resilient. The Philippines ranks relatively well globally in terms of gender equality. The Philippine remains top in Asia in reducing the gender gap on four key dimensions including economic participation and opportunity, education attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment [55]. The outcome of the 2021 World Gender Gap Report [56] ranked the Philippines 17th globally, second to New Zealand in the East Asian and Pacific region, closing gaps in education attainment, and on health and survival. This aspect was well captured in the following quote which notes a positive lesson to draw from:

- Many single moms in the Philippines. Most live in comfortable life and are independent. My landlady is a single mom and she cares for her 3 children, works hard for her family, and runs a restaurant and soap-making business. This is something we in India need to learn from. I see the girls in the Philippines are very hard working, are independent and are protected by the law. In India it is not a popular culture for girls to work. Boys tend to just laze around the house. Those from Rajasthan and Haryana need to learn from the Philippines on how girls can be vital and important- Indian male student.

An extension of ensuring gender equality in the country in part includes the general acceptance of persons of different sexual orientations and identities. Amid the backdrop efforts to pass legislation to mitigate against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity or expression (SOGIE)<sup>1</sup> in the country, Filipinos are relatively accepting of persons of different sexual orientations so long as conformity with stereotypes and occupational niches

<sup>1</sup>There have been several attempts to pass House Bill No. 4982 or "An Act prohibiting Discrimination on the Basis of Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity or Expression (SOGIE) and Providing Penalties therefor" since it was first filed in the 11th Congress (1998-2001) by Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago and Akbayan partylist representative, Etta Rosales. The Bill awaiting a resolution by the Senate having been approved by the House of Representatives during the 17th Congress (2016-2019) (Congress) [67].

are maintained [66]. The visibility of persons who are gay or lesbian in the Philippines is a cultural shock among international students, especially from Africa and the Middle East. Despite this shocking experience, some positive lessons are gained which enhances the academic experience of international students by reducing anxieties or negative psychosocial effects, including hate, fear or discrimination, reflected in the following quotes:

- In the Philippines, you can be gay. In the Philippines, they don't judge you for being LGBT. I feel they (LGBTQ+) are the sweetest people I have met in the Philippines. They have a strong positive self-esteem. In Nigeria, you cannot comment and say you are gay. They will come and arrest you!-Nigeria female student 1.
- Gays and lesbians are relatively free. You can see guys putting on skirts, bum shorts, make-up, doing their hair and cat-walking like a lady even by the road side. They walk with regular partners as well. They are not even shy. You see them even in school doing PDA (public display of affection). In Nigeria, there is fear over coming out as gay or lesbian. Nigerian female student 3.
- In my early days when I first came here, I went to the salon for a haircut. There were transgender working there with 'normal' people. In India, the transgender are isolated. In the Philippines, transgenders work with other genders. They are very open. I don't think they feel ashamed of being transgenders. Not only in the salon but I have seen them work in restaurants, and that is very good and I respect them for this. -Indian male student.

Having pets is a common practice among Filipinos. The domestic rooster, cats and dogs are a common feature. Reports indicate that Filipinos adopted more pets, especially dogs, during the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, topping the Southeast Asian region. This was evidenced by rise in adoption and sales of pets and pet supplies which increase 144% in 2021 from 2020 [57, 58]. Dogs however were the preferred pet over cats among Filipinos. However, it is not uncommon to chance on stray cats and dogs in the Philippines as well, termed puspins (pusa pinoy for cats) and aspins (askal pinoy for dogs) in the local slang [59]. International students express some shock with regards to the penchant among Filipinos to keep pets, or fondling stray animals, especially cats. On the latter, some international students have to come to terms with changing their cultural mindset regarding

cats as expressed in the following quotes:

- In Nigeria, you cannot keep cats. Cats are like (associated with) witchcraft, especially black cats. Where there is a black cat, it means demonic things. But in the Philippines, they say cats are so cute. My classmate likes street cats and takes pictures of them. Even in some places we go to, they treat cats well. It is very strange for me because cats are demonic and signify evil. Now I feel different about them after living in the Philippines-Nigeria female 1.
- We have few cats in Nepal compared to the Philippines, where you see cats everywhere. I was shocked because compared to Nepal, Filipinos love cats. But it was kinda good because people are friendly to cats. But if it was back in my country, we could be chasing away these cats. Like cats, there are many roosters here in the Philippines. In Nepal, you see roosters in the rural area. Here in the Philippines, you see them in the cities. I think these are for entertainment purposes, for rooster fights (Sabong). We in Nepal have these roosters for eating purposes while in the Philippines for rooster fights-Nepali male student.

#### 4.1.4 Personal Safety

The Philippines, like any society, experiences cases of crime and criminality. Trends indicate lowering of cases of crime in the country over the recent past (73.76%) due to improved security measures [60]. Metro Manila was reported to have seen a decrease in crime by 9% in 2021 compared to the previous year [61]. International students in the Philippines reflect a positive experience with being safe in the country. These sentiments are captured in the following quotes:

- People in the Philippines don't run when crossing the roads. They walk casually like they own the roads. Care stop for pedestrians to cross. In Nigeria, you dare not cross the road when a car is approaching. I feel that road crossing is relatively safe in the Philippines-Nigerian female 3.
- In Nigeria, I wanted breakfast at 9am. There was none. In the Philippines, when I go on [nursing] duty at 3:30am, there is food and McDo (McDonalds) is open. McDo is open 24 hours and some restaurants as well. You can go out at any time. In Nigeria, at 3:30am, one can get kidnapped or robbed-Nigeria female 1.

These experiences around personal safety are seen

as a shock when contrasted against their countries of origin, an attribute that enhances their academic and life adaptations in the Philippines by allaying anxieties around their safety and feelings of discomfort.

## 4.2 Negative Culture Shock Experiences

### 4.2.1 Casual Lifestyle

Some of the casual lifestyles among Filipinos elicit negative culture shock experiences which may impact on international students' perceptions of Filipinos and in their adaptation in the country. One of the negative culture shock experiences were related to the manner of dressing up, as noted in the following quotes:

- The first culture shock is when I arrived in Manila. Before coming here, I was used to seeing women wearing hijab in my country. That is our Muslim culture and outfit there (in the Middle East). (But) when I arrived here, I see people, girls wearing shorts. And this is my first time to see that- Saudi male student 1.
- In the Philippines, everyone wears bum shorts. They don't care. In Nigeria, we are a very religious and conservative country. So when they see a lady wearing short shorts in public, they tend to take that as lacking modesty and label the lady a prostitute or immoral. Nigeria female student 4.

### 4.2.2 Food Culture

Food has always been an important part of Philippine culture—it connects people and bridges their differences [62]. Filipinos enjoy a wide variety of food, and these may be of culture shock to international students not familiar with a variety of food, including the staple rice, and pork which may be incompatible with international students from Islamic backgrounds or those who are vegetarians from South Asia. The food culture as a negative culture shock experience among international students was a highly discussed aspect of their cross-cultural experience as expressed in the following quotes:

- They (Filipinos) don't eat rice with stew. Rather, they eat rice with soy sauce. I went to McDonald's and they gave me rice with fried chicken and sauce. They also cook food with sugar. Filipinos eat sugary foods.-Nigerian female student 3.
- They are eating fish with everything. If there is no fish, they will get something like fish sauce. The fish sauce is brown. That is shocking to me because it smells. Sorry to say something like that but it smells mas mabaho (pungent). But we

respect what they eat. I know they will also get shocked if they see what we eat in our country also-Yemen male student.

- Filipinos are meat-eaters. They (Filipinos) eat pork, chicken and beef. Pork is very popular. I see barbeque pork (lechon) where piglets are roasted in full; skewered in barbeque sticks. That is very strange to me. They eat pork in their dinner, lunch and breakfast as well. They have meat product diet in all their food routine-Indian male student.
- Pork is important in celebrations in the Philippines. In Nigeria, we don't eat pork for important celebrations. In Nigeria, when we are celebrating events like weddings, we kill cows. Yah, beef. But here in the Philippines, they kill pigs. Lechon. I actually have come to love eating lechon so much-Nigerian female student 4.

#### 4.2.3 Inappropriate Behaviors and Attitudes

Some inappropriate behaviors and attitudes observed by international students in the Philippines bother them, such as staring, mimicking, perceptions of mixed-race Filipinos, cat-calling, lunch breaks, and pasaway culture (indiscipline). These inappropriate behaviors can be a discomforting experience for international students, which may negatively affect their academic work and life in the country. Some of these negative behaviors and attitudes are reflected in the quotes:

- Staring is common in the Philippines. In a jeepney, me and my sister were sitting and this guy was staring at us without blinking an eye. I leant to stare back-an eye for an eye fight. They eventually look the other side. I feel cat-calling is also a problem. Most of the tricycle riders or jeepney drivers' cat-call me often when am walking by. They also say 'anyong sayo' (Korean salutation) to anyone who looks Korean. This is toxic culture but others say it is the friendly nature of Filipinos to be humorous, always joke-lang- Korean female student.
- Everyone assumes that my dad is White! They would not ask me directly but they would start by asking if my mom is Filipina. And I would be like, yes she is. And then they would go, 'and our dad?' You know what they wanted to ask due to stereotypes I do not want to say what these are. If you know, you know, if not you don't. I tried not to let it bother me. But no, my dad is not White! My dad is completely, 100% fully

Filipino-Filipino-American female student.

- Lunch break is very important in the Philippines. Once it is 12 o'clock, everything is on lockdown. Lunch breaks are an important as making money-Nigeria female student 1.

Some students noted the need to adopt to the norms as there are no alternative options as expressed in the following quote:

- Lunch break is taken seriously in the Philippines. I have also never had my lunch at 12 like they do here in the Philippines. But since I came here, my time table has changed to adjust to the system here. I just had to accept it-Nepali male student

#### 4.2.4 Physical Environment

Perceptions on the environmental conditions in the Philippines were noted to be a negative culture shock experience given the lack of preparation for such conditions such as warm humid and rainy weather. This can cause some discomfort for students who hail from non-tropical countries like South Korea, China, Japan, and some Western countries. These perceptions were captured in the following quotes:

- It is humid in the Philippines. I walked out of the airport and it was so hot. And the traffic was terrible. It took 30 minutes from Makati to Bonifacio. It is not the same in the provinces. I live in Pampanga and it is not traffic. In Manila, it is a whole different stay. I have got used to the traffic that 3-4 hours travel is normal for me now-Korean female student.
- It rains a lot in the Philippines. It is nice because it is all green and [there are] no deserts. But it is weird for us foreigners that the rain is plenty. Also the sun is hotter here than where I come from in Africa. -Nigerian male student.

A concern for some international students is the need for maintaining sanitary conditions. Poor garbage collection practices can create a negative culture shock experience among students who come from countries with a high standard of cleanliness as expressed in this quote:

- With no enough public trashcans, there is plenty of litter in the streets. I see trash is normal here. I was told that trashcans in public were not common because terrorists could put a bomb in there. I read this on the Internet. I carry a plastic bag so that I can throw my trash when I get home. But

I am not saying the Philippines is dirty. -Korean female student.

International students need to be prepared to experience the poor public transport system in the country, mostly in the urban areas. Lack of adequate preparation can cause negative culture shock experiences as noted in the following quote:

- Public transport can be challenging. I have tried all public transport system in the Philippines. My worst experience is the LRT (metro rail line). It is so packed with not enough space anymore in the train but people keep pushing each other to get into the small spaces available. There are also lots of pick-pockets so make sure you put your backpack in front of you and be careful with the kilikili (armpit) smell- Korean female student.

Other concerns which may create negative culture shock experience among international students include the pasaway (indiscipline) culture among some Filipinos, be it from poor planning of urban places or individual behaviors as expressed in the following quotes.

- Electricity poles are so close to the road. These things are dangerous. I almost got into an accident because there was a car ahead of me in Calamba (in the south of Metro Manila). I was simply following the car ahead of me. And when the car turned without the driver putting on the indicator light, I saw an electricity pole right in front of me. I had to suddenly put on the breaks and swerve to the left of the road. Also get used to seeing bunch of cables hanging around. These are so bunched up and common in cities. They could have these underground but it seems like they have been doing this for a long time -Nigeria male student.
- Tricycles are a problem as the rider drives in the middle of the road. Let me explain. The roads have two lanes and sometimes the tricycles do not keep to their outer lane. They don't go to the side of the road. These tricycles cause a lot of accidents. Why can't they simply keep to their side of the lane and let other vehicles pass easily-Nigeria male student.

## 5 Discussion

The analysis of vlogs posted by international students in the Philippines point to challenges adjusting to a different socio-cultural environment. The findings of the study align with the empirical literature

which note that cross-cultural adaptation in the transition of international students from one cultural and educational setting to another is often difficult regardless of their ethnicity and socio-economic background. Challenges include concerns over arranging accommodation and transportation, adjusting to a different climate and dietary habits, to facing struggles related to linguistic proficiency and financial hardship.

The findings of the study equally reveal that international students in the Philippine show an ability to cope with their circumstances through culture learning practices, including learning the local language, eating the local foods, and adopting everyday practices. In agreement with Bochner [52], approaches of dealing with the affective, behavioral and cognitive challenges associated with culture shock “does not regard the response to unfamiliar cultural settings as a passive, largely negative reaction, but rather as an active process of dealing with change” (p. 7). The literature on international students' acculturation experiences acknowledges the fact that attending universities in a culture different from their own requires adapting to novel social, educational, and behavioral expectations [19, 63, 64]. These culture learning practices include learning the host language, communication styles, social interaction, and knowledge of norms and values effective for adaptive cross-cultural transition [65]. Drawing on similarities of culture-specific skills in the adaptation process, as unraveled in the study findings, attest to the argument that previous experiences play an important role for sojourners' adaptation since basic skills learned in the home country could be applicable to the new host context [65, 66].

It is the cautious contention of Ward et al. [67] that culture-specific skills are more difficult when the newcomer falsely assumes that the new society operates similar to those of their home country. As Snow [68] argues, “the building of intercultural competence requires that learners not only become skilled at managing the cognitive aspects of the interpretation process, but also be on the lookout for affective factors and better at managing the impact of feelings on interpretive judgments” (p. 20). In addition, cognitive competence and behavioral competence are deemed crucial aspect of intercultural competency [69]. Cognitive aspects in cross-cultural context, especially positive ones, enhances comprehension and nuanced appreciation of the complexities of new cultures and in inter-cultural

communication process among various ethnicities and nationalities. Positive behavioral competence would denote what is the capacity to address diverse communication challenges encompassing the ability to initiate and sustain reciprocal relationships.

Drawing from the study findings and critical discussion, a call is made to adequately prepare and guide international students in the pre-departure phase as preparation in the acquisition of culturally relevant knowledge and skills for their eventual successful adaptation in the host country. This suggestion draws from Lopez [32] who suggests for enhanced pre-departure programs to manage socio-cultural and psychological adaptation grounded on the argument that international students are “highly motivated individuals, can plan, anticipate risks, take initiatives, and prepare for possible consequences of their international experience” (p.174). This suggestion is relevant for stakeholders in the Philippines education sector through further research which takes the following two suggestion ala Lopez [32]: first, acknowledging that international experience starts prior to arrival to the host country, and secondly, grant the opportunity to reconsider attention on a scarcely studied topic “which does not necessarily encapsulate the experience abroad as a shock or presupposes a passive agency on the international student’s behalf” (p. 174). As Shafaei et al. [22] argue, successful cross-cultural adaptation among international students can lead to overall satisfaction with their social experience in the host country.

## 6 Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of this study was the sampling of students’ vlogs from YouTube. Future studies can explore the topic across different social media platforms. The study was additionally limited to the user-generated content posted on YouTube which can be biased. Future studies can include participatory Netnography which, according to Reid et al. [46] is immersive by “allowing the researcher to empathetically enter the (consumers’) online conversations [and] consists of the adaptation of traditional offline research strategies (such as face-to-face interview) to the online environment” (p. 266). Another limitation is the inability to explore response from higher education stakeholders on international student’s culture shock and adaptation experiences. These limitations provide a basis for further research on the topic in order to expand the

discourse in the Philippines. Future research can also be aided by the use of qualitative software to enhance.

## 7 Conclusion

The Philippines is an emerging market in the internationalization of higher education. Part of the consequences of this phenomenon is experiences of culture shock among international students while considering their abilities in adapting to the unique dietary, climatic, environmental and behavioral aspects in the society that necessitates certain culture learning strategies that enhance quicker adaptation. The study reveals the active role international students in the Philippines take in dealing with the affective, behavioral and cognitive challenges associated with their culture shock experiences in the country. Informed by the findings, this study argues for stakeholders in the HEI sector in the Philippines to give due attention and investment in pre-departure study abroad programs that will enhance the competencies of international students relevant to their successful adaptation. For higher education institutions in the country, emphasize should be placed in the creation of programs that can help enhance culture learning experiences among international students that may contribute to the wellbeing of international students. These strategies can lead to more international students pursuing higher education in the Philippines, as well as enhance the profile of local HEIs in the highly competitive international higher education market thus lending to Ferencz’s [70] suggestion that universities should be “prepared to meet students not only academically, but also socially and culturally” (p.1).

## Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available YouTube video blogs (vlogs). The specific vlogs analyzed in this study, along with their upload details and view counts at the time of analysis, are listed below. All videos can be accessed via the provided URLs.

1. 123JAPAN! (Japanese, Female). (2020, July 24). 5 Culture Shocks That Makes Japanese Crazy in The Philippines! About Money and Time? [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNqyd\\_HFddo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNqyd_HFddo)
2. Adii Mimi (Nigerian, Female). (2021, July 10). Why Indian students come to the Philippines for medicine: the role of Indian caste system in

- medicine [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nghjN-YRcO>
3. Damaris Enoch (Nigerian, Female). (2020, November 20). 10 baffling things about being a medical student in the Philippines [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSFCva2EOPE>
  4. Damaris Enoch (Nigerian, Female). (2021, March 1). Cultures in the Philippines I admire [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpKwLwX3Bmg>
  5. Eniola Ibikunle (Nigerian, Female). (2021, February 9). Culture shock I experienced in the Philippines [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e83OL7BjIDo>
  6. Happiness Boms (Nigerian, Female). (2020, November 28). Culture shock I experienced in the Philippines [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VkxyXlhAXIA>
  7. Iam Chernu (Kenyan, Female). (2021, January 22). Culture shock between Kenya and the Philippines [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nd8U3NpBVcQ>
  8. Igoche Joy (Nigerian, Female). (2021, March 3). Culture shocks I've experienced in Philippines [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_qgxH5oLrY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qgxH5oLrY)
  9. Kristypata (Korean, Female). (2020, August 28). Culture Shocks I experienced in the Philippines [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gxFBOBve7-U>
  10. Nurse Glory (Nigerian, Female). (2020, December 17). 13 Culture shocks I experienced in the Philippines [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lryCSSCIB\\_l](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lryCSSCIB_l)
  11. Nurse Ruth Nook (Nigerian, Female). (2020, December 17). Culture shock in the Philippines: Sharing my experience [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved January 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHfSfDO1Czw>
- accessed and analyzed for this study. The authors archived screenshots or local copies of the vlog content to ensure the integrity of the analysis, as online content is subject to change or removal. All data used are publicly accessible via the provided URLs.
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- ### Conflicts of Interest
- The authors declare no conflicts of interest.
- ### AI Use Statement
- The authors declare that no generative AI was used in the preparation of this manuscript.
- ### Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate
- Not applicable.
- ### References
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**Note:** The view counts and subscriber numbers were current as of January 6, 2022, the date the data were

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