
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dealing with Reverse Culture Shock after Cultural Exchange: Contributing Factors and Coping Strategies

Samira EL-Asri¹ ✉ Abderrahim El Karfa² and Hamza Farhane³

^{1,2,3}Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Dhar Al Mahraz, Sidi Mohammed Ben Abdelah University, Fez, Morocco

Corresponding Author: Samira EL-Asri, **E-mail:** elasrisamiraa@gmail.com

| ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the contributing factors that make returning exchange students' readjustment in their home culture difficult and lead them to feel reverse culture shock and the coping strategies they make use of to mitigate this reverse culture shock. Using purposive and snowball sampling, the data was gathered through a mixed method approach, including a questionnaire with 16 exchange alumni and a semi structured interview with 7 of them. The results of the study showed that most participants experienced difficulty readjusting due to different reasons, namely the unhealthy comparisons they made between their host and home cultures and the reverse homesickness and alienation they encountered in their home culture. The study also indicated two main coping strategies that students relied on to reduce their reverse culture shock: processing and accepting that they have become different after their exchange and staying in touch with fellow exchange alumni.

| KEYWORDS

Exchange students, exchange alumni, reverse culture shock, cultural exchange, reverse homesickness.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 26 March 2024

PUBLISHED: 26 March 2024

DOI: 10.32996/jpbs.2024.4.1.6

1. Introduction

Going on cultural exchange programs has been reported to bring about positive cognitive changes such as personal growth, independence, confidence, and cultural awareness (Sustarsic, 2020, p. 914; Suryanto et al., 2022, p. 82). However, upon returning from a cultural exchange program, the student may find herself struggling with difficulties akin to those experienced when first starting the exchange journey. Périco and Gonçalves (2018) compare it to the feeling of "no longer belonging to the country of exchange and of belonging to the country of origin" (p. 4). For many returning students, this experience of readaptation, as identified by Kim (2007), is similar to the process of 'stress adaptation-growth dynamic' which he explains as stressful internal turmoil between an individual's "loyalty to the original identity and a necessity to embrace a new one" that forces the individual to "to restructure their existing internal conditions to regain an internal equilibrium" (p. 244); especially for those students coming from developing countries and who view their exchange experience as a dream come true to live in a developed culture, education, and economy (Hien, 2022, p. 150). The process of readaptation is harder for younger students because it is easier for them to 'detach' from their home culture (Périco & Gonçalves, 2018, p. 5). It is also similar to a reverse acculturation process, which may result in psychological, academic, and socio-cultural consequences such as depression, homesickness, loneliness, and poor academic performance (Dentakos et al., 2017).

Therefore, the current study contributes to the much-needed body of research on cultural study abroad experiences post exchange as it aims to explore the factors that make exchange students' readjustment in their home country difficult and the coping mechanisms they mostly resort to in order to mitigate the feelings experienced by returning students post exchange. Hence, it will provide a useful source of related information for students who are interested in this type of exchange.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural exchange programs

It has become a fact among students that there is no 'substitute' for the experience of studying abroad (Gaia, 2015, p. 22). This is especially true in the case of cultural exchange programs because during this type of exchange the main aim is not purely of studies but more of changing oneself (Sebben, 2001 as cited in Périco & Gonçalves, 2018, p.2) as they provide various benefits for students such as knowledge, network, and ways of learning and acquiring the language that they would not have obtained if they have remained in their home country (Crossman & Clarke, 2010). As a result, those students provide researchers with ample opportunities for research on the dynamics of cross-cultural exchange experiences (Pacheco, 2020, p.1). However, though the personal and professional benefits of exchange surpass the drawbacks (Costello, 2015, p. 51), many returning students suffer from readaptation problems in their home country after the end of the exchange duration.

2.2 Reverse cultural shock

In simple words, reverse cultural shock can be defined as the equivalence of cultural shock experienced by the exchange student when first integrating into the host culture with the difference that it is experienced when returning to the home culture. However, it goes beyond that; for instance, according to Uehara (1986), the students returning from the exchange may have different feelings, such as alienation, loneliness, feeling of loss, isolation, unhappiness, loss of identity, depression and sometimes, illnesses which are the result of extreme levels of change (as cited in Périco & Gonçalves, 2018, p.4) especially after a close intercultural contact which can be defined as a "*personal, direct contact with native and non-native speakers of English as a lingua franca*" (Sobkowiak, 2019, p.686). According to experts, reverse culture shock has been found to be more difficult to overcome than traditional culture shock because the students feel out of place in their own home country (Berdan et al., 2013, p. 253) because many students find themselves struggling with several 'bipolar experiences' of bipolar experiences of conflict/peace, reality/idealization, freedom/restriction, changing/static and comfort/discomfort (Michellini, 2019, p. 42). Hence, they find difficulty adjusting to the "alien old world" (Dettweiler et al., 2015, p. 86 as cited in *ibid*). Some of the main ways of mitigating the impact of culture shock are for students to "*communicate with one another, engage in dialogue to process their experiences, and connect with close family, friends, and mentors*" so as to help them "reach a deeper level of understanding or meaning about what they experienced abroad" (Baker, 2019, p. 130). Another effective way mentioned in the literature is taking part in post-exchange orientations or re-entry programming because it provides the needed support for students to "*internalize and understand the experiences students have gained while abroad and integrate into their experiences at home*" (*ibid*, p. 47).

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research objectives and questions

The current study aims to explore the main factors that lead returning exchange students to experience reverse culture shock upon their re-entry and the coping strategies they employ to reduce the impact of this type of culture shock and to reintegrate successfully into their home communities. Hence, this study has been designed to answer the main following questions:

- To what extent do students experience reverse-culture shock?
- What are the factors behind students' experiencing reverse-culture shock?
- What are the ways that help students to better readjust to their home culture?

3.2 Participants

A total of 16 former exchange students were recruited to take part in the questionnaire data collection in this study using purposive and snowball sampling. They were alumni of the YES (Youth Exchange Scholarship) program, which is a ten-months cultural exchange program that targets students between the ages of 15 and 17 (U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Morocco, 2023). The participants' ages in this study ranged from under 20 to above 30, and there were 14 females (75%) and 4 males (25%).

For interview data collection, the same sampling methods were used to conduct individual semi-structured interviews with 7 of the alumni. The interviewees belonged to different exchange cohorts: 2 were 2022 alumni, 2 were 2019 alumni, 1 was a 2010 alumna, and 2 were 2009 alumni.

3.3 Research instruments

To collect quantitative data, the questionnaire included items that targeted the factors behind experiencing reverse culture shock and which were adapted from a list compiled by Labrack (1994). As for the possible coping strategies that students can rely on to mitigate the impact or reverse culture shock, the questionnaire items were adapted from a list by Elias (2022). The items were presented in multiple answer forms for students to select from.

As for qualitative data collection, the semi structured interviews included questions that aimed to gain in-depth insights into how students deal with readaptation in their home communities after the end of their exchange.

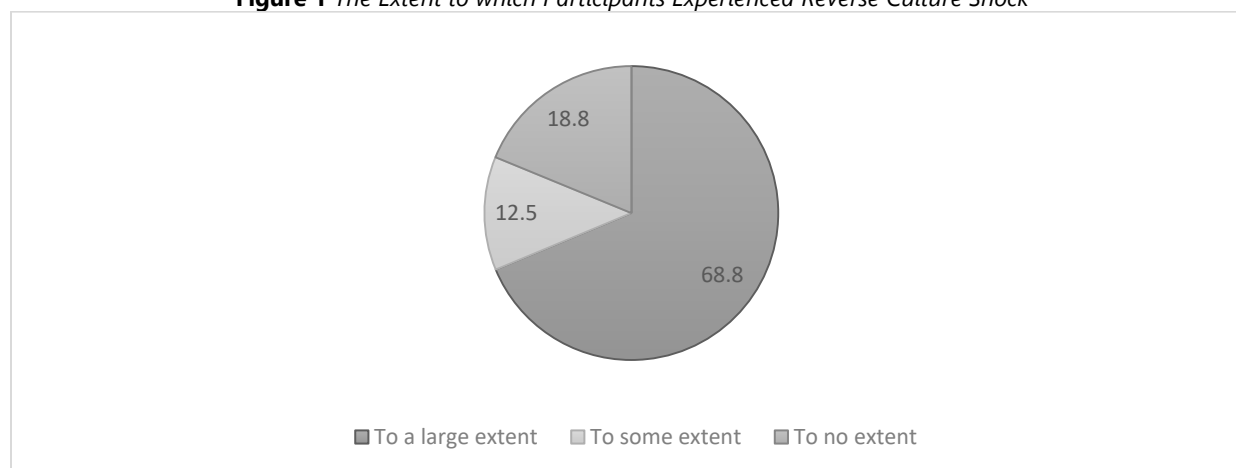
3.4 Data analysis

The results from the questionnaires were run using the Statistics Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 27.0 to interpret, whereas the data collected from the interviews were themed and employed according to the guiding research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

Before investigating the factors that made returning students feel reverse culture shock, they were first asked about the extent to which they experienced this reverse culture shock upon their return home. As can be seen in Figure 1, a majority of 68.8% reported that they had experienced it to a large extent, in contrast to 12.2% who reported that they had experienced it to no extent, whereas the rest of the respondents (18.8%) selected it to some extent. Hence, it is evident that most of the returning exchange students go through various degrees of reverse culture shock. This was also evidenced in some of the statements made by the interviewees; for instance, some of them experienced it more intensely than others. For example, interviewee 1, who reported how exchange students have to deal with both culture shock in the host culture and the reverse culture shock in their home culture, said, *"The culture shock as well as the reverse culture-shock are the two main things every exchange student deal with on the beginning and end of their exchange experiences."* She further admitted, *"I won't lie; it was not an easy transition. The reverse culture shock hit me hard."* Similarly, interviewee 4 also recounted how she struggled with reverse culture shock; she stated, *"Honestly, I felt the reverse culture shock when I came back to Morocco more than the culture shock that I experienced in the US."* In contrast, interviewees 2 and 5 reported that they had not experienced any reverse culture; they respectively stated, *"It wasn't very difficult for me personally. I tend to be adaptable and focused on the positive,"* *"I didn't really face any troubles readjusting when I got back."*

Figure 1 The Extent to which Participants Experienced Reverse Culture Shock



As for the factors that made the returning students' readjustment challenging and experience a reverse culture shock, respondents were asked to select from the list of factors mentioned in Figure 2. The results came up relatively close with the factor of making unhealthy comparisons between the home and host cultures first (20.4%). The second factor (18.4%), as voted by respondents, is reverse homesickness. Feelings of alienation and difficulty reconnecting with friends and family were equally selected as the third factor (16.3%). As for the fourth factor, boredom, along with the inability to apply new knowledge and skills, were also equally selected by 10.2% of respondents, whereas only 8.2% of respondents selected trouble in understanding the home culture as a significant factor that resulted in their reverse culture shock. The interviewees also highlighted these factors. The following are some of their answers,

"Reverse culture shock is real. Losing contact with old friends, missing your American family, and feeling like the odd one is all part of the exchange year package, and I wouldn't have it any other way," said Interviewee 1.

"It was challenging at first to readapt to my home culture norms and lifestyle as I kept making many comparisons between my host country and my home country," said Interviewee 3.

"It's probably because we didn't have any in person orientation after we came back (because of covid); it was hard at first to again get used to living with my family, whom I left a year ago and came back totally different," said Interviewee 4.

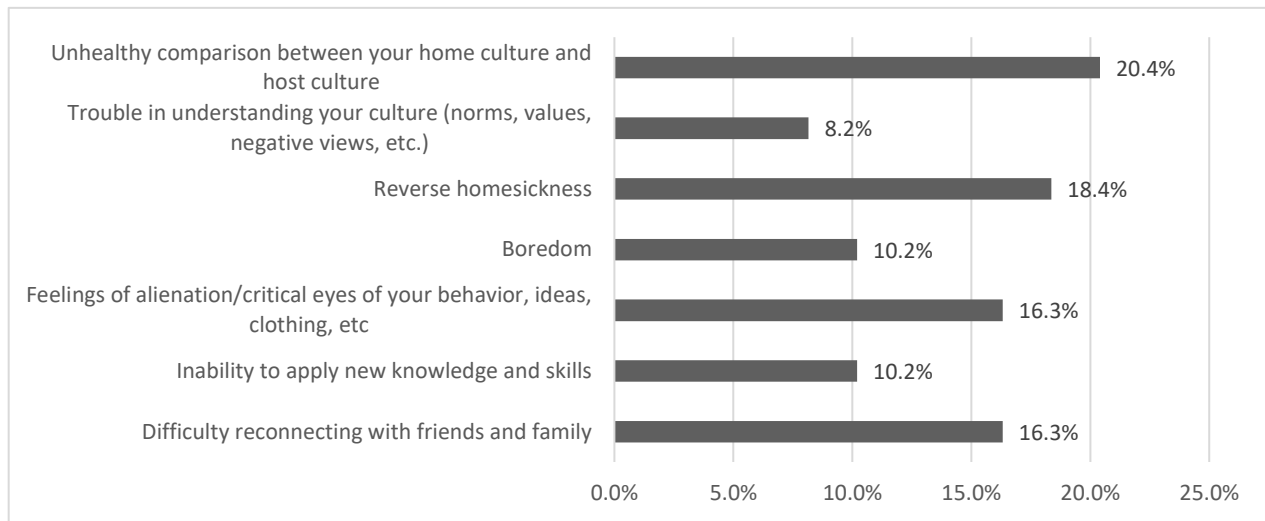


Figure 2 Factors that contribute to feeling reverse culture shock

For the third and final question, respondents were asked to select the personal coping strategies they most resorted to reduce the impact of reverse culture shock and readjust in their home culture. As can be seen in Figure 3, 39% of respondents selected the mechanism of understanding and accepting that they were different after their exchange, followed by 22% of them who relied on the connections they have made with other fellow exchange alumni to help to mitigate the impact of their readjustment process. However, the least selected mechanism (less than 5%) is getting professional emotional support from exchange program officials, which is usually done through organizing post-exchange orientations for students to help them process their experiences and reintegrate smoothly into their home culture. For the results collected from the interviews, the interviewees have also shared some of the coping strategies they personally used to readjust in their home culture, which are similar to the ones displayed in the above Figure.

"I would say one of the things that really helped me through it was having a friend who's experiencing the exact same thing, so we shared our struggles with coping and integrating back into our normal lives after experiencing one of the biggest, most exciting years of our lives," said Interviewee 1.

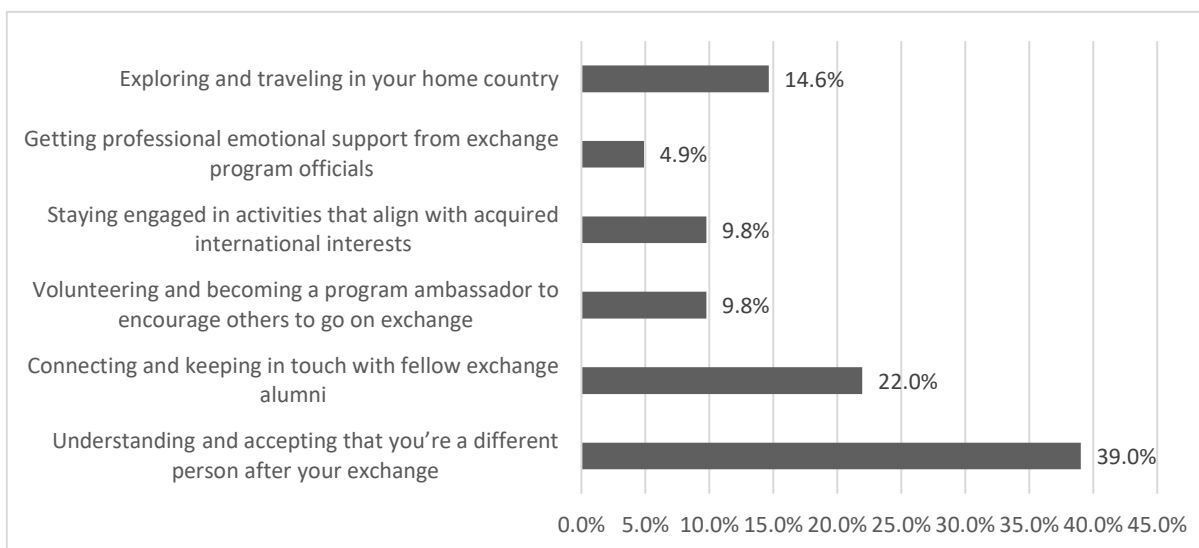
"One of the main strategies that helped me readjust was my realization that I was in this alone and that what I experienced was personal and not many people could relate to it. Travelling around also helped me reconnect with my home country," said Interviewee 3.

"What got me through a rather hard year upon arrival is staying in contact with my American friends and family and the support of the incredible alumni community," said Interviewee 4.

"Having contact with other yes alum and knowing that they were all going through the same "hardship" as me, knowing other people can relate to what I was feeling made me more relaxed and less anxious and overwhelmed," added Interviewee 4.

"Readjusting to my home country was relatively smooth. Staying connected with fellow Moroccan exchange students through online group chats helped me with the reintegration process into Moroccan culture," said Interviewee 7.

Another important coping mechanism was mentioned by interviewee 7, who shared how he was able to readjust academically due to the smart choices he made as an exchange student. He stated, *"In terms of academics, selecting the right subjects during the exchange experience played a significant role in an easy transition back to my home school,"* he added *"It's important not to choose only easy classes during the exchange year, as this can make readjustment more challenging,"* and recommended to opt for *"a balanced approach with a mix of challenging and manageable subjects can facilitate a smoother return, reducing the need for paying additional tutoring to overcome academic challenges."*

Figure 3 Coping strategies used by participants to reduce reverse culture shock.

Therefore, in relation to experiencing reverse culture shock, the results from the questionnaires and the interviews show that students experience it to different extents, which is very common among returning exchange students, as revealed by previous studies (e.g. Young, 2014). Such difficulty in readjusting in their home country has been found to be due to many factors that make their readjustment challenging and lead to feelings of alienation upon returning to their home culture, such as reverse homesickness, making comparisons between the host and home culture and difficulty reconnecting with their home communities; some of these feelings of alienation and troubles connecting with friends and family were previously discovered by other studies done by Gaw, 2000, Jones et al., 2012, and Young, 2014 (Baker, 2020, pp. 26-27). As for the coping strategies, some respondents reported that they had two main ways in common that they have resorted to in order to facilitate their readjustment, which was staying in contact with other alumni or host community members and internalizing and processing the exchange experience, whereas other participants relied on different strategies to readjust in different aspects of their lives such as travelling or making strategic academic choices.

5. Recommendations

Despite the limitation of the small scope sample, the current study paves the way to explore the difficulties that young exchange students under the age of 17 experience after the end of their exchange journey to reintegrate into their home culture and navigate the changes and growth they have gone through during that year away from their home culture. Moreover, it provides a background for different stakeholders concerned with exchange programs on how they can better facilitate the reintegration of the returning students in the home culture by helping them reflect on the transformative experience they have had and how they can continue this transformation. One of the main suggestions to achieve this is to connect them with other alumni and provide them with the needed support from program officials and mentors to help mitigate the impact of the reverse culture shock they are most likely to experience.

6. Conclusion

The factors that lead returning exchange students to have difficulty readjusting to their home culture and feeling reverse culture shock, as well as the coping strategies they must resort to, were investigated in the current study. Generally, most participants were found to have suffered a certain degree of reverse culture shock due mainly to the unhealthy comparisons they make between their home and host cultures, reverse homesickness, and the alienation they struggle with as a result of their inability to reconnect with people in their home culture. Regarding the coping strategies, participants were found to mostly rely on the connections they have made with other exchange alumni and the personal effort they make to make sense of the transitions they have gone through throughout the stages of their exchange. Thus, it could be suggested that program officials design more professional and emotional support programs following exchange to help those students process their transformation.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Baker, S. (2019). *Returning Home: Making Meaning of Study Abroad Experience to Facilitate Transformative Learning* (thesis). Boston.
- [2] Berdan, S. N., Goodman, A., & Taylor, S. C. (2013). *A student guide to study abroad*. Institute of International Education.
- [3] Costello, J. (2015). Students' Stories of Studying Abroad: Reflections upon Return. *Journal of International Students*, 5(1), 50–59. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i1.442>
- [4] Crossman, J. E., & Clark, M. (2010). International experience and graduate employability: Stakeholder perceptions on the connection. *Higher Education*, 59(5), 599-613.
- [5] Dentakos, S., Wintre, M., Chavoshi, S., & Wright, L. (2017). Acculturation motivation in international student adjustment and permanent residency intentions: A mixed-methods approach. *Emerging Adulthood*, 5(1), 27–41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696816643628>
- [6] Elias, C. (2022). *How to deal with reverse culture shock*. GoAbroad.com. <https://www.goabroad.com/articles/how-to-deal-with-reverse-culture-shock>
- [7] Gaia, C. (2015). Short-Term Faculty-Led Study Abroad Programs Enhance Cultural Exchange and Self-Awareness. *The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives*, 14(1), 21–31. <https://doi.org/http://ww1.iejcomparative.org/>
- [8] Hien, V. N. (2022). Levels of Satisfaction of Students when Joining Student Exchange Programs Abroad. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, 13(2), 149–157. <https://doi.org/10.47750/jett.2022.13.02.014>
- [9] Kim, Y. Y. (2007). Ideology, Identity, and Intercultural Communication: An Analysis of Differing Academic Conceptions of Cultural Identity. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 36(3), 237–253. doi:10.1080/17475750701737181
- [10] LaBrack, Bruce. (1994). Covert Competencies: The Recognition and Assessment of 'Hidden' Skills Gained from Study Abroad. In *Education Exchange and Global Competence*. Council for International Education Exchange.
- [11] Michelini, C. (2019). *Destination Brand Ambassadors in the Making: Acculturation and the International Student Exchange* (thesis).
- [12] Pacheco, E.-M. (2020). Culture learning theory and globalization: Reconceptualizing culture shock for modern cross-cultural sojourners. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 58, 100801, 1-8. doi:10.1016/j.newideapsych.2020.100801
- [13] Périco, F. G., & Gonçalves, R. B. (2018). Academic exchange: The difficulties of adaptation and readaptation. *Educação e Pesquisa*, 44(0), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1590/s1678-4634201844182699>
- [14] Sobkowiak, P. (2019). The impact of studying abroad on students' intercultural competence: An interview study. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 9(4), 681–710. <https://doi.org/10.14746/ssllt.2019.9.4.6>
- [15] Suryanto, S., Ayuza, B. L., & Othman, N. A. (2022). Learning English through international student exchange programs: English education department students' voices. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, 7(1), 77–96. <https://doi.org/10.18196/ftl.v7i1.13717>
- [16] Sustarsic, M. (2020). The impact of intercultural exchange on secondary school exchange students and their host families. *Journal of International Students*, 10(4), 912–933. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i4.1042>
- [17] U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Morocco. (2023). *Programs for Moroccans*. U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Morocco. <https://ma.usembassy.gov/education-culture/exchanges-programs/>
- [18] Young, G. E. (2014). Reentry: Supporting students in the final stage of study abroad. *New Directions for Student Services*, 146, 59–67. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20091>