



Culture Shock Experiences: A Case Study of a Canadian in Vietnam

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Abstract. Culture shock has always been an important issue. Previous studies on the cultural adaptation process have only focused on the general nature of culture shock. Yet, little attention has been drawn to how expatriates from English-speaking countries have undergone culture shock in Vietnam. This paper presents a case study of a native Canadian who had settled in Vietnam for 11 years (up to the time of the study). The study aimed to investigate the aspects of the participant's cultural experience, the factors determining its severity, and the strategies to facilitate the adaptation process. The research involved a case study approach using a semi-structured interview as a main data collection instrument. The findings reveal that (1) five aspects of culture shock were learning the Vietnamese language, joining a close community, detecting smells, using transportation, and observing local behaviors; (2) the factors determining the intensity levels of culture shock included language barriers, communities, personality traits and different regions in Vietnam, while previous overseas experiences had less impact; and (3) to overcome the culture shock, the participant learned the Vietnamese language, made friends with the locals, remained disciplined and kept himself occupied. The findings of this cultural phenomenon could provide helpful insights to English teachers and students interested in language and culture studies.

Keywords: culture shock · aspects of adjustments · factors determining severity · strategies · qualitative research

1 Introduction

1.1 Significance of the Study

Language and culture have long been considered to be inseparable [1] so the difference in languages means the difference in cultures, which results in culture shock.

This research paper aimed to find out what kinds of culture shock are experienced by expatriates in Vietnam rather than those experienced by any Vietnamese people emigrating to other countries.

1.2 Research Gap

Not much has been reported on the culture shock felt by expatriates in Vietnam. Despite the fact that many visitors have come to Vietnam as tourists, sojourners, international students or international business people, hardly have any written or video records of culture shock experienced by foreigners in Vietnam ever been found.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Culture Shock

Culture shock is “the feeling of disorientation experienced by someone suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture, way of life, or set of attitudes” [2].

The term culture shock was first used by Oberg [3] as “the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse”, and later was defined by Kohls [4] in a broader scope as noticeable “reactions to psychological disorientation” that most people have while immersing themselves in a culture strikingly different from their own. The symptoms include not only anxiety or frustration but also homesickness, helplessness, boredom, depression, fatigue, self-doubt, feelings of inadequacy, unexplained fits of weeping, paranoia, and physical ailments.

Bochner [5] classified two types of cultural contacts: the one between two ethnically separate groups within a country (e.g., between black and white Americans) and the other one between people of different nationalities (e.g., Vietnamese and Australians), but most of the research on culture shock focused on the latter [6].

In short, culture shock is individuals’ experiences of psychological distress and physical illnesses suffered by newcomers to new places with unfamiliar cultures.

2.2 Aspects of Culture Shock

Foreign travelers could experience culture shock in different forms. In their research, Rajasekar and Renand [7] identified aspects relating to communication, dress, ethics, individualism/collectivism, food, language, structure, perception, power distance, religion, rules, time orientation, traditions, and weather, in which religion and traditions were the key problems in most culture contacts. Ernofalina [8] later reported that Indonesian respondents in her study had difficulties in making non-verbal communication, such as body language, facial expressions or eye contact while talking to the people of the host country. Rafika [9] added some additional aspects of the natural environment, friends at work, local people, the changes in habits and women-men relationships.

2.3 Factors Determining the Severity of Culture Shock

The severity and the length of culture shock depended on various components [10], some of which could be listed as follows.

Firstly, spatial-temporal factors may increase the intensity of culture shock. People from nations with cultures and heritage similar to those of the host country suffer less from stress [11]. Some reports [6, 12] also stated that the more alien the new country

is and the longer the length of stay is, the more dreadful the culture shock is to the newcomer.

Another element was pre-departure preparation. People who had received careful preparation before coming to the new country were less likely to suffer from the consequences of culture shock [6, 13]. Oberg [3] and Pavla [14] also concluded in their research that the more individuals knew about the host country and culture shock, the easier it was for them to deal with culture shock and adapt to the new culture. Naeem, Nadeem, and Khan [15] emphasized the importance of pre-departure cross-cultural training for expatriates to their ability to adapt to the new environment.

Age also played a key role in the process of cultural adaptation. Yeh [16] concluded that the older the immigrants, the more mental health problems they encountered at home and school in the host country.

Different kinds of foreigners led to different culture shock experiences. There are numerous kinds of foreigners, including tourists, international students, expatriate workers, immigrants, and refugees [6]. For instance, a wealthy tourist who stayed in the host country for only a few days and had all facilities available in a hotel would encounter fewer cross-cultural difficulties than a refugee who had to live in refugee camps and to rely on the supplies provided by the host country [17].

Moreover, travelers who had previous encounters with new cultures could predict what to expect when coming to a new place [15]. Black, Mendenhall and Oddou [18] proved that having previous experience of living or working internationally helped facilitate the process of adjusting to a foreign culture. However, Torbiörn's study [19] suggested that there did not seem to have any relationship between a person's previous overseas experience and his/her current overseas adjustment.

In addition, the intensity of culture shock depended on the travelers' characteristics. According to Mendenhall and Oddou [20] and Naeem, Nadeem and Khan [15], the ability to easily accept different behaviors in an alien environment and to replace familiar activities in their home country with new ones in the host country, which were called cultural and cognitive flexibility, were crucial in tackling culture shock. Furthermore, people who had interpersonal skills to communicate successfully with the host people and who had good stress management skills could suffer less in cross-cultural environments than those who did not [15, 20]. Likewise, Oberg [3], Caligiuri and Santo [21] and Naeem, Nadeem and Khan [15] stated that ethnocentric visitors who considered the values in their native culture to be superior to those of others encountered more difficulties in dealing with culture shock.

Finally, social contact made culture shock more dreadful. Being unable to form good social networks in the host country or to keep in contact with family and friends back home could be examples of interpersonal factors [17]. Making or having friends of the same nationality also helped reduce the intensity of culture shock. Nguyen [22] reported that the fact that there was no previously settled Vietnamese group to provide initial support made Vietnamese refugees face many problems when they first came to the U.S. Moreover, Redmond and Bunyi [11] proved that having local friends helps individuals reduce psychological distress resulting from intercultural contact.

To sum up, how severe the culture shock was depended on such elements as spatial-temporal factors, pre-departure preparation, ages, the kinds of foreigners, previous overseas experiences, experiencers' personality traits and social network.

2.4 Solutions to Overcoming Culture Shock

Possible solutions to dealing with culture shock could be classified into four main points as follows.

The first way to deal with culture shock was to have careful preparation. Visitors should be mentally aware of culture shock and its nature [3, 14] and have as detailed information as possible about the host country in terms of its geography, culture, transportation, and living costs before entering the new environment [14, 23, 24].

Secondly, it was necessary for foreigners to make social contact with people of the same nationality in the host country [8], with the local people in the host country [8, 19, 25, 26] and with family and friends back home [8, 23, 24].

Thirdly, foreigners were advised to keep physically, mentally, and physiologically healthy [8, 17]. This could be gained by maintaining positive attitudes towards culture shock [23] by writing journals or diaries about both good and bad experiences that they had in the host country [8], by reading or having workouts in the gyms [15].

Another way of tackling problems caused by culture shock was to settle with people of the same nationality in the host country, which could allow expatriates to understand their new society while still in the social and economic shelter of a familiar culture [17].

The last advice given by Oberg [3] and Mendenhall and Oddou [20] were to learn to speak the language of the host country, which could not only give visitors confidence in performing such simple tasks as going shopping and talking to neighbors but also help them to understand the cultural meanings of the host country.

In conclusion, expatriates were advised to have thorough preparation, to build strong relationships, to ensure mental and physical health, to live with people of the same nationality in the host country and to learn to speak the host country's language in order to reduce culture shock.

3 Methodology

3.1 Setting and Participants

The research presented was a part of the Thesis Graduation which took place at Tay Nguyen University from March to June 2021.

The subject of this study, who is referred to here as the participant, was a native Canadian whose mother tongue is English and who had settled in Vietnam in 2009. During his years in Vietnam, he managed to have such a good command of the Vietnamese language that he could write many articles in Vietnamese in addition to his two published books in Vietnamese. The books were the two collections of autobiographical stories unfolding the writer's experiences, most of which had happened in Vietnam and a few of which reflect some of his culture shock experiences [27, 28]. He also has a Facebook account with nearly 34,000 followers, so it was not difficult for the authors to invite him to be the participant of the research.

3.2 Research Questions

The research was seeking to answer the following questions:

- What aspects of culture shock has the participant experienced?
- What were the factors determining the severity of the participant's culture shock?
- What strategies did the participant apply to reduce his culture shock in Vietnam?

3.3 Design of the Study

A qualitative research design is employed in this research, which allows an intensive study into a small sample size of purposely chosen individuals [29, 30]. This research design principally focused on comprehending, explaining, describing, and exploring situations, feelings, points of view, experiences, and attitudes of a group of people [31], which was the reason why the data-collecting methods and processes required flexibility and evolvement.

There was solely one participant in this research, which was categorized as the intrinsic case study by Tavakoli [30], who also stated that this kind of research was undertaken to obtain a deeper understanding of “a particular case that may be unusual, unique, or different in some way.” According to Kumar [31] and Cohen, Manion and Morrison [32], the sample in an intrinsic case study was neither selected randomly nor able to be generalized to a population that had different features from those of the participant being studied, but the emphasis was on gathering information from all available sources in order to understand the whole entity of the participant.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview via Zoom was carried out as the primary data collection instrument. The structure of the interview was based on books of previous research relating to the topic and from the participant's culture shock experiences mentioned in his two published self-reflection books.

In this semi-structured interview, apart from following the specific possible questions relating to the topic to be discussed, the participant was also asked extra questions that emerged during the interview in order to qualify, extend and clarify the participants' responses [32].

The collected data were processed and analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological framework as cited [33], which follows seven chronological steps, including: (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) identifying important statements, (3) formulating meanings, (4) clustering themes, (5) developing a full and inclusive description, (6) producing the fundamental structure of the phenomenon and (7) verifying the fundamental structure.

4 Findings and Discussion

The findings of this qualitative case study provided insight into the perceptions and experiences of the Canadian participant that are aligned with the research questions.

4.1 The Aspects of Culture Shock

The data on culture shock aspects were gathered after the interviewee was asked to tell which of his culture shock experiences were the most painful or the most memorable in different places in Vietnam. The aspects could be classified in 7 categories, including transportation, smells, language, customs, local security, food, and local behavior.

Transportation. The participant revealed that the transportation system was his first culture shock on his first arrival in Vietnam. He admitted never having seen so many motorbikes before, but the most appalling was the way Vietnamese people behaved while navigating on the road, including running red lights and riding motorbikes on sidewalks, which the participants in [34] also stated.

Smells. The study also revealed that another dreadful shock was the pervasive smell of fish sauce to which the natives of Vietnam were so accustomed that hardly did they ever notice. Indeed, this particular smell could cause discomfort to foreigners like the participant's mother who detected the smell with a negative reaction when she entered her son's home in Vietnam.

Language. Vietnamese tonal language was found to be so hard for learners of English-speaking natives like the participant. The two most serious challenges were phonetics and intonation, which made it difficult for him to memorize the vocabulary or to pronounce the words correctly. The participant affirmed that even though he knew a full Vietnamese sentence in its written forms, he failed to make himself understood by any Vietnamese listeners when he spoke it out.

Customs. The participant's first Lunar New Year in Vietnam confused him. He was extremely startled and upset when waking up one morning to hardly find anybody in his neighborhood in downtown Ho Chi Minh City, a situation in which he described as being in "a ghost town". Somebody then explained him that this was the time of Tet Holiday, which was a custom for Vietnamese people to leave the city for their home villages to be reunite Tet Holiday came approximately four months after his arrival in Vietnam without any of his preparation for or awareness of it.

Local Security. The participant was appalled to find that there was more theft in Ho Chi Minh City than he had expected. Prior to his settling in Vietnam, the participant had spent one year in Japan, where the security was good. More specifically, he said that once when he forgot his wallet at a coffee shop in Japan, and then the shop owner telephoned the participant to tell him to come back to take his forgotten wallet. As a result, the participant held a high expectation that the local security in Vietnam would be similar to that in Japan due to the geographical proximity of the two countries. Unfortunately, during his first three months in Ho Chi Minh City, the participant's belongings were stolen right in the hotel he was staying in, so he had to move to a cheaper hotel.

Local Behavior. The participant disclosed that the Vietnamese people's lack of discipline shocked him the most. The fact that most Vietnamese did not admit their mistake whenever they did something wrong caused annoyance to him. For example, when a

person hits another in traffic, neither of them would say sorry but blame the other person for the accident, which could eventually result in a fight. Unpunctuality was another behavior problem of Vietnamese locals, in which the participant was at times made to wait long for a date or a meeting with Vietnamese people. Breaking traffic rules, throwing garbage and making noise pollution were his three typical examples of the Vietnamese lack of discipline.

The participant’s culture shock experiences became more negative in Northern Vietnam. Having lived in a liberal society in his home country where “personal integrity” was highly retained in every relationship, he was thoroughly irritated by being forced to automatically pay respects to his boss or someone he “did not even know” while he was working in Thai Binh Province. Moreover, he was also furious at being urged to drink alcohol with his bosses or to invite them to drink against his will. Another culture shock experience described by the participant himself in Vietnamese as “chặt chém” whenever he made a purchase, in which the Northern local sellers had a tendency to push up their product prices to foreign customers. This was also consistent with the experience in a video about the Czech participant [35], who mentioned that he had to bargain for grocery items in the markets in the North but not so in the South of Vietnam. Additionally, the participant also found it harder to adapt to life in the North, especially in Hanoi and Thai Binh, than to that in the South because the culture in the Northern region was greatly influenced by China, in which the strict social hierarchy was similar to that of “feudalism”.

In short, the participant experienced six aspects of culture shock, including transportation, smells, Vietnamese language, customs, security, and local behavior, of which the last one implied that he experienced more culture shock in Northern Vietnam than in the South. However, the participant reported having no negative experiences with Vietnamese food, which opposed Trinh’s findings in the literature review [24] (Fig. 1).

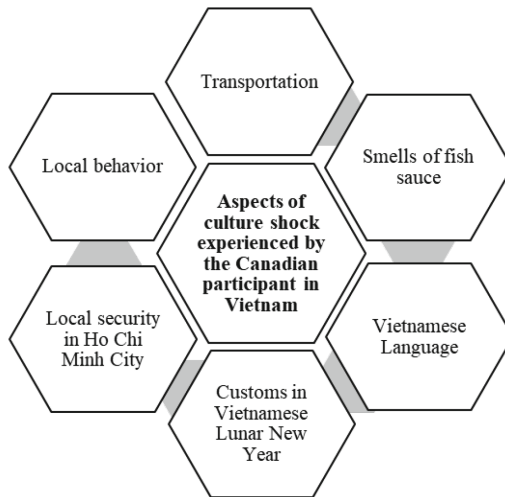


Fig. 1. Aspects of culture shock experienced by the participant in Vietnam.

4.2 Factors Determining the Severity of Culture Shock

The factors which contributed to the severity of participant's experiences of culture shock are categorized into 4 major parts, of which the first is whether the newcomers could join a local community; the second is the effects of the newcomers' previous overseas experiences; the third one is the newcomers' appropriate characteristics; and the last is whether or not the newcomers know the native language of the host country.

Community. As told by the participant, the community was the factor that was mostly attributed to the severity of culture shock. The participant specifically mentioned a concept known as "Dunbar's number", in which Dunbar suggested that people should limit their close community to about 150 individuals with whom they could maintain the most stable social relationships and from whom they could find support in times of need. The participant could not adapt to his living in Northern Vietnam, particularly in Hanoi and Thai Binh, because no one could "empathize" with him. After all, when he was at his "lowest point" of his mood, he received a phone call from his old community in Ho Chi Minh City asking him to come back there.

Previous Overseas Experiences. Before coming to Vietnam, the participant had had personal experiences living abroad as a Canadian soldier for one year in Afghanistan and as a teacher of English for one year in Japan. He had expected to have the same successes when moving to another Asian country. However, he confessed that his previous experiences of having lived overseas did not help much in his cultural adaptation to Vietnam. Especially in Japan, he had found himself adapting to Japanese culture more easily and able to learn the local language of Japanese more quickly than his native-English fellow friends did.

In short, this finding disagreed with Black, Mendenhall and Oddou [18] and Naeem, Nadeem and Khan [15], who concluded that having past overseas experiences could assist a person in getting used to the new culture. However, this finding did back up Torbiörn [19], who stated that a person's previous overseas experience had no connection with his/her current overseas adjustment.

Personality Traits. The participant's strong, flexible and self-motivated personality traits enabled him to adapt to new cultures faster than his native English friends did. His willingness to learn the native language of the host country and actively enter the host people's community to understand the alien cultures also resulted in his adjusting to the new cultures more rapidly than his native English friends did, both in Japan and in Vietnam.

This finding aligned with Oberg's [3] statement that people could adapt to the new culture faster by joining the host people's activities, even as participant observers.

Language. It was not until the participant's Vietnamese language was better that he was able to reduce the severity of culture shock in Vietnam markedly. After spending some time learning the Vietnamese language, he began to understand the Vietnamese ways of thinking and behaving, which according to him, helped him "empathize with" Vietnamese people and accept Vietnamese culture. This was a reality he had recognized before in Japan, where his native-English friends found it hard to adapt to Japanese

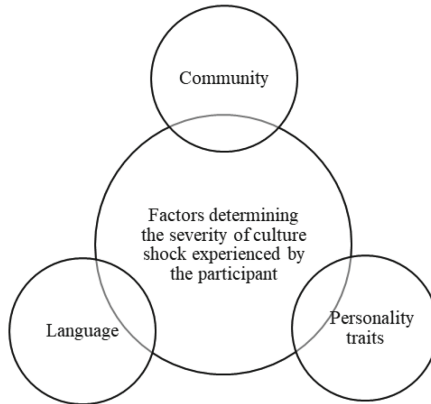


Fig. 2. Factors determining the severity of culture shock experienced by the participant

culture and became depressed partly because they did not try to learn Japanese. In short, how severe the participant's culture shock experiences were depended on his ability to speak and use the local language to communicate with the locals.

In conclusion, joining a community with the Vietnamese locals was a decisive turn for him to decrease his intensity of culture shock, followed by his capability to speak the Vietnamese language and his strong, flexible, adventurous characteristics, but his previous international experiences in Afghanistan and Japan did not contribute to the reduction of his culture shock in Vietnam (Fig. 2).

4.3 Strategies on Overcoming Culture Shock in Vietnam

When asked to make some solutions to dealing with culture shock in Vietnam, the participant gave 5 strategies, including learning the Vietnamese language, drawing a plan of the goals to be achieved during their stay in Vietnam, joining a close community with the locals, keeping oneself busy with different activities, and remaining disciplined even when suffering from culture shock.

Strategies on Learning the Vietnamese Language. The first solution used by the participant to overcome culture shock in Vietnam was to learn the Vietnamese language. Learning the Vietnamese language could take a huge amount of time, but it was highly rewarding. When the participant was able to start to talk to native Vietnamese speakers, he gradually understood that Vietnamese people's perceptions such as family ties and community spirit were different from those of his own. The participant realized that people from different cultures had different worldviews, and he eventually learned to accept those differences.

The participant applied the following tips when learning the Vietnamese language. The first one was to choose to live in a region where Vietnamese locals could not speak a foreign language so that the expatriates could learn the local language more efficiently. In fact, the participant could only learn Vietnamese after having moved to

Thai Binh District, where hardly anyone knew English. The second tip was to begin with learning Vietnamese pronunciation first of all, including the tones, the diphthongs and the phonetics.

Strategies on Making a Plan. The second strategy the participant applied was to draw up a plan of what he would do during his time in Vietnam and then stick to it. Defining the goals to be obtained in Vietnam could help international visitors figure out whether or not they should learn the Vietnamese language and culture. According to the participant, if expatriates planned to take a gap year in Vietnam to teach English and then return to their home country, they might not need to learn the Vietnamese language.

On the contrary, when overseas visitors are determined to settle down in Vietnam for a longer time, they should immerse themselves in Vietnamese communities to learn the Vietnamese language and culture. A French-speaking friend of the participant had a Vietnamese boyfriend and decided to stay in Vietnam with him, so she was obligated to learn to speak Vietnamese in order to build her relationships with her boyfriend's family.

Additionally, forming a plan for the goals to be achieved in the host country helped the participant avoid the negative consequences of culture shock. Some young, English-speaking friends of the participant had no detailed plan for their life in Vietnam; as a result of this attitude, they got "into these communities of expatriates who also had culture shock", and then started to form "a habit of drinking together", which made them become unhealthy and unable to improve their situations even after years living in Vietnam.

Strategies on Having a Community. Having a community in an alien land was the most essential to adapt to the new culture, according to the participant's experiences. People in a community of friends or neighbors tended to understand and empathize with one another, which helped the participant overcome culture shock. This corroborated [25]'s, [11]'s and [8]'s findings, which indicated that having local friends could reduce the psychological distress caused by culture shock and could help newcomers understand the host culture and people. One of the most effective ways of making friends and strengthening relationships with Vietnamese locals was to drink alcohol with them, or "nhậu". The participant admitted that joining a drinking community with his neighbors in Saigon helped him understand Vietnamese locals, but it also "cost" him his "health and discipline".

Moreover, since different areas in Vietnam have different customs and traditions, it is necessary for foreigners to find out which part of Vietnam has which cultural values that are suitable or unsuitable to their own culture and personality traits.

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Strategies on Keeping Busy. “Keeping oneself busy” was another solution to dealing with culture shock. The participant ignored the feelings of depression caused by culture shock in Vietnam by traveling to the Mekong delta, to which he confessed to becoming more “open-minded.” In addition, he remained busy by writing in Vietnamese, which not only improved his local language skills but also inspired him to become a well-known writer of Vietnamese, he mentioned by himself as what made him “feel worthy” and “have a meaning in his life again.” This reinforced Ernofalina’s conclusion [8] that writing about their own experiences in the host country could help expatriates lessen the burden caused by culture shock.

Strategies on Having Discipline. Being a disciplined person could help the participant reduce the negative symptoms of culture shock. Moreover, taking exercise regularly could reduce the intensity of culture shock, which was also stated by Stewart and Leggat [17], Naeem, Nadeem and Khan [15] and Ernofalina [8] (Fig. 3).

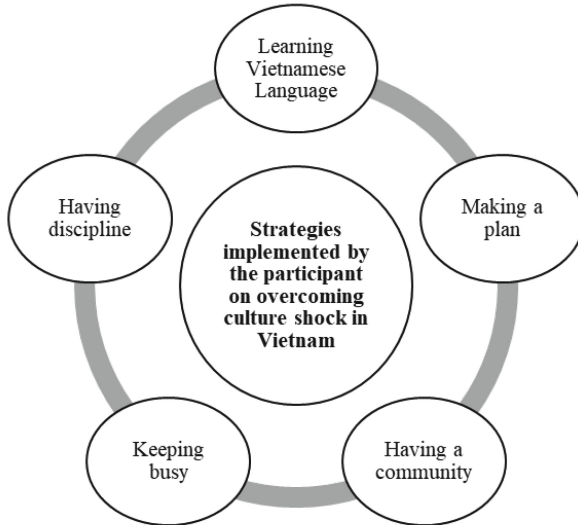


Fig. 3. Strategies used by the participant on overcoming culture shock in Vietnam

5 Conclusions

5.1 Summary of the Findings and Implications

The six main aspects of culture shock suffered by the participant were transportation, smells, language, customs, security, and local behavior, of which the first two were the most noticeable.

The varying severity of culture shock was reflected in different places. Living in Northern Vietnam, the Canadian expatriate suffered culture shock more severely than in the South because the hierarchical social structure in the former is much stricter than that in the latter.

The intensity of the participant's culture shock depended on three main elements, including the ability to build a relationship with the locals, the possession of cultural flexibility and inter-personal skills, and the capability of speaking the language of the host country, but the previous experiences of going abroad were found to have no effect on the participant's cultural adaptation to Vietnam.

When asked to make some proposals for other expatriates to deal with culture shock in Vietnam, the participant gave five pieces of advice, including learning the Vietnamese language, drawing a clear plan of the goals to be achieved during the stay in Vietnam, joining a close community with the locals, keeping themselves busy with different activities, and remaining disciplined even when they were suffering from culture shock.

The research findings could be useful to foreigners who have to deal with culture shock in Vietnam and to those who find an interest in cultural studies.

5.2 Summary of the Findings and Implications

One common limitation in this research and most case study approaches is that the findings do not lend themselves to generalizability [36]. Due to the research's employment of only one participant, the chosen case barely represents the larger population [37, 38].

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Since the research findings were based on the deep reflection of one sole participant, future research could further investigate a larger population so as to take a wider understanding of this cultural phenomenon.

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