



# Contemporary Urban Cultures in the Frame of Virtual Metropolis

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**Abstract.** Culture shock is often referred to completely different experiences faced outside one's hometown or comfort zone. The factor that causes culture shock is mainly geographical, such as living in the East and West would serve one differently. Nevertheless, in this contemporary era, where technology advances take place, living in one's comfort zone is also prone to experiencing culture shock. This research aims to point out manifestation and the representation of the virtual metropolis where urban dwellers experience fast-paced, rapid changes in their own home. The shift from concrete buildings to virtual world is changing the game of the urban dwellers: homesickness in one's own space. This discussion shows that urban dwellers, despite their blasé attitude, experienced culture shock. Cities being the center of economy promotes anonymity and bringing it to the virtual metropolis leaves little safety and security yet brings out more opportunities in different kind of spaces of flows and places. The connectivity with its 'anytime-anywhere' trait creates countless possibilities.

**Keywords:** Culture Shock · Urban Culture · Virtual Metropolis · Space of Flows · Space of Places

## 1 Introduction

A city needs to have three characteristics to be called as a city, according to Wirth, which are: having large numbers of people (size), a density of settlement (density), and a heterogeneity both the individuals and of group life [1]. It is claimed that each of these characteristic affects how people live their lives. Le Corbusier in *Contemporary City* implied size also matters in determining a city by stating: "the use of technical analysis and architectural synthesis enabled me to draw up my scheme for a contemporary city of three million inhabitants" [2]. Within the description of what defines a city, Simmel adds a description of a city from the view of individual metropolis. In *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, Simmel describes individual metropolis characteristics in a compact phrase: an individualistic modern life in urban space. This phrase can be broken down in three parts which are individualism, modern life, and urban space [3]. Individualistic, according to Oxford dictionary, means 'more interested in individual people than in society as a whole'. This suggests how an individual metropolis characterises the sharing of urban modern space (with other people) yet each of the dweller does not show interests

in relating or associating oneself into the society. In contrast to the rural life, Simmel implies that urban living is a fast flowing rhythm and an abstract way of living. As for the example: two people who do not know each other take an elevator in order to reach the floor they each want to get off at. This example consists of individuals, space, movement, and objectives. The idea that they share a small urban modern space of an elevator box yet remaining as strangers and keeping their mind on their goal (in this case, reaching certain floor) is what Simmel meant as individualistic modern life in urban space.

Meanwhile, according to Pile, Wirth argues that people in the cities have more opportunities to form bonds that do not rely on kinship attitudes [1]. This logical suggestion comes from the combination of the size, density, and heterogeneity of urban life: it is easy to meet just about any people. Yet, on the contrary, the suggestion is not easy to follow because of the urban society's social structure. This individual character is caused by the social structure. This individual character is caused by the social structure in which happened as a form of adaptations made by the personality in its adjustment to the external forces (government and/or historical heritage). Simmel suggested that adaptation that adaptations would always occur due to external and internal continuous shifts in relation to a modern aspect that promotes money economy and leads to the reduction of quality to quantity [3]. The money economy is inseparable with the thought of capitalism which leaving the quality trait and focusing on the quantity in order to generate more money; in other words, capitalism degenerates the human interrelations by putting aside the importance of quality; which in the end, promotes anonymity. In short, people living in individual metropolis share the urban space yet does not include emotions in their interaction whilst sharing one.

In relation to the notion of Space of Flows (mobility) and Space of Places [4], the metropolis keeps them separately. On the other hand, the virtual metropolis is characterised by the combination of the two spaces mention earlier; which both will be discussed later on. Gibson in his 1984 book *Neuromancer*, introduced the term cyber space that is described as the unthinkable complexity of clusters and constellations of data [5]. Today, the cyber space, which happens to be thinkable and present, is based on computer-mediated communications (CMC) and information and communications technology (ICT). The World Wide Web is the product of those computer-mediated technology. In relation to this, as the case of two people sharing an elevator, virtual metropolis view adds the term 'connections' into the picture. In the digital era, connections take place in the form of the possession of electronic device(s). To the same example, it is added a smart phone on each person's hand. They are now sharing the physical space and still are not making emotional attachment (even there may be a possibility to introduce one). The only difference is that they can make connections; although the connection might be made through other people they know, outside the physical space they are in. This makes the trait of virtual urban living where technology clashes the space and time. It is all because of the existence of global network that makes connections possible. Baker & Ward [5] offers the term 'virtual reality' that is described as removing the abstractness of physical characterised infrastructure of the metropolitan (urban spaces) and focuses on a functional one (virtual spaces). Therefore, a virtual metropolis leads to promote the search of both quality and quantity in many aspects for creating possibilities and opportunities within urban living [5].

## 2 The Culture Shock

Culture shock is defined as the feeling of anxiety or stress as the result of being in a new, foreign environment and the absence of the familiarities of the home country of the person [6]. It is seen as both psychological and physical reactions of a person staying abroad, and also as the biggest barrier to international travel – Feichtinger & Fink (1998) and Smith (2008) in [6]. If it is not handled properly, it could last for a quiet period of time and becoming a global issue in regards to the need for understanding cultural diversity and cross-cultural communication – Adler (2003) and Xia (2009) in [6]. In this essay, I would like firstly to suggest that culture shock is the term used not only by people who are away from their home country, but also the local urban people (urban dwellers) as the result of the shifting way of living from individual metropolis to virtual metropolis. After that, I would like to bring up examples of contemporary urban living issues that reflect the idea of global networks and the needs of connectivity as definitions of virtual metropolis; and later address the findings/examples as its manifestation and representation. Before going to the main discussion, it is necessary to discuss the definition of individual and virtual metropolises and the result of the shifts (culture shock experienced by urban dwellers) is like.

A contemporary urban world is seen as heterogeneous place and, like one of Wirth's city characteristics, it is characterised by the variation of number and proportion of people occupying urban places [7]. The changes made from the individual metropolis to virtual metropolis create a form of culture shock, such as the kind of technology-ignorance and homesickness, in the contemporary urban world that is claimed to be heterogeneous. This heterogeneity comes in a sort of ethnography that lays from one aspect to another; from race, education, politics, to economics, which in regards to why such problems exist. Being technology-ignorant can be either an optional or non-optional choice. In the era of advanced technology, as one of virtual metropolis traits, urban people are expected to be familiar with the functions of it and how to use one. A smart phone, for example, now consists of tons of everyday needs in the form of applications, apart from the use of phone itself. Starting from basic, personal applications (a calendar, phonebook, notes, alarm clock), built-in features (flashlight, camera/video camera), advance connection (push mail, messaging, video call), to virtual global network applications (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram). A smart phone can be exciting for younger generation but overwhelming for the seniors (old generation). For the older generation, all of the applications mentioned above were used to be single, individual, separate things. This idea of hard to accept this is where the culture shock sets in. The anxiety of being in a new and foreign environment and the absence of the familiarities can be seen within their technology-ignorance behaviour. It is optional for people who are able to afford (financially capable) but could not careless. Yet, it is non-optional for poor people and for the senior citizens. This is where the implication of the cities in Charles' Dickens' *The Streets* is; that they are always related to movement and continuous activities. Thus, by being non-optional towards technology-ignorance are closely related to those who cannot keep up the pace of the urban living movement. Being technology-ignorance suggests the digital era is far from familiarities (time form) and that it creates the attitude of not wanting to change or accept changes. This is the problem that is dragged from the individual metropolis characteristic where individual independence and existence is limited by authorities [3].

Then what is the remedy for the mentioned culture shock? UK government supports to fight technology-ignorance by having libraries to offer computer class for seniors to learn word-processing and search engine, in order for them to keep up and be familiar with. There are also many other independent organizations to handle this behaviour, one of them is “Which?”. “Which?” in general provides information in the form of magazine ranging to hotline services. The idea is to give simple articles for people who have questions within the era of fast growing contemporary urban living (which.co.uk).

Homesickness is also one of the culture shock that often occurs to new people in town. Apart from the real meaning of homesick (that is commonly related to people away from home), old residents in cities can be homesick from the cultural shifts as well. The idea of homesickness is similar to technology-ignorant; it is far from familiarities yet in the spatial form. The changes of urban space and urban people attitude made a gap and created movement as well. Wirth suggested that the large number of people a city makes differences on how they interact with one to another based on three reasons: the range of variation between individuals, the numbers of social interactions, and potential differentiation among them [1] and the greater they are, the less interaction made. In short, homesickness is the act of objectivity towards the existence of electronic gadgets in a physically-shared places. One among many examples of changes in urban spaces is the public demand of charging points. Charging points where people can charge their gadgets can now be seen in many of public places like coach stations, airports, coffee shops, etc. People are even more no longer bothered of making new friends in occupied physical space, but becoming absorbed to another world in their hand virtually via connection. This suggests the lack of human interaction even more, but on the other hand; this virtual world is where the connections between virtual people happen. The ICT plays a big role in the virtual world establishment; it is of course has its own positive and negative sides in regards to urban style of living in terms of interactions.

Just like the real world, virtual world also has its own space to rent called ‘website’ which consists of pages of any information. In relation to the individual metropolis, rent is based on the monopoly of private owners of certain portions of the globe [8]. This gives the idea that the trait of money economy still exists within the virtual metropolis. If so, who do people pay to and rent from? In simple, big companies like Google Inc. And Wordpress.com own servers that are capable of holding millions of websites. Aside from renting the digital space for money, many of the offers to have one’s own website for free is by making a blog. Blog is a very basic interface of how a developed website can look like; although with its limited features, it is more than just a start for people who are interested. A blog can be developed to a greater idea, where advertisement boxes can be put for the price of a couple of cents for every view or click: another form of renting virtual space. The positive side of connectivity in global network is how it makes all connections possible among people, the citizens of the real world, although it is done virtually; a world within a world – the same conceptualization of “a city within a city”. The example of a negative side that can connectivity brings is how a person can have multiple virtual representations under made-up usernames which may lead to criminality. Cybercrime can be considered as one of negative outcome of virtual metropolis. In 2008, it is reported that the estimation of damage cause by cybercrime is at \$100 billion annually.)

### 3 Virtual Services

The money generated within cybercrime can come in many forms: frauds and hacking. It also means that money flows within this cyber space and one example is renting a virtual space which clearly suggests the involvement of money in the digital world. The idea of space of flows and places can be applied within this 'renting' term in its relation with the virtual metropolis and the use of ICTs. According to Castells [4], space of flows is 'the accelerating domains of trans local and transnational movement and flow' while space of places is 'the geographic spaces and communities of everyday life in cities. The movement of electronic money from one point to another is occupying the understanding of the space of flows, whereas the rented space although it does not seem to be geographical, the one who rented can be acknowledged as occupying the space of place. As the result, contemporary urban living is sometimes addressed as the cashless society. This does not mean the like of poverty, but more to the system of how people nowadays are encouraged to simplicity and practicality in regards to financial matters. E-money, e-voucher, e-banking, e-commerce, e-business, are now common financial terms for money transactions are done within online connections in a global network.

In order to prevent cybercrime, one of the trusted and claimed to be secure money-management website is PayPal. In an essay *Successful E-Business Systems: PayPal*, Avaliani [9] started that PayPal is founded in 1998 and started off as X or (X.com). It carries out services that provide the easy, secure, and fast money transactions using an account-based system. Security is important as the protection guarantee of the user's data confidentiality which include name, address, telephone numbers, and credit/debit cards number. In 2002, PayPal was acquired by eBay and gained popularity ever since. The company covers 38 countries and has around 40 million customers (2004). Internet-based transactions became more secure for PayPal acts as the medium between one party to the other one. For example, a buyer wants to buy a book from a seller on eBay. The idea that both parties have no account of the other side makes the virtual world a better crime place; there are tons possibility of frauds. Therefore, as a medium, PayPal offers a guarantee to both parties; where buyers pays right amount of money which then sellers, after getting a confirmation of the payment, send the correct item to the buyer. As the item received and got no complaints, PayPal will transfer the money to the seller [9]. As customers/users, there is no need to go to the bank, fill in a form, wait some days to be processed; in short, it saves the customers' time. The most important thing is how PayPal supports global networking. PayPal customers can login from anywhere around the world with any web-supported electronic gadgets as long as it has internet connection. Also, the fact that it serves in 38 countries makes PayPal a global company as it also supports multi-currency transactions. Less and less transactions actually need fresh bills. A cashless society is now even more developed with contactless cards. In London, for example, debit cards can now be used very similarly to that of oyster cards for travelling by London public transports. Moreover, it comes with an online-tracker to know your balance and track what stations one has been that day (tfl.gov.uk).

From the example of PayPal transaction process earlier, it is clear that online shops exist. eBay and Amazon are two major companies that offer the service to act as the 'shop'. Sellers and buyers can get into this shop by using the account-system based that usually connects to the online payment website, like PayPal, that plays role as the data

verification. It does not matter where the sellers and buyers are for the meeting/transaction is not spatially limited within geographical terms. A buyer living in Korea can buy goods from a seller living in Scotland, as long as the payment is made, despite of how long the goods will take to arrive in Korea. The term 'space' has been widely referred, not only physically and psychologically, but also virtually. Psychologically, according to Massey [10] the social choice of the avoidance of sharing the physical space is seen as result of the tension of urban spatiality: "it is the sheer density of interactions, and the juxtaposition of so many differences, which generate both the excitements and exhilaration of the city and its potential for cultural innovation, as well as the anxiety and need to withdraw into oneself. It can also be the answer to homesickness in present days, which is the social networks. Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, are giving the opportunity to stay 'close' to real friends or close ones who as well get connected online. This is supported by a group of researchers who tried to point the need to maintain the numbers of social networks' members in order to stay around. Jin et al. [11] argued that the Internet connectivity has further facilitated users to interact and exchange information with others. Quoting Wellman et al., the connections are made through computer-supported social networks such online chat rooms, bulletin board systems, newsgroups, instant messaging software, and other similar sites. Most websites/applications come with similar features where people get to upload (sharing and putting data on the Internet) their photos in order to stay updated. The importance of the social networks is to keep the connection 'alive' between people. Yet, this means social networking acts as the getaway of the complexity the city gives. People can even have a live chat, written or face-to-face. The role of global network and connection is very big in this one as I mentioned that these social networking websites are seen as an alternative platform for individuals in order to obtain information despite being geographically dispersed [11]. The possibility for a person to talk live and real-time to another person halfway around the world is wide open; or maybe even a conference from more than two different cities in the world.

#### 4 The Available Opportunities

Choice of being virtually involved, there are a lot of fields that are benefitted in the virtual metropolis. Virtual metropolis characteristics are closely related to opportunities, possibilities, connectivity, and global networks; whereas a city is a place where fast and vast movement takes place. In this section, I would like to talk about the possibilities to get educated/better education (education field) and the opportunities to get a job (occupational field) within the traits of a virtual metropolis in contemporary urban living.

This global network environment benefits education field; starting from the mandatory aspect to learn, which is the information, to the spatial aspect, which is the classroom. The information learner's can get is hugely available in the virtual world everywhere: from books to MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses); again with the internet-connected electronic devices. Books can be bought online either in paperbacks or in the form of e-books (which usually cheaper because of no printing fee applied). The other source of information in relation to education is MOOCs. MOOCs are usually free of charge and supported by academic institutions and research institutes around the world (e.g. Coursera, edX in Cambridge, etc.). They offer course assignments and exams similar to on-campus courses. It is no doubt one education-related social networking for its

'Discussion Board' feature which opens to tens of thousands of students to share ideas and discuss materials [12]. The other benefit of the no geographical boundaries (spatial aspect) is the opportunity to study 'abroad'. People who wish to get a degree in world-class universities of choice are now possible to pursue it in a programme called 'Distance Learning'. University of London, for example, promotes this course by stating: "Study wherever you live, graduate from the University of London" ([londoninternational.ac.uk](http://londoninternational.ac.uk)). The promotional statement confirmed the virtual metropolis traits: it is possible, non-spatial, and of course, virtual. This type of opportunity is also suitable for full-time employees who wish to have professional development.

The second benefitted field is the open possibilities to get a job; in relation to spatial aspect. Urban dwellers with their tension and anxiety of the urban density [10] might get the opportunity to have been online-interviewed when they try to apply for jobs. The computer software that are commonly used to conduct this kind of interview is Skype or Facetime. Unlike Facetime which is exclusively designated for Apple product users only, Skype are just like any other account-based websites. It allows one-on-one video chat or even conference, without having to physically share the same space with the interviewers. In the positive perspective, apart from the use in professional world, this kind of application can also be used in personal terms. Video-chatting lets people experience real-time conversation to their family apart from being spatially disparate and moreover, the chance to virtually experience real-time environment of the other end. In the negative perspective, the development of virtual interview is worsen because of the use of audio computer assisted self-interviewing (audio-CASI). The use of audio-CASI lessens the need of human resources to conduct interviews; but this is not the only case. The question is focused on the interviewees' behaviours towards people and machine as the study assessed the differential effects between them and are found categorised within groups with stigmatised behaviours, neutral behaviours, and psychological distress [13]. The result of the research suggests that the use of technology can diminish the idea of human-to-human relationship in which such suggestion is a potentially sensitive question. Newman et al. treated their study as motivations to maintain social respect, obtain social support, and altruism [13].

## 5 Conclusion

This research tried to point out the manifestation and the representation of the virtual metropolis in the contemporary urban cultures. It starts from the shifts of displacement from the individual metropolis characteristics (based on Simmel's view) to a virtual one. The effects made by the shifts affected the urban dwellers in relation to coping with the changes. The changes experience is levelled with that of culture shock which are defined as the uncertainty that a person feels when facing an unknown culture – Taff (1977) and Chen et al. (2011) in [6]. The assumed cultural shocks are technology-ignorance (time aspect) and homesickness (spatial aspect). Being technology-ignorant can be both optional or non-optional based on the financial ability and age; meanwhile homesickness is the act of objectivity towards the existence of electronic gadgets in physical public space. Both suggest the implication of not wanting to change that felt mostly by the older generation who experienced the shifts. In the light of Simmel's



argument on an individual metropolis, these behaviours occur because of the earlier individual independence and existence limitation against the government and historical heritage. Simmel also suggested the money economy aspect in relation to degrading quality and promoting quantity then leads to the idea of anonymity [3].

The virtual metropolis characteristics are mainly related to the digital and technological world (the age of information) and the application of the mix between the space of flows and space of places [8]. The involvement of electronic money makes the reflection of the combination of both spaces. As the example, PayPal and eBay create a big opportunity for people around the world to connect and make secure, fast transactions. It suggests the possibility of people to 'meet' despite of spatially disparate and the fact that money economy trait is still around, makes one trait of the previous view remain unchanged. This interaction is brought further in regards to the existence of social networking websites that allow users to interact and be connected with somebody they know or even new ones. The Internet connectivity opens global network. It allows and has facilitated this virtual interaction, the possibility to exchange information [11]. Various websites are available online from online chat rooms, bulletin board systems, newsgroups, instant messaging software, and other similar sites – Wellman et al. (1996) in [11]. Apart from the thought that setting might be harmful, since they are mostly on account-based system (one person can create as many accounts as wanted — for just about any reasons, positive or negative), the connectivity also allows positive opportunities to come. The opportunities can be seen in benefitted fields such as educational and occupational. In education field, the materials needed by learners can be easily found online: from books to MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), and the spaces to learn in cyber classroom are also available even with the supports from academic institutions and research institutes around the world. Another kind of opportunity in relation to both educational and occupational fields is the distance learning programmes. This kind of programme is suitable for people looking for professional development. It promotes the flow of information within non-sharing physical space. Similar idea is also applied in job interviews. People can write their Curriculum Vitae and apply world-widely available jobs online only by attaching their resumé. If the company is interested to meet and conduct an interview, yet the distance between both parties makes it physically impossible, a formal online video-chat is conducted. Some other cases used audio computer assisted self-interviewing (audio-CASI) [13] which suggests the oppression of interrelationship between human beings. Even though the result of the research is claimed to be a potentially sensitive question and creates the need to conduct a bigger scale of data, Newman et al. treated their study as motivations to maintain social respect, obtain social support, and altruism [13].

In conclusion, it is agreed that the shifts from the individual metropolis is made to virtual metropolis where the global network and connections linked between spatially disparate urban cultures. The virtual metropolis characteristics within the contemporary urban cultures can be found through the complexity of combination between spaces of flows and places. It promotes the range of possibilities, opportunities, and connectivity in the global network that are accessible for people around the world, especially those who live in big cities (urban dwellers). Real-time virtual events and examples discussed



acted as the application of having the virtual space of flows in digital scheme and space of places in the same fashion.

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