A Qualitative Analysis of Academic and Cultural Adjustment: American Students in Thailand, What Can Be Done for Them?

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Abstract
Historically, academic inquiry regarding student mobility was conceptualized within an East-to-West paradigm. However, the number of Americans studying in Thailand increases annually. The United States and Thailand differ in terms of academic culture and sociocultural norms. As such, the visiting American students encounter a variety of academic and cultural adjustment issues. This qualitative study focuses on identifying and examining various cultural adjustment barriers that American students face when studying at a Thai university. The aim of this article is to identify the major cultural adjustment issues. Face-to-face in-depth interviews with 22 Americans were audio recorded and thematically analyzed. This case study of participants at a major international college in Thailand identified five primary themes: (a) The “Farang” Bubble, (b) Language Barriers, (c) Traveling Within the Region, (d) University Life, and (e) Local Transportation. Specific recommendations regarding how universities and study abroad companies can provide better services to facilitate cultural adjustment and overall student experience as well as which additional services are needed are addressed.

Keywords
American study abroad, Thailand, higher education, cultural adjustment

Introduction and Background
International education has long been conceptualized as the flow of students from the East to the West, and this is often generally the case as many Asian students, particularly Chinese (Gu, 2009), continue to study in the United States. The top three incoming nationalities at American universities are Chinese, Indian, and Korean students (Ruiz, 2014). The United States is the largest host nation for international students with approximately 20% of the total international student enrollment (Andrade & Evans, 2009), and China continues to be the largest exporter of these students (Gu, 2009). However, an increasing number of Western students are now attracted to educational opportunities in Asia which has led to a rise in the number of international students in the region (Lin & Kingmingh, 2014). Lavakare (2018) predicts India to be a center for international students in Asia. Yet India is not the only country making attempts to tap this lucrative market. Many non-native English-speaking countries are creating programs and developing national policies to attract students to their markets (Hu et al., 2014). These changes represent a shift in student mobility which necessitates greater empirical inquiry.

American university students are studying abroad in increasing numbers every year (Institute of International Education, 2018). The 2016–2017 academic year saw an increase of 2.3% from the previous year. In that same year, Asia saw a 6.7% increase of incoming American students, with Southeast Asia increasing 14.4%. Thailand is becoming a particularly popular destination for study abroad with a 32% increase for the same year. Thailand also received the most American students in Southeast Asia for that academic year with 2,763 staying at least one semester in the Kingdom (Institute of International Education, 2018). This recent trend contradicts the traditional model of study abroad as observed in the 20th century whereby students from Eastern countries study abroad in Western universities (Cochrane, 2014).

Contrary to the Asian students who migrate West to study abroad, many of the international students in higher education programs in Asia are studying in countries where the students do not speak the host language. While many Asian nations share similarities in culture such a high degree of collectivism and high power distance, Asia is not a homogeneous
continent. There are dramatic differences in culture, history, religion, language, climate, food, and ethnicity. This tendency toward the homogenization of students from a variety of cultures, histories, religions, languages, climates, culinary backgrounds, and ethnicities can be problematic. In the international student adjustment research paradigms, the homogenization of international students potentially lends to unreliable and inaccurate research outcomes which is partially due to the overgeneralization of participants as sharing the same experiences.

In recognition of the paucity of literature on the Western international student adjustment experience within the Asian context, the purpose of this study is to avoid the overgeneralization of the “Western” experience in Asia and to explore the social and cultural adjustment experiences of American students within the Thai higher education system. The goal of this inquiry is to ascertain the typical adjustment barriers via a qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 21 American students at a Thai university. This article defines an American study abroad student in Thailand as a university-level degree-seeking student enrolled at a university in the United States who decides to study one or more semesters abroad in Thailand before returning to finish their degree at their home university.

**Literature Review**

Previous research on international student mobility has often grouped international students from many ethnic, national, and linguistic backgrounds into one category (Rujipak & Limprasert, 2016) or looked specifically at one ethnic group such as the Chinese (Lin & Kingminghae, 2014), the Korean and Japanese (Rhein, 2018b), the Burmese (Rhein, 2016), or the experiences of African Americans (Rhein, 2018a). Such research has concluded that international students from Western countries reported greater sociocultural adjustment as compared with the students from Asian countries (Rujipak & Limprasert, 2016). Other studies have also shown that studying abroad can have a variety of positive effects on the individuals (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012; Ingraham & Peterson, 2004; Ng, 2004). In particular, research has shown that the study abroad experience can greatly improve the student’s language abilities as well as their cultural understanding in their host country (Anderson, 2005; Black & Duhon, 2006; Savicki, 2020). Previous research on the American study abroad phenomena indicates that studying abroad has been linked to positive outcomes, such as increases to overall world mindedness (Douglas & Jones-Rikkers, 2001).

Given the overall positive nature of these findings, this research aims to explore these experiences in greater detail with specific attention aimed at methods of improving the quality of this experience and detailing the needs of American students within the Thai context. The literature available on American study abroad experiences can broadly be broken down into three main themes: (a) models of acculturation and adjustment, (b) American students’ study abroad experience in Thailand, and (c) cultural differences between Thailand and the United States.

The process of acculturation can be conceptualized with a review of relevant models. The U-curve model (Lysgaard, 1955) aims to describe the timeline of cultural adjustment for people who live abroad for an extended period of time. This model states that individuals typically encounter an initial honeymoon phase, then the crisis phase, followed by the recovery phase and finally the adjustment phase. This model has variations that suggest other patterns of cultural adjustment (Oberg, 1960). The W-curve (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) is an alternative that has more stages and includes both the time spent in the host country as well as returning to the home country. Berry (2005) argues that the sociocultural context impacts the adjustment process and that the clarification of cultural values is an important aspect of the overall adjustment process (Berry, 2006). However, these models of acculturation are not appropriate for this study which aims to look at short-term adjustment of American students in Thailand who typically spend less than 4 months abroad.

This article builds on the concepts of Ward’s (1996) model of adjustment in terms of coping frameworks and patterns of adaptive behavior to help students cope with their study abroad experience (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). The process of adjustment has been the topic of interest in various fields in the social sciences, including education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and counseling studies. Cross-cultural adjustment is a complex and repetitive, sometimes circular, process which requires travelers to overcome the stressors of their new environment and solve the problems which arise as a result of the unfamiliar, whereas adaptation is process of “learning to live with change and difference, in this instance, a changed environment, different people, different norms and different customs” (Steele, 2008, p. 34). Adjustment in this context is referring to the reduction of stress or satisfaction in one’s environment. It does not refer to happiness or acceptance of the environment. Adjustment is the short-term pursuit of fitting in or making small changes to affect, behavior; and cognition patterns to accommodate for the new setting. This approach suggests the exploration of adjustment as opposed to adaptation or acculturation is an increasingly important area of academic inquiry within international student experiences in Asia, particularly when research models incorporate the reduced duration of the average study abroad experience in the region.

The second thematic area of exploration in regard to American students in Thailand relates to the experiences they have both on and off campus. This is important given the preponderance of studies on international education at English-speaking universities in Western sociocultural settings (Andrade, 2006). Rhein (2018a) uses interviews with study abroad students to gain insight into their experiences adjusting to Thai international higher education. These studies found that not everyone adjusts to Thai society during
their stay. The main barriers of adjustment were a sense of isolation in Thailand, the excessive attention received from their hosts, awkward or confusing responses to Thai culture, and difficult adjustment to academic differences. Within the Thai context, American students are in an English-learning environment but a Thai-speaking social environment wherein classes are conducted in English but Thai is the lingua franca when socializing, dining in the canteen, or during student activities such as on campus clubs.

Further differences in the on-campus experience are exemplified in university policies. For example, most universities in the United States do not require any type of uniform to be worn by students in class or on campus. However, in Thailand, a student uniform is required at almost all Thai universities (with the exception of Thammasat University where uniforms are only required on examination days). Schools which offer associates degree or vocational degrees often have widely varying uniforms yet the standard bachelor degree level uniform is a white shirt, black pants/skirt, a specific belt with an emblem of the university, black shoes, and a neck cord that holds their student identification card (“Uniform Policy, n.d.”). According to official university policy, students must wear the proper uniform at all times when on campus even if they are not in class. This policy can be interpreted as a method of promoting a sense of collectivism among students.

The acceptance and administrative reinforcement of social hierarchies at Thai universities is evident though institutionally endorsed activities such as “rub nong” which is a type of initiation ceremony for all new students. Every new student is assigned a group by the university and is welcomed by their senior classmates. The goal of these groups is to build strong friendships and bonds with other classmates. Most universities in the United States have social fraternities or sororities. However, only a fraction of students in America partake in these types of organizations as they must seek them out, instead of being placed into them.

The third area of exploration of cultural adjustment often involves theoretical frameworks such as those developed by Hofstede and the dichotomous cultural dimension’s model (Hofstede, 1984). This widely used model expanded in recent years and currently offers six cultural dimensions that help explain the behavior and mental processes of people in different countries. “Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity, Long Term versus Short Term Orientation and Indulgence versus Restraint.” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 493). Hofstede’s model will be used with the two countries to attempt to identify which cultural dimensions might be more or less difficult for Americans to adjust to while living in Thailand. The greatest disparity between these two cultures is the variance in the degrees of individualism. Thailand scores quite low with 20, while the United States’ score is very high at 91. In most collectivist societies, people tend to identify with certain “in groups” that look after each other. These groups include family, friends, coworkers, and other close relationships. Thais are generally non-confrontational and individuals may agree with something because it aligns with the group’s interests (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

Given the aforementioned cultural variances, it may seem difficult to grasp how Thailand, as a country which has formulated a national culture which is normatively characterized by respect for and obedience to authority (Piller, 2007), collectivism (Hofstede, 1984), an avoidance of individual accountability (Hallinger & Kantamara, 2000) and an avoidance of conflict (Kim et al., 1999), has become both a global tourist hub and has increasingly attracted students from the West which have most likely been raised in cultures which are diametrically opposed to the cultural norms within the Thai educational milieu. Thus, this study seeks to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of American international students in Thailand.

Research Questions

The semi-structured interviews consisted of 16 interview questions some of which have subquestions. The questions, amended for Thailand, were based on the work of Steele (2008), and her thesis on Chinese international student’s sociocultural adjustment in Singapore, included, but were not limited to, the following:

What are the most important adjustment issues you or any of your friends have encountered after you came to Thailand?

What organizations/groups have you joined or are a part of? What support do they offer that help you adjust to life/school in Thailand?

Where do you live? How is it? Does this affect your adjustment at all? How?

Who are your closest friends here in Thailand? Do you have Thai friends?

Methodology and Ethics

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. Given that the topics discussed in these interviews may be considered sensitive, a snowball sampling procedure was implemented whereby adult-aged participants (18–24), staying in Thailand for between 4 and 6 months, volunteered or privately nominated other potential participants to contact the researcher for information detailing the summary of the purpose, goals, and methodology. A written announcement which outlined the aims, study design, expected time commitment, right to withdraw, and sample questions was posted on campus where the data were collected. Prior to contacting the participants, institutional review board (IRB) approval was attained from the authors’ institutional affiliation. In additional, all participants have
been given pseudonyms in the results section to ensure anonymity. These pseudonyms were chosen by the participants following the interviews. The interviews were conducted through one-on-one video calls and in-person interviews at an international university in the greater Bangkok area. All participants studied in Thailand between 2018 and 2020. In total, there were 22 interviews with 10 men and 12 women. Nineteen interviews were conducted in person and three were done via video call. This sampling method used was implemented with the hope of eliciting feedback from as many American students at the university as possible.

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The initial analysis synthesized participant’s comments into categories following an inductive content analysis which allows for the data, through axial coding procedures, to be organized thematically. The emerging concepts were labeled thematically and codes created to ensure commonality of content and avoidance of unintended overlapping themes. The classification system of generating thematic labels is designed to ensure specific differentiation of themes as each specific unit of comparison allowed for greater elucidation in the results section. A further method of analysis was based on a grounded theory approach (Cresswell, 1998) whereby the qualitative software analysis program NVIVO (Richards, 1999) was implemented and a comparative analysis of researcher generated themes with NVIVO generated themes was conducted to ensure accurate representation of thematic structures as well as to avoid unwanted overlaps within the presentation of data.

Results of Research Question

Following the analysis of the interviews, a major theme related to entry shock and five specific subthemes emerged. These themes focused on the specific barriers to sociocultural adjustment; namely, the “farang” bubble, language barrier, traveling in the region, university life, and local transportation. Each of these themes will be discussed in detail.

Common Theme: General Overall Adjustment

Many students reported similar patterns of adjustment. The most common pattern that emerged was an initial sense of excitement mixed with shock in response to exposure to Thai society and culture. Nineteen out of 22 participants reported that it was their first time in Thailand, while six out of 22 reported that it was their first time outside of the United States. Those who had been in Thailand before reported much less sociocultural adjustment issues. For example, Jacob, a 21-year-old senior from Colorado, said,

I actually took a trip to Thailand with my family when I was young. Well, that experience was much different from this one, I think it made my adjustment much easier than compared to some of the other guys in my program.

The students who were abroad for the first time in their lives reported much more difficulty at the beginning of their stay. Shonda, a 19-year-old student from Louisiana, explained,

Honestly, I was kinda freaked out in the beginning. Like I said I’d never been to Asia or anything. I checked into my room at Bundit [a student dormitory near campus] and was like “What the f**k am I doing here?” The next day I was kinda scared to go outside by myself.

These results suggest that prior international exposure may be a very important aspect regarding initial levels of comfort. When speaking about adjustment a couple of months into their stay, there were still differences between those who had international or Thai exposure and those who did not. However, the differences were not as drastic as in the beginning. This suggests that the most memorable adjustment struggles may occur in the first few days in country and that most students do typically overcome them in the passing days. When asked about the overall assessment of their adjustment, every student, even those who struggled in the beginning, reported that they eventually felt like they adjusted successfully to life as a study abroad student in Thailand. Regarding the length of stay in Thailand, most students stayed for between 3 and 4 months. The majority of students said that they wished they could stay longer, with two students actually extending their stay for an additional term. Only one student reported that she really wanted to return to the United States. Haley, a 21-year-old female from Utah, said,

I can’t wait to get back. I’m actually taking my finals early so that I can go back and be with my family.

Specific Theme 1: The “Farang” Bubble

“Farang” is a Thai word that typically is used to describe Westerners. However, many Thais use it to describe a variety of ethnicities that are non-Asian. At many of the international programs in Thailand, the international students are all placed in housing designed specifically for foreigners. That area, known locally as “soi tangsin,” is a street close to the university which offers a wide range of accommodation primarily inhabited by visiting and exchange students. American students reported that living there made life a lot easier at first because of the conveniences. However, they reported that it did not help them integrate with local Thai people and Thai society. Ashton, a 21-year-old male from Virginia, remarked,

[living on soi tangsin] would make you never really have to adjust. You have [the] taxi line, hamburgers, it has nothing really to do with Thailand.
Thus the use of the term the “farang bubble.” A majority of students in this study mentioned that most of their friends were other Americans mainly because they had a lot in common. This may suggest a low level of overall adjustment regarding relationships with locals. This “farang” bubble means that most students have limited interactions with Thais and a lack of Thai friends. Most students reported making Thai friends; however, the overall results are that the closest friends, as well as the friends who American students spent the most time with, were other American students. It may also suggest that the accommodations provided are not helping students adjust as they are surrounded by many other foreigners. When asked what could be done to help students adjust better, Jacob, a 21-year-old senior from Colorado, commented,

I think if there were other housing options than “soi tangsin,” some students would adjust better, “tangsin” is great for people who are uneasy about living in Thailand, and it offers a lot of convenience. However, it doesn’t give the real Thai experience. I think if there were homestay options for students who really wanted to experience Thai lifestyle, that would be great.

Similarly, Jessica, a 22-year-old female who studies in Colorado, explained,

You know we live with American students, we study together and I’m not sure why but we just sorta self-segregated so most American students sit with each other. I didn’t come here to make American friends, you know I’m happy I did, but I came here to make Thai friends, so I had to reach out more in my classes which I did, so I have a couple of Thai friends now but it wasn’t to the extent that I thought it would be.

This unintentional self-segregation was discussed in many of the interviews. While voicing a desire to befriend locals the Americans chose to sit with each other in classes and travel with each other on the weekends. Genesis, a female student from California, responded,

I don’t have to interact with Thai students as much as I would have expected. The Thai students I do interact with it’s because I reach out to them. Like, a lot of my classes organized themselves so that all of the westerners end up sitting together and there’s no forced integration so no one bothers to integrate.

Some of the respondents voiced their ideas for methods of avoiding this bubble. For example, Sarah, a 22-year-old from New York remarked,

I would love to have a 2-week homestay option where you could stay with a Thai family and get a taste for what Thai life is really like. . . I guess I would really enjoy that. Even just a week, having that experience would be very beneficial.

To date, there are no known homestay or culturally immersive housing options provided by the universities or higher education study abroad programs for students who would like to experience a more authentic Thai living experience.

Specific Theme 2: Language Barrier and Socializing With Thais

The issue of language as a barrier or obstacle to American students was another common theme. Since Thai is not a global language, none of the students in this study spoke any Thai beyond a few words or phrases prior to their arrival. On average, Thai people’s English abilities are very low (EF English Proficiency Index, 2019). However, this depends greatly on where in the country one is. Thai people in Bangkok and tourist destinations typically speak a higher level of English than those in other areas. The setting of the university in this study is a suburban neighborhood on the outskirts of Bangkok. Therefore, other than people in the university and the associated community, English ability is often quite low. This can become an obstacle for students who are trying to interact with locals. The most common social interactions American students discussed related to interactions with local vendors and service providers such as in restaurants or cell phone stores. Ordering food was reported to be very difficult when restaurants did not have menus in English or pictures. Jesse, a 23-year-old student from New York, revealed,

Ordering food was pretty difficult in the beginning. Most of the shops don’t really speak English, so I usually went to restaurants that had English menus where I could just point to the dish I wanted.

Jacob, a 21-year-old senior from Colorado, also commented about the language barrier:

Since I don’t really speak Thai, the only Thai friends I made were other students. I would have really liked to connect with a wider range of Thai people, but it is difficult when you don’t know the language.

Some of the students discussed their reliance on translation applications available on their phones. For instance, Colten, a male student from Oregon said,

The first few days it was really difficult to talk to people but the locals are really receptive and so they have made it easier because they help you try to figure out something you are trying to say. It was hard sometimes but local people use the app (Google Voice) and they talk into it and then they’ll show you whatever it says and you do the same so that makes it better.

The low level of English ability in Thailand limits the ability of American students who do not speak Thai to form friendships with locals. The university does provide a course for students which introduces Thai language and culture; however, not all students are able to take it as it
may not align with their graduation requirements. In addition, Thai language courses are usually full credit courses which can cost each student hundreds of dollars to enroll in. The expense and the limited potential to transfer the course to their home university made this aspect of adjustment problematic. One student who did enroll in the Thai course reported that they wished they had the opportunity to learn Thai prior to arrival because once the class was over, it was time to return to the United States and they had limited opportunities to practice their new language skills. Not all of the American students shared negative insights regarding their language concerns. Some of the respondents chose to see the problematic nature of communication from a positive perspective. Jessica commented,

It is a problem but it’s also kind of fun. In the first week we went to a mall and we sat down at a restaurant and there was no, like, neither of us spoke the other one’s language so there was a lot of pointing and figuring it out so, I don’t know but I enjoyed it. It teaches you a lot.

Similarly, Hannah, a 21-year-old female student from Massachusetts, argued,

I actually think it’s a bonding experience with the local people because if they did understand me it wouldn’t be like us trying to work together instead it’d be like ‘let me take your order and leave. So, it was kind of nice, even though we were both confused, but it was a bonding experience almost.

Overall, it is important to note that most students who choose to study in Thailand arrive with limited to nonexistent Thai language skills. The typical length of a short-term study abroad, which is what the majority of Americans experience, is not sufficient for conversational Thai language development. While the universities in Thailand do offer classes in Thai language and culture, providing methods of alleviating problems associated with local language usage is important to improve the experiences of international students with in the Thai context.

Specific Theme 3: Travel and Tourism

Southeast Asia and Thailand, in particular, is a very popular tourist destination. Several students in the study explained that one of the main reasons they came to study in Thailand was the travel opportunities within the country and neighboring ASEAN countries. The prevalence of weekend trips to other South East Asian nations was far greater than initially anticipated. Hannah, a 24-year-old from Maine, revealed,

I chose to come to Thailand because it’s a fun and cheap place to travel around. Most weekends I try to take a trip somewhere within the country. After finals I’m gonna check out some of the other Southeast Asian countries.

The most popular destinations for American students within Thailand include mountainous cities such as Chiang Mai as well as various islands such as Phuket, Krabi, and Ko Chang. The most popular destinations abroad were Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Every participant in this study mentioned traveling within Thailand at least once, and several went to neighboring countries as well. The language barrier in Thailand was not reported to be a very big issue when traveling in touristy areas. However, when participants traveled to less popular destinations, the language barrier became much more of an obstacle. Thomas, a 21-year-old senior from Maryland, said,

Ko phi-phi [a popular Thai island] was easy, everyone spoke English there. But when I went to Lopburi [a rural province north of Bangkok] it was pretty hard to get around because people didn’t really speak English there.

One solution to the travel and communication problems reported was the students’ use of technology to ease related burdens. Many of the participants in this study discussed sharing various apps and websites with one another to ease the anxieties of travel both domestically and internationally. Katherine, a 20-year-old from Arizona, remarked,

I want to see as much and experience as much as I can in a short period so I just had to like go, go, go. Plus, Traveling is very, very easy, especially with the online resources like 1-2 Asia, hostel world and Airbnb make it really easy to find places to stay.

Overall, travel was reported to be a very positive and important motive for the American students. While travel within Thailand may be more convenient than other locations, it is also possible that travel may help with the process of adjustment as it may help familiarize American students with different regions of Thailand which lends to greater exposure to a variety of customs, food, languages, and so on. Furthermore, in a setting like Bangkok, many Thais come from all over the country to study and work. If an American student has been to different regions of the country, it may help them to communicate and form friendships with others who come from other regions of Thailand.

Specific Theme 4: University Life

The topic of university life or the general experience of actually studying in Thailand was another common theme. Adjusting to university life was reported by the majority of participants to be relatively successful, yet several stressors were highlighted. In particular, many of the participants commented on the number of group presentations, the emphasis on examinations, and the longer class times. These three areas of academic adjustment were reported as the most problematic. Anwar, a 22-year-old student from California, disclosed,
I’d never done any presentations at my college back home, so I wasn’t really confident when presenting. Also, I hate how much exams weigh towards our grades. I think there should be more of a focus on actual learning, than just remembering facts for an exam.

The emphasis on group work and group presentations is a reflection of the importance of collectivism within the Thai context. Within a collectivistic society, a group presentation may provide a sense of comfort as one need not have to speak publicly by themselves. Group projects, presentations, and assignments allow students to work together to form a collective opinion. This approach reduces individual accountability and lends to group discussions and the maintenance of conflict avoidance through indirect communication patterns. This was problematic for the American students who have been socialized toward the formation of opinions and argumentation through direct communication.

As for exams, a group of students all studying the same material to produce very precise responses may be a result of the collectivist desire for a group to respond to questions in a uniform manner instead of producing work that is more individualized, such as is required in research papers or class discussions. The commonality of rote learning and assessment also reinforces the educational power distance wherein the teacher is the authority figure dispensing knowledge for the students to absorb unquestioningly. Within this context, there is one correct answer and it is presented in the lecture.

Shonda, a 19-year-old student from Louisiana, remarked,

| I got my first and only ever “D” here. I studied a fair amount for the exams, but I’m just not very good at memorizing lots of information. I’m used to classes back home having papers and projects along with quizzes or exams. |

This suggests that some American students may struggle with the rote learning approach to exams; however, this method of teaching is very common in the Thai education system (Kirkpatrick, 2012). The final barrier within the adjustment to university life was the length of each of the class. Many Thai universities have class once a week for a 3-hr block or twice a week for 90 min. This is apparently longer than the American students experienced in their home programs. One student, Colten from Oregon, said,

| One thing I really struggle with is 3 hour classes. At home I’m so used to having classes be 50 minutes and then here I feel like my attention span, you know, after an hour I can’t focus on anything. I try but I get distracted easily. |

**Specific Theme 5: Local Transportation**

Problems associated with local transportation are the final theme identified in this investigation. When asked how students typically commuted to university and the surrounding area, the most common forms of transportation were the van service provided by their housing and taxi services. Ashton, a 21-year-old male from Virginia, said this regarding local transportation:

| The van services in Thailand are great because it leaves right in front of my building and drops me off on campus. However, I wish I had a motorbike or something to rent because I get tired of taking a taxi to go anywhere other than school. |

An unexpected aspect of this research was once again the degree to which the American students used technology to assist in their day-to-day lives in Thailand. In this case, just as with the traveling in Thailand and around South East Asia, the students went online and booked their taxis through various applications. While Uber is the app of choice in the United States, Grab is the most commonly used ride hailing app in Thailand. Marisa, a 21-year-old female student from New Jersey, remarked,

| I grab everywhere. I think we all use Grab or taxis but Grab is everywhere and it’s easier. |

Further illustrating this point, Hannah said,

| I’ve been trying to pick up on key Thai phrases since I’ve been here. So many places sound the same so sometimes I have a taxi drop me off at the wrong place and I don’t know what to do so once I got on Grab that was it. |

This reflects the use of apps and technology to assist in what would otherwise be a potentially stressful barrier to adjustment.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

The responses from the participants necessitate institutional adjustments be made to the provisioning of specific services to alleviate the reported problems. Therefore, this section of the article will address each of the specific themes and offer potential solutions as well as recommendations to international higher education programs in Thailand.

To begin, the “Farang bubble” is an issue which is often discussed in international student literature yet in different contexts. To provide some context, in Thailand, Caucasians are referred to as “Farang” which is also associated with concepts of progress, wealth, and modernity (Wilson, 2004). For this reason, the farang students are given a privileged status yet do not socialize with the locals as often as one would expect. To address this issue, the ability to reside, perhaps temporarily in a homestay would be ideal for the American students. In Bangkok, there are no known homestay or culturally immersive housing options provided by the international universities or the study abroad programs. If these options were available, the visiting students are likely to experience a higher level of cultural adjustment. This article suggests that the university or study
Students (Vincent-Lancrin, 2008). To provide a specific vide quality education and the related services to these visit-

the Thai and American students the opportunity to commu-

ation. Social activities with institutional support which allow

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benefits of extended contact with the host culture. Given

that international students spend more time

and academic adjustment process. This is in line with the

findings by Kashima and Loh (2006). The results are also in

a long line of research, starting with Bochner et al. (1977)

which indicates that international students spend more time

with compatriots than any other group. Research suggests

that students who experience a sense of connection with the hosts often display lower levels of stress (Russell et al.,

2010). Further research (Ward et al., 2001) outlines the

benefits of extended contact with the host culture. Given

the lack of interaction and the desire to form relationships

or to socialize with locals, more activities should be planned

which facilitate intergroup cooperation and communica-

Social activities with institutional support which allow

the Thai and American students the opportunity to commun-

icate and work together would lend to greater interaction

for both groups of students.

As student mobility increases, there is also a need to pro-

vide quality education and the related services to these visit-

The second subtheme addressed in this research is the

international students desire to overcome the language bar-

rier and socialize with Thais. This article recommends vari-

ous methods that can be implemented to achieve this, in-

cluding the development of friendships with locals. Very

coregious that international students spend more time

with one another, this would allow for much greater inter-

group contact. To find the ideal match between local student

and international student, the buddy system could be aligned

with the list of clubs students sign up for, thus leveraging a

shared hobby and a chance for the students to interact through

activities which allows for students to work together toward

common goals, provides an opportunity to socialize and get

to know one another, and has explicit institutional support

via funding, location choice, and advising. All of which

should lend to improved intergroup relations.

Additional intervention practices such as a support group

or the creation of more group activities with the host com-

munity and the international students are also beneficial.

International mixers, cooking events, sports events, and

other activities aligned with the buddy system would facili-
tate the development of a support network among the hosts

and the sojourners. This is common in many schools and has

proven to be very effective (Allameh, 1996; Bigelow, 1996).

Finally, it is reasonable to assume that these activities and the

buddy system would further decrease the perception of the

“farang bubble.”

The third subtheme was related to both domestic and

international travel. All of the participants emphasized

their travel experiences as both a motivation to study in

Thailand and a regular weekend activity. Given the amount

of short trips the America students reported taking, Thai

universities would benefit from the production of pam-

phlets, brochures, and signs which inform students of the

most popular and safe travel sites. It is also necessary to

provide specific advice on reputable websites which facilit-
tate travel for students to book their own trips at discount

rates. In addition, universities should plan and provide

short trips to specific locations domestically such as is
done in Europe where the universities arrange tour busses

and the visiting students travel with domestic students to

various historic sites. This should be done with an empha-

sis on local Thai student involvement to further increase

the intergroup contact. This is a particularly important

aspect of service provisioning given the amount of local

and international travel the participants reported.

It behooves international programs to create announce-

ments and information hubs to assist students with this aspect

of the study abroad experience. Specific attention should be
given to famous Thai locations such as islands, national

parks, and the mountainous areas of Chiang Rai and Chiang

Rai. If Thai educational providers are reticent about engag-
in such practices, perhaps a private company which spe-
cializes in regional and domestic airlines and hotels which

could give students a discount on travel services should be

approached. This would improve overall student experience
as traveling was reported as an important aspect of their experience in Thailand.

The fourth subtheme which resulted from this research is related to academic concerns. Academic cultures vary greatly. Andrade (2006) focused on the academic problems international students are likely to encounter such as language use or academic writing style difficulties and the need to establish support services specifically for this group. This is not a relevant concern for American students in the international programs in Thailand. American students, unlike their South East Asian counterparts, do not enroll in international higher education in Thailand to learn English. The academic issues American students face are largely due to long classes and limited yet heavily weighted assessments such examinations valued at 30% to 40% of the overall score. This aspect of studying in Thai programs is not discussed in the marketing materials or in pre-departure training, yet the authors suggest that it should be. Finally, the concerns surrounding local travel were quickly overcome with the use of ride-hailing apps. Therefore, promotional materials and the orientation sessions should highlight the specific apps used in South East Asia. The American students in this study quickly shared their various methods of solving problems with the other visiting students, but these barriers can be addressed in advance through the development of detailed orientation sessions which focus on the specific needs of the international student cohorts.

**Future Research**

Further research should also be done to examine the establishment and impact of homestays on the adjustment of students in Thailand. If homestays facilitate the process of cultural adjustment, it may encourage universities and study abroad companies to provide this form of accommodation as an option to students. In addition, to provide the necessary services, further research should attempt to determine which subjects are the most difficult for American students in Thailand. Finally, other nationalities, ethnicities, and motivations for mobility should be analyzed in regard to adjustment in Thai higher education.

**Conclusion**

Prior research on international student sociocultural adjustment has often neglected to recognize the developing trend of Western students studying in the East, particularly American students in Thailand. Evidence suggests that there is an increase in the number of outbound American students and an increase of inbound study abroad students coming to Thailand. It is important to understand the sociocultural adjustment process as well as to provide insight and suggestions to improve the experience for future students. The participants in this qualitative inquiry reported experiences which were categorized into five themes which included the most common theme on general overall adjustment and subthemes; namely, the “farang” bubble, language barrier, traveling in the region, university life, and local transportation. The results indicate that there were distinct recurring themes regarding cultural adjustment that emerged from the interviews. However, in most cases, these issues were not a significant impediment to the overall adjustment experience. The results are useful for the implementation of ideas that can help universities and study abroad companies improve services to American students and potentially other nationalities.

**Authors’ Note**

Blue Rybo-LoPresti is an independent researcher now based in Boston, USA.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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