

## **The Utilization of Communication Technologies by Study Abroad Participants**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This pilot project was designed to evaluate study abroad participants' degree of homesickness and use of communication channels, specifically telephone and email. A questionnaire was developed to assess several dimensions involved with studying abroad, including degree of culture shock and homesickness, and frequency and methods of communicating home. Respondents were 14 study abroad participants from a medium-sized southern university, including 4 males and 10 females. Based on the findings of this study, homesickness and degree of culture shock were related as measured by the items of strain, helpless, missing, accepted, escape, and shock. As hypothesized, students who reported being homesick were also more likely to utilize communication technologies. In addition, those students reporting higher levels of homesickness also reported that phone contacts back home helped them overcome feelings of homesickness. While frequency of use of email and phone were strongly related, only talking with family and friends back home was reported to significantly help with feelings of homesickness. Limitations and future research directions were also discussed.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When students study abroad, they typically find themselves in an unfamiliar culture with people they do not know or understand. Transitioning to a new environment requires making major adjustments, which may be difficult for students participating in study abroad programs. These adjustments include challenges such as making new friends, language barriers, social pressures, and money management issues. The students are often overwhelmed by the cultural differences they encounter and they find themselves experiencing culture shock and homesickness. Literature suggests that this response is widespread and worldwide (e.g., Fisher, 1989, Burt, 1993).

In an effort to overcome these feelings of homesickness, students on a study abroad often communicate with family and friends back home. Unfortunately, little research exists which examines the specific ways students deal with homesickness (Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets, & Wan Heck, 1997). Two of the main ways of communicating abroad are through telephone and email. Other communication technologies are typically not considered effective given the short amount of time students are abroad, or the difficulty associated with trying to mail something to someone having multiple destinations

Communication is a fundamental and important aspect of daily activities. Therefore, media selection is an essential component of the communication process. According to Daft and Lengel (1984, 1986), media richness is a medium's ability to change understanding. Face-to-face interaction ranks as the richest medium, followed by telephone, and then electronic mail.

Face-to-face interaction is the richest medium because it includes both verbal and nonverbal cues. Voice intonation gives a great deal of information, including the speakers' feelings and emotions. Communicating face-to-face also incorporates visual cues, such as body language and facial expressions. Face-to-face interaction is a more personal

form of communication because there is physical presence (Andres, 2002). It also provides immediate feedback, which is helpful in clarifying any questions or when a response is needed quickly.

The telephone is not as rich a medium as face-to-face interaction because it lacks visual cues of nonverbal behavior. However, it is a good substitute for face-to-face interaction since the telephone incorporates voice intonation and immediate feedback. Email has the least media richness of the three methods discussed, because it lacks all verbal and many nonverbal cues. It also lacks immediate feedback because the person the student is trying to communicate with may not be online. This may cause a problem for students experiencing homesickness.

Based on research by Steinfield, electronic messaging systems (EMS) are used for various purposes including task-related and socioemotional usage. Task-related usage of EMS includes coordinating projects or scheduling meetings. Students communicate via email for task-related purposes such as scheduling group meetings or communicating with professors. Task-related email has advantages over traditional means of communication because it is fast, inexpensive, and allows for verification (Strischek, 1999). Socioemotional usage of EMS includes keeping in touch with family and friends (Steinfeld, 1986). For the purpose of this study, socioemotional usage of EMS was investigated.

Early research on EMS suggested that because it lacked nonverbal cues and physical proximity, it should not be used for exchanging complex information (Short et al, 1976). However, this is not the case. Email is used for numerous purposes including disclosing personal information, telling jokes, asking embarrassing questions, and giving honest opinions of others that would never be given in person (Strischek, 1999).

When students studying abroad experience homesickness, they may want to communicate with family and friends back home. For these students, the telephone can play a major role in helping them overcome their feelings of homesickness. By communicating via telephone, the students can hear their family and friends' voices and receive immediate feedback, which can comfort them and relieve some of their homesickness. Communicating via email is a second option; however, communication through email can mean that once the student sends their message they have to wait sometimes hours or even days for a response.

Interestingly, an inverse relationship between students' frequency of communicating home and homesickness has been discussed in the literature (Cellphones, 2004). According to this article, communicating with family through phone and email too often can hinder students' adjustment to college and cause unintended consequences. These unintended consequences include students upsetting their parents and then parents calling and upsetting the students again at a later time. This becomes a continuous cycle and, therefore, hinders the students' adjustment. The article suggests that there are ways to overcome homesickness other than only communicating with family, such as exercising or going out with new friends (Cellphones, 2004). Dwight Call, Assistant Vice President for International Education at Georgia College & State University, gives similar advice at study abroad orientations. He suggests that students should not call home when they are upset because it makes their parents upset, thus beginning the cycle previously discussed (Call, 2006).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between study abroad participants' degree of homesickness and usage of email and telephone communication technologies, including frequency of usage. It was hypothesized that the higher degree of homesickness a student experiences, the more often they will communicate with family and friends back home. It is further hypothesized that homesick students will prefer phone conversations to email, as this medium provides a richer communication experience.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants*

Participants were students that attended a 3-week study abroad program to Australia. A total of 14 students completed the questionnaire, including 4 males and 10 females. The age of the respondents ranged from 19 to 25. The academic status of the respondents was as follows: one sophomore, 5 juniors, and 8 seniors in the group.

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire consisted of 17 questions designed to measure the students' adjustment to the new culture, degree of homesickness, frequency of telephone and email usage, and demographic information (see the Appendix for a complete copy of the questionnaire). The questionnaire was administered after the students returned.

The questions designed to determine the degree of culture shock were based upon Mumford's (1998) study of measuring culture shock. Respondents were asked to indicate on a five-point scale (never, not often, neutral, often, and always) how they felt about the new culture and people.

In addition to culture shock questions, several items were included to assess the degree of homesickness and usage of phone and email. The students were asked to rank their degree of homesickness on a five-point scale (not at all homesick, slightly homesick, moderately homesick, fairly homesick, and extremely homesick). Each of the "homesickness" variables was rated on a scale from 1 to 5. The variables relate to the specific questions as identified below.

STRAIN: Question 1 – Did you ever feel strain from the effort to adapt to the new culture?

CONFUSED: Question 2 – Did you ever feel confused about your role or identity in the new culture?

HELPLESS: Question 3 – Did you ever feel helpless or powerless when trying to cope with the new culture?

MISSING: Question 4 – Did you find yourself missing your family and friends back home?

ACCEPTED: Question 5 – Did you feel generally accepted by the local people in the new culture?

ESCAPE: Question 6 – Did you ever wish that you could have escaped from the new environment altogether?

SHOCK: Question 7 – Did you find things in your new environment shocking or disgusting?

HOMESICK: Question 8 – During the study abroad trip, how "homesick" did you feel?

To determine how long students spent per day communicating home by telephone and email, students were asked to indicate on a five-point scale (less than 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 30 minutes, one hour, and greater than one hour) their communication patterns.

To evaluate how telephone and email helped the students overcome feelings of homesickness students indicated on a five-point scale (did not help at all, helped very little, neutral, helped moderately, and helped greatly) how much each helped them overcome their feelings of homesickness. The "communication" variables relate to the specific questions as identified below.

FREQ: Question 9 – How often did you communicate with family or friends back home?

PRIMARY: Question 10 – What was your primary way of communicating back home?

AVG\_EM: Question 11 – On average, how much time per day did you spend communicating by email with family and friends back home?

AVG\_PH: Question 12 – On average, how much time per day did you spend communicating by phone with family and friends back home?

EMAIL: Question 13 – Did email contacts back home help you overcome feelings of "homesickness"?

PHONE: Question 14 – Did phone contacts back home help you overcome feelings of "homesickness"?

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### *Correlation Analysis of Culture Shock and Homesickness Variables*

The correlation matrix for the culture shock and homesickness variables is presented in Table 1. All seven culture shock variables display a positive correlation with Homesick, with coefficients ranging from 0.31 to 0.67. The correlation coefficients for Strain, Helpless, Missing, and Escape were all positive and significant at the 5% level. Students tended to feel more homesick if they felt strain from the effort to adapt, helpless when trying to cope with the new culture, and when they missed their family and friends. Furthermore, the desire to escape from the new environment was most highly correlated with feelings of homesickness. Responses to Question 5 were recoded using the reverse scale for consistency with the other variables. Accepted ( $p = 0.053$ ) and Shock ( $p = 0.055$ ) were also positively related to homesickness. This indicates that lack of acceptance by the local people and the perception that things were shocking or disgusting may also contribute to feelings of homesickness. The Confused variable shows a weak positive correlation with Homesick.

	Homesick	Strain	Confused	Helpless	Missing	Accepted	Escape	Shock
Homesick	1							
Strain	0.456** (0.031)	1						
Confused	0.307 (0.108)	0.555** (0.013)	1					
Helpless	0.602*** (0.008)	0.458** (0.034)	0.303 (0.117)	1				
Missing	0.418** (0.040)	0.576*** (0.008)	0.525** (0.016)	0.124 (0.305)	1			
Accepted	0.401* (0.053)	0.557** (0.013)	0.069 (0.393)	0.139 (0.292)	0.415** (0.045)	1		
Escape	0.671*** (0.003)	0.408* (0.052)	0.462** (0.035)	0.194 (0.223)	0.677*** (0.003)	0.438** (0.043)	1	
Shock	0.388* (0.055)	0.678*** (0.003)	0.528** (0.017)	0.194 (0.218)	0.623*** (0.005)	0.481** (0.027)	0.462** (0.032)	1

\*\*\* Kendall's tau, significant at 1%, 1-tailed

\*\* Kendall's tau, significant at 5%, 1-tailed

\* Kendall's tau, significant at 10%, 1-tailed

Table 1: Correlation Matrix for the Homesickness Variables

It was hypothesized that the greater the feeling of homesickness the more often students would communicate with friends and family back home. When asked how often they communicated back home with family or friends, the responses were as follows: 14.3% “once a week”, 50% “2 – 3 days per week”, 7.1% “4 – 5 days per week”, and 28.6% “once a day”. The most popular form of communication was a combination of both phone and email (50%), followed by email only (35.7%), and phone only (14.3%).

The correlation matrix for the communication variables is presented in Table 2. The correlations coefficients for Homesick and the communication variables ranged from 0.27 to 0.46. As hypothesized, there was a positive correlation between homesickness and the frequency of communications with family and friends back home (p = 0.060). Surprisingly, there was also a gender effect, with males communicating more frequently than females. Average email and average phone usage were positively correlated with homesickness at the 5% level. This suggests that students experiencing a greater degree of homesickness tended to spend more time, on average, communicating via both email and phone. The strong correlation between Email and Phone (p = 0.002) suggests that students, who feel that one form of communication helps to reduce homesickness, also feel that the other form of communication helps. However, only the Phone variable had a positive and significant correlation with Homesick. That is, only phone communications were perceived to help overcome feelings of homesickness (p = 0.036).

	Homesick	Freq	Primary	Avg_Em	Avg_Ph	Email	Phone
Homesick	1						
Freq	0.378* (0.060)	1					
Primary	0.309 (0.106)	0.082 (0.371)	1				
Avg_Em	0.457** (0.030)	-0.063 (0.398)	0.066 (0.396)	1			
Avg_Ph	0.428** (0.038)	-0.031 (0.449)	0.318* (0.099)	0.462** (0.028)	1		
Email	0.267 (0.130)	0.194 (0.207)	0.124 (0.305)	0.344* (0.074)	-0.217 (0.179)	1	
Phone	0.438**	0.378*	0.212	0.362*	0.000	0.697***	1

	(0.036)	(0.060)	(0.197)	(0.068)	(0.500)	(0.002)	
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\*\*\* Kendall's tau, significant at 1%, 1-tailed

\*\* Kendall's tau, significant at 5%, 1-tailed

\* Kendall's tau, significant at 10%, 1-tailed

Table 2: Correlation Matrix for the Communication Variables

## CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the findings of this study, homesickness and degree of culture shock were related as measured by the items of strain, helpless, missing, accepted, escape, and shock. Intuitively, this finding is not surprising and expected. All of the students communicated back home at least weekly, and most emailed or phoned home at least two or three times a week. As hypothesized, students who reported being homesick were also more likely to utilize communication technologies. In addition, those students reporting higher levels of homesickness also reported that phone contacts back home helped them overcome feelings of homesickness. While frequency of use of email and phone were strongly related, only talking with family and friends back home was reported to significantly help with feelings of homesickness.

One of the most significant limitations to this piece of research is the very small sample size. While 16 students participated in the study abroad program, only 14 completed and returned the questionnaire. The data for this study was collected several months after the program was completed as a pilot study for a subsequent project. Future plans include collecting data using a repeated measures design in the hopes of determining the timing of homesickness and its relationship with the utilization of communication technologies. Different media may be chosen at different times during the program depending upon the degree of homesickness experienced. It is possible that in the early stages of a study abroad, during the "honeymoon" stage (Chaney & Martin, 2004), communications back home may be less common, or email may be sufficient to transmit information about their experiences. But, as culture shock and homesickness set in, students may want to phone home when they desire a richer communication media.

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