Negative Side Effects of Music Listening During Cross-Cultural Transitions: Exploring How Music Hinders Cross-Cultural (Re)Adaptation among Student Sojourners

Abstract

Although media use has been shown to have benefits in many contexts, including study abroad, it may also hinder cross-cultural transitions in academic sojourns. This study examines how music (as a form of communication media) may interfere with adaptation to the host culture and readaptation to the home culture. Focus groups and interviews with a total of 23 college students (twelve U.S. students and eleven international students) revealed that music hindered sojourners' ability to interact in social interactions, as well as amplified negative feelings while abroad and during reentry. Participants experienced these temporary side effects in conjunction with (or as part of) their purposeful and functional use of music to escape from the social environment and alleviate negative emotions.

Keywords: music, study abroad, reentry, cross-cultural adaptation, intercultural communication

Negative Side Effects of Music Listening During Cross-Cultural Transitions:

Exploring How Music Hinders Cross-Cultural (Re)Adaptation among Student Sojourners

The positive effects of music as a form of art, therapy, and communication are well documented (MacDonald et al., 2013). Music listening is associated with improved well-being and interpersonal relationships (Ji et al., 2021), prosocial thoughts and behaviors (Greitemeyer, 2009), and reduced prejudice and stereotypes (Case et al., 2021). Music can ease life transitions including retirement (Saarikallio, 2011) and cross-cultural experiences (Jia & Koku, 2020), and can help student sojourners learn about the local culture, improve their language skills, and remember their study abroad experience upon reentry (Fanari et al., 2022). Despite its facilitative role during cross-cultural transitions, music may also amplify stressors associated with the arrival abroad or the reentry home for cultural sojourners. Music's ubiquitous presence and potential for solitary use can limit sojourners' opportunities for socialization and exploration of the new culture (Larson, 1995). Upon reentry, excessive media use, including music listening, can intensify feelings of nostalgia, alienation, and discontentment with life at home following a study abroad experience (Pitts, 2016). Little is known about these possible hindering effects.

The present study seeks to examine potential negative effects of one specific type of media—music—that has become an integral part of students' study abroad experience due to its internationalization, accessibility, and ubiquity across social settings (Vidas et al., 2022). Because cross-cultural transitions are already associated with high levels of stress due to the loss of familiar language and relationships (Pitts, 2016), this study considers how music use might interfere with the process of adaptation among student sojourners. Our findings add insight to the literature concerning media's facilitating and inhibiting effects on cross-cultural adaptation (Kim, 2001). We examine these concerns in the context of study abroad programs for U.S. and international students.

Theoretical Foundations

This study was guided by Kim's (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation (ITCCA), which emphasizes the central role of communication in sojourners' cross-cultural transitions. *Cross-cultural adaptation* is the process by which people "establish and maintain relatively stable relationships in a new, unfamiliar, or changed environment" (Kim, 2001, p. 31). According to ITCCA, cross-cultural adaptation unfolds according to a normative cycle characterized by stress, adaptation, and growth, where sojourners experience conflicting emotions related to letting go of aspects of their own culture (i.e., deculturation) while integrating new ones from the host culture (i.e., acculturation). Despite the stress experienced upon initial arrival abroad, sojourners gradually adapt and experience growth from this process of intercultural transformation (Kim, 2015). According to Kim (2001), cross-cultural adaptation is associated with three outcomes: *functional fitness* (i.e., capacity to perform daily tasks such as interacting in the foreign language or ordering at a restaurant); *psychological health* (i.e., overall sense of well-being, belonging, and the managing of negative feelings); and *global personhood* (i.e., a new sense of self that encompasses aspects of the home and the host culture; McKay-Semmler & Kim, 2014).

Pitts (2016) theoretically extended ITCCA's stress–adaptation–growth cycle to explain how sojourners readjust to their culture of origin. On return, sojourners must navigate physical, psychological, and interpersonal difficulties that make the reentry more challenging than expected (Fanari et al., 2021). A common challenge involves reconciling aspects of their identity gained abroad while attempting to fit again in their former home (Pitts, 2016). Although some of these challenges are temporary in nature, some returners experience long-term effects that hinder their readjustment over time (Szkudlarek, 2010).

ITCCA highlights communication's central role in the process of (re)adaptation—the sojourner uses media from the culture of origin (i.e., home media) and from the host country (i.e., host media) (Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013). Host media can facilitate adaptation by helping sojourners learn about local culture (Hetz et al., 2015), increasing language fluency (Yang et al., 2004), and providing social support (Mikal, 2011). In contrast, excessive use of home media can interfere with sojourn experiences by preventing disengagement from the home culture and limiting immersion and involvement in the host culture (Huesca, 2013; Sandel, 2014). Sojourning students who spend a lot of time checking their social media and consuming media from their home culture are less likely to achieve language fluency and more likely to develop feelings of nostalgia and "fears of missing out" from social media content posted by friends at home (Huesca, 2013; Yang et al., 2004). While the role of traditional mass media (Reece & Palmgreen, 2000) and new media (Park et al., 2014) during cross-cultural transitions has been documented, less is known about sojourners' use of music. We focus on music as a unique, hybrid, mass-interpersonal form of media that accompanies students throughout their study abroad experience.

Music Listening During Cross-Cultural Transitions

Music promotes human connection, facilitates emotional expression, and assists in managing life-span transitions (Harwood, 2018). People use music to manage negative emotions (Lonsdale & North, 2011), facilitate relational formation and maintenance (MacDonald et al., 2013), and transcend cultural boundaries (Higgins, 2012). These positive effects also occur among study abroad students, as music helps sojourners to establish new routines, become open to new genres, learn about the local culture, manage negative emotions, and memorialize their experience abroad (Fanari et al., 2022). Examining popular music use among Chinese international students adapting to the U.S., Jia and Koku (2020) found that students who listened to English songs more frequently were more likely to adapt to the U.S. lifestyle and make American friends compared to students who listened to Chinese songs more frequently. Vidas et al. (2022) also confirmed the positive effects of music listening as an effective coping resource to increase well-being among domestic and international students.

Despite its benefits, music can also have negative effects, especially in terms of emotional regulation. Music can be a solitary and isolating activity (Larson, 1995), and solitary listening can exacerbate negative effects (Zhang et al., 2018), especially in difficult moments such as romantic breakups (Knobloch & Zillmann, 2003). Solitary listening can also impede social interactions because the public use of headphones sends social signals of “I don’t want to be talked to” (de Souza e Silva & Frith, 2012). Because of its immersive and absorbing properties, music can also become a distraction from daily tasks. It can, for instance, distract pedestrians and increase the probability of being hit by a vehicle (Schwebel et al., 2012).

Some of these negative effects might be especially relevant during cross-cultural transitions, when sojourners are trying to establish relationships with locals and learn implicit cultural norms to fit into the new environment. By staying in a “music bubble,” sojourners might become distracted and unobservant of their local surroundings (Schwebel et al., 2012) while simultaneously signaling indifference to host nationals and missing important cultural cues. Furthermore, host-culture music listening might inadvertently idealize the host culture as a foreign and exotic location, leading to disappointment when sojourners’ expectations are not met. Similar processes could occur during reentry if home-culture music listening nurtures a romanticized and idyllic view of home. Pitts (2016) suggested that, upon reentry, excessive host media use intensifies feelings of nostalgia, alienation, and discontentment with life at home following a study abroad experience.

This study considers how music might hinder cross-cultural adaptation abroad and readaptation at home for study abroad students. Most study abroad students are at an age when music listening is both most prevalent and perceived as most important (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2013). Extending current country-specific research (Jia & Koku, 2020; Saarikallio et al., 2021), we focused on both U.S. and international students to explore possible hindering effects of music listening. We focused on short-term acculturating individuals because of the unique pressures that they experience adjusting, establishing social relationships, and learning culturally appropriate norms in a short amount of time (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Student sojourners often lack the social support and resources to cope with acculturative stress, thus putting them at risk of experiencing compromised mental health (Misra et al., 2003). Thus, we posed the following research question:

RQ: In what ways (if at all) does music hinder cross-cultural transitions or adaptation to a new culture and readaptation into one's home culture?

Method

We used semi-structured focus groups and interviews to capture participants' subjective experiences and allow findings to emerge from the ground up (Krueger & Casey, 2014). We interviewed three participants individually because they were unable to join scheduled focus groups. Our semi-structured protocol allowed us to supplement the interview guide with spontaneous follow-up questions, thus guiding the conversation without imposing a rigid structure (Charmaz, 2014). A separate analysis of the data has reported how music facilitates cross-cultural adaptation (Authors, blinded for review); our analysis here focuses on music's negative effects.

Participants and Recruitment

Twelve U.S. students who had returned from study abroad (1 man, 11 women, *M* age = 19.4 years), and eleven international students who were studying in the United States when the research was conducted (3 men, 8 women, *M* age = 27.5 years) participated in our study. The U.S. students had studied abroad for an average of six months, in countries including Italy, Spain, France, Russia, Sweden, Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Vietnam, China, Chile, Australia, and Morocco (White *n* = 10; Hispanic/Latino *n* = 3; Asian *n* = 1). The international students came from China, Taiwan, India, Vietnam, Italy, Netherlands, Colombia, Mexico, and Ghana (*M* time in the U.S. = 4 years;

Asian *n* = 5; White *n* = 3; Hispanic/Latino *n* = 2; Black *n* = 1). We recruited participants using purposive and snowball sampling and shared our study on social media pages for study abroad students. We recruited participants who studied abroad between 2017 and 2020. Participants received $15 gift cards as compensation.

Most U.S. participants reported listening to music every day during their study abroad experience (7 days a week *n* = 9; 5–6 days a week *n* = 1; 3–4 days a week *n* = 1; 1–2 days a week *n* = 1). The modal daily time spent listening to music while abroad was 1–3 hours (*n* = 8). Most U.S. students reported listening to music more frequently on average when they were abroad than when they were at home (*n* = 9; one reported listening to music less frequently abroad than at home, and two said their music listening habits did not change abroad as compared to at home). Some international students also reported listening to music every day during their study abroad experience (7 days a week *n* = 4; 5–6 days a week *n* = 3; 3–4 days a week *n* = 1; 1–2 days a week *n* = 3). Most international students spent 30 minutes to 1 hour listening to music (*n* = 6) or 1–3 hours (*n* = 3). Most international students reported listening to music more frequently on average when they were abroad than when they were at home (*n* = 8; one reported listening to music less frequently abroad than at home, and two said that their music listening habits did not change). All participants reported listening to music by themselves throughout their study abroad experience, especially while commuting, traveling, going to the gym, or engaging in daily activities, either using headphones (if they were in a public space) or by playing music through their phone if they were in a private setting (like their room or their car).

Procedures

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted six focus groups and three interviews via Zoom. Prior to the discussions, participants completed an online questionnaire containing the informed consent, demographic questions (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, home country, and host country), and music listening behaviors while abroad (e.g., average music listening behavior per week and per day, and music platform). One member of the research team led each discussion, while another served as notetaker. To establish a conversational atmosphere, discussions began with the moderator asking participants to introduce themselves. Then, the moderator used the focus group protocol to ask about participants' music habits in their home country and while they were studying abroad (e.g., "How have your music preferences and habits changed since you arrived in the United States?"). Participants were also asked to reflect on *how* they used music during study abroad (e.g., "How did you use music while you were abroad?"), and how it might have helped them to adapt (e.g., "In what ways can music facilitate adaptation abroad and readaptation at home?"). During these discussions, participants spontaneously shared that listening to music did not always help them to (re)adapt. All discussions occurred during Summer 2020 and lasted approximately 60–70 minutes. We reviewed transcripts for accuracy and replaced identifying information with pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

We used principles of thematic analysis to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Because of their experience conducting qualitative research, the first two authors coded the data using NVivo 12 (i.e., *collaborative coding*), while the rest of the team evaluated the findings to ensure their trustworthiness. Collaborative coding involves an iterative process of group and individual decision-making, where agreement is achieved through "joint focus and dialogue … to produce an agreed interpretation" (Cornish et al., 2014, p. 79). Collaborative coding strengthens credibility in qualitative data analysis because it integrates multiple viewpoints that are "brought to bear on the analysis and interpretation of the data" (Cornish et al., 2014, p. 79). The two coders kept a detailed audit trail and met weekly to engage in peer debriefing to ensure consistency in the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Analysis proceeded in four phases. First, we read the transcripts several times to gain a broad understanding of participants' experiences. We coded the first interview together to establish coding rules and resolve possible inconsistencies. Second, conducting a first round of open coding, we assigned descriptive labels to relevant segments of the data to capture specific nuances of participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). When possible, we used participants' own language and words as code labels to stay close to the data and accurately capture experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Third, we used the constant comparison method to identify connections within the data, clustering and synthesizing codes that fit together into broader themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A theme is a "broad unit of information that consists of several codes or categories aggregated to describe a common idea" (Creswell, 2013, p. 186). Themes help to answer the research questions in meaningful ways and provide a coherent picture of participants' experiences. We continued this process until most codes were sorted into coherent themes and we did not identify any new categories, codes, or properties (i.e., until we achieved *saturation*; Charmaz. 2014).

To assess the prominence of our findings, we looked at the recurrence and repetition of each theme in the data, their coherence pointing to a shared experience, and the descriptiveness and richness through which participants talked about hindering effects of music (Owen, 1984). Saturation was used as an additional criterion to ensure that our themes were not capturing isolated findings but shared experiences common to most participants (Charmaz, 2014). Finally, we returned to the coded data to select vivid passages illustrating each theme (i.e., *exemplars*). This process was essential to honor participants' experiences and define the conceptual boundaries of each theme.

To ensure the trustworthiness of our analysis, we engaged in several processes. First, we developed an audit trail and engaged in memo writing to keep a detailed record of our coding decisions and personal insights throughout every phase of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Memo writing allowed us to maintain consistency in our coding and validate findings (Charmaz, 2014). Second, we engaged in regular peer debriefing to ensure consistency in our coding decisions and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing is an essential step in collaborative coding because it allows coders to review each other's coding decisions, discuss, and resolve possible inconsistencies. Finally, we used member checking to establish the credibility and confirmability of our themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by sharing our findings with a subset of participants to ensure that we accurately captured their experiences.

Findings

Theme 1: Interfering with Social Interactions

Throughout their study abroad experience, music was a big part of students' life in many settings: hangouts with friends, concerts, theatrical performances, local festivals, karaoke nights, bars, street improvisations, and worship gatherings. Even though participants said that music was helpful to break the ice and start a conversation, sometimes it acted as a barrier to further relational development. Since music is "always there, in the background" (Kelly), sometimes it was hard to focus on other people. In settings where loud music was played, students who tried to make new friends were frustrated because they could not hear what the other person was saying. Camilla described differences between music in social settings in the U.S. and in her home country of Italy:

> When you go to a bar in the U.S., music is very loud and it's hard to hear what people are saying … but in Italy the music is mostly a background so you can listen to what people are saying and talk to them.

Similar feelings were expressed by other international students studying in the U.S., who mentioned that loud music increased language barriers and hindered interaction. Deshi shared his experience at a rap event with U.S. friends: "The music was just really loud, and it was hard to talk to people. And obviously it seemed that a lot of people were really enjoying themselves, but I felt a bit uncomfortable." Sara also mentioned that, though music made the environment more "comfortable," it did not allow for having a conversation with someone: "Music was like a filler to make things more comfortable, so you didn't have that pressure to talk, but I guess it didn't really help to get to know someone, especially in bars and other places where it was so loud." In this case, music was embedded in the cultural environment, and hence we imagine that students over time adapted to these settings or learned to avoid them. However, in the immediate term, this aspect of the environment blocked processes instrumental to broader cultural adaptation (e.g., developing social relationships).

Music also hindered social interactions if used to control the outer environment and provide an escape when students did not want to socialize, especially while traveling (Andrew) or working (Gitali). Many students reported solitary listening behaviors using their headphones in public places, such as when they were on a plane, using public transit, doing homework in the library, or waiting in line. According to Jane, music became more important in the U.S. compared to in her home country: "I listen to music when I do my work to block out external stuff or noises, when I don't want to talk to people." Students also relied on music when they did not know what to say or wanted to "hide" by wearing their headphones. For example, Jeronimo used headphones in public places to avoid pressure to interact: "Sometimes I prefer to be in my own bubble with music. … Sometimes it is better to keep my music going so I don't have to talk."

Some students noticed cultural differences between how people used music either alone or with other people. For example, Eduardo observed that, compared to in his home country (Mexico), in the U.S. people often listened to their own music, so he preferred not initiating a conversation:

> I noticed in the States, you are not that close to people, and then you're not getting in the business of other people. It seems it's not as acceptable to talk to other people in public; people are in their own bubble with music on their phone, so I also put my music on.

Selena also made a similar observation talking about how music in Spain was more social and collective, while in the U.S. it was more individual because people have their headphones on:

> When I was in Spain, music seemed more social. I would see people carrying boom boxes, speakers on their heads, even people would carry drums and crates on the streets. And there was this one festival where everyone was singing or playing music, and everybody had different speakers and everybody, like, synced up the song. And that was really, really cool. And I would say just the collective thing of going into a restaurant and everyone is singing that song while you're waiting in line; so I experienced that, which was something new 'cause in the U.S., people always have their headphones on and they don't want to be talked to, so I tried to not have my headphones on all the time in Spain.

Listening to music sometimes prevented students from starting conversations by filling awkward silences. According to Diu, her host family and friends abroad were always playing music, so there were fewer opportunities to engage in a conversation: "Me, my friends, my family, we listen to music a lot. If I do not know what to do, I'm just going to turn on the music to fill the silence." Amy's study abroad group had similar experiences, "just putting on YouTube videos to hang out" but "it's not that we were really talking or getting to know each other. And that was interesting because I still felt part of a group but didn't really *know* these people." Overall, music interfered with social interactions during study abroad when it was too loud or was used to fill silence to the point of preventing further relational development.

Theme 2: Insulating Negative Feelings

The second way music hindered adaptation was by insulating negative feelings and keeping students in a negative or melancholic mood. Even though students were often trying to alleviate or manage these negative emotions, they also reported that music use prolonged feelings of loneliness, homesickness, and nostalgia for their home country. When students had difficulties adjusting to the host culture, they listened to specific music to "allow themselves" to feel these negative emotions and shield themselves from outside interactions. Katie said that sometimes music did not help improve her mood: "Listening to songs, especially during a certain time has somewhat kept me within a state of sadness or loneliness … but it has been a reinforcement of loneliness." Emilia shared a similar experience, remembering when she first arrived in the U.S.: "It was hard at the beginning, and I often listened to sad Italian music that reminded me of home and made me feel closer but also more nostalgic. I wonder if listening to less depressing music would have helped me to adjust better and talk to people more." For Sara, insulating negative feelings was like a side effect of using music to alleviate negative emotions and escape from study abroad:

> I found myself listening to music more in my room by myself, because I lived in a pretty gray and rainy part of the world and music on one side helped alleviate that, but also accentuated the feeling of sadness because I was still alone in my room at the end of the day and didn't want to go out or talk to people. Almost like a side effect of music.

This theme also emerged when participants described their reentry, specifically when they talked about music increasing negative feelings of nostalgia for the host country. Participants often (and sometimes unsuccessfully) turned to music to find a safe space during this time of transition. Carissa found that music seemed to only intensify feelings of longing for the study abroad country. Similarly, Selena turned to music when she felt like her friends or family did not care about her experience, often neglecting those relationships in the process: "I definitely think I spent more time alone in the first month of school trying to settle back in and I spent a lot of time listening to music and missing my study abroad." When students used music like this, they were more likely to hold onto negative emotions, possibly slowing their readaptation. In Amy's case, music made it hard to bring closure to her experience: "I definitely did try to keep my same routine of listening to the same types of music that I already had, but sometimes it didn't help." Sara had a similar experience using music upon her reentry: “As soon as I got back, I was missing all of my friends over there and I went through Spotify to listen back to what I listened to there.”

Discussion

This analysis explored how music listening hindered the process of adaptation abroad and readaptation at home among U.S. and international college students studying abroad. Our findings do not demonstrate a causal relationship between music listening and students’ (re)adaptation; instead, they indicate broad patterns of *how* music interfered with those processes. We think of these negative patterns as “side effects”—borrowing the phrase from Sara, one of our participants—because of the undesirable, unexpected, yet temporary nature of the outcomes that participants experienced from music listening. In fact, participants experienced these negative side effects in conjunction with (or as part of) their purposeful and functional use of music to escape from the social environment (i.e., diversion) and alleviate negative emotions (i.e., mood regulation; Lonsdale & North, 2011; Saarikallio, 2011). Thus, the negative side effects of music listening must be understood within the broader literature showing numerous beneficial and positive effects of music listening during cross-cultural transitions (i.e., Fanari et al., 2022; Jia & Koku, 2020).

Overall, our findings suggest that music hindered students’ (re)adaptation in two ways: by *interfering with social interactions* and by *insulating negative feelings*. Notably, these themes and descriptions emerged spontaneously in our discussions: We did not ask explicitly about music as a barrier. The first theme, *interfering with social interactions*, primarily emerged when students talked about their initial adaptation abroad. While music’s pervasiveness across social settings provided opportunities to meet new people, it interfered with further relational development when it was too loud or when students wanted to avoid interactions and filled in awkward silences with music. Common to this theme is the aspect of music acting as a barrier within social settings. In some cases, this interference was related to uncontrollable aspects of music in the environment impairing interpersonal communication (e.g., loud music in bars). In other cases, students exploited the same aspect of music to intentionally shield themselves from conversations by putting headphones on. Because music is auditory, it inherently interferes with other auditory stimuli—notably, oral communication. Passive environmental music barriers emerged largely when students talked about adaptation rather than readaptation, presumably because background noise is less of a problem when operating in a native language. Furthermore, while adaptation abroad involves forging new social relationships, readaptation typically involves preexisting relationships, where awkward silences and social pressures to interact are perhaps less salient.

The second theme, *insulating negative emotions*, reflected music maintaining or prolonging negative emotions such as nostalgia or homesickness. This theme can be best understood in the context of mood management theory, which suggests that people sometimes strategically—although not necessarily consciously—select media that are congruent with their emotions, including negative ones (Zillmann, 2000). People experiencing romantic loneliness, for instance, are more likely to select music with "love lamenting" than "love celebrating" lyrics, possibly because music helps them to feel less alone in their struggles (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007). This finding aligns with the literature on eudaimonic motivations for using media (i.e., seeking meaningful rather than simply hedonic media content; Oliver & Raney, 2011). A mood management interpretation adds nuance to our frame that music hindered the process of (re)adaptation. If the mood management interpretation is correct, then some of these listening behaviors might have been functional for the individuals. While wallowing in negative emotions is mostly unhelpful, actively reflecting on those feelings can be useful, providing a temporary space of solace and comfort. Thus, in some cases, the temporary hindering effect might be functional for long-term (re)adaptation.

Interestingly, *insulating negative emotions* only emerged when students listened to music alone, which aligns with findings on solitary music listening as amplifying sadness and negative emotions (Van den Tol & Edwards, 2013). Zhang et al. (2018) found similar results, although the focus of their study was the emotion portrayed in the music, rather than the students' own emotional state. In contrast, previous findings on collective study abroad music experiences suggest that consuming and producing music together with other people are uniquely helpful in cultivating connections with others (Fanari et al., 2022).

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Our findings provide a counterpoint to the largely positive literature concerning the effects of music during study abroad, and our respondents' words provide a rich understanding of the negative side effects of music. Consistent with Kim's (2001) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation, in some cases, music can interfere with successful (re)adaptation in regard to functional fitness (i.e., *interfering with social interactions*) and psychological health (i.e., *insulating negative emotions*). In combination with previous research, our findings indicate that music can be associated with both positive and negative effects—depending on how it is used. Per ITCCA, because successful adaptation depends on the sojourner's *communication competence* (i.e., the cognitive, affective, and operational abilities necessary to effectively navigate the new environment), the degree to which students effectively and appropriately use music (as a form of interpersonal and mass communication) could result in more (or less) beneficial effects.

By identifying potential negative effects of music, we also offer practical implications to sojourners to be aware of their own music listening behaviors. Sojourners should be aware of how often and for how long they engage in solitary music listening behaviors using headphones in public places. Because music listening disrupts auditory signals, it might lead people to miss important sociocultural and interpersonal cues. Intercultural encounters are often serendipitous, occurring within social events, while traveling, or in public spaces (Chiocca, 2021). If students habitually wear headphones in public, they forfeit opportunities to learn and engage in meaningful cross-cultural encounters. By wearing headphones, sojourners are sending a message that they do not want to be disturbed and interrupted, which “makes it hard for others to initiate contact” (Bull, 2006, p. 135).

Sojourners should also evaluate their use of headphones in light of the cultural orientations of the host country. Cultural orientations influence music listening behaviors but also their social perceptions (Boer & Fischer, 2012); solitary music listening might be perceived as rude or disrespectful in some situations. Especially in high-context and collectivistic cultures, using headphones in a public place might be perceived as inappropriate, especially if there are opportunities to interact and engage in small conversations with people from the host culture.

Limitations and Future Research

The exploratory and cross-sectional nature of this study did not allow us to capture meaningful differences in music listening behaviors during different phases of the study abroad experience, thus limiting our understanding of when music might hinder cross-cultural (re)adaptation. Our findings suggest that the negative effects of music listening might be particularly evident during the initial phases of the adaptation abroad and readaptation at home because those are the crucial phases during which sojourners learn to navigate the environment and (re)establish interpersonal relationships (Kim, 2001). Future research should consider longitudinal designs to explore music listening behaviors, motivations, and effects on functional fitness and psychological health at different times during the (re)adaptation process. Quantitative longitudinal data would help distinguish any causal effects between psychological health and music listening. Future research should also examine whether the lyrical content of musical preferences maps onto students’ situations abroad (e.g., seeking lyrics about feeling alone or alienated while experiencing those emotions during the study abroad experience).

There was large variability between U.S. and international students' demographic characteristics, including age, educational status (undergraduate vs. graduate), and duration of their study abroad experience. As a result, our U.S. and the international samples differed greatly in their adaptation levels, and thus their reports concerning music use and cross-cultural transitions. Further, because the international student sample mostly included graduate students, it is possible that the isolating and stress-inducing nature of pursuing a graduate degree (as opposed to U.S. students who only received credit in partial fulfillment of their program) might have influenced international students' solitary music listening behaviors.

Finally, we acknowledge that this study has emphasized negative effects as separate and decontextualized from the positive effects of music listening. Our findings must be understood within the larger body of literature demonstrating beneficial consequences of music in adjusting abroad and readjusting at home (Jia & Koku, 2020; Vidas et al., 2022). Future research should continue to investigate positive and negative effects (and their magnitude) of music listening during cross-cultural transitions, including how such effects interact, and when they might be stronger or weaker (e.g., home vs. host, solitary vs. collective music, time since arrival or reentry).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting specific ways music use might hinder cross-cultural transitions. Recent technological advancements have contributed to easy and unlimited access to music during international experiences, and sojourners might not be aware of how their daily music listening might have implications for their experiences abroad as well as on their return home. We have extended understanding of how media contribute to cross-cultural adjustment by illustrating music's unique characteristics in this regard—as an auditory stimulus, it is uniquely positioned to interfere with interpersonal interaction during a time when such interactions are critical to psychosocial adjustment.

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