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Exploring experiences of proculturation in international students during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This study intends to find what are the experiences of international students semiotically adapting to unfamiliar signs in the United Kingdom before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six international university students to learn about their experiences of adapting to a new country. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Two themes were classified as dialogical self in interpersonal adaptation and linguistic elements of semiotic adaptation, each with two subthemes. Participants' experiences of merging self-constructs seem reflective of proculturation theory. The researchers termed 'language bridges' to refer to social representations dependent on language-specific signs. Some of the participants' self-constructs relied on signs not provided by the environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, proculturation offers insight into the complex psychological and social processes of adapting to unfamiliar signs.

Keywords

Acculturation, COVID-19, qualitative, language barrier, international students, proculturation, dialogical, semiotic, bilingual

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It is estimated that one in ten people in the United Kingdom (UK) is of foreign nationality, and it is expected that this average will continue to increase in the coming decade (Dash, 2019; Sturge, 2020). Although the challenge of immigrants defining their identities in an unfamiliar environment has received substantial academic consideration (Verkuyten et al., 2019), there is contention in this field of study of the assumed division between the self and the setting (Gamsakhurdia, 2020). Further, research approaches in cultural psychology have been criticized for their basis on Cartesian dualism where inner and outer worlds are understood as entirely separate, leaving the contributions that each one offers to the other's essence omitted (Gamsakhurdia, 2020). Social sciences may benefit from aligning with Von Bertalanffy's (1950) arguments that academics should focus on studying the dynamic relationships that cannot be reduced to their components, rather than trying to understand their elements as singularities. Gamsakhurdia (2020) furthered this view to the process of human adaption having to be understood as an intercorrelated phenomenon between the self and the environment.

Mainstream psychological research on cultural adaption seems to have adopted a Cartesian approach, denoted by the prominence of acculturation research. Redfield et al.'s (1936) description remains the most accepted definition of acculturation (Gamsakhurdia, 2022b), stating that it is the continual first-hand contact between groups of people from different cultures, including changes that may follow in the cultural patterns in any of the groups. Although this encapsulates the main aspects associated with cross-cultural interactions, it treats cultures as ontological entities without accounting for the role of subjectivity; culture is a social construct that exists solely in human interpretation (Gamsakhurdia, 2018a). A country cannot have a definite culture because there is no homogenous perception of it as views will vary across individuals, and it is from the similarity of these perceptions that the conceptualization of a culture is created (Valsiner, 2014). Despite this, acculturation has branched into the infamous acculturation model, in which Berry (2001, 2005) classifies the experiences of adaption into four orientations based on the individual's connections, or lack of them, with their native and host cultures: assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Although Berry's model has shown to be effective at correlating these orientations with well-being (Berry & Hou, 2016), it does not show regard for affective and cognitive processes, as it simply relies on surveys of one's attitudes towards cultures (Gamsakhurdia, 2022b). The experience of adaptation is again being atomised as if the elements of it could be understood in a vacuum with the absence of the interconnections that compose them.

Moscovici's (2008) Social Representation Theory (SRT) offered an alternative to the Cartesian and reductionist stances (Marková, 2017). With a basis in cultural psychology semiotic dynamics, knowledge is conceived as a construct, and social representations are the constructs shared among individuals; social representations are therefore collective interpretations, but they also serve as resources for personal interpretations (Marková, 2000). This means that an individual makes sense of the world based on the understandings that are acquired socially (Moscovici, 1988). However, Moscovici's (2000) statement that "we see only that which underlying conventions allow us to see" (p. 23) exhibits the rooted reductionism of these representations, as individuals' perceptions are entirely reliant on interpersonal resources. SRT does acknowledge the mental systems

involved with one's interaction with the setting, but it does not contain the autonomous role of the self negotiating and creating those meanings, and neither does it show enough consideration for the affective processes involved (Gamsakhurdia, 2020).

Theoretical development towards a less reductionist approach will not only require an idiographic basis to address the subjective nature of adaptation, but it will also have to incorporate the dynamic relationship between the self and the environment. Hermans (1999) proposed the dialogical self theory (DST), where the self is viewed as a democratic and hierarchical construction that allows the expression and exploration of contrasting social representations. Identity can be understood as an autonomous conception of oneself in the position of some (real, imaginary, or remembered) object, which in combination with other constructs forms the whole self (Hermans, 1999).

In the DST, any interpretation of a sign is an 'I-position' which organises itself hierarchically and nomologically with other I-positions, meaning that a self-construct will be made of and part of other I-positions (Hermans & Konopka, 2010). For example, if an individual self-conceptualizes with the I-position "I as German", this I-position would be part of a hierarchical schematization with affective value — meaning the structures of other I-positions— about perceived German elements. These I-positions are not stagnant, but instead are dynamic and self-regulating, as they can interact with each other and change their dominance in the hierarchy, all of it being part of the interpretation and decision-making involved with the setting (Hermans & Konopka, 2010; Valsiner, 2014). Furthermore, such hierarchies can vary across different levels of affective semiosis, where semiotic units, such as I-positions, with more emotional value can promote or inhibit those in lower levels (Valsiner, 2014). Overall, Hermans and Kempen (1998), along with Valsiner and other researchers, furthered the idea of cultural adaption from simply the external processes involved with an individual moving across locations, to instead being a constant movement of identity.

There are still gaps in the DST's framework, as it proposes no consideration of distant temporal constructions of I-positions, meaning one's imagined future self (Gamsakhurdia, 2020). With a basis in the DST, Gamsakhurdia (2018a) conceptualised the process of proculturation. It considers the development of I-positions in relation to past experiences and anticipation of future ones, even detailing the different temporal proximities (Gamsakhurdia, 2019a). Proculturation is part of the irreversible process of semiotic adaptation. It follows semiotic ruptures, referring to when the present I-positions cannot inform in the meaning-making process of unfamiliar signs. While in DST conflict between I-positions is addressed by moving in a linear progression of an I-position's dominance over another, which arguably leaves the conflict still unresolved, proculturation is a circulinear shift of the opposing identities, where I-positions may change or fuse with each other, or completely new I-positions may be created to address the rupture (Hermans, 2001; Gamsakhurdia, 2019c; 2020a). Proculturation offers the opportunity to explore the experiences of immigrants from the sought-after holistic approach rather than the traditional positivistic one (Gamsakhurdia, 2018a). If cultural psychology research is going to take into consideration the dynamic relationships of the internal and external elements of adaption as a gestalt, rather than reducing them to separate parts, then interpreting the process of adaption through the lens of proculturation may be the path forward.

Proculturation has been studied in the context of macro-cultural changes, such as the pandemic of COVID-19 (Gamsakhurdia, 2022a). It has previously been emphasized the importance of macro-cultural contexts when trying to understand the experiences of immigrants at a micro-level (Doucerain et al., 2013). Gamsakhurdia (2019a) discussed how environmental differences at a macro-level, such as policies and specific attitudes, can provide challenges to adaptation and play a role in immigrants' internal processes of proculturation. When adapting to a new country, immigrants would have to adapt to the environments that are more custom for people to socialize. However, the recent event of COVID-19 which led to national lockdowns has made these social settings unavailable. Gamsakhurdia (2022a) has analysed proculturation in the context of COVID-19, describing how distancing from a sign is a form of engagement with it; however, they did so using online anonymous communication, meaning that interpretations were made without the insight of individuals' life experiences. This leaves a gap in academic research to understand proculturation in the context of COVID-19 in a migratory population while also considering their unique backgrounds.

The current paper explores international students' perspectives, emotions, and experiences of adapting to a new social environment while studying in England. The aim was guided by addressing the research question: 'what are the experiences of international students semiotically adapting to unfamiliar signs in the UK before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?'

Methods

Methodology

Considering the developmental process of proculturation discussed above, this study is underpinned by the discipline of phenomenology, utilising individual stories and conversations to access the participants' lived experiences (Wertz, 2014), and to understand the meanings that they ascribe to that experience (Barker et al., 2002). Therefore, this study employs a qualitative research paradigm, taking a critical stance toward the dominant positivist research approach within psychology, acknowledging that this 'process of dialogical and relational adjustment' is not quantifiable (Gamsakhurdia, 2020, p.89) and requires interpretation. Valsiner (2017) argues that absolute truth does not exist and that knowledge is always incomplete. In support of this notion, we acknowledge that the researchers' interpretation of participants' stories has influenced the findings (Klakegg & Pasian, 2016), recognising this researcher's subjectivity as a valued analytic resource (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Participants

A sample of six undergraduate international students (one male and five females) participated in this study. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that a small sample size can offer the concentrated focus necessary to explore the complexities of most human phenomena. All participants were second-year students who had been attending a university in the West

Midlands, England for about 18 months (see Table 1 for the demographic characteristics of each participant). All of the participants' native languages differed from English. Before the outbreak of COVID-19 some participants had been employed part-time in sociable jobs. For example, Mary served food to spectators at rugby games and Jane was an ambassador at her university, but this was no longer the case due to lockdowns from the pandemic. In addition, all lectures were being delivered online; a unique circumstance that allowed the students to conduct their studies from their home country. Three of the socially mobile students who had spent a year studying in the UK chose this option, predominantly for financial reasons. Following the quarantine measures in the UK, students returned to have lessons on campus during their third year. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

Participants reported having expectations from the media and said the main motives to come to study in England were to experience a different or better education, to explore new cultures, or for a sense of adventure. Virginia was mainly motivated by education, as she believed that university degrees for her course were of lower standard in her country compared with England. The same was reported by Harper, but she also said she wanted to live an adventure, make friends and have fun. Emily wanted to become less shy while in England and be more outgoing and sociable. Mary, Will and Harper expressed a strong intent to stay in England after finishing their degrees. Mary reported that her parents' reactions were mixed, with her father encouraging her while her mother was concerned about Mary going to a new country by herself. In contrast, Will spent the first month in England with his mother.

Data Collection

Each student participated in an in-depth semi-structured interview, allowing further exploration of idiosyncratic experiences while retaining a focus on the topic (Wilson & Books, 2014). Interviews were conducted on the web conferencing platform Microsoft Teams to maintain adherence to the government's social distancing requirements. Web conferencing platforms have previously been identified as a suitable tool for qualitative data collection (Archibald et al., 2019; Hanna, 2012). Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Nationality	Location during interview
Jane	20	Female	Portuguese	England
Virginia	19	Female	Slovakian	Slovakia
Emily	19	Female	Finnish	England
Mary	19	Female	Portuguese	England
Will	19	Male	Portuguese	Portugal
Harper	19	Female	Portuguese	Portugal

Ethical Considerations

This research study received approval from the University's Ethics Committee and adhered to the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) and the British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics (2014). All participants were provided with informed consent forms prior to enrolment in the study and all data were stored following the guidance of the General Data Protection Regulation (2018)

Analytic Strategy

This study adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process of thematic analysis, which has been suggested as a valid and reliable method of analysing multicultural identity negotiations (Collie et al., 2010) and is appropriate for research grounded in a phenomenological basis (Khan, 2014). While Sullivan et al. (2012) recommend frequent reflection by the researcher regarding their role in the research, Braun and Clarke (2019) assert that a reflexive thematic analysis reflects the values of a qualitative paradigm. Therefore the interviewer acknowledged that, as a Portuguese emigrant, they already held some preconceived ideas about the developmental process.

Having read each transcription repeatedly, the data was coded based on significant features with relevancy in answering the research question. From these initial codes, similarities and patterns were identified and relationships between them were classified into themes. The themes generated captured both manifest (explicit) and latent (underlying) meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analysis

Using thematic analysis, two main themes were identified. The main theme 'dialogical self in interpersonal adaptation' includes two subthemes: semiotic familiarity; development of fused I-positions. The other main theme is 'linguistic elements of semiotic adaptation' and it includes two subthemes: affective charge of language; language bridges.

Dialogical Self in Interpersonal Adaptation

Semiotic Familiarity. All participants reported socializing with people of the same culture, and some reported interacting more with those of their native culture than with those from the host one.

> "I was not able to spend Christmas with my family. So I spent with friends, and they're all Portuguese." (Jane, Portuguese)

> "Then I met *Romeo* and *Juliet*, my Portuguese friends. And after that, I started meeting a lot Portuguese people (…) I don't think I know any British students." (Mary, Portuguese).

It seems that a common nationality may have served as a sign to recognise those with similar semiotic understandings that may contrast with those of the environment. This similarity also appears to have been important in the development of a social network. This is similarly reported by Will who would "look more into my country, Portuguese people, and in the first weeks, I was always with them." There seems to be present native culture in a foreign environment based on shared signs.

> "Portuguese people know you for one minute, and they're talking about their whole life. Compared with British people, they're like 'I'm not going to talk to you that much because I don't know you'." (Harper, Portuguese)

Participants seem to have schematized both cultures. Harper has internalized specific signs about Portuguese people by comparing them to British people. Her pervious I-positions of Portuguese traits are being informed by the new unfamiliar signs offered in the British context.

The schematization of British culture was also present in other participants, even before they travelled to Britain.

> "From movies and history itself. I feel like Portugal… is not an open country. You know, series like The Crown[1] and movies that portray the country. I always felt it was a different way of approaching people, different way of social conduct." (Will, Portuguese)

British media seems to have informed Will's expectations for social interactions in England. His positions would have informed his interpretation of these semiotic signs presented by the media, which could then have informed his interpretation of new signs when he travelled to England.

Development of Fused I-Positions. Almost all participants reported feeling as different to those native to the host country. For some adaptation improved with time, but for others adaptation was a challenge.

> "I felt like a guest, (…) but as the time went I adapted and I saw the country and saw how people behaved (…) Because of Covid, I went home and now again I can feel some conflict inside me: where is my home? Is it in the UK or in Slovakia?" (Virginia, Slovak)

Virginia appears to experience an internal conflict with her national identity. Her relationship with her new environment seems to have shifted native self-constructs. She holds no sole self-construct of nationality, but is instead is in a liminal space between British and Slovakian identities.

Will was one of the participants whose motivation to come to England was to interact with a new culture. Before continuing his studies in Portugal, he expressed having concerns about returning to his home country.

> "How am I going to balance this new side of my personality when I go back to Portugal? (…) I hadn't talked to them for so long that I didn't know how to talk with them the same way. Because I had developed a new personality." (Will, Portuguese)

Will's self-constructs seem to have shifted. Having a 'new side' to his personality suggests that the contrasting self-constructs are present without conflict, rather than one I-position dominating another. There seems to be concern for how he will adapt to his native environment; his self-constructs are now also informed by social representations which are unfamiliar to those in his native culture.

Linguistic Elements of Semiotic Adaptation

Affective Charge of Language. It is worth noting that all participants who continued their studies in their home country during the pandemic recalled feeling that they might have difficulty staying connected with their native language.

> "I also didn't want to lose a bit of my mother language." (Mary, Portuguese)
>
> "When you're studying in country where have to talk fully English and leave your mother language behind, it's very hard." (Will, Portuguese).

It appears that being a speaker of their native language can be part of participants' native self-construct. Participants seemed to value their native language and have a desire to maintain a connection with it, suggesting that their relationship with language can be a sign with immense emotional value.

> "The two biggest fears of mine, that my English was not going to be enough and that's why I'll just be lonely without anyone." (Virginia, Slovak)
>
> "I was like 'I don't know if I want to talk to them, because they'll judge my English and I'll forget what to say.'" (Harper, Portuguese).

This indicates that affective value was also present in relation to the host language. The construct of being proficient in the host language seems to be dependent on the perceptions of other individuals. Other students also reported that their self-construct as proficient English speakers had basis in the environment.

> "Just going to face-to-face classes and arguing with my classmates would help academic reports. Now that everything is online, my English is… ok, it could be better." (Will, Portuguese)

The environmental changes due COVID-19 do not seem to have offered the same resources for the positioning as a proficient English speaker. Will's I-position as an English speaker does not appear to be reported as dependent on other people's perceptions, but instead is based on his own perception.

Language Bridges. This theme considers the term 'language bridge' to refer to shared symbolic representations that are reliant on language communalities.

> "Maybe that's why here I know a lot of Portuguese people, and maybe that's why, because of the language, I feel more at home when I'm talking to them." (Mary, Portuguese)

The participant's native language presents certain semiotic signs that seem not to be offered by the host language. These signs also seem to have affective value unique to her language.

> "It was so easy to meet new friends, and have those friends who have similar native language (…) it's like easier in your native language to… like… express the whole thing you want to tell." (Emily, Finnish)

It seems that similarity in language offered participants a greater facility at self-expressing, possibly based on social representations only present in the context of their native language. Not having such social representations in the host environment's language may limit the tools for which to communicate certain meanings. Language seems to have served as a bridge for some semiotic signs.

> "When I'm talking to Portuguese, I feel more myself." (Harper, Portuguese)

The words 'feel more myself' indicate that socializing in her native language allowed her to present self-constructs that remain unexpressed in the host language. It seems that language bridges are relevant to Harper's self-construct, suggesting that some aspects of the self are retained in one language.

Discussion

This study intended to explore the experiences of international students semiotically adapting to a new environment. The current findings provide insight into some of the dynamic relationships between different constructs, showing the role of idiosyncratic and collective processes that inform about adaptation to a new setting. Further, these findings also suggest the role of language in relation to certain semiotic constructs.

One of the themes, *dialogical self in interpersonal adaptation,* refers to the development of constructs based on personal interpretations and the setting' resources. Within this, the sub-theme of *semiotic familiarity* was found, referring to participants' seemingly showing a greater focus towards familiar signs than unfamiliar ones. Valsiner (2014) described these shared similarities of meanings across individuals as a collective culture, which, in the context of the current findings, seems that nationality served as a sign to identify individuals that may share their collective cultures. However, semiotic similarity appears to have been based on contrast, such when participants describe their native culture in contrast to British culture. This would be an example of Gegenstand, which refers to meanings being defined counter to their opposite (Valsiner, 2014; Gillespie, 2008). Gamsakhurdia (2019b) described how the self as Georgian is constructed through what it is *not*, such as *not* being a Westerner. In Harper's case, she is defining her familiarity with 'Portugueseness' through the foreignness of 'Britishness'. Thus, the unfamiliar signs of the new environment are serving as reference points for the interpretation of familiar signs.

Another insight of this theme was that signs specific to the foreign culture were not necessarily unfamiliar to the individual. For example, Will had specific expectations because of media in relation to British culture and British social customs, suggesting that semiotic adaptation had started before he travelled to England. This suggests an intention to adapt by acting according to the social 'normality' of Britain, making it a form of pre-proculturation, as it shows that foreign signs were being interpreted before direct interaction with that foreign culture (Gamsakhurdia, 2020, 2021). This can support the need for a temporal dimension of I-positions which proculturation offers to the DST (Gamsakhurdia, 2018a; Hermans & Konopka, 2010), as it shows how the interaction of new I-positions based on the environment can be interpreted by I-positions based on anticipation.

The other subtheme, *development of fused I-positions,* demonstrates other aspects of the proculturative process. Gamsakhurdia (2019b, 2019c) explains that opposing self-constructs creatively fuse familiar and unfamiliar signs leading to the development of new meanings. Virginia's experience seems to reflect this, as her I-positions informed by the social representations of the different settings did not align with her native or host culture. Her dilemma "where is my home? Is it in the UK or in Slovakia?" reflects Gamsakhurdia's ideas that she does not possess self-constructs fully aligned with just one of these cultures, but that she was instead in a liminal space between them. Similar experiences have been reported by Portuguese immigrants in Luxembourg, with one participant reporting she was neither Portuguese nor Luxembourger but instead a mixture (Barros & Albert, 2020). Gamsakhurdia (2021) has observed another similar experience in the participant Nino, who's self-constructs no longer matched the representations of being Georgian or German after her migration. Overall, this shows that the shift of self-constructs is one of fusion rather than one of replacement, showing support for a proculturative process of combining of elements of different I-positions, rather than one I-position dominating another as previously conceived (Gamsakhurdia, 2018a, 2019b; Hermans, 2001).

The findings of this study suggest that nationality served as a sign to identify shared social representations. Considering the role of Gegenstand, this would mean that these collective cultures are being defined by the surrounding unfamiliar signs (Valsiner, 2014), which is something that does not occur to the native social representations not in contact with these unfamiliar signs. In other words, Mary, who developed a network with people of the same nationality, would share Portuguese collective cultures defined in the context of being in England, which would be distinct from the Portuguese collective cultures in her home country. A similar experience is reported by Will, who states that he no longer knows how to communicate in the same way with the people in his home country, an attitude which is perfectly encapsulated by Gamsakhurdia's (2020) statement that "the foreign country can become home and vice versa; homeland can become an alien place" (p. 77). It suggests that new I-positions, informed by previously unfamiliar signs, no longer align with those of his native collective culture (Gamsakhurdia, 2020; Valsiner, 2014). This is in part similar to Virginia's experience of proculturation, but it demonstrates how a shift in personal culture can also be a shift in one's collective culture.

Another main theme was *linguistic elements of semiotic adaptation*, which explored the role of language in semiotic interpretations. A sub-theme of this was *the affective*

charge of language, referring to the emotions associated with self-constructs related to language. Language can be a sign founded on historical memory, referring to subjective constructions internalized during childhood (Gamsakhurdia, 2018b; Wagoner, 2011, 2013) For participants, being a speaker of the native language was seen as important because of the emotional connections that language has to their home culture, suggesting that language is a sign with affective value based on historical memory. This process is more interesting when considering the role of Gegenstand in the positioning of language. A sign is not defined by just one opposing meaning as there can be several symbolic borders between it and other signs; therefore, a sign is defined by several Gegenstands (Gamsakhurdia, 2020). For example, "I as a Slovakian speaker" is defined by several borders like "I not as an English speaker" and "I not as a Spanish speaker". Even though both Will and Mary mentioned interacting mainly with people who share their native language, they seem to experience concern with losing their positioning with their native language. This may be because their I-positions of 'I as not an English speaker' is shifting to that of 'I as an English speaker', thus changing the symbolic border it has with the construct of 'I as a Portuguese speaker'. Their emotional experiences demonstrate the affective dimensions of shifts in Gegenstands.

Another aspect of individuals' I-positions as proficient in the host language is that I-positions can be vocalized through dialogue. This dialogue can be internal, referring to the individual's own views, or external, which refers to other people's views (Gamsakhurdia, 2022b; Hermans, 2001; Hermans et al., 2017). Some participants considered possible perceptions from people about their proficiency in English, while others focus only on their own perceptions of their ability. It suggests that for some participants the newly developing self-construct of being a proficient English speaker was more vocalized by external voices, while for other participants it was more vocalized by internal voices. Overall, this small insight shows how much can learned about the nuances of adapting to another country's language, which other mainstream approaches in cultural psychology, like Berry's (2005) strategies, cannot offer.

The remaining sub-theme was that of *language bridges*. Language bridges are intended to contrast with language barriers, which refer to when language differences inhibit communication; the absence of these sometimes being referred in research as a non-language-barrier (Perera et al., 2021). This study uses the term 'language bridges' to refer to communalities in language that serve as a bridge to shared semiotic meanings. Valsiner (2014) describes that some words may be impossible to translate, leaving their meaning as a hostage in the language. Similarly, some social representations may only be understood through the signs provided in a specific language. Participants seemed to experience this, as the host language was not reported as a barrier, but instead participants reported that the native language allowed self-expression with greater ease. This suggests that it might not be linguistic skilfulness in the host language that inhibits shared meanings, but that the home language may offer specific signs for those shared meanings.

Furthermore, it was also reported there to be an affective dimension to these language bridges. This is distinct from the emotions mentioned in the previous sub-theme. The affective charge of language bridges does not refer to the self-construct of being a language speaker, but instead to the emotions provided by any signs specific to certain

languages. However, this affective dimension can still be relevant for self-constructs, as Harper reported "when I'm talking to Portuguese, I feel more myself", suggesting that certain language bridges can inform one's sense of self. This shows the added layer of consideration needed in semiotic adaptation across linguistic contexts. Further, it poses the question how signs and self-constructs specified to different languages may interact and proculturate. These explorations could benefit from further research and study.

The quarantines during the COVID-19 pandemic inhibited several individuals from accessing opportunities to socialize with the host culture, with some participants continuing their studies in their home country for one academic year. All participants continued their academic studies online throughout quarantines, meaning that the signs of their home environment changed as the academic and home environment merged (Gamsakhurdia, 2022a). Participants seemed to report that a virtual environment could not provide the same signs as the face-to-face environment and that some of these unreachable signs were part of one's self-construct. As Gamsakhurdia (2022a) explains in his semiotic exploration of COVID-19, online communication still occurs in an alienated environment. For example, Will's I-position as an English speaker was perceived as inhibited by his lectures being conducted online because of the differences in communication. Proculturation is an irreversible process, meaning that these shifts in self-constructs would still ripple post the COVID-19 pandemic (Gamsakhurdia, 2020).

One limitation of this study may be the gender imbalance, as males and females can have different experiences of cultural adaptation (Chuang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2013). Thus, this study may have explored mainly the female experience of adaptation. Further, all interviews were carried out online to abide by the recommendations and policies of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers have warned about the use of online interviews because of possible interferences, such as technical difficulties (Rowe et al., 2014).

Conclusions

The aim of exploring how international students semiotically adapted to a new environment during the COVID-19 pandemic has guided the study into offering insight into some of the nuances of participant's experiences of adaptation. Shared nationality served as a sign to identify collective cultures in a foreign environment. These collective cultures may re-defined by Gegenstands of the host culture, thus forming social representations distinct from the native ones not informed by host's unfamiliar signs. Unfamiliar signs also seemed to be interpreted and fused with familiar signs, in alignment with the theory of proculturation. These fusions were shown when participants' self-constructs matched neither their native or host culture, being instead in liminal space between them; this shift in personal culture leading also to a shift in collective culture.

The participants' self-constructs as speakers of a language seemed to be reported with great affective value. Some students seemed to report these I-positions to be vocalized by internal or external voices. The last sub-theme referred to the conceptualisation of language bridges as a type of social representation that is dependent on signs specific to the linguistic context. While language differences can serve as barriers for collective

meanings, language similarities can serve as bridges for shared signs. Further, the researchers conclude that language bridges can inform one's sense of self. Finally, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the alteration of communication towards virtual mediums meant that the environment no longer provided some of the signs that composed certain I-positions. Overall, this study supports proculturation's value in understanding the nuanced experiences of adapting to an unfamiliar culture and it shows the role of language in informing self-constructs.

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Note

1. The Crown is a Netflix drama based on the British monarchy.

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Maxine Watkins currently works at University of Birmingham as a Post Doctoral Research Fellow. She is interested in human development and behaviour across a life span, particularly the development of individual, relational and collective identities and their association with life and career decisions. Between October 2018 – July 2021 Maxine was a lecturer within the School of Psychology, University of Worcester.