

**Enhancing Cultural Understanding and Adaptation Through Study Abroad: A Photo  
Journal Analysis of Students' Experiences in Greece**

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## **Introduction**

Getting involved with study abroad programs can lead to increased maturity, global-mindedness, appreciation for diverse cultures, and self-awareness (Norman, 2017). According to Zhao (2025), an essential element of study abroad experiences is cultural adaptation, which influences whether students adapt within unfamiliar environments. Language hurdles, homesickness, melancholy, and trouble communicating with others are some of the difficulties that come with adjusting to a new culture (Antonakopoulou, 2013). Additionally, study abroad programs in agricultural education offer students opportunities to expand their knowledge on agricultural practices (Degreenia et al., 2023). This study aims to explore how study abroad programs can enhance students' cultural understanding and adaptation to new environments by using photo journals and prompts that encouraged deeper reflection on their experiences. The following objectives guided this study: (RQ1) Identify the themes that emerged from the narratives associated with students' photo journals (RQ2) Identify the most common icons and symbols that emerged from the photographs (RQ3) Categorize the experiences into each cultural adaptation stage outlined by Oberg (1960).

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

This study was grounded in the U-curve of cultural shock theory by Oberg (1960) and the semiotic theory by Pierce (1931). Oberg's theory outlines those individuals undergoing cross-cultural experience throughout distinct phases (Lapitpova et al., 2017). These stages include the Honeymoon Stage (excitement and fascination), the Culture Shock Stage (frustration and anxiety), the Recovery Stage (increased understanding and adaptation), and the Adjustment Stage (comfortable integration into the new culture). This framework helped with the analysis of agricultural education, communication and leadership students' study abroad experiences in Greece, examining how their emotional and cultural transitions unfold through photo journals and journal entries. However, semiotics was applied to the study of cultural experiences abroad through the analysis of photographs and personal entries, offering insights into lived experiences (Dobbins et al., 2020). Semiotics allows for a deeper understanding of cultural phenomena by reading certain photos and entries. These two theories were employed to gain a better understanding of the two components of photo journals to explore students' experience in study abroad programs.

## **Methodology**

This study utilized a mixed-methods content analysis using a convergent design to examine the experiences of eleven students who participated in a fourteen-day summer study abroad program in Greece, conducted by the Department of Agricultural Education and Communications at Texas Tech University. For this research, photo journals created by eleven participants were selected through purposive sampling. The analysis consisted of two different approaches: a qualitative analysis of the associated narratives and a semiotic analysis of the photographs. The narrative analysis for the first objective involved a two-phase process: initial open coding to identify the emergent codes, followed by a thematic analysis to get the overarching themes (Saldana, 2015). The photographic analysis for the second objective employed semiotic principles to categorize the images based on their iconic and symbolic characteristics. Finally, to explore students' journeys, the narrative codes were chronologically organized by day. Then they were categorized into Oberg's (1960) U-curve cultural shock

theory, detailing students' progression through the study abroad experience. Intercoder reliability was established to ensure consistency in the coding process. Three coders were trained to measure reliability in the coding process and achieve consistency in thematic analysis.

### **Results/ Findings**

Three themes emerged for research objective one to provide insight into the differences in agriculture, lifestyle, and culture and how they adjust to their unfamiliar surroundings. Students mentioned *agricultural differences* as the first theme to contrast agricultural education and farming practices between Texas Tech University and the American Farm School in Greece. The second theme was *lifestyle/culture* where participants noted that the Greeks' views on health and lifestyle differed. Many students reflected on how mindful eating and reflection inspired them to reconsider their lifestyle decisions and take up better routines after studying abroad. The third theme that emerged was a *reality check* to highlight how students encountered difficulties, including homesickness and language barriers, during their journey. However, as they adjusted to their unfamiliar environment, these challenges offered valuable teaching moments and contributed to their personal development. For research objective two, 489 photographs were analyzed. The most frequent type of pictures found in the photo journals were photos of places ( $n = 117$ ), followed by one-person pictures ( $n = 80$ ). The average number of icons identified in one picture was two, with five being the max number in a single photograph. The most identified symbol in the photos was nature ( $n = 139$ ) followed by historical symbolisms ( $n = 103$ ) and culture ( $n = 90$ ). For objective three, days were classified based on the narrative of the journal's codes. Days 4–6 were categorized as part of the honeymoon stage, days 1–3, 9, and 14 as the culture shock stage, days 7, 10, and 13 as the recovery stage, and days 8, 11, and 12 as the adjustment stage.

### **Conclusion/ Implications/ Recommendations/ Impact**

Students became more aware of differences between agricultural practices, including sustainability, aligning with previous literature (Degreenia et al., 2023). Participants also developed an ability to adapt to new environments, aligning with Zhao (2025). Nature was the most common symbol found in the photos, followed by elements of history and culture, allowing students to reflect on their connection with Greece's beautiful landscapes, rich history, and vibrant culture during their time abroad (Norman, 2017). This study demonstrates how study abroad programs can help create a more aware generation, equipped to address diverse cultural backgrounds (Antonakopoulou, 2013). Regarding Oberg's (1960) cultural adaptation stages, participants spent most of their journey in the cultural shock phase, in alignment with Antonakopoulou (2013), students experience difficulties and challenges in adjusting to a new culture. A recommendation for practice includes introducing students to cultural practices before starting the study abroad program to reduce culture shock that students experience during their trip. Future research could look at how study abroad programs influence students' long-term career paths and their ongoing interest in sustainability. Researchers could also explore how cultural immersion affects students' decision-making.

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