

## International Students and “The Presentation of Self” Across Cultures

Abu Kamara  
Acadia University, Canada

---

### ABSTRACT

*Findings from this qualitative research study suggest that some international students view social and academic interactions not simply as mediums for absorbing requisite sociocultural and academic norms, and discipline knowledge, but also as stages for expressing their varied identities. As a result, whenever students' ability to present their preferred identity is threatened, whether due to language competency issues or discrimination, some attempt to regain their equilibrium by withdrawing from social and academic interactions. However, the findings also suggest that, in some instances, students who find their ideas marooned in the space between silence and language rediscover the ability for expression in the language of space and time, and comparison and contrast.*

**Keywords:** Identity, cultures, support rules, language stage, confession

---

The Canadian government released its first international education strategy in 2014 (Canada's International Education Strategy: Harnessing our knowledge advantage to drive innovation and prosperity, 2014). The document recommends an overall increase of the international student population from 293, 500 to 450,000 by 2022 as a strategy for addressing Canada's human capital needs (Global Affairs Canada, 2014, p. 11). If implemented successfully, the plan will give an added boost to Canada's already surging international profile as a top 10 international student receiving country (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016).

Canada's meteoric rise as an attractive, cost effective, provider of post-secondary education has resulted in yearly historic growth rates in its international student population (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2015). Currently, the top five sending countries of

international students to Canada are China, India, Korea, Saudi Arabia, and France (CBIE, 2015). While traditional sending countries such as China, India, and Korea still account for the majority of the international student population in Canada, the fastest growing student populations are from Nigeria, China, Vietnam, Brazil, France, and India which have increased by 24%, 16%, 16%, 15%, 15%, 11% respectively (CBIE, 2015). Even though the overall growth rate of the international student population in Canada continues to trend upwards, the dispersion of students, once they arrive in Canada, is still very uneven, with 43.9% choosing universities in Ontario, 24% British Columbia schools, and 14.3% Quebec universities (CBIE, 2014).

Unsurprisingly, the majority of research projects that have explored the experiences of international students in Canada have focused almost entirely on international student populations in Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia. Consequently, our understanding of the experiences of international students comes mainly from the aforementioned provinces, resulting in literature that has not fully captured the nuances of international student experiences in Canada. For example, even though Nova Scotia attracts about 3.9% of international students who come to study in Canada, international education researchers have only given minimal attention to the experiences of international students in the province (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission [MPHEC], 2012).

In this paper, I explore the notion of self-presentation across cultures by drawing on the findings of a dissertation study that investigated the living, and learning experiences of international students in Nova Scotia, a province which has increased its international undergraduate student population by 138%, and its international graduate student population by 101% within the last decade (MPHEC, 2012). I begin in section one by providing an outline of the international education research. In section two, I present the research methodology, and in section three, I highlight key research findings along with some implications for future research.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Within the international education discourse, international students are usually identified by researchers as ideal immigrants both because of their language ability, and for the recognizable qualifications they will possess upon graduation (Akbari, 2012; Kamara, 2012; Scott, Safdar, Trilokekar, & Masri, 2015). These so-called positive characteristics form the core of elaborate narratives that neatly weave together information about students' economic and social contributions to buttress rationale for expanding recruitment and retention strategies. While the economics of immigration

still remains a dominant theme in the international education discourse, some researchers have adopted a comprehensive perspective that takes as its point of departure a fundamental recognition of the interconnectedness of students' social, academic, and psychological experiences (Andrade, 2006; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Mori, 2000; Yang & Noels, 2013; Yeh & Inose, 2003).

In Canada, discussions about the integration of international students have highlighted acculturative challenges that threaten students' ability to thrive academically, and socially as areas of major concerns (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Kamara, 2012). Within such discussions, identity has emerged as a useful concept for understanding the social and academic experiences of international students (Stewin, 2013; Waters, 2006). Though perspectives vary widely among researchers on the meaning of identity, some have found existing identity related concepts such as race, gender, ethnicity, and citizenship to be effective frameworks for examining students' experiences (Morita, 2004; Poyrazil & Lopez, 2007).

In the immigration context, the drumbeat for policy that recognizes the different manifestations of identity has been perhaps loudest in the camps of multiculturalists and interculturalists (Kymlicka, 2012; Meer & Modood, 2012; Taylor, 1994, 2012). However, there have been some vocal critics of institutionalized notions of identity that have underlined the ongoing need for policies that favor a dynamic understanding of identity (Cantle, 2012). A sophisticated version of this argument is found in the work of Foucault.

Foucault's main aim, as a historian of ideas, is to deconstruct the self-evident appearance of the self by telling its history. For Foucault, this includes making visible the technologies, the rules and procedures that shape the reflective systems of the self, that give it its language of desire, that condition its terms of relations, and confession, and that set the horizon of possibilities for its communicative processes (Foucault, 1980, 1982). By telling the history of the self, and by bringing into the light of critical analysis the processes of subjectification, Foucault not only exposes the role of power but also rescues the possibility of both critique, and unbridled self-determination.

While there are still serious questions about the concept of identity, something akin to a consensus has emerged among some social scientists. Generally, it is accepted that individuals take up positions, or become subjects through exposure to ideas that emanate from the social, cultural, political, and economic fields (Alcoff, 1988; Aveni, 2005; Foucault, 1982; Mantero, 2007). Put differently, the sociocultural environment supplies the raw material that coalesces to form the horizon of possibilities for subjective understanding and agency (Erichsen, 2011; Gill, 2007; Habermas, 1988; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 1994). It is this understanding of the self, its social, cultural, intercultural, economic, and psychological

experiences, its relations of power, and forms of representation, which underpins the meaning of the self that circulates in most current social science research.

In the context of international education, questions about the self have surfaced in discussions about the economic, cultural, and psychological experiences of international students. In particular, it is understood that some international students may struggle socially and psychologically living, and studying in new social and academic environments (Andrade, 2006). Even though mental health challenges are not unique to international students, some international education researchers have found that the experience of studying in an unfamiliar cultural environment does increase, in some cases, the risk of stress-related psychological problems (Carr et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Hyun, Quinn, Madon, Lustig, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Gaps in some international students understanding of the rules, and procedures that govern behavior within academic, social, and support spaces in host universities have also been highlighted alongside mental health issues as prominent themes in the international education literature (Kamara, 2012; Mori, 2000). Increasingly, internationalization of the formal and informal curriculum is presented in the literature as an instrument for reimagining the fundamental assumptions that underpin higher education philosophies (Haigh, 2010; Leask, 2001, 2009, 2013; Qiang, 2003).

In particular, at its core, internationalization of the curriculum aims to democratize administrative, recruitment, teaching, learning, and support processes in higher education (Leask, 2005, 2009; Leask & Bridge, 2013). By infusing diverse forms of knowledge into both the formal and informal curriculum, internationalization of the curriculum endeavors to transform social, academic, and support spaces of universities into inclusive spaces where such issues as discrimination and acts of racial micro-aggression cannot thrive (Brunner, 2006; Gacel-Avila, 2005; Guo & Chase, 2009; Leask & Carroll, 2011; Ryan & Viete, 2009; Sherry, Karuppan, & Barari, 2011; Volet & Ang, 1998). In another sense, internationalization may be understood as an analytical tool which holds up a kind of critical mirror to the products of knowledge production processes in order to not only encourage deep reflection but also the institutionalization of processes which maximize the recognition of diversity. Unfortunately, the success of university internationalization activities is still plagued by challenges that stem from discrimination, and other acts of micro-aggression.

There has been a sharp increase in studies in the past five years that have offered revealing insights into the effects of discrimination on international students. For example, Houshmand & Spanierman (2014) argue that behavior such as ridiculing of students' accents, demeaning or downplaying their intelligence, behaviors that the authors identified as acts

of racial-micro-aggression, can marginalize and silence international students. Acts of racial micro-aggression can also include actions based on negative readings or interpretations of students' bodies. Reflecting on the notion of the body-as-a-text Hall (1997) notes:

The body is a text. And we are all readers of it. And we go around, looking at this text, inspecting it like literary critics. Closer and closer for those very fine differences, such small these differences are, and then when that does work we start to run like a true structuralist.... we are readers of race, that is what we are doing, we are readers of social difference.... when you say race is a signifier. No, it is not! See the folks out there they are different! You can tell they are different. Well, that very obviousness, the very obviousness of the visibility of race is what persuades me that it functions because it is signifying something; it is a text, which we can read (p.14).

If we take Hall's notion of the body-as-text as a point of departure, it becomes thinkable that some international students may avoid interacting with their peers, support staff, and faculty if doing so subjects them to negative readings or interpretations of their bodies (Bepple, 2014; Qiu, 2014). No grand leap of the imagination is required to see that social environments that are structured by ideas that want to perpetuate negative interpretations of students' bodies, either explicitly through verbal language or implicitly through non-verbal, and symbolic languages, may result in social conditions that undermine students' ability to present their preferred identities across cultures. At times, the biggest threat to international students' ability to contribute to the social, cultural, and economic sectors of host countries seem to come from policies that contain flavors of ethnocentrism (Marginson et al., 2010; Scott et al., 2015).

To a certain degree, universities can address many of the barriers that threaten international students' ability to thrive in host nations by leveraging or incorporating knowledge of students' diverse learning styles, and social, and support preferences into the development of support infrastructures. Amos & Lordly (2014) for example highlight:

University food integration programs featured as a component of an international student university orientation could introduce students to ethnic restaurants, describe features of Canadian cuisine, and explain how to access traditional ingredients. Such programs would celebrate the ethnic diversity of the international student body and reinforce students' personal identity as they acculturate (p.63).

Food integration programs represent only one example of micro-inclusive activities that can elevate the overall experiences of international students at host universities while also maximizing opportunities for students' self-presentation. Other micro-inclusive ideas such as pre-graduation professional development opportunities, programs that strengthen university/community/business partnerships, and language training can also help students thrive in the social, academic, and economic environments of host nations without undermining or compromising their ability to present their preferred identities across cultures (Aveni, 2005; Nisbett, 2011). In the next section, I present the research methodology before moving on to outline research findings.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

The data for this paper comes from a qualitative dissertation study that investigated the living, and learning experiences of 31 full-time undergraduate and graduate international students in Halifax, the largest city in Nova Scotia, Canada. Students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs in the Faculties of Business, Social Sciences, Arts, Engineering, and Computer Science at three universities were recruited through emails, posters, and snowball sampling to provide a representative account of international students living and learning experiences in Canada. A qualitative research design was selected because it created more opportunities for capturing the nuances of students' learning and living experiences.

### **Participants**

In total, the research sample included 17 males and 14 female graduate and undergraduate students from 17 different countries. Participants had no prior experience living, and studying in Canada, and had spent at least one year living and studying in Canada before contributing to the research project. Participants were asked to reflect on their living and learning experiences in Canada over the course of semi-structured, open-ended, personal interviews that averaged between 30-70 minutes. The interview script was framed by themes that emerged from a thorough literature review. Not meant to be too structured, or exhaustive, the interview script gave participants opportunities to reflect, and explain their international studying experiences. Participant responses were recorded using a digital audio recorder, a procedure that minimizes distractions that can compromise the integrity of the interview process (Levy & Hollan, 1998). Once collected, the data was transcribed, coded into categories and analyzed for emerging themes (Strauss & Corbin,

---

1990). I will highlight key research findings in the next section before moving on to discuss potential future research directions.

## **RESULTS**

### **Sociocultural norms and self-presentation**

Students in this study identified linguistic challenges as well as low understanding of the rules and procedures that govern social, support, and academic spaces as barriers to their ability to thrive at host universities. A Nigerian student explained: When I speak in class and hear my own accent, I often wondered what the Canadian students are thinking. I felt that people would view me less because of it.

Not only is the process of living and learning in an unfamiliar social environment difficult, and stressful for some students, and not only can it undermine some students' self-presentation, it can also lead to feelings of loss, disorientation, and anxiety when language competency issues are thrown into the mix (Aveni, 2005). Perhaps the most elegant and instructive investigation of the behind-the-scenes activities of human agency of this kind was done by Ervin Goffman. Goffman (1959) argued in "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", that individuals involved in social action maintain a strong desire to manage and control how they are perceived. Describing Goffman's Dramaturgical concept, Habermas (1981) notes:

From the perspective of dramaturgical action, we understand social action as an encounter in which participants form a visible public for each other and perform for one another. "Encounter" and "performance" are the key concepts.... a performance enables the actor to present himself to his audience in a certain way; in bringing something of his subjectivity to appearance, he would like to be seen by his public in a particular way (p. 90).

In this respect, it is possible to reimagine the social, academic, and support environments of host nations as stages, which, depending on norms, rules, and procedures, can either facilitate or block students' ability to make their 'subjectivity' appear. However, participants' responses in this study also suggest that when faced with certain competency issues, some students find brilliant ways to innovate discursive stages for presenting their preferred identities across cultural lines. A Nigerian student explained:

During my first-year here, I felt really inferior. Speaking in public was really difficult. When I first got here, people thought that I was really shy. My confidence was really low. I did not know what to expect, and who I was going to meet outside my country and

culture. It is so different from back home. It reduced my confidence. Every time I go back home, I feel like yes. I am back. My confidence bounce right back up. I feel like myself again. I can tell jokes and I can understand them.

By comparing and contrasting her troubled and less preferred identity in Canada with the preferred identity, this particular student effectively uses the language of comparison and contrast as a device to make the presentation of her preferred identity possible. Put differently, through the vocabulary made available to her by the language of space and time, for instance 'before I came to Canada', and 'here in Canada', she acquires the ability to create a discursive space for the presentation of her preferred identity, even while still struggling with the limitations of her second language ability (Kinging, 2013). This students' experience illustrates that in some instances some students are able to circumvent the effects of language competency issues to open up discursive frontiers for ushering in their preferred identities across cultural lines. For example, by highlighting her 'humor back home', her 'personality back home', the Nigerian student rediscovers in the language of space and time, and comparison and contrast, the capacity for self-presentation.

At times, students' challenges with self-presentation arise in the context of academic writing. For example, Hyland (2002) notes:

...our discursual choices align us with certain values and beliefs that support particular identities. In other words, we do not simply report findings or express ideas in some neutral, context-free way, we employ the rhetorical resources accepted for the purpose of sharing meanings in a particular genre and social community. Writers have to select their words so that readers are drawn in, influenced and persuaded. Our use of these resources, and the choices we make from the alternatives they offer, signal who we are (p. 1094).

In this example, Hyland (2002) reimagines writing as an intersubjective communicative practice that relies on shared understanding of the rules, and procedures for its effectiveness. This reality is echoed in the following response from one participant:

I entered Canada fully confident, but as I grew to understand my weaknesses, I lost my self-esteem. It was a humbling experience for me. For example, I never used to show my work to anyone. I was afraid that they would see my grammatical errors. It was really a struggle for me to capture what I think in my language in English (Filipino student).



Without knowledge of the rules and procedures that structure the writing process, students can quickly find their ideas marooned in the unintelligible space between language and silence. Besides the writing process, some participants in the study noted personal values and religious differences as self-presentation barriers. A student from Malaysia explained:

Everyone has their values and sometimes those values are not compatible with the Canadian value system. It is different country. That creates a challenge. When you come here, everything is new. It is a new way of life, a new way of doing things, new ways of being social. So you learn and try to keep things separate. You still form friendships, but they are different. There are some barriers that you just cannot break in. The way Canadians are brought up, sometimes the value systems are not compatible. Its different kinds of friendship. Some kind of invisible barriers that you cannot break.

This student's critique was echoed by an Egyptian student who identified the incompatibility between his religious obligations and the social norms of his university as a barrier to his ability to participate in his department's activities:

Students are not going to leave their identities behind. Students will integrate, but they are not going to completely change. I'll give you a small example. Sometimes, in my department, my colleagues have presentations. They usually have very good presentations and such but part of this thing is that they have beer and wine and things like that. I told them that I am interested in participating but as a Muslim, I am not allowed to drink: I am not allowed to even be present in a place where other people are drinking. Yes, it is your culture but this is my religion. I am a person who does not like to break my rules. I respect your culture and understand that this is the way you are used to living. But this is also my culture and this is the way I am used to living. So, if can separate these things so that I can be there to present and to help my colleagues that would be great.

### **Guest culture and self-presentation**

The challenge of navigating brand new social, academic, and support spaces is daunting for many international students. Besides religious obligation, Canada's 'appointment culture' and lack of 'guest culture' also appear to pose threats to students' self-presentation. A student from Uganda explained the challenges he encountered while navigating Canada's appointment culture:

Sometimes it is challenging when you want to have something done. There are certain things that you sometimes want answer to right away, but here you have the procedures that have to be followed. You have to book an appointment before you can meet with someone. You have to carry the burden until you meet someone. For some participants, Canada's social and academic environments are dominated by a kind of individualism which spawns a sociocultural milieu that puts a stranglehold on 'come-from-aways' efforts to connect with locals. A participant from Uganda compared Canada's sociocultural mores with his own country's cultural climate in the following way: "In my country, it is the responsibility of the host to take care of the guest. Here it is different. Everyone is just running around doing their own thing." This student's interpretation of a guest culture extends the zone of locus of control to include community members, thus grounding the reason for success or failure in the community instead of in individual actions entirely.

### **The body-as-a-text and self-presentation**

Participants highlighted discrimination and racism alongside the aforementioned appointment culture and lack of guest culture as challenges that pose serious threats to their ability to present their preferred identities across cultural lines. In particular, visible minority participants in the study underscored acts of overt racism, and acts of racial micro-aggression both inside and outside the classroom as serious social and academic barriers. A student from Syria noted: "I was coming home one day from the bars when someone called me a racial slur". Another student from China said: "I was walking down the street and someone pointed and started laughing at me."

Participant responses suggest that the process of navigating the living, and learning spaces of host universities sometimes puts them in the path of classmates, staff, faculty, and off-campus community members who not only read their bodies negatively but also react visibly, at times, in ways that unsettle or silence them. Largely, the experiences related here mirror the findings of researchers who have identified discrimination as a challenge for some international students (Houshmand & Spanierman, 2014; Marginson et al., 2010; Meeuwisse, Severiens, Born, 2010; Messina, 2007; Peacock & Harrison, 2008). Recalling an incident of discrimination, a Malaysian student explained:

The thing is, it really doesn't matter that much if you become a permanent resident or a Canadian citizen. At the end of the day you cannot change your skin color. A store had a contest for a free coffee. So I peeled the sticker and found that I had won. I won a free coffee. The last two letters, 'ee', were missing but I didn't think it was a big deal. I went to the store. The person working there refused to give me my coffee because the last two letters were

missing. I felt that if it were someone else that looked Canadian, she wouldn't treat them the way she did me. The way she came at me, it was a different approach. She ended up giving me the coffee after telling me that she won't next time. The thing I don't like is the tone. It is very upsetting to me. You can feel it in the tone. That's really upsetting to me....She wouldn't be saying the same thing to an Anglo Canadian in the same tone. I feel that here sometimes, as a person of color you always have to do something extra to really be that somebody. You cannot just be equal skill—you always have to have something extra when you are competing with others academically or professional.

This student's experience underlines how negative readings of some international students' bodies in host nations can undermine their ability to present preferred versions of their identities across cultures. A Filipino student explained:

There seems to be some subtle racism here. It is not in the open but I know what is going on. I feel it below the surface with some people. It affects your interaction with them, your self-confidence. I don't like dealing with them because you feel that.

Elaborating on his notion of race as a signifier, Hall (1997), notes:

...to put it crudely, race is one of those major concepts, which organize the great classificatory systems of difference, which operate in human society. And to say that race is a discursive category recognizes that all attempts to ground this concept scientifically, to locate differences between the races, on what one might call scientific, biological, or genetic grounds, have been largely shown to be untenable. We must therefore, it is said, substitute a socio-historical or cultural definition of race, for the biological one (p.6).

In choosing the concept of discourse over biology to ground his definition of race, Hall makes it possible to analyze how power functions through knowledge production and representation processes to fix meaning. Reimagined this way, Hall's ultimate purpose is not to deny the existence of difference but rather to show that difference only becomes meaningful or intelligible through the meaning making-processes of discourse (Hall, 1997, p. 6). While it is possible to disagree with Hall's analysis, it is difficult to ignore the fact that negative interpretations of students' bodies impact the outcome of some international student's social and academic experiences.

### **Markers and self-presentation**

Some studies that have investigated interactions between Canadian and international students have underscored acts of micro-aggression as examples of challenges that sometimes affect students' self-presentation (Grayson, 2008). A student from Bangladesh explained how his status as an international student shaped the reactions he received from peers:

It is a bit difficult in the beginning. The format was different from the way courses were structured in my home country, in terms of group assignments. That was a bit of a challenge in the beginning because at that time, I felt as if my view was not that important in a way. Because some people dominated the conversation. Also, if the assignment was in three parts, I always was given the easiest one because I am an international student. This kind of classification, it's not direct. It is not a direct thing. It is a hidden. In the way things play out you get the feeling that they don't think I am able to contribute as much as they were.

This student's experience suggests that, in some instances, the marker of 'international student' can become a barrier to students' self-presentation. In the U.K., Peacock & Harrison (2008) found that some domestic students resented working with international students because of a "perceived threat that an international student could bring the marks of the group down through his or her lack of language ability, lack of knowledge of the United Kingdom or understanding of British Pedagogy" (p. 8). Researchers have identified similar challenges both in the United States and in Australia (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Cruickshank, Chen, Warren, 2011; Leask & Carroll, 2011).

### **Academic expectations, language and self-presentation**

Findings from this research suggests that universities can do more to support international students during their academic transition. A participant from Korea described her experience as follows :

The biggest difference for me was professor expectations. The professors' expectations are completely different here. The big difference is that in education system of my home country only the professor speaks in the classroom. Here students raise their hands and can even disagree with the professor. In my country, if you have a question, it really has to be important for you to ask it in class. Plus, it has to be helpful to everyone in the class, not just to you.

Aside from academic expectations, some participants identified language competency issues as self-presentation barriers. A student from Nigeria noted:

My personality is sometimes different speaking the language of my country than it is here. In my language, I like to do a lot of jokes, but here I don't want to make jokes. I don't know if they are appropriate.

Besides its role as an intersubjective meaning-making tool, language also appears to function as a stage which facilitates the appearance of students' identities in social situations (Goffman, 1959; Heidegger, 1953; Hyland, 2002; Aveni, 2005). The following response from a student from Chile highlights the effects of language on some international students' agency across cultural lines:

Back home, I am a very competitive person. I like to argue. Here because of language difficulties, I cannot be as competitive. I have to be brief. It is so frustrating.

Language difficulties seem not only to affect some students' ability to present their preferred identities across cultures but also their ability to participate in cultural activities. A student from South Korea underlined this point:

English is not just a language; it also includes the culture. If you cannot overcome the language barrier, there is no way for you to interact and communicate with Canadian people. The more you can speak English the more opportunities you can have with Canadian people. The more you get involved in the society.

This student's experience brings into focus the considerable impact language can have on students' self-presentation. Such an understanding has the possibility not only to expand the horizons of our understanding of international students' cross-cultural experiences but also the chances of broadening our support imagination.

### **Support structures and self-presentation**

Participants in this study identified the rules and procedures that govern support spaces, and obligations of confession imposed by support experts as barriers to their ability to access support. Reflecting on his support seeking decision-making process, a Syrian student noted:

The resources are behind the same barriers that a lot of international students have to get over—the language and the social barriers. It's like I am struggling with fitting in due to language and social barriers, and then you design resources to help me but put them in the environments where I have to get over the language and social barriers to get to them.

### **Expertise and self-presentation**

A student from Uganda outlined his struggles with the obligation of confession imposed by some support experts: “It is difficult to tell a stranger all the personal things that are happening in your life.” Some students in this research chose to avoid support experts because such interactions sometimes marked their bodies with signs that made it difficult for them to navigate the social, academic, cultural, and economic fields. Markers such as ‘the student with mental illness,’ and ‘the student with language deficiencies’, while typical of support language, impose specific meanings on students’ bodies which can limit their ability to present their preferred identities. Consequently, the use of expert knowledge or expertise to mark support-seeking bodies can limit students’ ability to manage how they are perceived by peers, faculty, staff, and community members.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper has explored findings from a small qualitative research project that investigated the experiences of international students in Nova Scotia, a province that has increased its international student population by over 100% within the last decade. Due to the small scale of the project, the findings should be viewed as a work in progress that can be extended by future research. With that said, the paper makes several important contributions to our understanding of the learning and living experiences of international students. Paramount among them is the fact that international students’ self-presentation can be limited by the rules and procedures that govern social, academic, and support environments. Additionally, drawing on the research findings, the paper suggests that international students have a strong desire to present and manage their identities across cultural lines. As such, students naturally view social and academic interactions not simply as mediums for absorbing requisite sociocultural and academic norms, and discipline knowledge but also as stages for expressing their varied identities.

However, in some cases, some participants in this study who found their ideas marooned in the space between silence and language because of language competency issues were able to regain their ability of expression by using the language of space and time, and comparison and contrast.

Lastly, drawing on Hall's (1997) notion of the body-as-a-text, the paper outlined how negative readings or interpretations of students' bodies can undermine or diminish their ability to present their preferred identities across cultural lines.

Researchers who have an interest in building on the findings and questions underlined in this article might find it useful to take up the following questions: Does the support discourse, with its institutionalized notions of time, authority, expertise, support procedures, and progress, function as a technology of subjectification? Is it possible to frame students' hesitation to partake in social, academic, and support interactions as a sort of resistance against subjectification?

## REFERENCES

- Andrade, S. M. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 5(2), 131-154.
- Akbari, H. A. (2012). Socioeconomic and demographic profiles of immigrants in Nova Scotia. *Atlantic Metropolis Centre*. Retrieved from <http://community.smu.ca/atlantic/documents/Akbari209-1draftNSreportJuly11.pdf>
- Alcoff, M.L. (1988). Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism: the identity crisis in feminist theory. *Signs*, 13(3), 405-436.
- Amos, S., & Lordly, D. (2014). Picture this: a photo voice study of international students' food experience in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Dietetic Practice and Research*, 75(2), 59-63.
- Arkoudi, S., Watty, K., Baik, C., Yu, X., Borland, H., Chang, S., Lang, I., Lang, J., & Pearce, A. (2013). Finding common ground: enhancing interaction between domestic and international students in higher education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18(3), 222-235
- Arthur, N., & Flynn, S. (2011). Career development influences of international students who pursue permanent immigration to Canada. *International Journal for Educational Vocational Guidance*, 11(3), 221-237.
- Aveni, P.V. (2005). *Study abroad and second language use: constructing the self*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge, UK.
- Bepple, N. (2014). International students strategies to obtain career-related work in Canada after graduation. (Unpublished doctoral thesis) University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia.
- Brunner, B. R. (2006). Student perceptions of diversity on a college campus: Scratching the surface to find more. *Intercultural Education*, 17, 311-317.
- Canadian Bureau of International Education (2015). Facts and figures. Retrieved from <http://www.cbie.ca/about-ie/facts-and-figures/>.
- Cantle, T. (2012). Interculturalism: for the of globalization, cohesion and diversity. *Political Insight*, 3(3), 38-41
- Carr, L.J., Koyama, M. M., & Thiagarajan, M. (2003). A woman's support group for Asian international students. *Journal of American College Health*, 52(3), 131-134.
- Cruickshank, K., Chen, H., & Warren, S. (2012). Increasing international and domestic student interaction through group work: A case study from the humanities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(6), 797-810.
- Eisenberg, D., Downs, F.M., Golberstein, E., & Zivin, K. (2009). Stigma and help seeking for mental health among college students. *Medical Care Research and Review*, 66(5), 522-541.
- Erichsen, A.E. (2011). Learning for change: transforming international experience as

- identity work. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 9(2), 109-133.
- Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada. (2014). Canada's international education strategy: Harnessing our knowledge to drive innovation and prosperity. Retrieved from <http://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/education/strategy-strategie.aspx?lang=eng>.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777-795
- Foucault, M. (2007). *The politics of truth*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press.
- Frey, L. L., & Roysicar, G. (2006). South Asian and East Asian international students' perceived prejudice, acculturation, and frequency of help resource utilization. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 34(4), 208-222.
- Gacel-Avila, J. (2005). The internationalization of higher education: A paradigm for global citizenry. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 9(2), 121-136.
- Gill, S. (2007). Overseas students' intercultural adaptation as intercultural learning: a transformative framework. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 37(2), 167-183.
- Global Affairs Canada. Canada's international education strategy: Harnessing our knowledge advantage to drive innovation and prosperity. (2014) Retrieved from <http://international.gc.ca/global-markets-marches-mondiaux/assets/pdfs/overview-apercu-eng.pdf>.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Carden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Grayson, P. J. (2008). The experiences and outcomes of domestic and international students at four Canadian universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 27(3), 215-230.
- Guo, S., & Chase, M. (2009). Internationalization of higher education: integrating international students into Canadian academic environment. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(3), 305-318.
- Hall, S. (1997). Race, the floating signifier. *Media Education Foundation*. Retrieved from [https://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/407/transcript\\_407.pdf](https://www.mediaed.org/assets/products/407/transcript_407.pdf).
- Habermas, J. (1984). *Theory of communicative action volume 1*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Haigh, J. M. (2010). Internationalization of the curriculum: Designing inclusive education for a small world. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 26(1), 49-66.
- Hanassab, S. (2006). Diversity, international students, and perceived discrimination: Implications for educators and counsellors. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(2), 157-172.
- Heidegger, M. (1953). *Being and time*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Houshmand, S., & Spanierman, B.L. (2014). Excluded and avoided: Racial microaggressions targeting Asian international students in Canada. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 20(3), 377-388.
- Hyland, K. (2002). Authority and invisibility: authorial identity in academic writing. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34(8), 1091-1112.
- Hyun, j., Quinn, B., Madon, T., & Lustig, S. (2007). Mental health needs, awareness, and use of counseling services among international graduate students. *Journal of American College Health*, 56(2), 109-118.
- Institute of International Education. (2013). Trends and Global Data. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Project-Atlas>.
- Kamara, A. (2012). International students and the politics of growth. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.
- Karuppan, M., & Barari, M. (2011). Perceived discrimination and international students' learning: An empirical investigation. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 33(1), 67-83.
- Kenyon, K., Frohard-Dourlent, H., & Roth, D.W. (2012). Falling between the cracks:



- Ambiguities of international students status in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 42(1), 1-24.
- Kinginger, C. (2013). Identity and language learning in study abroad. *Foreign Language Annals*, 46(3), 339-358.
- Kymlicka, W. (2012). Comment on Meer and Modood. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33(2), 211-216
- Leask, B. (2001). Bridging the gap: Internationalizing university curricula. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 5(2), 100-115.
- Leask, B. (2005). Internationalization of the curriculum and intercultural engagement: A variety of perspectives and possibilities. Paper presented at the Australian International Education Conference, Gold Coast, and Old. Retrieved from <http://aiec.idp.com/uploads/pdf/Leask,%20Betty.pdf>.
- Leask, B. (2009). Using formal and informal curricula to improve interactions between home and international students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(2), 205-221.
- Leask, B., & Carroll, J. (2011). Moving beyond 'wishing and hoping': Internationalization and student experiences of inclusion and engagement. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(5), 647-659.
- Leask, B. (2013). Internationalizing the curriculum in the disciplines—imagining new possibilities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 17(2), 103-118.
- Leask, B., (2013). Comparing internationalization of the curriculum in action across disciplines: Theoretical and practical perspectives, *Compare*, 43(1), 79-101.
- Leask, B., & Bridge, C. (2013). Comparing internationalization of the curriculum in action across disciplines: theoretical and practical perspectives. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 43(1), 79-101.
- Lee, S.J., Koeske, F.G., & Sales, E. (2004). Social support buffering of acculturative stress: a study of mental health symptoms among Korean international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 28(5), 399-414
- Levy, I.R., & Douglas, H. (1988). Person-centered interview and observations in Anthropology. In R.H. Barnard (Eds.), *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (pp. 333-364). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Marginson, S., Nyland, C., Sawir, E., & Forbes-Mewett, H. (2010). *International student security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission. (2012). International students in maritime universities. *Trends in Maritime Higher Education*, 9(3), 1-4. Retrieved from [http://www.mphec.ca/resources/TrendsV9N3\\_2012.pdf](http://www.mphec.ca/resources/TrendsV9N3_2012.pdf)
- Mantero, M. (2007). *Identity and second language learning: Culture, inquiry, and dialogic activity in educational contexts*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Meeuwisse, M., Severiens, E. S., & Born, P. M. (2010). Learning environment, interaction, sense of belonging and study success in ethnically diverse student groups. *Research in Higher Education*, 51(6), 528-545.
- Meer, N., & Modood, T. (2012). How does interculturalism contrast with multiculturalism? *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 33(2), 175-196.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco, California: Jossey Bass.
- Mori, C.S. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78(2), 137-144.
- Morita, N. (2004). Negotiating participation and identity in second language academic communities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(4), 573-603.
- Nisbeth, N. A. (2011). Labor market perceptions of Caribbean international students and the factors that influence their decisions of whether to remain in Canada to work or return home (Unpublished master's thesis), McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario.
- Peacock, N., & Harrison, N. (2008). "It's so much easier to go with what's easy":

- “Mindfulness” and the discourse between home and international students in the United Kingdom. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(4), 487-508.
- Poyrazil, S., & Lopez, D. M. (2007). An exploratory study of perceived discrimination and homesickness: a comparison of international students and American students. *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, 141(3), 263-280.
- Qiang, Z. (2003). Internationalization of higher education: towards a conceptual framework. *Policy Futures in Education*, 1(2), 248-270.
- Qiu, J. (2014). Mainland Chinese international university students’ travel motivations, travel information sources, and general travel patterns within Canada: A case study at the University of Waterloo (Unpublished master’s thesis), University of Waterloo, Ontario, and Canada.
- Ryan, J., & Viete, R. (2009). Respectful interactions: Learning with international students in the English-speaking academy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(3), 303-313
- Scott, C., Safdar, S., Trilokekar, D.R., & Masri, E. A. (2015). International students as ‘ideal immigrants in Canada: A disconnect between policy makers’ assumptions and the lived experiences of international students. *Comparative and International Education*, 43(3), 5.
- Shen, X. (2011). Understanding the role of culture in health-seeking behaviors of Chinese international students in Canada. (Unpublished master’s thesis), University of Ottawa, Ottawa Canada.
- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, H. W. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Higher Education*, 60(1), 33-46.
- Siddiq, F., Baroni, J., Lye, J., & Nethercote, W. C.E. (2012). The Economic impact of post-secondary international students in Atlantic Canada: An expenditure analysis. Retrieved from [http://camet-camef.ca/images/eng/docs/EconImpact\\_IntStud\\_AtlCan\\_2010\\_eng.pdf](http://camet-camef.ca/images/eng/docs/EconImpact_IntStud_AtlCan_2010_eng.pdf).
- Smith, A. R., & Khawaja, G. N. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(6), 699-713.
- Stewin, E. (2013). An exploration of food security and identity among international students studying in Guelph and Windsor, Ontario, Canada (Unpublished Masters of Arts Thesis). The University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Taylor, C. (2012). Interculturalism or multiculturalism. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 38(4-5), 413-423.
- Taylor, C. (1994). *Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: a theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.
- Tierney, W.G. (1992). An anthropological analysis of student participation in college. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 63(6), 603-618.
- Viete, R. (2009). Respectful interactions: learning with international students in the English-speaking academy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 14(3), 303-314.
- Volet, S., & Ang, G. (1998). Culturally mixed groups on international campuses: An opportunity for inter-cultural learning. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 17, 5-23.
- Volet, S. (2004). Challenges of internationalization: Enhancing intercultural competence and skills for critical reflection on the situated and non-neutral nature of knowledge. In P. Zeegers, & K. Dellar- Evans (Eds.), *Language & academic skills in higher education* (pp. 1-10). Adelaide, Australia: Flinders University.
- Volet, S., & Jones, C. (2012) Cultural transitions in higher education: Individual adaptation, transformation and engagement. In: Karabenick, S.A. and Urdan, T.C., (Eds.) *Transitions Across Schools and Cultures*. (pp. 241-284). Bingley, U.K.: Emerald
-

Group Publishing Limited.

- Waters, L. J. (2006). Geographies of cultural capital: education, international migration and family strategies between Hong Kong and Canada. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 31(2)*, 179-192.
- Whitsed, C., & Green, W. (2014). What's in a name? A theoretical exploration of the proliferation of labels for international education across the higher education sector. *Journal of Studies in International Higher Education, 18(2)*105-119.
- Yang, P.J.R., Noels, A.K., Saumure, D. K. (2006). Multiple routes to cross-cultural adaptation for international students: mapping the paths between self-construals, English language confidence, and adjustment. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 30(4)*, 487-506.
- Yang, P. J. R., & Noels, A. K. (2013). The possible selves of international students and their cross-cultural adjustment in Canada. *International Journal of Psychology, 48(3)*, 316-323.
- Yeh, J.C., & Inose, M. (2003). International students' reported English fluency, social support satisfaction, and social connectedness as predictors of acculturative stress. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 16(1)*, 15-28.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Interview script**

Hello! Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today. I appreciate you taking the time out of your day to participate in this study. I would like you to first read through this consent form and let me know if you have any questions or concerns regarding anything you see. Once all your questions and concerns have been addressed, I will ask you to sign the form and we can begin the interview.

This interview will cover your living and learning experiences in Canada. Your interpretation of these experiences will also be explored. I am hoping that the information gathered from this discussion will give us a better understanding of the living and learning experiences of international students in the Atlantic region of Canada. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Rather, I am interested in learning about your experiences and your perspectives relating to your living, and learning experiences in Canada. This interview will not exceed one hour unless you wish it to.

Please remember that you can let me know at any time if you wish to skip a question or take a break. I am going to audio-record this interview so that I can review it later and transcribe what we talk about here today accurately. You may ask me to turn off the audio-recorder, clarify questions or stop the interview altogether at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin? If you are ready, I will now start the audio-recorder and begin the interview.

#### **Background**

1. Where are you from?
2. How similar is the host culture as compared to your home country?
3. If there are similarities between the culture of your country of origin and the host country, have they helped you to engage the culture in the host country?
4. If there are differences, have these issues prevented you from doing what you want to do?
5. Are you from a rural or urban area?
6. Have you ever talked yourself into or out from doing something because of similarities or differences in the two cultures?
7. Did you leave behind family members or extended family members?

#### **Language**

8. What is the official language of your home country?
9. How would you rank your oral English on a scale from 1-10?

10. How would you rank your written English skill on the same scale?
11. Have you encountered any barriers because of language issues?
12. Do you have to repeat yourself a lot when you speak to members from the host culture? How does this make you feel?
13. Has language prevented you from being able to access different resources at school and in the community?

**Immigration**

14. How confident do you feel in social settings with individuals from the host culture?
15. How does this affect your desire to engage in social interaction with members from the host culture?
16. Typically, how long are these interactions?
17. Do you consider yourself independent and able to do what you want?
18. How competent do you feel during interactions with people from the host country?
19. Do you have any social needs that are not being met by the community?
20. How would you describe the difference between these two social settings---when you are with people from the same country and when you are with people from a different country or from the host nation? What is different?
21. What would you change about your current social setting?
22. Do you ever seek out situations that may pose social challenges?
23. When you learn something new about the culture, do you integrate it into your life? Do you persist when things do not go as plan?
24. What are you studying?
25. When did you come to Canada?
26. Do you have family in Canada? Where are they located?
27. Did this influence your decision to come to this region?
28. Are most of your friends from the same country or from the host country?
29. Are your friends from the same country or from the mainstream culture?
30. How would you describe your first experiences in Canada?
31. Where would you like to live after you graduate? What are some factors that might influence your decision?
32. Would you like to stay in Halifax? Would you want to move to a big city or small town? Why?
33. How big of a role would you say job plays in your decision in terms of where to move?
34. Do you have enough money to support yourself or do you have to work?
35. Do you have any questions?

---

**ABU KAMARA**, PhD, is a researcher who focuses on international students' cross-cultural experiences. E-mail: akamara2@gmail.com.

*Manuscript submitted: January 3, 2016*

*Manuscript revised: June 6, 2016*

*Accepted for publication: December 5, 2016*