

# Seeing Me, Seeing You: An Investigation Into Students' Cultural Identity And Intercultural Engagement In A 21st Century Higher Education Context

## Background

Through the process of globalisation, contemporary society has become increasingly more diverse with the expansion of different cultures and nations across the world. Yet, with such an assortment of nationalities living amongst each other, the matter of clashing ideologies and values frequently raise arguments and frustrations, typically due to a loss in translation, both linguistically and culturally. Such contrasting cultures amassing can be found in a university setting, where different people from different walks of life come together all to achieve the same thing: a degree in higher education. A university situation exhibits a suitable environment to investigate how different nationalities and people with different cultural identities clash or are compatible within a social setting.

### Aims:

- To analyse and pinpoint how cultural identities operate between students in a university environment.
- To evaluate how culture affects the relationships and choices that students make whilst attending higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Methodology

This investigation was conducted anonymously using an ethnographic style technique in an interview format, recording three international individuals attending a UK university.

### Participant 1

- Female, 20 years old
- Eurasian
- British Citizen, born and raised in Singapore
- First Language: English
- Second Language: Chinese

### Participant 2

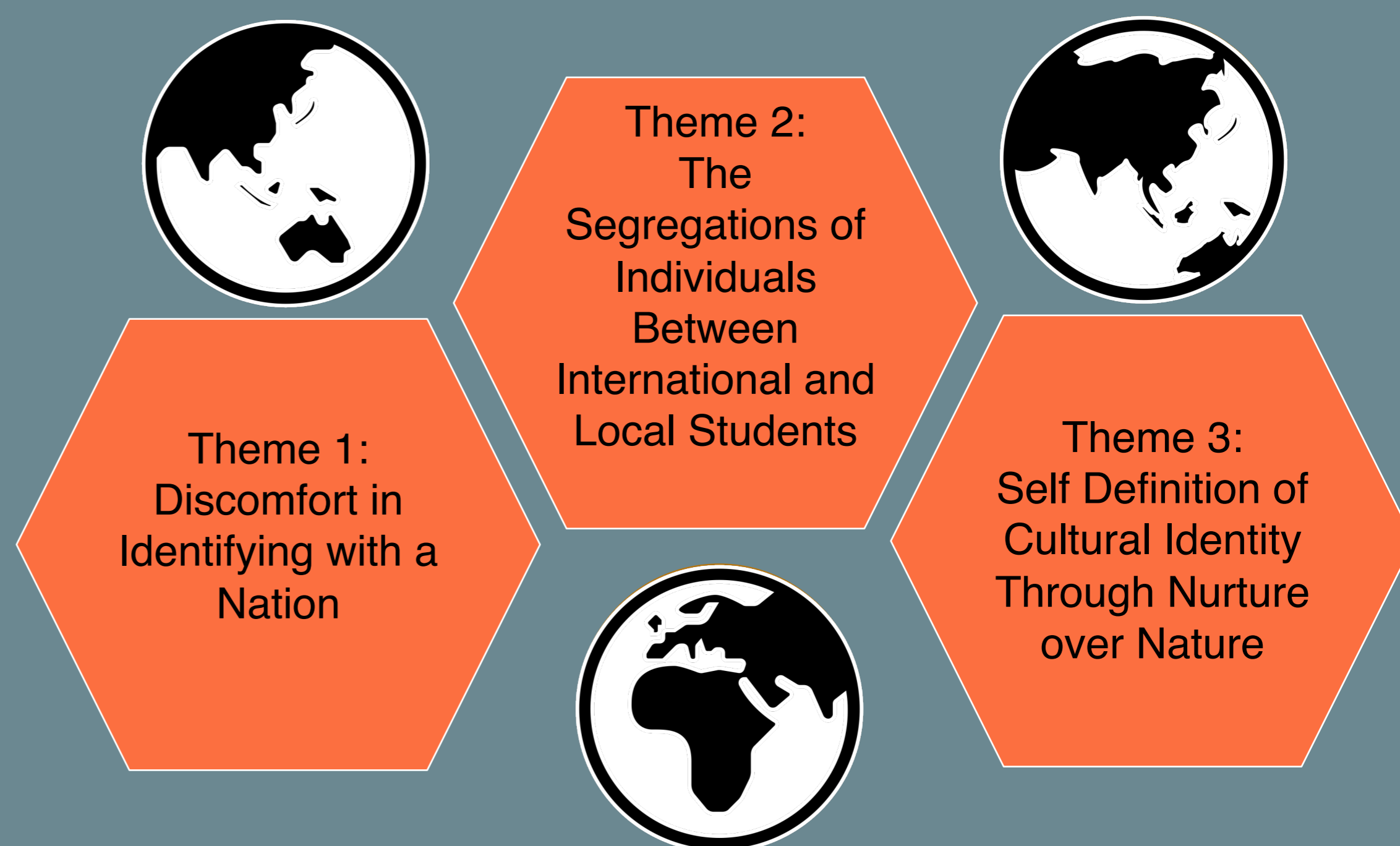
- Female, 22 years old
- Caucasian
- South African Citizen
- First Language: English
- Second Language: Afrikaans

### Participant 3

- Female, 22 years old
- African
- Nigerian Citizen
- First Language: Hausa
- Second Language: English

The interview was recorded and transcribed after. The transcript was then analysed through coding, revealing repeated concepts, which were labelled themes. These themes were then analysed to investigate the university student's cultural identities as well as intercultural relationships with other students, supported by the data from the interview transcript. Ultimately, the outcome of this ethnographic style interview was 27 minutes of fluid and organic data.

## Themes



## Key Findings

Two out of three participants view their nation to be where they grew up.

Mixed feelings regarding how strongly and comfortably the participants felt about identifying with their home countries was observed. However, participant 3 firmly believed her nation is where her parents originate.

Holliday's ideology of 'othering' (2012) was demonstrated by all three participants.

The participants differing perceptions between themselves and the British undergraduates creates a very distinct divide between international and native students. However, the participants express this 'othering' is not one-sided and that they believe the British students themselves also easily form stereotypes of their own, predefining what other cultures are like, forming a divide.

Nationality has little effect on forming social groupings.

Ultimately, all interviewees state that forming social groups is about one's own personal preference. All three participants eventually draw to the conclusion that it doesn't matter where you're from, it only matters if another's personality fits your own. Subsequently, contradictory features fail to matter; there will be a mutual foundation for a friendship to be built.

## Conclusion

One's cultural identity is a large contributing factor to forming social groups during higher education, All three participants in this study exhibit an international background and thus have been heavily influenced by their own cultures. This has influenced how they initially seek out social groups. Nevertheless, "identity itself is composed of multiple dynamic and relatively autonomous identity positions" (Watzlawick, 2012), thus through a combination of a need to belong combined with new influences and cultural change, this alters how individuals view their own cultural identities, easing into multi-cultural relationships.