

ABSTRACT

MEJIA BENITEZ, PAOLA ALEJANDRA. Culture Negotiation: Investigating International Students during Their OPT Experiences (Under the direction of Dr. Joann Keyton).

International graduate and undergraduate students with the F1 visa have the option to prepare themselves professionally in the U.S. by engaging in practical training after they complete their degree program. According to the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the number of Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) records with authorization to participate in the 2018 OPT program was 288,415. The objective of the thesis was to identify and analyze how international students with OPT visa negotiate their cultural identities within the national and organizational cultures of their OPT employers. This study provides an opportunity for organizations to restructure their onboarding training and organizational culture to be more culturally inclusive. For this study, 25 international students enrolled in the Optional Practical Training were interviewed to explore the concepts of culture, identity, corporate identity, identity negotiation theory.

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Culture Negotiation: Investigating International Students during Their OPT Experiences

by
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to all international students seeking to achieve their dreams and goals in the United States.

BIOGRAPHY

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CHAPTER 1

Literature Review

Many international students go to the U.S. to study in recognized institutions accredited by the U.S. Department of Education. After completing their degrees, and applying for the F-1 visa, they can apply to stay in the U.S. to practice in U.S. organizations and expand the knowledge they learned in their university programs. To do so, international students need to categorize as temporary migrants and apply for the OPT or CPT program.

According to Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Optional Practical Training is a program that allows international students studying at U.S. higher education institutions (HEIs) to complement their education with practical work experience. This program extends the F-1 student visa by 12 months and allows students to work in a field related to their area of study (8 CFR § 214.2(f) (10): Practical Training). The OPT program has become so popular that many international students apply to it after their graduation. According to the Web page of, The Institute for International Education, “the number of F-1 students participating in OPT tripled in the last decade from around 48,000 students in 2006/2007 to nearly 150,000 in 2015/2016, making it the fastest-growing international student group tracked by the Institute for International Education” (2018). Of those who apply to the OPT program, students from China and India account for nearly two-thirds of all OPT recipients, followed by South Korea and Taiwan. While India has traditionally maintained higher numbers of students in these programs, China has experienced a fivefold increase in OPT participation within the last 10 years moving to 52,193 individuals or one-third of those currently in the program (IIE, 2018). Graduating from U.S. colleges and universities is the core requirement to be able to be part of the OPT program. In this way, the U.S. has created a way to filter skilled migrants through higher education. Companies in

the U.S. recruit talent studying within the country instead of overseas because the student will presumably have (a) mastered the English language, (b) understand U.S. culture, and (c) possess the skill qualifications needed to work domestically (Faggian et al., 2017; Suter & Jandl, 2006; Ziguras & Law, 2006;). Nevertheless, those policies are designed to enable, or restrict international, student graduates of U.S. institutions to stay and work in the U.S. and try to transition towards permanent status. As a result of the transition to working legal migrant status, international students may experience a negotiation of their national identity within the organizational culture.

National Culture

The word culture is a fairly broad concept that encompasses different meanings. Past studies in intercultural communication focus on cultures other than one's own culture. However, several theorists like Beamer's with his schemata model, and Haworth and Savage's (1989) channel-ratio model of intercultural communication, have rejected these definitions since they do not include the internal state that develops when culture is imposed on individuals. These scholars view culture as "an internal state of mind that underlies and influences the process of communication" (Jameson, 2007, p. 202). The distinction is important since it helps scholars understand the self-concept that each individual constructs internally about their cultural identity and how that internalization affects their interactions with individuals in other cultures. For example, when an international student studies abroad and meets someone native they project their cultural identities onto each other, and this leads to a positive or negative interaction.

Internal State of National Culture

Yuan (1997) discussed that "intercultural communication theories should be interaction-based, emphasizing how individuals communicate, not how cultures communicate" (p. 311).

Yuan's view focuses on the importance of the construction of culture as an internal conceptualization. Beamer's (1995) model of an individual inward-directed schemata could explain how the self-schematas are created internally. This is important because it would be interesting to find a way to link a person's internal state of culture with the external state of culture or their view or understanding of external culture. Creating these internal/external culture links could lead to the development of adaptation strategies for individuals from a national culture different than the national culture of their employing organization.

External State of National Culture

The external state of culture is focused on an audience analysis of culture instead of a self-analysis. For example, when a person is wearing an Andean Poncho, another person would assume that the person wearing a poncho comes from the Andes in South America. Beamer's (1995) model of intercultural communication approaches audience analysis through the concept of schemata, which is a preexisting mental structure with organized categories that allows a person to make sense of information. In the cultural context, a person's schemata can be different from others. In order to communicate, a person may have to align their schemata, which will allow his/her schemata to be modified and refined. When culture is generalized it is important to understand that there are going to be variations within cultural categories like ethnicity, religion, location, social class, and more-- could lead to unfair stereotyping. Besides, Varner and Palmer (2005) describe the process through which cultural self-knowledge could be incorporated in a systematic way into the corporate induction that employees receive when they are assigned to work abroad.

National Culture from a Communication Perspective

Culture initially was studied by anthropologists in an attempt to distinguish groups of people from different geographical locations. Studies such as these are ethnographies. According to Carbaugh, an ethnography involves carefully creating a detailed, descriptive record of the practices being investigated (2015, p. 2). This suggests that culture is based on shared practices of groups. Hofstede (2001) suggested that cultural bias is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p. 11). Alternately, many scholars refer to culture as the cultural differences between nationalities. For example, A cultural difference between Americans and Latinos is that they have a different time orientation or time systems (chronemics).

Other important terms are macro cultures and sub-cultures. According to Copley (2008): “Mainstream culture may integrate and co-opt subculture in an ultimately elitist fashion; on the other hand, subcultures may transform mainstream culture in an egalitarian direction as subcultural vocabularies and styles become naturalized forms of communication in the culture” (p. 5).

As Copley mentioned, some scholars view culture as a hierarchical model in which national culture is a macro-culture and subcultures and cocultures are secondary (Chaney & Martin, 2007). For example, Bailey (2000) has noticed that service encounters in American convenience stores are conducted differently by African Americans than by Korean Americans. In this example, the national culture would be the American culture, while the subculture would be the African Americans and Korean Americans.

According to Williams (1981), he views culture as an object to be studied by sociologists, because culture is the product of social interactions and formations, institutions, organizations,

and ideologies; these are the historical means of cultural production and reproduction. For instance, there can be problems between the different cultures since the production and reproduction of culture are so complex. Jenks (2005) suggested that the modern understanding of culture unfolds along a dimension involving tensions. Some attempts will be made to establish and maintain a given cultural formation while eschewing traces of others. For example, the Ecuadorian culture does not include many ancestral and traditional cultural practices, like the *Inti Raimi* celebration, eschewing in this way the indigenous culture.

Culture Adaptation and Assimilation

Globalization has increased international travel in the world. However, migration has leveled off. People who move from one country to another country experience adaptation. “Cross-cultural adaptation is the attempt to establish and maintain a functional and reciprocal relationship with the environment” (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2006, p. 404). For example, when a person from the United States moves to Jamaica, will need to adapt to drive on the contrary side of the road.

On the other hand, people who spend a period away from home can experience cultural assimilation. According to Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, (2006) “assimilation occurs when people adopt the host culture’s values and norms rather than maintaining the values of their home culture.” (p. 407). For example, TexMex food resulting in a mix between traditional Mexican food and Texas-style food. “Various studies of historical change in immigrant through assimilation communities document their gradual assimilation, that is, the highest degree of acculturation theoretically possible, to the mainstream culture of the host society” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992, p. 216). Nevertheless, adaptation and assimilation not only happen between national cultures, but it can also happen in the organizational culture of companies.

Organizational Culture

Companies differentiate themselves from one another by their products or services, their visual image, brand recognition, and reputation, but also their organizational culture. According to Keyton, culture would emerge from any collection of individuals who comprise themselves as an organization. Schein (1992) defines organizational culture as:

A pattern of shared assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 12)

This definition emphasizes the need for people in an organization to socialize, integrate, and adapt as they work toward organizational goals. As Keyton mentioned, “culture is not produced for them; it is produced by them as they interact with one another” (p. 18). Individuals inside organizations are held together because of their size, purpose, or structure and they work together to achieve a goal. For this reason, they will have to communicate and interact within the organizational structure and create their culture. As Keyton suggested, “culture emerges from the complex and continuous web of communications among members of the organization” (p. 20). For this reason, there is seldom only one organizational culture inside an organization; rather, many cultures are created inside the corporations by organizational members through their communication.

Organizational Communication

Organizational communication is the process of sending and receiving messages within a complex organization. According to Keyton, “organizational communication is a complex and continuous process through which organizational members create, maintain, and change the

organization” (p. 13). Inside organizations, shared meanings are seldom achieved by all members of the organization. Keyton, explains why organizational communication is created:

Organizations must address and meet their monetary needs, organizations are also sites of hierarchy, dominance, and power with organizational members having varying degrees of power and status and varying degrees of control over message creation and message meaning. (p.14)

It is important to create a system of organizational communication to engage employees and create a “continuous process through which organizational members, create, maintain, and change the organization by communicating verbally, non-verbally, electronically, and writing with individuals and groups of people engaged in roles as internal and external stakeholders” (Keyton, p. 17). Undoubtedly, organizational communication is not only important to create a good working environment but also to develop and share an organizational culture and promote its identity.

Identity

Identity is a broad concept and scholars from different disciplines have contributed several definitions. For sociologists, identity is often “a kind of interface or conceptual bridge between the individual and society (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p. 1338). On the other hand, Erikson’s (1968) psychological theory of identity proposed that identity helps one to make sense of and to find one’s place in, an almost limitless world with a vast set of possibilities. Another scholar in psychology, Brewer (1991), mentioned people usually have a pent-up need for social validation individuation. Identity is a construction of the self and many factors can influence the creation of the self. Social scientists believe that “what is interesting about identities is how they are constituted – how society invents and perpetuates them. The way that society categorizes

people, the laws it draws up, the visual images it promotes, the jokes it allows – all these are discourses of identity” (Antaki, 2008, p. 1). Huntington (1996) describes global conflicts in the 21st century and argues that identity is at the center of these conflicts, in that clashes between countries (or groups) self-definitions can produce disagreements. For example, the concept of identity can be analyzed and explained from an organizational level. According to Ashford et al. (2008) “we view identity and identification as ‘root constructs’ in organizational studies in that every entity needs to have a sense of who or what it is, who or what other entities are, and how the entities are associated. Identities situate entities such that individuals have a sense of the social landscape, and identification embeds the individual in the relevant identities” (p. 326). In other words, identity can be understood from an individual perspective and a societal perspective; and many factors can affect our own definition of identity.

National Cultural Identity

Within the concept of national culture, it is important to talk about the concept of identity. “In tribal or so-called ‘traditional’ societies, identity is not a topic that is constantly discussed, enacted, and negotiated” (Lars, 2015, p. 3). In other words, national cultural identity is “relatively fixed, ascribed by traditions and practices beyond the influence of the individual person” (Lars, 2015, p. 3). Other scholars like Chua and Ser Tan (2012) define national cultural identity as a “collective self-recognition and sentiment among a people who possess a shared sense of belonging and feeling of attachment to a nation, best understood as an ‘imagined political community’” (p. 1). This happens when individuals share a common culture (language, customs, institutions), and “history can provide the basis for individuals to identify themselves as a people or nation” (Chua & Ser Tan, 2015, p. 1). Also, as Sussman (2000) discusses, “the terms culture and country are used interchangeably” (p. 355).

However, over time, identity has become a multilevel concept. According to Lars, modernity makes us question our traditional practices and authorities that sometimes previously defined the roles and positions people assume in their society. According to Duty (2015), “cultural identity is influenced by various sources and factors. Certain socializing factors might include the family, church, or the community. Moreover, cultural identity is shaped by numerous sources, such as language, ethnicity or nationality, religion, sexuality, race, sex and gender, and social status.” (2015, p. 1). According to Chua and Ser Tan, “it is conceivable that globalization will bring nation-states to a place of becoming more protective of their respective identities, even as global cultures sometimes tend to overwhelm local cultures” (2015, p. 2). It is evident that globalization has made individuals invent their cultural identity based on various factors (e.g., ethnicity, religion, institutions). However, globalization brings another important problem, how the terms of culture and country are used inside organizations; employees could become more protective of their respective national identity inside the organizations.

Organizational Identity

There are many companies in the world; however, each seeks to differentiate itself in a unique way and keep its organizational identity the same across its different locations. Organizational identity is one of the ways that is used today to be different and recognized by its customers. According to Lars, organizational identity is solid, reliable, and continuous which shows the entity's personality. For example, “organizations enact their identities through the messages they convey, directly or indirectly, about themselves, their past, their ambitions, and their perceptions of the environment” (Lars, 2015, p. 2). With this in mind, organizational identity is comprehended as the understanding from and claims by stakeholders about the character of the organization in comparison to its rivals. On the other hand, corporate identity is

the symbolic and tangible expression of the desired organizational identity which are the products that communicate a specific image of the organization. Corporate identity is the way in which companies represent themselves in the eyes of their stakeholders (e.g., employees, stockholders, customers). This constitutes the impression and the reputation that the company manages.

In order to have an organizational identity within an organization, certain organizational concepts need to be determined. “Organizational identification refers to situations where people define themselves in terms of an organization, including its products, its missions, its slogans, and its values” (Lars, 2015, p. 4). The mission, vision, values, philosophy, history, and visual image allow companies to differentiate themselves from one another.

According to Dutton (1994), when organizational members identify with their workplace, they internalize its customary ways of doing things and eventually develop a feeling of oneness with the organization. However, Dutton is referencing a static organizational identity. According to Gioia et al., “in examining the fluid nature of identity, it is useful to differentiate between an enduring identity and an identity having continuity” (2000, p. 65). For example, the military identity is a kind of enduring identity while an identity that has continuity could be brands that let their identity evolved based on historical problems like Ben & Jerry’s. As a result, employees’ “self-interpretation of an organization in relation to its environment might prevail, but identity is nonetheless inherently dynamic” (2000, p. 65). For this reason, identity dynamics inside organizations can be understood from the Identity Negotiation Theory.

Identity Negotiation Theory

Identity negotiation theory (INT) is a transactional interaction process in which individuals attempt to define, change and/or support their own identity or others’ identity. “INT

posits that human beings in all cultures desire positive identity affirmation in a variety of communication situations. However, what constitutes the proper way to show identity affirmation and consideration varies from one cultural context to the next” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 4). Ting-Toomey defines identity as “an individual’s multifaceted identities of cultural, ethnic, religious, social class, gender, sexual orientation, professional, family/relational role, and personal image(s) based on self-reflection and other- categorization social construction processes” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 1). For this to happen one must “exchange verbal and nonverbal messages between the two or more communicators in maintaining, threatening, or uplifting the various socio-cultural group-based or unique personal-based identity images of the other in situ” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 1). According to Collie et al (2009), “people who do not engage in identity negotiation consciously, and continually draw on familiar categories and frames of reference, are said to be undertaking mindless identity negotiation.” (p. 209)

Competent intercultural communication among organizational members allows relationships to be formed. However, according to Ting-Toomey (2015) the competent intercultural communication is defined as “the importance of integrating the necessary intercultural knowledge, mindfulness, and interaction skills to manage identity-based issues adaptively and to achieve desired identity outcomes creatively” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 3). By developing competence in intercultural communication, an identity support strategy is created. Ting-Toomey (2015, p. 6) argues that individuals negotiate identities by engaging in “mindful listening and dialogue, share empowerment and alliance formation strategies, and constructive identity validation and empathetic inclusion behaviors are some productive identity interaction moves that can promote quality intergroup and interpersonal relationship satisfaction outcome.”

According to Collie et al. (2009), “Ting-Toomey’s work in the field of intercultural

communication provides insight into what might drive attempts to fuse or alternate between different cultural identities in interpersonal conversations” (p. 209). This can happen if there is an identity-rejection where “behaviors such as mindless attendance and ego-focused monologue, power dominance or patronization, indifferent attitudes or identity minimization messages can maximize the intergroup distance spectrum” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 6). According to Branscombe et al. (1999), the rejection-identification model is “the awareness of being a member of a discriminated group might lead to a stronger in-group identification. Also, Hotta and Ting-Toomey mentioned that “some of the international student interviewees felt that U.S. host students perceived them as being too different from them and, therefore, felt interpersonal rejection” (p. 562).

A study from Hotta and Ting-Toomey of intercultural adjustment and friendship dialectics in international students suggested that “the longer the international students or sojourners stayed in the host culture, the more likely they viewed their sojourning experience as going uphill in a positive and productive direction. Furthermore, the longer the international students stayed in the U.S., the more complex or differentiated their views concerning their adjustment experiences” (p. 562). Nevertheless, “some international students who are emotionally secure are more likely to continue interacting with dissimilar others and seek to establish intercultural friendships in the new culture (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013, p. 562). This supporting identity and rejection-identity negotiation may be perceived, for example, by graduate students working in companies in the United States on their OPT visa while they negotiate their cultural identity and the corporate identity to which they belong exposed.

Organizational Identification Theory

One important theory to explain identity from an organization's perspective is the Organizational Identification Theory. According to Kuhn, "identification provides a key to understanding organizing practices, the individual–organization relationship, and the construction of selves" (2008, p. 1). For this reason, organizations desire that their employees identify and connect with them. According to Cheney, organizational identifications refer to the maintenance, changes, creation of relations between individuals and the organization (1983). According to Kuhn, "identification scholarship builds on a conception of personal identity in which we create selves, as well as distinctions from others, in social settings comprised by a variety of social groups" (2008, p. 1). This means that inside organizations their needs to be a connection with the individual identity to feel part of the group. Also, Kuhn mentions that "we identify with organizations because we recognize some congruence between our personal identities (or perhaps our desired selves) and the identities projected by organizations (2008, p. 2). For example, people who like to travel are likely to enjoy working inside organizations in which "they help" other individuals to travel like EF Education First, KLM, Kaplan, and more. In other words, organizations are attractive places as sources of self-identification. According to Gutierrez et al (2010), organizational identification aligns individual and organizational identities, resulting in a sense of unity between the person and their organization.

United States Immigrations Laws (OPT Visa)

There are several classes of immigrants and nonimmigrants; the kind of visa one may receive depends on their nationality, how long they will stay in the United States, and for what reason (e.g., B1 Visa for tourists, H1B1 Visa for work, F1 Visa for students) This study will focus on international students who apply for and receive the F-1 visa and participate in the

Optional Practical Training (OPT) program. “The F-1 Visa (Academic Student) allows you to enter the United States as a full-time student at an accredited college, university, language training program and more” (USCIS, 2020).

Many students with the F1 visa, have two options to prepare themselves professionally in the United States. The programs are the CPT and the OPT program. According to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement's ICE, the CPT is integral to a major and this experience must be part of a student's program of study. Also, the CPT requires a signed cooperative agreement or a letter from your employer in order to be part of the program. The “OPT is temporary employment that is directly related to an F-1 student's major area of study” (USCIS, 2020). According to the U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services, once the OPT is obtained, students can then engage in this program while they are a student (the pre-completion option) or after they graduate from their degree program (post-completion option) (USCIS, 2020).

According to the Cato Institute, in 2018 around 200,000 international graduate students with OPT were hired and had their first job experience with a U.S. organization. The Optional Practical Training program was promulgated in 1992 by Justice Department Regulation (57 Fed. Reg. 31,954). Today, Title 8 of C.F.R. part 214 subsection (f) stipulates that an OPT student “may apply to United States Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) for authorization for temporary employment for optional practical training directly related to the student's major area of study.” In 2018, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement filed 288,415 authorizations to participate in the OPT program; 200,000 graduate students were hired by companies in the United States and experienced for their first time the job experience with a U.S. organization.

McMahon (1992) examined the flow of international students from 18 developing countries during the 1960s and 1970s; he tested the “push-pull” model from Everett Lee’s Migration Theory. According to Mazzarol and Soutar:

McMahon (1992) found a negative correlation between economic prosperity in sending countries and the volume of international student flows, perhaps because greater educational opportunity counteracts the effect of improved GDP per capita. Involvement by the developing country in the international economy was a significant factor, as was the home government's emphasis on education. A positive correlation was found between the size of the host nation and the sending nation's economies. The other explanatory factors within the "pull" model varied from country to country (p. 83)

According to Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), the push model suggests that the level of economic wealth, the developed country involvement in the world economy, the education priority by the developing country government, and the availability of educational opportunities in the home country affect the student flow. On the other hand, the pull model suggests that home economy compared to host country, the economic link between home and host governments, political interests between home and host country, and cultural links between the host and home country can affect the attraction to a host country.

International students can experience the push and pull factors that make them want to stay in the host country or return to their home country. Bratsberg (1995), proposed a model in which he found “the propensity to remain in the United States varies significantly across source countries, but that the variation may be explained by differences in economic and political conditions in source countries. In particular, students tend to return” (p. 381). Also an important factor that makes international students remain in the U.S. is “ if skills are valued more in the

source country, an increase in the fraction that stays in the United States should have a positive impact on the average earnings in the pool of non-returning students” (p. 380). For this reason, some international students will decide to stay after they graduate if their professional skills are more valued in the U.S. than in their home country.

On the other hand, Constant and Massey (2003), suggested that “those who kept strong ties with the country of origin are more likely to return” (p. 643). The home country’s lifestyle, culture, and relationships can be important factors that influence international students’ desires to return to their home countries. According to Constant and Massey (2003), “higher wages and employment opportunities at home are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for return migration. Instead, familial and cultural considerations are relatively more important in return decisions” (p. 634). In another study, Alberts and Hazen (2005), suggested that “many of the international students indicated a lack of integration into American society (p.143). For this reason, it is important to understand the experiences of international students inside organizations while they have their OPT visas. Their cultural identity negotiation within organizational and national cultures could be another factor for which international students stay in the U.S. or return to their home countries. This study uses in-depth interviews to answer this research question:

RQ: How do international students employed with OPT visas in organizations in the United States negotiate their cultural identities across organizational and national cultures?

CHAPTER 2

Method

After IRB approval, qualitative data collection will lead to a Grounded Theory analysis. This qualitative study in business communication and cultural studies attempts to clarify how individuals create meaning from their cultural social experiences inside U.S. based organizations. According to Glaser (1967), qualitative methods are “the only way to obtain data on many areas of social life not amenable to the techniques for collecting quantitative data” (p. 17). For this reason, Grounded Theory will be used as the method in this study.

Grounded theory methodology is an approach developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s. This idea was a new way for a different form of research that was hypothesis-generating. Glaser (2001) has identified two approaches to Grounded Theory methodology: (a) Critical-rationalistic thinking by Straus and Corbin, and the (b) Glaaserian Grounded Theory methodology that discovers a theory that might be subsequently verified by other studies to determine veracity.

The Glaaserian Grounded Theory methodology is “a general methodology of analysis linked with data collection that uses a systematically applied set of methods to generate an inductive theory about a substantive area” (Glaser, 1992. p.16). This means collecting information in order to generate a theory. According to Rupšienė and Pranskuniene (2010), “Glaser’s Grounded theory is called “traditional, classical because of its greater loyalty to the original ideas, published in 1967” (p. 8). Today this methodology is used throughout the world by scholars in different disciplines. One of the important principles of the Glaaserian Grounded Theory is that “no pre-existing hypothesis are attempted to be verified” (Rupšienė & Pranskuniene, 2010, p. 10) which means that there is no need to have a hypothesis because the

data collected will lead to the creation of a theory that attempts to explain the data results. Due to this, “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it merges” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967 p.45).

This study will be using the Strauss Grounded Theory method because it allows the use of literature before the collection of empirical data to review the information and generate an emergent theory afterward. Strauss and Corbin (1990) wrote that Grounded Theory is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived Grounded Theory about a phenomenon. Rupšienė and Pranskuniene (2010) Suggested that Strauss theoretical sensitivity comes from methods and tools” (p. 9). This means that Strauss Grounded Theory is a strategy of qualitative research. According to Rupšienė and Pranskuniene (2010), It “is possible to use literature before collecting empirical data only for the purpose of review, so that a researcher could familiarize better with the researched phenomenon and could formulate questions that act as a stepping off point during initial observations and interviews” (p. 10). This difference from the Glaserian perspective is interesting because it allows involving yourself with theories that could be applied and that could help the researcher to create an emergent theory. Strauss and Corbin (1998) described theoretical sampling as “data gathering driven by concepts derived from the evolving theory and based on the concept of ‘making comparisons,’ whose purpose is to go to places, people, or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions” (p. 210). In summary Moghaddam (2006), explains Strauss Grounded Theory perspective as the “the assumption of having an unbiased position in collecting

data and applying a certain technical procedure by letting the participants have their own voice” (p. 53).

Respondents

In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 participants. In order to qualify, individuals were required to meet three criteria: (a) be an international student, (b) be employed with the OPT visa, (c) work for an organization in the United States.

After initial inquiries to the researcher’s network of international students, additional participants recruited by using snowball sampling (referral) from (a) Facebook groups (e.g., living abroad, international students, jobs for OPT & CPT students), (b) phone apps (e.g., Homeis, Social Expat, Imcovery), and (c) Reddit groups (e.g.; F1 visa and study abroad).

Data Collection

Interviews semi-structured, using an interview guide (see appendix) that contains general questions about cultural characteristics, followed by questions that address participants’ negotiation between their cultural identity and organizational identity of the company they are working for. Interviews conducted on-line by a video tool such as Zoom. Interviews audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory has several distinct methodological that can help researchers to analyze and interpret their researchers. Traditional Grounded Theory is associated with Glaser; evolved Grounded Theory is associated with Strauss, Corbin, and Clarke; and the constructivist Grounded Theory is associated with Charmaz. The analysis perspective that this study will take is Charmazian’s Grounded Theory analysis. First, all interviews need to be analyzed from a perspective in which experiences can be taken into account. Charmaz (2006) defines GT as “a

method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data” (p. 187). The analysis perspective that this study will take is Charmazian’s Grounded Theory analysis. First, all interviews need to be analyzed from a perspective in which experiences can be taken into account. According to Ratnapalan (2019):

The constructivist Grounded Theory articulated by Charmaz assumes that analysis is created from shared experiences and relationships between the researchers and the participants. Charmaz’s approach allows researchers to explore how participants’ experiences are embedded in a larger context of structural, cultural, temporal, and social situations and relationships. The differences and distinctions between people and hierarchies of power and communication that maintain and perpetuate such differences and distinctions become visible during the analysis. (p. 667)

The constructivism Grounded Theory definitely lest researchers be immersed in the research and share experiences and relationships. At the same time, there are a lot of complexities that could come out from the data collected. The systematic approach will be used for the analysis of the data. According to Donnadiou et all. (2003) the systematic approach is:

[a] New discipline which brings together theoretical, practical, and methodological approaches, relating to the study of what is recognized as too complex to be approached in a reductionist way, and which poses the problems of borders, internal and external relationships, structures, laws or emerging properties characterizing the system as such, or the problems of mode of observation, representation, modeling or simulation of a complex totality. (p. 2)

The systemic approach is not only about knowledge, it also about practices and the way in which it is important to understand the world's complexities. To be able to develop this approach there are some stages like "observation of the system by various observers and from various angles or aspects; analysis of interactions and regulatory chains; modeling that takes into account the lessons learned from the evolution of the system; simulation and confrontation to reality to obtain a consensus" (Donnadieu et al., 2003, p. 7). This approach "provides an 'honest person' of our time, one who seeks to understand and situate one's self, with the keys for understanding the world in which he lives" (Donnadieu et al., 2003, p. 11). An effective systematic approach will formulate solutions that society needs.

The data was analyzed by a specific process:

1. The data collected in the interviews was transcribed
2. The document was read
3. The analysis looked for constructs
4. The analysis looked for similarities
5. The analysis looked for differences
6. The analysis looked for analogies
7. The analysis looked for graphic language
8. After de analysis of the document the researcher went back to the literature review

CHAPTER 3

Results

Participants

Twenty-five participants from nine different countries agreed to participate in the study. Participant countries were: Belgium (1 participant), Brazil (1 participant), Colombia (1 participant), Cyprus (1 participant), Ecuador (8 participants), India (1 participant), Israel (1 participant), Mexico (10 participants) and Venezuela (1 participant). OF the 25 participants, 5 were international graduate students and 20 were international undergraduate students. There were no differences in the OPT experiences between graduate and undergraduate students because the OPT program gives the same practical experience after completing their educational programs.

About the gender of the participant, fourteen participants identified as men; and 11 participants identified as women. Twenty-one participants went to educational institutions in the United States to pursue their careers. They went to institutions like North Carolina State University, University of North Carolina, American University, and others. On the other hand, four of the interviewees attended an aviation school in the state of Florida.

The recruited participants studied different careers. Some of the careers that were determined were aviation, communication, economics, international relations, management, and more. All the mentioned participants completed their OPT in organizations in the United States.

OPT Visa Process

After finishing their student programs, international students can apply for Optional Practical Training (OPT), which is part of their student visa. During data collection, respondents expressed different experiences and perspectives in getting approval for their OPT visa. The

formal approval process is shown in Appendix A. The following paragraphs report how participants reported on this process.

A number of interviewees mentioned that they needed to fill out and submit a considerable amount of paperwork to apply. Participant 4MEC explained:

it was a little tough because there's a lot of papers that you have to fill in and because during this time, I mean a lot of people are going through the same process, it's kind of difficult to get help because I mean the office, the International Office, is usually packed . . . so it's kind of difficult to get to fill out all these papers and try to figure out if you're doing it correctly.

The time it takes for approval after the paperwork is submitted was also a concern for participants as it could take between 3 to 5 months (See appendix B) to get approved for the OPT visa. One participant said:

So, I graduated as a mechanical engineer from TCU, and like two or three months before graduating, I'd started my application process for the OPT and that lasted around three to four months to get a response. . . . I remember it was like it was a closing period between the 90 days that I needed to get a job. So, I was urged to get a job. But then I finally got a job--here in San Antonio. So, I had to move from Fort Worth, and my OPT got approved probably a couple of weeks before the 90 days to the expiration date. (17WEC)

Half of the participants mentioned that the university managed part of the process of the OPT visa, which is significant because other students mentioned that they had gone to workshops, seminars, and informative sessions given by their institutions to learn about the OPT visa before applying. Participant (10WMX) from Mexico revealed

So, there were a couple of workshops about that, and they just helped us through everything. Literally everything and then after that--after we finished the workshops, we just went to international services to get checked, and then I went to the closest FedEx.

They took a photo for us and then we send it.

Participant 10WMX mentioned that his university managed the documentation but also that the process was smooth.

The window for applying for OPT depends on students' graduation dates. International students may apply up to 90 days before they complete their degree; after completing their degree, they have 60 days to apply for the OPT (See Appendix B). Participants mentioned that they applied by the end of their program degree; most applied to jobs and received offers after applying for the OPT. Some of them mentioned that their EAD card [Employment Authorization Document (Form I-766/EAD; also known as the EAD card)] did not arrive on time, requiring participants to negotiate their starting date. The EAD card proves that international students are allowed to work in the United States for a specific time period. Students can only begin their OPT after submitting and receiving their I-765 Form (the form that students submit) approved, and the EAD card (See Appendix x). This was frustrating for some international students, for example, participant 4MEC revealed:

I actually did it on time and what made it difficult for me is the fact that, so I put in all the papers, right and then you have to wait until like you're approved, and you receive the [Employment Authorization Document]. Because I was already approved [by the USCIS for the OPT] the problem for me was that I already had an offer but had to wait for that EAD card to actually start working. So, like that was probably the only difficult thing Most [companies] wanted me to . . . make myself free immediately. And I couldn't

because I did not have the EAD card, so that makes it super difficult because I had a lot of offers that I did not take because . . . I couldn't.

Only one participant waited to apply for jobs after getting the OPT Visa approved and received his EAD card. Only three subjects applied for jobs and got a job offer before applying for the OPT Visa. The rest of the participants applied for jobs while waiting to obtain an approved response from the USCIS. All the international students got job offers while waiting for their approval.

Even though the university managed the process, a couple of participants still expressed that the process was stressful. An insight that supplements this idea is that participants relayed that they felt that they needed to have everything perfect.

So, you always have to make sure that you had your dates right That was the most stressful part, always making sure that I . . . I was doing everything at the right time because everything had the right time to be done. (8WVE)

Another group of participants mentioned that the process was straightforward, what they expected, and was overall a good experience. An insight that supplements this idea is that some participants followed family or friends who had completed the process of filling the documentation and sending it to the correct offices.

So, I applied so I graduated May 28th and I apply for the OPT in May and I got my OPT within the 90 days the frame . . . I feel like I got it the end of July I'll say it was hard, but thankfully I had friends that were in the same process. So, they got me through all the procedures and the application and everything, so everything went smoothly, and the things that happen were the things that I expected to happen. (5WEC)

One participant was rejected for the OPT Visa.

“Well, I was a student-athlete at North Carolina State University. So, our International Office did everything for us and we just had to drop it off . . . at the mailing office, but I forgot to sign it the first time. So, I got a notification, a rejection notification the first time--that was very scary, so I had to send it back signed this time and it got approved” (18WMX).

Another participant (9MEC) from Ecuador reported that further information was requested from him. He explained:

My process to getting the OPT approval took a while since my paperwork was in the middle of the 2020 pandemic, so it took longer than expected. And my roommate and I . . . did the same paperwork, but apparently, the officer who did the paperwork was different and my friend [roommate] got accepted immediately. [For my application, they] requested further information such as transfer credit, who provided me the funds, additional documents that take a while, but after three and a half months I got my OPT approved, and here I am. (9MEC)

Both subjects who faced some problems with the OPT application re-applied and were able to get their OPT visa.

National Culture of OPT Students

The participants in this study who applied for the OPT come from different cultures, so they were asked to describe their national culture and what makes their culture unique. As mentioned before, the participants interviewed were from Belgium, Brazil, Colombia, Cyprus, Ecuador, India, Israel, Mexico, and Venezuela. There were 3 groups identified (Latin America, Europe, and Asia). In the first group, there were 21 participants from Latin America (Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Venezuela). In the second group, there were 2 participants from European

countries (Cyprus and Belgium) and in the third group, there were 2 participants from Asian countries (Israel and India).

Most of the Latin American visa applicants described themselves as warm, friendly, outgoing, and welcoming. Some did emphasize their traditional food and music as a factor that differentiated them from other cultures. Some participants mentioned that their national culture is family-oriented, and they also emphasized the willingness to help and being hard workers.

European participants (6WCY, 25MBL) described themselves as warm, friendly, outgoing, and welcoming. While 6WCY from Cyprus emphasized her family and religious traditions, participant 25MBL from Belgium emphasized how hardworking Belgians are, how shy they are, and their country's cuisine. Asian participants described their national culture as a straightforward and goal-oriented culture (2MIL), and diverse and passive (3MIN).

Other Employees' Beliefs of International Students' Culture

Participants mentioned that employees' culture at their OPT organization, was similar to their national culture and other employees had positive reactions towards international students' culture. Participants also mentioned that some employees did not know much about their cultures. For example, participant 10WMX from Mexico said that his colleagues thought his culture was great, but they didn't know much about the Mexican culture. His colleague's knowledge of the Mexican culture was acquired mostly from what they have seen on the TV. At the same time, participants reported that many employees inside U.S. organizations showed interest in learning more about the international students' home culture. For example, participant 5WEC from Ecuador mentioned that she worked in a hospital where there were not employees from Latin America. Her colleagues were surprised and curious about why she was in the United States. Nevertheless, they were open-minded and willing to learn about her culture and costumes.

Another interesting insight is that some employers did not believe where the students came from “I think the people in the plants are always very surprised about me being Mexican; they can’t believe I’m Mexican because I’m blond and have blue eyes” (19MMX).

Participant 6WCY, from Cyprus, was also seen as culturally different inside her American OPT organization, “I would get the word like *exotic* a lot. I think people associate that because it's an island. . . . and it's not really that--it's more Mediterranean climate. So, I like, I personally laugh because exotic for me is something totally different. But they would say like ‘oh Cyprus so exotic,’ and I’ll say ‘sure’” (6WCY). Another participant 12WEC mentioned that her colleagues help stereotypical beliefs. The stereotypes mentioned were that Latinxs like Reggaeton and that Latinxs are spicy. Nevertheless, after they got to meet her, they were surprised that she was not from the U.S. because of her proficient English.

Unfortunately, one of the participants from Ecuador felt there was racism in her OPT organization. For example:

Because I’m an engineer they're older [colleagues], a lot older than I am. So, I know they grew up in a totally different stage of life . . . so I feel like there's a lot of racist thoughts against my culture--Latin American culture. Inside [the organization] they tried not to show it because obviously, I work there and they're awesome people, but I know their mentality is like drugs like everyone is a drug dealer, everyone's a thief like there's just like a little amount of people that come here to actually do good. And I’ve, I've kind of heard comments like that, that make me understand, that might be the way they think and see our culture or Latin American culture. (17WEC)

Sharing Information with other OPT Students

The OPT process united international students in experiences and feelings. Most international students mentioned that they shared the knowledge and experience acquired from the OPT documentation process. For example, participant 2MIL revealed, “I think we share the same experience of trying to understand the process when we get here when we're students” (2MIL). Since all the students followed the same process all of them understood the requirements and documentation to apply for the OPT. Besides the learning process, some international students shared negative and positive shared experiences. There were two common negative themes expressed by the international students. One was about uncertainty and another one was about stress and anxiety.

Uncertainty

One of the main things the participants experienced is uncertainty, followed by having backup plans and consequential mental effects. In reference to uncertainty caused by the OPT, interviewee 25MBL explained, “Uncertainty, not much stability or like, you know, a stable future, because we don't know what's going to happen to us.” (25MBL). Regarding having backup plans, participant 23WMX said “I just think what we have in common is just the struggle of always needing to have a backup plan or already plan ahead of what you're going to be doing next” (23WMX). Participants 12WEC revealed:

Now that I have a year left--it's very scary because you really don't know what you are going to be doing in the next year, so it's hard to like, I don't know, commit to things, commit to like a lease, or commit to a relationship or things like that, because you just don't know where you are going to be in the next year--it kind of sucks. So that's like a fear I guess of mine that I live with that thought in my head like every day. It's like,

where am I going to be in a year? Should I sign that lease? Should I go on a date with that guy?--like you know, so it's always been like a problem. (12WEC)

Stress and Anxiety

Some consequential mental effects of uncertainty and having the need to create backup plans are the feelings of stress and anxiety. Participant 17WEC, in regard to the question of what international students share with other international students with OPT, emphasized the stress and anxiety. The participant revealed:

Anxiety--feel like at least for me, applying for the OPT and doing all this paperwork and knowing that I may lose or not even get the job that I currently have, gave me a lot of anxiety and I know a lot of students feel that way too, because unfortunately, our countries are third world countries which are not the best to go back and find the job or get a good job as here in the States, and is used to like living here for five years for me, maybe eight [years]. . . .and then like kind of risking that because it might get taken away, just because OPT can be like, denied . . . it gives a lot of like bad thoughts and anxiety and I know that my roommate is also on OPT and she really got super stressed about her job and like what if she didn't get [the OPT approved] and all of the adult choices that come in hand, may be stopped if the OPT isn't accepted or like we get it denied.

For most of the international students this experience is a struggle, for example, the participant 23WMX said:

I think we know it's a struggle at the end of the day, it's a struggle to--you know, we're getting our education here for a reason. And I, at least, talking about myself when I was young, I didn't realize the whole process of being an international student in the United States. So just the struggle of like waiting for months, and then you only have one year

and then from there, you kind of see, if you're going to be able to get a visa or you have to go back to your country or back to school.

Not only do OPT international students express fear about their future, but they also experience the possibility of being rejected for their OPT visa status. Participant 4MEC explained:

It's not an easy thing to achieve, especially because of the process, not only the paperwork but the [job] interview process, especially because once you mentioned that you're OPT during an interview. I mean, I've got like probably 60% or 70% of companies cross me out just because of that [having the OPT].

Positive Experiences

At the same time, there are many international students with OPT who believed they had good experiences through their OPT. Some participants talked about their professional growth and better job opportunities throughout the OPT experience. For example, interviewee 5WEC said:

I feel like most of us are looking for better work opportunities than in our home countries. We're all looking to improve or to find job security in the States and we're all like in the same boat . . . our country cannot offer [jobs], sadly, like good-paying jobs sometimes. So, it's like we're all in the same boat that we want to like get better and work for a country that gives us a lot of opportunities and where we can grow [in] our career in a better way.

Other participants mentioned personal growth by figuring out how to problem-solve. “I think that myself and other international students, we kind of share this experience of figuring things out and finding the best approach to move forward” (2MIL). Besides personal growth, international students reported developing skills of adaptability and versatility. “I think

adaptability, versatility and just being able to make the most out of the experience while still maintaining our culture” (8WVE).

Despite sharing positive and positive experiences, one thing is clear, OPT is a temporary status. One participant revealed, “I think the one thing we share is that every one of us knows that this is not a permanent thing, and everyone has to make some plan and some accomplishment toward moving on to some working visa.” (3MIN)

Cultural Confusions

Participants were asked if they have experienced the confusion of cultural situations or actions from the host culture or other cultures inside their OPT organization. A number of participants did not have any confusion about the U.S. host culture. Another participant reported he did not feel any cultural differences. One respondent, however, said:

Nothing really dramatic, I was just really shocked at how many greeting cards everybody gives here. . . . here's Valentine's Day, so we get a greeting card, and then St. Patrick's Day and Easter, and I am like ‘what do people do with so many greeting cards?’ (11WMX).

OPT participants could not recall a situation of cultural confusion because they had lived for a long time in the United States and had adapted. Participant 1MMX from Mexico explained, he did not remember any situation where he felt confused because he has been living, studying, and working in the U.S. for about 6 years. He said that he is culturally well-adapted and that is rare to have a situation where he feels culturally confused.

Nevertheless, studying and living in another country can cause confusion with situations and actions in the host culture. The most common confusion described by the participants was language. One participant revealed, “I don't understand their lingos . . . and those phrases they

use--I really get confused. So, I asked them, what was that actually? and that is when I go, okay now I understand” (3MIN). Another OPT applicant said, “Yes, so sometimes when they explain something, they already think that you know [what they are talking about], and I mean, English is my second language” (10WMX).

Despite knowing English, some international students still experience language confusion in certain situations. Other confusion occurs when international students with OPT face situations of racism, disrespect to women, work relationships, gun possession, and holidays. In regard to racism and disrespect to women one participant mentioned this:

I've realized first, because I'm a woman, and second because I'm Latina . . . there's a lot of instances; in which I've realized he's [my boss] called a lot of people out on how they speak about a woman or how they speak about other cultures . . . just because he [my boss] doesn't want me to feel like uncomfortable. And I know that's probably not common . . . just because everyone on the engineering floor is American, like a white person, so that kind of like, is a little shocking. But at the same time it's kind of like, I kind of knew it was going to happen. . . . This is a part of the States . . . even though there's a lot of immigrants here [Texas] and a lot of Latinos that live here [Texas], white Americans are still like very entitled to everything. And I want to respect where they come from, but I also want them to understand that I never came to steal someone else's spot. I came to do my career and I was able to win my spot there [in the organization], and I was essential at the moment and I'm essential now. So, yeah, it's not a bad atmosphere at work, but there's sometimes when I just feel like uncomfortable just because of the comments that go around . . . I tried to not give my opinion just because I

don't know that much, but it does make me feel uncomfortable. I wish I knew more so I can like defend people that can't defend themselves, but I don't. (17WEC).

Another participant mentioned the lack of personal relationships in the working environment with his colleagues. He explained:

Whenever you're Latino you try to be as positive and as connected with your colleagues as possible--and I mean in the US culture [it] is not the same. Some people are, but like, it's not a common thing. And the fact that . . . you are not really personal with your colleagues; I mean you can be friends . . . [but] in my culture . . . you get to know your colleagues on a personal level. Sometimes I mean what's different is that like when I get to a company here [in Ecuador], you kind of feel at home because you're sharing your personal stuff. I mean there [in the USA], it's, it's kind of different. More like--more work rather than actually sharing everything that's going on in your life, which is totally fine, but it's just different. (4MEC)

Based on what this participant said, employees in some job experiences, develop stronger relationships with their colleagues, which is different in U.S. organizations.

Some countries have laws against gun ownership, Ecuador is one of them. One of the participants was shocked about the gun culture in the U.S. she revealed:

So, there were instances where we had like [weekly] meetings [in one of the meetings] they would talk about like are we allowed to bring guns inside of the building And people were like so blown away that they were not allowed to have guns with them when they were working, that for me that was like, whoa. I would never have thought of bringing a gun to work, but for them . . . it's their right. It's a way of like expressing themselves and being able to protect themselves in case something was to

happen . . . I did not fully agree, but I accepted in the end because it's a way of thinking.
(5WEC)

Other national cultural shocks were about the number of holidays. Regarding vacations in organizations in the United States, a participant said:

I get 14 days a year, which to me was like shockingly little, and everyone was like ‘oh my god 14 [days] like that's great.’ And I was like, ‘Are you guys kidding [me]?’ How am I going to travel transatlantic back home? [and] Beat the jet lag. Like I could only afford one big trip a year, like what is this? Um, so yeah. That was definitely a shock.
(6WCY).

One of the participants experienced confusion when he was asked to only speak in English in the office. He explained:

So, once I had a situation, well, it wasn't . . . discrimination, but I had other friends from Mexico, well Mexican Americans that they were working at that company. So only once . . . we were talking in Spanish so, they [organization’s employees] said that we should only talk English because it can be rude for some people that only understand English.
(16MMX)

The organization asked the participant to stop speaking in Spanish and to speak English in the office so he could be understood by the rest of his colleagues.

Besides the confusion with U.S culture, some international students also experienced confusion with other cultures. One participant from Mexico felt confused when she saw a colleague praying. She revealed:

I saw one of my ex-coworkers on the floor, on his knees, and I was very confused, and I was like saying, like calling him by his name, and he really, he wasn't replying to it. I was like, 'what the hell is going on,' but he was just praying (18WMX).

Another participant had an experience where he felt confused by the tone of voice of a colleague. He was confused by the high pitch that his coworker had. He said:

So, if you could hear them talking, you would think they were in a fight. And one time, we were all talking like a normal tone voice and this specific person, I think it was from . . . either Russia or South Russia . . . we thought he was mad and later at the end of the meeting, he explained to us that, that's the way he has been talking since he was a child" (9MEC)

In addition, participant 14MEC, who was attending a flight school, was surprised by the military background and mentality that some of his colleagues had. He explained:

The mentality of people from Asia or like different countries, such as Israel . . . [is like they are] getting ready to work at all times. So, once they have to actually do military service mandatory . . . [they] change their mentality . . . and also change their attitude (14MEC).

Organizational Culture Experiences

International students had different organizational culture experiences inside their organizations during their OPT. Most international students mentioned having worked in an informal organizational culture inside their OPT organizations. Participant 8WVE said:

My company is definitely very much laid back . . . it's very easy to have a conversation with higher management. In fact, sometimes like I never met the CEO, but from [the experience of] . . . other coworkers that I had, they were able to literally like, say hi and

have casual conversations with the CEO, whereas like that doesn't happen in every company. So definitely a very laid-back company. And, um, it's very easy to . . . make relationships with like other coworkers, and like said, upper management too, which just creates a really good communicative environment.

Additionally, the majority of international students reported working in culturally diverse organizations. For example, participant 3WIN revealed:

It is very much a diverse [organization]. We have a lot of diverse people on my team. It is a very, very diverse [organization] and I've traveled to other offices and they also [have] quite a lot of people from other cultures, other countries. So, I'd say It's like 65%-35% [diversity]. 65% of people from here, who are born or brought [here] [and 35% from other countries].

On the other hand, international students who did their OPT experience in small companies. Regarding working in a small organization, one participant said, “We are small, pretty much our bosses and the colleagues we treat [each other] as, like family, sometimes even we organize virtual happy hours for example.” (1MMX). In contrast, a small number of participants worked in large corporations. Participant 11WMX explained, “I worked for a large, large corporation in Florida. So, it was very structured and obviously, they were nice... it was friendly, it was professional, but they were all very focused on like networking.”

Unlike international students who experience a relaxed organizational culture, only one participant mentioned having worked in a formal and corporate environment. Participant 24MMX said: “I mean it [was] really, really formal. . . . the [upper management] are at the top [hierarchy]. But when you are thinking about the bottom [organizational structure] like everybody is kind of equal.”

Only a single international student said that the experience he had was chaos. He mentioned “I would describe it as a mess. Well, as I said, it was a company that was just getting started. We were still figuring out what we're doing, what we're going to be good at, and everyone was kind of trying to bring something to the table.” (2MIL)

Following the U.S. National Culture Inside the Organizations

While living in the United States, some international students followed the U.S. national culture in order to fit inside the organizational culture of their OPT companies. Some participants said they did not do anything to follow the U.S. national culture in order to fit inside the organizational culture. For example, one participant revealed, “No, I don't think I've ever been in that situation.” (23WMX)

Another participant mentioned he had to follow the work habits from the U.S. national culture to fit better in his organization. He said:

Sometimes the way they [people from the U.S.] work. I will say, you know like our culture is kind of . . . lazy. They like to take time So maybe my culture, they'll take even a little bit extra time [to complete work] but in here it's actually, you know, pretty strict to the rules so you better finish it off. So, at the beginning, there was a shock with that, but then after that, you learn. (7MCO)

Some international students mentioned that in order to fit within the organization's culture they had to act as American or follow American culture. For example, participant 19MMX said:

The moment I stepped into the plant; I think. When I was in college, and when I was for a few weeks in the corporate [part of the company] before going into the front-line. People are very well educated, and people have traveled, there are people from all over the

world. So, people are very open to different things. They understand different things.

[But] once I got to the front-line, most people have never left the US, most of them don't have a college education or anything like that. So, you really do have to put yourself as an American because otherwise they won't be able to follow what you say or the way you express yourself or anything like that. So, in order to have a good relationship with people, you do have to act as American or at least like, make sure they understand that you're making an effort to communicate with them.

Additionally, international students followed different holidays to fit inside their organizations' cultures. The respondent 8WVE said:

Like, I found it actually nice that they did a lot for their veterans and retired military So that was definitely new to me I think, And I guess I kind of had to like not to rewire myself but realize, oh, like yeah in America they're very patriotic and proud of their vets So, I found myself trying to you know, like on Veterans Day, like [say], 'Oh, thank you for your service or whatever,' you know, which is something I never did before, or never cared for . . . but after seeing that my company really honored [veterans] that . . . kind of made me rewire my brain a little bit (8WVE).

One international student from Mexico mentioned that she had to readjust her name to fit in with the organizational culture. She explained, "[I had to change] my name, [and] I had to change my signature name. I couldn't use my actual name. I had to use the American version of it" (18WMX).

Feeling Out of Place

Some international students reported feeling out of place inside their organization because of their national culture; others did not. Being from another country could generate the

feeling of being out of place inside the organizational culture. Almost half of the participants mentioned they did not feel out of place because of their national culture. One of them said, “No, I was never out of place to my luck. . . . [the organization was] very accepting [about] other people coming from other cultures” (3MIN).

However, a considerable number of international students mentioned that they sometimes feel out of place when talking about U.S. culture topics, vacations, and sports in their OPT organizations. A participant from Brazil revealed:

There was a [work] social event that we [colleagues] went to . . . it was . . . a trivia night, but it was mostly like U.S. facts. So, I didn't know [U.S. facts] . . . you know, a US citizen might know much better . . . but I guess that was just a random situation where I felt a little out of place just because . . . I didn't have the same background as the other people. (21WBR)

As mentioned earlier, holidays are situations in which international students continue to feel detached from the organizational culture, but holidays are also sometimes the reason why international students feel out of place. One respondent said:

I guess only the holidays . . . well, you know, Thanksgiving is coming up I don't really celebrate that for example, right now is like Thanksgiving and all of these people are planning their dinners and all of that. And in my case, I mean . . . it's not a big deal for me. (1MMX)

Aside from holidays, international students also feel out of place when talking about sports.

For example, an event would be like the Super Bowl. Where I don't know a lot about football and they start talking about it and making bets and they're like, ‘Hey, who are

you going to bet for' and I don't have a clue who is even playing. But yeah, felt out of place. (9MEC)

Additionally, language is another way for international students to feel out of place within an organization. One participant mentioned,

I can say with the language sometimes, they have. . . different idioms . . . that's something I don't understand, but I consider myself a fluent person. There were a few moments that I would ask 'Can you repeat what you were saying?' I think it was like a little like a language barrier, somehow, but that was like the only like case or the only thing that I felt like out of the organization, the language could be like a barrier.

(19MMX)

Culture Threat

International students were asked if they felt their national culture was threatened inside their OPT organizations. All of them responded "no." For example, one participant said, "Luckily, I have never felt that because of my national culture. I never have felt threatened because of my beliefs, clothing, way of speaking or thinking, not really" (9MEC). Despite not feeling threatened. One international student mentioned that she believes the Latin American culture has been insulted. She explained:

I don't think it's been threatened, my national culture, the Latin American culture has been disrespected, I don't know if [I've been] threatened or if I had to like stop being like Latina or like Ecuadorian. . . . I've always told them who I was and like where I'm from, and that's never been disrespected. (17WEC)

Another international student with OPT did not feel threatened but she emphasized her colleagues' lack of knowledge about her country. She mentioned, "No, no, I never felt that way .

. . I think maybe they just have like a lack of knowledge, how my country works or how is it actually but besides that I never had any issues about that.” (10WMX)

In regard to immigration topics, a participant said she is not threatened but sometimes her colleagues disapproved of the number of immigrants from certain cultures, living in the U.S. For example, she said:

Not threatened . . . my personal . . . culture . . . is respected but sometimes, you know, some of my coworkers would talk about current immigration laws and . . . immigration topics and they would be a little disapproving of the number of certain nationalities that are currently working in the U.S. and like taking some of like people's jobs, but that's not really like culture-wise related that's more like a general idea about immigration. (8WVE)

Another international student explained she did not feel that her culture was threatened, but she had an experience where she felt she was being stereotyped. She said:

Not like threatened but . . . one occasion when I was . . . interviewed for a position . . . [a] guy . . . [who] was also Hispanic . . . [asked me] the question like ‘what are some of your strengths?’ and I'm like ‘oh, I’m dedicated, [I have] attention to details and all the stuff’ and . . . he was like, ‘why you didn't answer hard worker because we are Hispanics and we have a lot of obstacles and stuff like that’. . . . I really didn't like the stereotype, I mean, of course, is not as easy as coming . . . [to] the workforce . . . with a green card or as a citizen I mean yes it’s hard but I don't want to be remembered [like that] So, I was like okay, ‘I don’t have anything to say [to you], you gave me the answer that I had to say’ that [I] thought that [it] was out of place. (11WMX)

Preservation of National Culture

International students with OPT do things to preserve and demonstrate their national culture within their organizations. International students not only talk about their national culture but some of them share things about the culture like their food, handmade gifts from their countries, music, videos, and pictures.

Talk About It

International students reported talking about their national culture to share more information about where they come from. For example:

Um, so pretty similar to what I did in college. I tried to speak a lot about my heritage. I tried to speak a lot about Mexico. If there's a holiday I let people know . . . what the holiday is about. I try to speak well and a lot about Mexico and I think that's the best way that I feel I can keep my heritage and also like transmitted to other people. (19MMX)

Food

International students with OPT, would cook food from their countries and share it with their colleagues so that they can learn a little more about their national culture. One participant said:

To maintain my national culture, sometimes either after work, I would gather with people that are from my same origins that share my same national culture and we will talk about our country's, food, [and] sometimes even make food and invite others so they can try a piece of it, and they're more than delighted. And I will say that it's important to have their own national cultures because each national culture can add a little bit to that big organization and always be open-minded always be a heart welcoming for everyone. (9MEC)

Handmade Gifts Made in their Countries

Not only would the international students share their food, but they would also bring gifts made in their countries. A respondent said:

As a nice gesture every time that I go home like, I try to bring gifts from our country I just try to get something from your country to show them here this is where I come from and this is what it means. Because at the end of the day, they are also from different countries so, they get to know, and this is nice because once you actually tell them and explain what it means. And they actually like the gifts you know; they go to Google, and they start finding stuff and they get to know our country as well. So, it's nice because they get to see a different view of a place that they never been so yeah. (14MEC)

Music, Videos, and Pictures

Additionally, one participant mentioned she uses music, videos, and images to show her culture. The respondent said “I’ll just play Hispanic music then I’m just like showing everyone pictures of Ecuador and I am playing YouTube videos of what the country looks like. And just like talking about it You keep like the culture alive, like by teaching people” (12WEC). Other ways of maintaining their national culture are by being professional and asking for a flag representation in their OPT organization.

Be Professional

Other international students talked about the importance of being professional to give a good image and representation of their national culture. One participant said, “Try to work in a responsible way. Try to keep a good image” (15MEC). Another international student said, “I think like being professional says [a lot] about the person [you are] and . . . specifically about [your own] culture.” (16MMX)

Tangible Country Representation

One participant from Cyprus said she tried to get her flag in the office. Participant 6WCY said that the office has a corridor with flags from different because the organization prides itself on its diversity. She is the only person from Cyprus, and given the size of the country, she believed the company would not ever get to have another person from Cyprus.

Indifferent Feelings about Maintaining the National Culture

Finally, a couple of students did not feel the need to maintain their national culture and they explained they did nothing to preserve it inside their OPT organizations. Only a few international students said they do not do anything to share their national culture inside their organization. One participant revealed, “Honestly, not much, like I said, I don't embrace it a lot.” (18WMX)

Importance of Maintaining the National Culture Identity

International students mentioned their beliefs on why it is important to maintain their national culture within their organizations. Almost half of the international students mentioned that maintaining their national culture is important because it is who they are. For example, one respondent said:

It's part of who I am and it's so important to let people know who you are and what's your essence. It's such an important part of what you want to portray and what you want to do in the future. I feel like if I'm working anywhere in the world, I want them to know who I am, what I can bring to the table. What is my culture like, why am I like this? Why do I believe the things that I believe? And I want them to know and also, I want them to learn and I can learn from them. (5WEC)

She also mentioned the cultural contribution that she brought. For example, another participant mentioned the same. He said, “I think, is because just because you are an international student, you are part of a different culture, you have things that you can contribute in any position, in any kind of job” (1MMX)

Besides the cultural contribution, other participants mentioned that their national culture is part of the identity. One of the respondents said, “I mean is your identity is where you come from. So, it will . . . educate other people with it.” (18WMX) Also, some international students mentioned that their national culture shows where they belong. For example, participant 7MCO said,

Because it's basically where you belong. You know, so if you like something the way you like it and people don't respect it, then you might feel not safe or not in a good environment to work. You know, so you want them to feel good.

Also, showing their national culture caused a feeling of pride. For example:

Oh, I will say that you always have to be proud of where you're coming from. And the culture and the values that you learned at your house . . . and [that] you can adapt, and . . . take part of your culture to where you're currently living. But it's up to you if you want to show your culture or forget your current culture. (22MMX)

An important insight is that some international students said that maintaining their national culture shows that they are different. One participant” (6WCY), said “It's important because you know you're not American. Um, but at the same time, I feel like sometimes. Sometimes I'll push my identity.” She also mentioned she sometimes pushes away her identity in order to adapt to the U.S. culture.

International Students with OPT Inside U.S. Organizations

Most of the international students worked in U.S. organizations where they did not know other international students with OPT. International students with three or fewer international OPT students in their organizations were asked how they would feel if there were more international students with OPT visa from their national culture inside their organization. All of them responded with positive thoughts. One participant said she will feel, “Awesome. I wish I could know; I could work with more Latinos and Ecuadorians. Yeah, but I know it's a hard thing to get, even many people may get their OPT but not get a job” (17WEC). Other participants emphasized the benefit of having international students from different cultures inside their organization.

I feel like that would help a lot. That would be great because I mean, everyone has different opinions or maybe they're like, um, it's a personal point of view, different point of views, they have a different point of view. So, I feel like they would help the company because I mean they're not only increasing the diversity in the company, which I haven't met anybody else from any other country, to be honest in the company. So, I feel like if there was somebody from my culture, they will be also spreading my culture to other departments, not only my department, maybe like helped to be more open-minded, understanding our culture, being interested, and maybe like get them interested in other cultures, not only my culture. (13WEC)

Additionally, two participants mentioned that they would feel at home if there were more international students with OPT visas from their national culture inside their organization. One of them said:

It would make me feel definitely more at home. I guess if I'm surrounded with, like, more people from back home, and it would make me also feel like I guess proud . . . more people from my national culture are working alongside me, so it would be all like positive reactions. (8WVE)

International students with four or more international OPT students in their organizations were asked how they would feel if there were fewer international students with OPT visa from their national culture inside their organization. All of the international students with four or more international students with OPT studied at a pilot school where there is a large number of students with OPT visa. One respondent from Colombia said:

It would feel weird, you know because you don't want to be like the only one in that, but maybe a bit special, maybe they could treat you right you know maybe you could be like something very different from them. So, they might like it, they might not. (7MCO)

Another participant said he would feel ashamed of his organization and robbed of the lack of intercultural relations if his organization had fewer international students with OPT. He said:

I will be . . . ashamed if there . . . [were] fewer international students because then I wouldn't have that chance to interact, as [in] a university, with different cultures So, there's not that sharing about each other's culture. So . . . I would be feeling like if I was robbed [international experience]. (9MEC)

Additionally, one participant from Ecuador said he could not even imagine his work experience with less international with OPT in his company because the kind of industry that he is working in involves a lot of international people. He said, "I can't imagine how it would be. This industry [aviation] is global, so you are always going to be surrounded by people with different cultures." (15MEC)

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

Many international students decide to do an internship after finishing their university undergraduate and graduate degree programs. When starting the process of the university-to-work transition, international students have communication problems from the beginning of the application to the end of their work practice. Communicational problems range from language barriers to adaptation and assimilation of American culture in the work environment. This discussion section seeks to answer the question: How do international students employed with OPT visas in organizations in the United States negotiate their cultural identities across organizational and national cultures?

International students with OPT are negotiating their national culture inside the U.S. organizations with their colleagues, but they are not identifying with the organization. Additionally, international students are not creating an in-depth relationship with their employers because U.S. organizations are not acknowledging the national culture of their international students/employees. Negotiating culture is like dancing. The act of dance in this metaphor is an integration between international students and the organizations where they need to take coordinated steps to facilitate the negotiation. If they do not dance at the same rhythm, the dance will stop and the cultural negotiation will experience some pauses, and both sides will have to work to get back to the same rhythm.

Optional Practical Training

The Optional Practical Training (OPT) is an optional one-year permit for international students who study at educational institutions in the United States. The OPT provides undergraduates and graduates international students the opportunity to practice their careers and

obtain jobs within organizations in the United States, for one year. However, the process has a formal and informal side. In the OPT there is a formal process that all students must follow; there is also an informal process that international students experience during their application process to the OPT.

The OPT application process is a long process, full of paperwork, and with deadlines that must be met in order to obtain a work permit. One participant (3MIN) said,

The OPT paperwork processes, is a . . . little lengthy and it takes around 15 to 20 days to get the paperwork done before you can submit [it], and once you submit it, [it] takes around 90 days to come [the approval].

The application for this permit can begin 90 days before the end of the program or 60 days after the end of the program.

The same participant mentioned,

You sent your application within the time frame, because . . . it was supposed to be before graduation, but not more than 60 days before graduation. So, you always have to make sure that you had your dates right.

To apply to the OPT, students must choose a date to start their OPT; this date must be within 60 days after having finished their degree program. The OPT has two application phases. The first phase consists of obtaining a new I-20 document, which is generated by the university. And the second process consists of sending the documentation to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

The first phase is a process that takes place directly with the designated school official (DSO). According to the USCIS, the DSO is typically administered in the international services offices in U.S. educational institutions. The DSO will make a recommendation in the new I-20

form (Certification of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status,) and then will make an online entry for the Information System for Students and Exchange Visitors (SEVIS). The process described in this document is those followed by North Carolina State University. According to the USCIS, the designated school official (DSO), must of the time the international service office, at their international student academic institution. For this reason, the process across the academic institutions could be similar.

Phase 1

For international students to receive the recommendation of the DSO. They must first complete the OPT application, which is often found on the educational institution's DSO website. The application consists of obtaining the signatures of the supervisors and directors of the international student program. At the same time, students have to choose an OPT start date (e.g., 60 days after completing their program) and enter their GPA.

After completing the application, the international student must complete a quiz. The quiz appears at the end of a tutorial/presentation where all the information about the OPT process is found. This quiz helps international students know what their role in and what is expected when applying to the OPT. Once the international student completes the OPT application and passes the quiz, they can send the documents to their DSO.

A DSO advisor reviews the submitted material and makes sure nothing is missing. If something is missing, the DSO advisor contacts the international student to obtain the necessary documents. The participant 22MMX said,

Before I send it [to the USCIS] the university, . . . the Office of International Students analyzed and reviewed the documents that I was about to mail. And you got approved by them, so you have a second pair of eyes, and then you just mail it.

If the documents are complete, the DSO contacts the international students (about 10 business days) and sends a scanned copy of the new I-20. With this copy, the international student can begin phase two of the OPT application process that consists of sending the documents to the USCIS (it must be applied no more than 30 days after receiving their new I-20). If the student needs more than 30 days to send their documents to the USCIS, they can request a new I-20 that fits their schedule.

Phase 2

The second phase consists of submitting documents and paying a fee. One participant said, “I forget how much the fee was, but it was expensive too” (3MIN) For the second phase, form G-1145 is optional but important as it approves USCIS cell phone and email notifications. Next, applicants must complete the I-765 form, pay the fee (\$410) to the US Department of Homeland Security. With the forms and payment, applicants include two passport-style photos (cropped on the I-765 page), a copy of the I -94, a copy of the most recently issued passport biography page, copy of visa page, a copy of I-20 with OPT recommendation, and copies of other I-20s showing OPT or CPT. All documents must be sent in the suggested order, and the USCIS must receive the application within 30 days of the date that the DSO issued the new OPT I-20.

The approval response from the USCIS takes 3 to 5 months. After receiving approval, the student must wait to bring their Employment Authorization Card (EAD) because is the only document that shows the international student’s legality to work in the U.S. One participant mentioned. “After I was approved [for the OPT] . . . the problem . . . was that I already had an offer but [I] had to wait for that EAD card [to arrive], to actually start working.” (4MEC) Only through the USCIS approval process, and with this document, international students can legally

start working in the United States. If the student receives a Request for Evidence (RFE), a denial, or the request is returned, the student should contact the DSO to generate a new I-20 or appeals. One participant mentioned this in regard to the RFE, “I was requested further information such as transfer credit, who provided me the funds, additional documents that take a while, but after three and a half months I got my OPT approved.” (9MEC) Meanwhile, another participant that was rejected said “So, I got . . . a rejection notification the first time, that was very scary, so I had to send it back [to the USCIS], signed this time and it got approved.” (18WMX)

In addition to the formal process, there is the informal process, where communication problems can be evidenced in the experiences of international students. International students are unaware of the OPT process. Some international students decide to attend conferences, events, or sessions organized by their universities to learn about the OPT. This is one of the first encounters that international students have with the OPT. After attending these events, international students begin to prepare to follow the formal application of the OPT.

Some international students who want to apply to the OPT ask for help from their colleagues and relatives who have gone through the process. One participant mentioned, “I’ll say it was hard, but thankfully I had friends that were in the same process. So, they got me through all the procedures and the application and everything.” (5WEC) Many times, a language barrier can create insecurity when completing paperwork. Several students reported feeling the pressure, as the documents must be filled out perfectly and by the deadlines. The participant 4MEC said,

It's kind of difficult to get help because. . . the International Office is usually packed with all these [OPT] questions, so it's kind of difficult to get [help] to fill out all these papers and try to figure out if you're doing it correctly. . . . you definitely want to have that one-year experience [so] you want everything to be perfect.

At the same time, while international students are filling out their documents, many of them are in the last semester of their university program where they not only have the stress of finishing their degree but also of applying to the OPT and jobs.

Once the documents have been sent on the indicated dates, it is time to wait for approval, rejection, or a request to send more documentation to the USCIS. During this 3 to 5 months of this process, international students feel uncertainty, anxiety, and stress not knowing what could happen to their student status. Many of them find it difficult to make a commitment (e.g., lease, relationships, jobs). Participant 12WEC said,

It's very scary because you really don't know what you are going to be doing in the next year so it's hard to . . . commit to things, commit to like a lease, or commit to a relationship or things like that, because you just don't know where you going to be in the next year.

For this reason, international students believe it is necessary to have backup plans in case they have to return to their country. Some of their backup plans include looking for other visas, going back to university, or returning to their country. One participant mentioned,

we [international students with OPT] all share a lot whether it's . . . the stress of the paperwork, whether it's 'oh my god you know I may have to pack my bags and leave'. And I don't want to leave because . . . I like . . . my colleagues, this feels like home [the U.S.]. I'm doing well career-wise and I want to continue . . . living here and pursuing this . . . career goal. And it's, it definitely. . . [could sabotage something] . . . when all of a sudden . . . after OPT you like apply for H1B1 [Working Visa]. And if that doesn't go through, then you have to leave [the U.S.]. So, I would say like a lot of stress and a lot of

backup plans. Like, what happens if I have to . . . leave my apartment mid-lease and pack everything up and go [back to my country]. (6WCY)

During the 3 to 5 months of waiting, international students are dedicated to looking for work in the United States. International students decide to stay in the U.S. and practice their careers, as they often see more job security in the U.S. than in their own countries. At the same time, many international students stay in the U.S. for the possibility of professional growth. However, some international students say they are crossed out by employers for the very fact that students have OPT status. When applying for jobs, many companies seek immediate employment, but international students cannot start working immediately as they must wait for the approval of their OPT and EAD card. One participant mentioned he missed out on better opportunities because he did not have the documentation to start working. He said,

When I was interviewing for a lot of companies. Most of them wanted me . . . to make myself free immediately and I couldn't because I did not have the EAD card. . . . I had a lot of offers that I did not take because . . . I couldn't and it was probably much better job offers at that time.

After receiving their OPT approval, international students must wait for the arrival of the EAD card. Without this card, international students cannot legally start working. Any violation can affect the student's visa status. However, many times the EAD card arrives after approval from the OPT. This can be a problem, as many international students must negotiate flexible work start dates. One participant said, “we have to negotiate the starting date. . . . if it doesn't come on time [the EAD card]. So, you have to tell the employer let's postpone it by another 15 days or so.” (3MIN) Therefore, there is a problem if the OPT is approved but the EAD card does not arrive in time to start work on the indicated date. These delays interfere with students moving

to other cities, financial problems, leases, and more. However, students can do nothing about it other than solving their problems and wait for the EAD card to start working.

Once international students receive their EAD card, they can begin working. The stress does not end there, as OPT applicants must keep the Designated School Official (DSO) and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) updated on where they are working; their address must always be up to date. After completing this last step, students can practice their careers in organizations in the United States, where they not only develop their job and professional skills but also experience the organizational culture. Near the end of the 12 months of OPT, international students can return to their country, apply for another visa status, such as the H1B1 work visa, as long as they are sponsored by their companies, or extend their OPT if they are students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) careers.

Organizational Work Culture

Once OPT students begin work, international students are interacting with other employees inside the organization; s culture. Organizational culture is composed of beliefs, values, assumptions, and forms of work interaction that contribute to the social and psychological environment of an organization. Each organization has a unique organizational culture that differentiates it from the others.

International students had different experiences of fitting into the organizational cultures within their organizations during their OPT. Most international students described the organizational culture of their companies as laid-back, diverse, and small organizations. One participant said, “I will say [my organization is] somewhat laidback . . . we are [a] small [organization], [we are] pretty much our bosses and . . . we kind of treat us like family” (1MMX). The participant 2MIN said,

My organization is very much diverse. We have a lot of diverse people on my team. It is very, very diverse and I've traveled to other offices and they also [have] quite a lot of people from other cultures, other countries.

In contrast, few international students were in larger, more formal companies, which tend to have multiple layers of hierarchy that create more formal organizational structures. One participant mentioned:

There was definitely like some kind of hierarchy . . . it was very interesting to see how aside from the CEO . . . [in the] very top [of the hierarchy], and everyone else [like] supervisors' VPs. . . . for example, the VP would meet with the CEO separately obviously not the whole company through the CEOs, but when they [VPs] would release that information down to . . . everyone else was all like very peer to peer the same level. (6WCY)

When starting to work in the United States, international students not only perceived the organizational culture, but also the national culture as exhibited by their American colleagues within the organizational culture. Colleagues' U.S. national culture influenced perceptions of organizational culture when working in the U.S. as an international student.

Most international students said that they did not feel any confusion about the U.S. national culture within their organizations' culture. Nevertheless, when working in a work environment in the United States, some international students have been confused by the national culture actions and situations that can influence the organizational culture of organizations.

One of the cultural confusions that can influence corporate culture is the language barrier. For some students, it is difficult to understand idioms and colloquial language within organizations. One participant said:

I can say with the language sometimes, they have. . . different idioms . . . that's something I don't understand, but I consider myself a fluent person. There were a few moments that I would ask 'Can you repeat what you were saying?' I think it was like a little like a language barrier, somehow, but that was like the only like case or the only thing that I felt like out of the organization, the language could be like a barrier.

(19MMX)

In order to understand what various workers in the company mean in conversations, students reported asking about the meanings and for explanations. However, since OPT students studied in the United States, many workers within organizations assume that by explaining something or giving directions about something, that the international student fully understands everything. Participant 10WMX said, "so sometimes when they explain something, they already think that you know [what they are talking about], and I mean, English is my second language." Some international students are left with questions due to the fact that despite knowing English (as a second language), there are still certain language barriers that hinder the internal communal understanding of the organization's processes and organizational culture. Some international students, when they find people that speak their same language, connect with them, and sometimes they end up speaking in their language and not in English. One participant said:

So, once I had a situation, well, it wasn't . . . discrimination, but I had other friends from Mexico, well Mexican Americans that they were working at that company. So only once . . . we were talking in Spanish so, they [organization's employees] said that we should only talk English because it can be rude for some people that only understand English.

(16MMX)

This can be perceived poorly by employees inside the organization because not everybody can understand foreign languages and can cause an internal disconnect through languages.

For some international students, there is a disconnect in the internal relationships between colleagues. International students described their relationships with their colleagues as distant and lacking in personal relationships. In other cultures, international students described internal relationships as more personal. One participant said,

Whenever you're Latino you try to be as positive and as connected with your colleagues as possible--and I mean in the US culture [it] is not the same. Some people are, but like, it's not a common thing. And the fact that . . . you are not really personal with your colleagues; I mean you can be friends . . . [but] in my culture . . . you get to know your colleagues on a personal level. Sometimes I mean what's different is that like when I get to a company here [in Ecuador], you kind of feel at home because you're sharing your personal stuff. I mean there [in the USA], it's, it's kind of different. More like--more work rather than actually sharing everything that's going on in your life, which is totally fine, but it's just different. (4MEC)

To such a level that they can talk about personal things as friends. For the organizational culture, this can be reflected in the lack of relationship of workers within an organization, thus affecting the organization's culture.

Other U.S. cultural topics such as racism and gun possession have been popular lately in the United States. At the same time, this has caused confusion and amazement on the part of international students within their OPT organizations.

Following the increase in recent racist attacks, several companies have made efforts to hire more international workers to generate more diversity in their organizations. "As protests

sweep the nation, more and more companies are announcing initiatives aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion within their walls.” (Stevens) Some companies continue to fight to eliminate gender discrimination and racial discrimination within organizations. Many organizations do not want their workers to feel uncomfortable. Despite a large number of immigrants from many parts of the world, racism still exists in the United States. International students who receive a job offer in the United States are not stealing jobs but are earning them with their merits and effort. One participant said:

Even though there are a lot of immigrants here [Texas] and a lot of Latinos that live here [Texas], white Americans are still very entitled to everything. And I want to respect where they come from, but I also want them to understand that I never came to steal someone else's spot. I came to do my career and I was able to win my spot there [in the organization], and I was essential at the moment and I'm essential now. (17WEC)

According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2021), in 2020 the total number of 6,377 charges were filed and resolved under Title VII alleging national origin-based discrimination. Racist comments within a company can generate discomfort, many international students decide to let such comments pass and do not comment because they rationalize the comments. According to Castle Bell et al. (2015), “rationalization is defined as providing an alternative explanation or justification that downplays or diminishes the serious nature of various forms of verbal or nonverbal communicative injustices committed by DGMs” (p. 2) The same participant said:

There's sometimes which I just feel uncomfortable just because of the comments that go around about, like, I don't know, like who's the president or immigrants coming here for

like receiving like Medicaid and stuff like that. It's just like I tried to not give my opinion, just because I don't know that much but it does make me feel uncomfortable. (17WEC)

Nevertheless, this can cause discomfort inside the organizational culture.

As one example, gun ownership laws in the United States have always been a controversial topic. In several countries represented by OPT students, the possession of weapons is illegal. For an international student, it was shocking to learn that people use to take guns to their workplace. In a weekly meeting of her work, they talked about the prohibition of possession of weapons in her workplace. However, what was important was her reaction. Although she did not agree with the possession of weapons at work, she accepted that her colleagues demanded their rights regarding the possession of weapons. As she explained:

So, there were instances where we had like [weekly] meetings [in one of the meetings] they would talk about like are we allowed to bring guns inside of the building And people were like so blown away that they were not allowed to have guns with them when they were working, that for me that was like, whoa. I would never have thought of bringing a gun to work, but for them . . . it's their right. It's a way of like expressing themselves and being able to protect themselves in case something was to happen . . . I did not fully agree, but I accepted it in the end because it's a way of thinking. (5WEC)

For her, that is their culture and she, not being part of the American culture, decided not to comment, if not accept it despite not thinking the same.

Many international students want to visit their country while working on an OPT visa. However, one confusion that exists for international students is the number of vacation days allowed by their OPT organization. For some international students, the number of vacations is

absurd when, as they need to travel to their countries, survive the time change, and repeat that process going back to the states return immediately. One participant said:

I get 14 days a year, which to me was like shockingly little, and everyone was like ‘oh my god 14 [days] like that's great.’ And I was like, ‘Are you guys kidding [me]?’ How am I going to travel transatlantic back home? [and] Beat the jet lag. Like I could only afford one big trip a year, like what is this? Um, so yeah. That was definitely a shock. (6WCY).

Vacations are policies that affect organizational culture so for some international students it may be surprising.

When starting to work in companies in the United States, international students not only perceived the U.S. national culture within the organizational culture but also the national culture of international colleagues. This is more common in companies where there is significant diversity. Some of the confusion was due to language, religious traditions, and cultural values and beliefs. For example,

The tone of voice also contributes to communication. In some countries, there are high and low tones that could affect the communication because it could alter the significance of what you are saying. When entering organizations with a diverse organizational culture, there may be problems understanding language. As for the high tone of voice, other cultures may perceive it as aggressive language or that the person is angry. The opposite happens with low tones of voice. For example, one participant mentioned,

So, if you could hear them talking, you would think they were in a fight. And one time, we were all talking like a normal tone voice and this specific person, I think it was from . . . either Russia or South Russia . . . we thought he was mad and later at the end of the

meeting, he explained to us that, that's the way he has been talking since he was a child”
(9MEC)

This can create confusion among internal workers regarding organizational culture interactions. Also, in organizations with a diverse organizational culture, there are workers with different religions. In certain countries, there are smaller and fewer religious communities, so seeing different religious traditions in the same workplace can cause confusion. In addition, international students with a military background may have a different way of interpreting things than other international students who have not had to participate in military service in their country.

However, besides the language barrier, there is a disconnect between international students and the organization, when talking about fully American issues. These topics can be politics, sports, popular culture, and historical events. The majority of times that international students have felt out of place have been at company-organized events or meetings where topics related to the United States are discussed. One participant said,

There was a [work] social event that we [colleagues] went to . . . it was . . . a trivia night, but it was mostly like U.S. facts. So, I didn't know [U.S. facts] . . . you know, a U.S. citizen might know much better . . . but I guess that was just a random situation where I felt a little out of place just because . . . I didn't have the same background as the other people. (21WBR)

In order not to feel out of place in work situations and in general, some international students have adapted to American culture. Participant 1MMX from Mexico explained, he did not remember any situation where he felt confused because he has been living, studying, and

working in the U.S. for about 6 years. He said that he is culturally well-adapted and that is rare to have a situation where he feels culturally confused.

National Culture

International students experienced cultural adaptation to the U.S. national culture. According to Deal and Prince, “Cultural adaptability is the willingness and ability to recognize, understand, and work effectively across cultures. It presumes that such interactions will have successful outcomes” (2007, p. 7). Adapting to the national culture of the USA, international students have started to follow the American culture. Examples of this are work habits (e.g., adjusting to long work hours, few vacation days, non-personal work relationships). On the other hand, most of the international students have learned about U.S. holidays and celebrations celebrated commemorated in the United States. For example, Thanksgiving Day and Veterans Memorial Day. International students not only adapt to work and its celebrations; many have changed their name to a U.S. version (i.e., Marco for Marc), and tried to reduce their accent in order to be understood better. Students mentioned that they would push their identity in order to adapt to the U.S. Culture.

Additionally, international students experienced cultural assimilation into the national culture of the U.S. Cultural assimilation is the process in which a person comes to resemble other people of a culture. While this is more common in immigrants, it is a gradual process. Some international students have been living in the United States for between 3 (master's students) and 5 years (undergraduate students). Many OPT students have established their lives in the United States and have adapted so well to American culture to the point that they feel they have assimilated well into the culture.

International students did not report feeling threatened within their American organizations. However, some reported that felt that their national culture has been disrespected (e.g., Hispanic and Latin American cultures). The Latin American and Hispanic culture has been seen as illegal, criminal, and thieves, which has generated conversation about certain nationalities that live in the United States. One participant said,

Some of my coworkers would talk about current immigration laws and you know just immigration topics and they would be a little disapproving of the number of certain nationalities that are currently working in the US and like taking some of like people's jobs, but that's not really like culture wise related (8WVE)

Also, some Hispanics have been stereotyped by the way they look. "I think the people in the plants are always very surprised about me being Mexican; they can't believe I'm Mexican because I'm blond and have blue eyes" (19MMX). A Hispanic with light eyes, light skin, and light hair is viewed differently than the "typical Hispanic." However, the stereotypes and disrespect of the Latino and Hispanic cultures are due to the lack of knowledge of other cultures or countries. Despite stereotypes and beliefs towards some cultures. Workers within organizations in the United States are willing to learn from new cultures. Most OPT students reported that their colleagues proved to be open-minded, intrigued, curious, and willing to learn from other cultures.

International students display their national culture by sharing and teaching some aspects about it to their colleagues. International students try to show a little of their country and their cultures to their colleagues. To show a bit of their culture, international students talk about their country. Some international students, apart from talking about their country, show photos, videos, and music. One participant said,

[When] we are all together and we're working on something, I'll just play Hispanic music. . . . and then I'm just like showing everyone pictures of Ecuador. And I play YouTube videos of what the country looks like and just like talking about it. (12WEC)

Also, international students share their national food with their colleagues within their OPT organizations. One participant shared,

To maintain my national culture, sometimes either after work, I would gather with people that are from my same origins that share my same national culture and we will talk about our country's, food, [and] sometimes even make food and invite others so they can try a piece of it, and they're more than delighted. And I will say that it's important to have their own national cultures because each national culture can add a little bit to that big organization and always be open-minded always be a heart welcoming for everyone. (9MEC)

They also talk about their celebrations and traditions. Another participant mentioned, For example, I like the Day of the Dead. So, I always mention that to them that does me like the most special holiday for me. So literally, I just explained it to them like which holidays I like and sometimes they're like, 'oh, we should do these, we should do that'.

In addition, international students show their culture to their colleagues, giving them gifts made in their country. However, for some, the best way to demonstrate their culture or where they come from is by being professionals in order to represent their country in the best way possible. Also, some international students can ask for tangible representation of their country, as one participant from Cyprus did, she tried to get her flag in the office.

For international students, maintaining their culture within their OPT organizations is important because it is part of their identity. "I mean is your identity is where you come from.

So, it will . . . educate other people with it.” (18WMX) Being from a certain country or culture defines the identity of the essence of the person. For international students, their culture and country are where they grew up and where they learned to be the person they are. In addition, international students believe that having a diverse group of employees inside organizations can contribute to the development of their organizations. One participant said, “That will be very beneficial . . . to have more students with OPT, at least that brings diversity. . . . they [international students] are bringing other skills that can be useful to their employers.” (1MMX) This is because international students may offer global opinions or different ideas. Demonstrate the culture of international students, educate people within organizations. International students are proud of where they come from and their culture; and, not many international students have the opportunity to leave their country in search of better opportunities.

Organizations in the United States should consider the number of international employees in their workforce. All international students with OPT said they would like to see more international students from their countries in their organizations. Thus, it would be important if companies in the United States consider hiring more students with OPT. On the other hand, for companies with great diversity, it is preferable not to lower their percentage of internal diversity since it can generate a negative perspective of the internal diversity of the organization.

Implications

As well as providing interpretations of the results, it is important to look back to the scholarly work in the literature review of the study. From the results, it has been possible to find insights into how international students with OPT negotiate their cultural identities across organizational and national cultures. The implications will show how this study has contributed

to intercultural and organizational communication and why we should care about international student's cultural identity negotiation.

The International Institute for International Education (2018), mentioned that most of the students that apply for the OPT visa come from Asia. Nevertheless, the study had a majority of respondents from Latin America. This could have been because of the researcher's recruitment posts on different social media. Since the researcher is part of the Latin American group, there was an affluence of respondents from this group.

According to Faggian et al., 2017; Suter & Jandl, 2006; and Ziguras & Law, 2006, most U.S. companies hire international students that study or studied in the U.S. because the international students will presumably master the English language, understand the U.S. culture and possess the skill qualifications needed to work. However, despite having the qualified skills to work and understand the culture of the U.S., international students still face language barriers and cultural confusions. For example, in regard to the language barrier, a participant said, "so sometimes when they explain something, they already think that you know [what they are talking about], and I mean, English is my second language." (10WMX) Meanwhile, another participant said she experienced cultural confusion in a corporate event.

There was a [work] social event that we [colleagues] went to . . . it was . . . a trivia night, but it was mostly like U.S. facts. So, I didn't know [U.S. facts] . . . you know, a U.S. citizen might know much better . . . but I guess that was just a random situation where I felt a little out of place just because . . . I didn't have the same background as the other people. (21WBR)

Despite the language barrier and cultural confusion situation, international students seek to gain experience during their OPT. Nevertheless, national culture plays a large role in the experience of international students within organizations in the U.S.

National Culture

Many of the national culture definitions exclude the internal state of culture. As Jameson (2007), said culture is an internal state of the mind that can influence the process of communication of individuals. Each international student described their national culture differently because each of them has a unique internal state of mind about their culture. This can affect positively or negatively their process of communication.

Internal State of National Culture

Every international student is different. As Yean (1997), indicated, intercultural communication should be analyzed based on individual-level communication and not based on generalized views of how people from a particular culture communicate. From the data generated, most international students' internal states are biased to adapt or assimilate to the U.S. culture. According to Facchini, Patacchini, and Steinhardt (2015) assimilation is:

A process of convergence of immigrant behavioral and attitudinal outcomes to the outcomes of the native-born – is a complex phenomenon. It can occur along some dimensions (language, citizenship acquisition, or employment), but not necessarily along others (religiosity). It can also be very heterogeneous across destinations, origins, or both.
(p. 620)

One participant said, “I live here in the US. throughout my Ph.D., so almost six years counting the work. So, I guess I am well adapted.” (1MMX). Also, a participant provided an example of cultural assimilation saying,

So sometimes . . . they're (U.S. coworkers) shocked that I'm actually not from here.

People usually think I'm from here because I guess my English is good or whatever. So, like when I tell them, like 'no I'm from actually Ecuador and I was born and raised there, and I came to the States six years ago . . . they're like, 'what? Really? you seem so natural here'. (12WEC)

Some international students' internal cultural conceptualization consists of showing more or less their culture in the U.S. Beamer (1995) mentions that self-schemata are created internally. That is, each international student has a unique internal state of mind and their own cultural schemata. This can also influence the external state of national culture.

External State of National Culture

Beamer's (1995) model of intercultural communication describes the necessity of aligning self-schemata in cultural situations. When international students align their schemata to the U.S. culture, they culturally adapt and assimilate. In the process of alignment, international students show the external state of their national culture to the host culture by talking about their culture, showing pictures, videos, food, etc. Some examples of this are "I would gather with people that are from my same origins that share my same national culture and we will talk about our country's, food, [and] sometimes even make food and invite others [colleagues from other national cultures] so they can try a piece of it." (9MEC), another participant said:

[When] we are all together and we're working on something, I'll just play Hispanic music. . . . and then I'm just like showing everyone pictures of Ecuador. And I play

YouTube videos of what the country looks like and just like talking about it. (12WEC)

Meanwhile, Most OPT students reported that their colleagues proved to be open-minded, intrigued, curious, and willing to learn from other cultures. These results build on existing

evidence of Beamer's model of intercultural communication, in which for example, both international students and people from the U.S. adjust their self-schemata in cultural situations.

The external state of culture influences the creation of groups that share similar cultures. (i.e., Latin Americans, Europeans, Asians). For this reason, several responses from the interviewees are similar despite the fact they are from different national cultures. As mentioned by Hofstede (2001), cultural bias happens when people distinguish members of a group from another. Therefore, international students can be stereotyped as one participant mentioned the stereotype that Latinos take jobs from people in the U.S. The participant said,

Even though there are a lot of immigrants here [Texas] and a lot of Latinos that live here [Texas], white Americans are still very entitled to everything. And I want to respect where they come from, but I also want them to understand that I never came to steal someone else's spot. (17WEC)

Despite the internal and external state of national culture experienced by both international and Americans, stereotypes exist within organizations. Still, international students want to gain their OPT experience within organizations in the U.S. by negotiating, adapting, and assimilation in the U.S. culture and the organizations' culture.

Organizational Culture

Companies have unique organizational cultures, that differentiate them from other companies. Keyton (year)said culture would emerge from any collection of individuals who comprise an organization. She also mentioned that culture is not produced for employees but is produced by them when they interact. Few international students mentioned being part of organizations that are diverse. One participant said,

My organization is very much diverse. We have a lot of diverse people on my team. It is very, very diverse and I've traveled to other offices and they also [have] quite a lot of people from other cultures, other countries. (3MIN)

Therefore, the organizational culture within these organizations must have a multicultural approach. Other international students were not as lucky, as they were in organizations with a lack of diversity. For example, one participant mentioned,

I'm the only darker skin person in my company But I guess it was . . . a little striking to see that I was the only kind of person like that. So, it made me kind of question . . . how diverse my company was or not. (8WVE)

For this reason, it is important for organizations to put effort into cultural integration.

Organizational Communication

As mentioned in the literature review, organizational communication is the process of sending and receiving messages within an organization. Keyton (year), mentioned that organizational communication is a process in which members of the organization create, maintain, and change the organization. There can be a small disconnect in an organization's communication when the organization's culture is mixed with the national culture of international students. International students accept organizational communication whereas others try to improve the organization's communication. One participant 6WCY from Cyprus tried to create a more diverse organizational culture?? when she wanted to put her country's flag in the office building's corridor with flags from different, as the organization promotes having pride in its diversity. Meanwhile, other participants adapted during the organizational communication process by changing their name to a U.S. version (i.e., Marco to Marc). By

improving the organizational communication to be more multicultural, international students felt more integrated and engaged inside organizations.

Identity

Identity is a broad concept, some scholars like Snow and Anderson (1987) mentioned identity as a conceptual bridge between society and individuals. Meanwhile, Erikson's (1968) psychological theory of identity proposed that identity helps individuals to make sense of, and to find one's place in a limitless world of possibilities.

National Identity

National cultural identity as Lars (2015) said, is fixed and scribed by traditions and practices. The national cultural identity is learned by international students in their countries and then they use what they have learned about their national culture, to identify themselves in the U.S. As Erikson said, identity helps individuals make sense of their environment and helps them find a place. For international students in the U.S., their national culture is part of their identity. One participant identified with his national culture by saying,

It's part of who I am and it's so important to let people know who you are and what's your essence. It's such an important part of what you want to portray and what you want to do in the future. I feel like if I'm working anywhere in the world, I want them to know who I am, what I can bring to the table. What is my culture like, why am I like this? Why do I believe the things that I believe? And I want them to know and also, I want them to learn and I can learn from them. (5WEC)

Also, Sussman (2000), mentioned that sometimes the terms *culture* and *country* are used interchangeably. When international students identify themselves in the U.S., they want to show

their external state of culture. They would say, for example, “I am Mexican,” because that represents part of their identity.

Antaki (2008) said,

What is interesting about identities is how they are constituted – how society invents and perpetuates them. The way that society categorizes people, the laws it draws up, the visual images it promotes, the jokes it allows – all these are discourses of identity. (p. 1)

International students and people from the U.S. have different internal cultural states that create different national culture schemas. This generates various discourses of identity.

According to Chua and Ser Tan, “it is conceivable that globalization will bring nation-states to a place of becoming more protective of their respective identities, even as global cultures sometimes tend to overwhelm local cultures” (2015, p. 2). International students can show their national cultural identity by teaching others about their traditions. Nevertheless, some people are against organizations hiring employees from other cultures. Some employees could become more protective and could generate racism and stereotypes. This could cause the suppression of the national cultural identity for international students who work in the U.S.

Organizational Identity

Dutton (1994) mentioned that when employers identify with their workplace, they internalize working customs and eventually they will develop a feeling of being one. These results provide new insight into the relationship between organizational identity and international students’ organizational identification. Most international students in this study did not feel identified with their organization. This could be because of various factors like not getting a job at an organization where they identify with the organization. One participant mentioned,

When I was interviewing for a lot of companies. Most of them wanted me . . . to make myself free immediately and I couldn't because I did not have the EAD card I had a lot of offers that I did not take because . . . I couldn't and it was probably much better job offers at that time. (4MEC)

Since international students cannot accept jobs before having their OPT approved and their EAD card, sometimes they lose the opportunity to work in organizations where they could feel more identified.

Most of the international students get jobs at smaller organizations to practice their degrees. "I will say [my organization is] somewhat laidback. . . . we are [a] small [organization]." (1MMX) They are doing the OPT for the experience and what could come in the future, like a more permanent status with the H1B1. As one participant said:

I'm doing well career-wise and I want to continue . . . living here and pursuing this . . . career goal. And it's, it definitely. . . [could sabotage something]. . . when all of a sudden . . . after OPT you like apply for H1B1 [Working Visa]. And if that doesn't go through, then you have to leave [the U.S.] (6WCY)

Another participant reinforced the transition to a more permanent status when he mentioned, "I think the one thing we share is that every one of us knows that this is not a permanent thing, and everyone has to make some plan and some accomplishment toward moving on to some working visa." (3MIN)

Besides the organizational identification, international students had to negotiate their identity inside the organizations and the U.S. culture.

Identity Negotiation Theory

According to Ting-Toomey (2015) the Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) “posits that human beings in all cultures desire positive identity affirmation in a variety of communication situations. However, what constitutes the proper way to show identity affirmation and consideration varies from one cultural context to the next” (p. 4). International students negotiate their national culture identity inside organizations in the U.S. in a variety of communicational situations. To negotiate the identity of international students within organizations and in the U.S. national culture the, the need to “exchange verbal and nonverbal messages between the two or more communicators in maintaining, threatening, or uplifting the various socio-cultural group-based or unique personal-based identity images of the other in situ” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 1). For example, one participant said,

[When] we are all together and we're working on something, I'll just play Hispanic music. . . . and then I'm just like showing everyone pictures of Ecuador. And I play YouTube videos of what the country looks like and just like talking about it. (12WEC)

According to Collie et al. (2009), people that do not engage in identity negotiation consciously will fall back to categorize and not internalize the identity negotiation. The negotiation of identities needs to be mindful to minimize the intergroup distance spectrum. According to Ting-Toomey (2015), competent intercultural communication is defined as “the importance of integrating the necessary intercultural knowledge, mindfulness, and interaction skills to manage identity-based issues adaptively and to achieve desired identity outcomes creatively” (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 3). Therefore, the results of the study fit with Identity Negotiation Theory Ting-Toomey (2015). International students negotiate their national cultural identity within organizations and the U.S. national culture.

Organizational Identification Theory

Organizations want that their employees identify with them as Kuhn (2008) mentioned, that identification with the organizations provides an understanding of the practices, relationships, and constructions of selves. This means that in order for an international student to identify with the organization there needs to be a national cultural identity negotiation to feel part of the group. For this reason, the results do not fit with the Organizational Identification theory because most of the international students inside U.S. organizations do not feel identified with the organization. In order for international students to feel identified, the organizational culture and organizational communication needs to be negotiated with the national culture of the international students and implemented inside the organization.

Limitations

During the research study, there were limitations that affected the study. The limitations involved the COVID-19 pandemic, sample size, participant diversity, international students' bias, and researcher bias. The limitations of this study are presented below.

The primary limitation of this study is that it was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic [January through March 2021]. This could have affected the duration of the OPT process due to the change of work to online? forms, a new modality of sending documents, and more. Some of the participants described their application processes to the OPT as long and with many delays. This may have affected the experience and perceptions that an international student may have about the OPT process.

Another limitation was the sample size and the degree of diversity of the OPT students interviewed. During the study 25 participants were recruited; a larger sample size could have helped to generalize the results obtained from this study. Furthermore, the majority of

international students were from Latin America, so it would have been helpful to recruit more participants from Europe and Asia. This may have affected the data analysis since most of the participants were from Latin America.

In addition, international student biases and researcher bias were other limitations of the study. International students may have been biased in how they view American culture. They can also have cross-cultural biases, so it is important to mention that participants' experiences could be affected by these. Also, the author is an international student starting the OPT process, so there may have been biases throughout the investigation.

Recommendations

As a recommendation, the study should be carried out under normal circumstances where there is no pandemic. The pandemic can affect the experiences of international students at the time of data collection. Second, it would have been preferable to have an equal number of OPT students from Latin America, Europe, and Asia. I would even recommend recruiting participants from all the continents of the world to study their experience and cultural negotiation. For future studies, it would be important to study the adaptation and assimilation of international students with OPT inside organizations. Also, how does the culture of organizations adapt to the culture of international students with OPT?

This study serves as an indicator of the experiences of international students with OPT within organizations in the United States. Also, the study serves as an indicator to improve the organizational cultures of U.S. companies' degrees of diversity. Throughout the study, cultural negotiation opportunities can be observed where international students and employers can reach agreements to implement cultural changes. For example, the number of vacation days could be extended for international students that live in another continent to ease the adjustment back into

their country. Also, the implementation of culture appreciation days where the national culture of the international students with OPT is embraced. Also, some tangible representations like flags, country recognitions, and posters on bulletin boards could be implemented.

In addition, international students with OPT can do some practical things to negotiate their culture inside their organizations. International students can be assertive by introducing themselves, going on a coffee meeting to talk about their culture, or suggest changes to the organization to implement more cultural celebrations and appreciation.

If culture is produced through interactions, then organizations should put more effort toward the integration of the national culture of their international employees. Organizations should teach about different national cultures but should also help international employees negotiate organizational identity and the national cultural identity of its international employees to increase organizational identification. International students are negotiating their national culture identity inside their employers' organizations, but without an organization's motivation to embrace cultures, international students will not feel totally part of an organization in the United States.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Introduction:

Potential participants will be sent a survey to verify that they can qualify for this study. In order to qualify, individuals must meet four criteria: (a) be an international graduate student, (b) be employed with the OPT visa, (c) worked (or recently worked) in the Research Triangle, and (d) have completed the one year OPT visa experience at a company. Potential participants that satisfy the four criteria will be invited to continue in the study.

In 2018, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement filed 288,415 authorizations to participate in the OPT program. Many students joined companies in the Research Triangle area. As you know, international students who apply for the OPT visa come from many different countries. The goal of this interview study is to hear your experiences in how you negotiate your cultural identity in the company you work for.

Questions:

1. First, can you briefly tell me about your process of getting approved for OPT?
2. How would you describe your national culture?
3. What do you think is unique about your culture?
4. What do they believe people from other countries at their OPT job think about your culture?
5. What has surprised (beliefs, traditions, values, events, outfit, etc.) you when you've met people from other countries with the OPT inside your organization? (only for participants who know more than 3 people with OPT)

6. What do you feel you share with other students that have the OPT inside your organization?
7. Describe a situation at work where you felt confused by the actions of someone from the host culture? From another culture other than the host culture or your own?
8. How would you describe the culture within your OPT/CPT organization?
9. Describe a situation where you felt you had to follow the U.S. national culture in order to fit better inside the organization's culture.
10. Describe a situation where you ever felt out of place inside your U.S. organization because of your national culture.
11. What do you do when you feel your national culture is threatened inside the company?
12. Why do you think maintaining your national cultural identity is important inside your company?
13. How would you feel if there were more or fewer international students with OPT visa from your national culture inside the organization?

Appendix B

USCIS OPT Instructions

According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services:

“Optional Practical Training (OPT) is temporary employment that is directly related to an F-1 student’s major area of study. Eligible students can apply to receive up to 12 months of OPT employment authorization before completing their academic studies (pre-completion) and/or after completing their academic studies (post-completion). However, all periods of pre-completion OPT will be deducted from the available period of post-completion OPT.” (USCIS, 2021)

In order to request the OPT, there are 2 phases that international students must follow. First, they have to request to the designated school official (DSO), most of the time the international service office, at their international student academic institution. International Students may apply up to 90 days before you complete your degree, but no later than 60 days after you complete your degree. The DSO will make “the recommendation by endorsing your Form I-20, Certification of Eligibility for Nonimmigrant Student Status, and making the appropriate notation in the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)” (USCIS, 2021).

Second, after receiving the new I-20, international students will have to “properly file Form I-765, Application for Employment Authorization with USCIS, accompanied by the required fee (\$410) and the supporting documentation as described in the form instructions” (USCIS, 2021). The process can last between 3 months and 5 months. Students can only begin their OPT “only after we approve your Form I-765 and they receive their Employment Authorization Document (EAD)” (USCIS, 2021).

According to the USCIS, U.S. employers need to check if their employees are allowed to work in the United States. “Having an Employment Authorization Document (Form I-766/EAD) is one way to prove that you are allowed to work in the United States for a specific time period.” (USCIS, 2021).

Appendix C

International Office Services OPT Information

The website of the Office of International Services (OIS) from North Carolina State University, has specific information for all international students who want to apply to the OPT. On its website, the OIS explains the OPT as:

Optional Practical Training (OPT) is a type of employment authorization for students in F-1 status who wish to engage in off-campus employment in their field of study during and/or after their course of study. No job offer is necessary to apply, but students must meet the eligibility requirements and obtain a new Form I-20 from OIS with an OPT recommendation before being able to apply. Students submit their applications to the USCIS, and USCIS will issue an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) to the student. This EAD authorizes the student to engage in temporary employment in their major field of study for up to 12 months anywhere in the US. Most F-1 students at NC State University wish to take advantage of this benefit and will apply for their EAD 2 to 3 months before they graduate (OIS, 2021).

They also give information about OPT processing time. The OIS webpage says:

The OPT approval process generally takes around 3-5 months after it has been received by USCIS. Students should consult USCIS's Case Processing Times for the most up-to-date information regarding processing times and eligibility for submitting case inquiries. Students/graduates are not legally eligible to begin employment under OPT until the EAD is approved and in the hands of the student AND the start date for employment falls within the validity dates of the EAD. It is the responsibility of the student to apply early enough to the OPT approved and the EAD in-hand to meet the desired employment start

date. Students who apply for OPT less than 90 days before their program completion run the risk of not having the EAD before they graduate. In some cases, they put themselves in the position of being ineligible for employment for many weeks after they have completed their program. Students should apply for OPT as early as possible in their final term of enrollment at NC State. OIS is not involved in the processing of any petitions filed with USCIS. Any questions regarding the process need to be sent to USCIS. OIS, 2021).

However, you must be eligible to apply. Below is the information that must be taken into account in order to be eligible to apply for the OPT.

OPT Eligibility

- Students must have been enrolled full-time for at least nine months (two consecutive semesters)
- Students must have completed at least one semester at NC State
- Students must be maintaining lawful F-1 status
- Students must be in good academic standing
- Students must be making normal progress toward their degree (or have completed it)
- Students must obtain the recommendation of their Academic Adviser (for undergraduate students) or Director of Graduate Program (for graduate students)
- Students must not have already engaged in full-time OPT for that particular level of study
- Students must have not worked for 12 months or more on full-time Curricular Practical Training (CPT)

- Students must have obtained a new Form I-20 with OPT recommendation from OIS
- Students must file their OPT application while they are physically present in the U.S.
- Students must seek employment directly related to their major

Regarding the information on how to apply for the OPT, the North Carolina State University Office of International Services says:

1. Complete the OPT Application form and gain all necessary signatures. We will accept electronic signatures on the application form.
2. Review the OPT Online Session and complete the quiz at the end of the session
3. Receive an email from OIS confirming you passed the quiz
4. Go to go.ncsu.edu/ois-opt-form and complete the Post-Completion OPT Request forms.

You will upload a pdf of the quiz results email and your OPT Application form in this process.

After completing the 4 steps, an OIS advisor will review the submitted materials and check if anything is missing from the document. Otherwise, if all the information is complete, the OIS will send a copy of the new OPT I-20 within 10 business days. With this I-20 copy, you can proceed to mail your OPT application to USCIS.

At the same time, the OIS offers guides, slides, virtual tours, and workshops to learn more about the process of applying to the OPT.

Appendix D

Table 1. Pseudonym list

Pseudonyms list	
1MMX	José, Mexico
2MIL	Noam, Israel
3MIN	Harish, India
4MEC	Miguel, Ecuador
5WEC	Ana, Ecuador
6WCY	Lia, Cyprus
7MCO	Victor, Colombia
8WVE	Alejandra, Venezuela
9MEC	Carlos, Ecuador
10WMX	Guadalupe, Mexico
11WMX	Juana, Mexico
12WEC	Mariana, Ecuador
13WEC	Maria, Ecuador
14MEC	Marco, Ecuador
15MEC	Miguel, Ecuador
16MMX	Luis, Mexico
17WEC	Laura, Ecuador
18WMX	Margarita, Mexico
19MMX	Francisco, Mexico
20MMX	Jesus, Mexico
21WBR	Joanna, Brazil
22MMX	Antonio, Mexico
23WMX	Veronica, Mexico
24MMX	Pedro, Mexico
25MBL	Luca, Belgium

Appendix E

Table 2. OPT Timeline

OPT Timeline	Days	Weeks	Months
Apply for the OPT before the program end date			3 months
Application window	90 days		
Maximum date for the OPT application received by the DSO before graduation		3 weeks	
Graduation date			
OPT start day after graduation	60 days		
OPT employment			12 months
OPT End date on the EAD card/Last day to work			12 months
Period to either leave the U.S., transfer to a school or, change to another visa category	60 days		
Depart U.S. after the last day of the EAD card	60 days		

Appendix F

Figure 1. Application Timeline

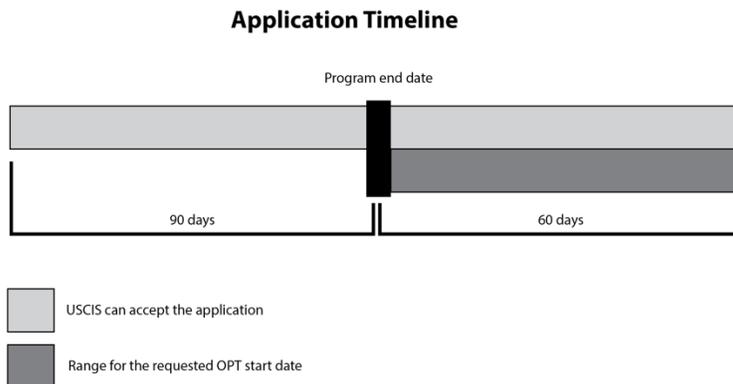


Figure 2. Application Phases

