



Factors that contribute to homesickness among students in Thailand

Darrin Thomas

Asia-Pacific International University, Saraburi 18180, Thailand

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Abstract

Homesickness is a problem among students at many universities. Few studies have examined this phenomenon and its relationship with cellphone involvement, resilience, social integration, and academic integration. Employing a cross-sectional survey methodology with stratified sampling at a university in Thailand found that a structural equation model was able to explain 36 percent of the variance of homesickness ($n = 220$). Through improving academic and social integration, resilience, and decreasing cellphone involvement, steps can be taken to lessen the impact of homesickness upon students.

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Introduction

Worldwide, approximately 3 million students study abroad at university level, in addition to those who stay in their country but move away to study (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012). In addition, 60 percent of new enrollments experience homesickness (Harrison & Brower, 2011). Feelings of homesickness can lead to difficulties in focusing, depression, anxiety, withdrawal, physical health problems, and socio-cultural adjustment issues (O'Reilly, Ryan, & Hickey, 2010; Tochkov, Levine, & Sanaka, 2010). There is evidence that homesickness can also influence academic performance, which is detrimental to completing college (Harrison & Brower, 2011; Tinto, 1975).

Tinto (1975) developed a theory focused on student departure from college. His theory focused primarily on reasons why students leave school before graduation with

a focus on academic and social integration being some of the main challenges to staying enrolled. Issues with academic and social integration in other studies have been found to affect homesickness (D'Amico, Dika, Eling, Algozzine, & Ginn, 2014; Rienties, Grohnert, Kommers, Niemantsverdriet, & Nijhuis, 2011). This indicates that aspects of Tinto's theory may explain homesickness as well.

However, there are at least two concerns with Tinto (1975) theory. First, Tinto (1975) theory was developed before the advent of cellphones which are common today. Second, there is evidence indicating that resiliency is a critical component in dealing with the challenges of studying away from home (Yakunnina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac, & Elsayed, 2013).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how cellphone involvement, academic integration, social integration, and resilience influence homesickness among students who have chosen to study away from home. Understanding homesickness would benefit teachers and administrators who are constantly challenged with students who are experiencing symptoms of homesickness.

E-mail address: dtsac18803@gmail.com.

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Literature Review

Homesickness is defined as the distress caused by separation from home (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Common traits of homesickness include loneliness, missing friends/family, difficulty adjusting to a new home, and recurring thoughts of one's home (Stroebe, van Vilet, Hewstone, & Willis, 2002). In general, students who are experiencing homesickness in a university setting are facing challenges academically, social, and emotionally as they wrestle with their new life.

Discrimination is a major problem that leads to homesickness, as students are not always accepted (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010). For example, in Thailand among international students, discrimination has led to homesickness (Vergara, Smith, & Keele, 2010). Students who had a lower level of perceived discrimination also had lower levels of homesickness (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011). Therefore, it may be critical that students believe that they are welcomed into the community in which they are attending tertiary education.

A key component in addressing homesickness is social connectedness (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011). Socializing with local students prevents homesickness, as the more international students mingle with local students the less homesickness they experience (Tochkov et al., 2010). Students who feel that the local community accepts them are often less homesick (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The challenge is that international and local students do not interact with each other much as documented in many studies due to cultural, geographical, and language barriers (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Rienties et al., 2011). This indicates that efforts may need to be made to foster social interaction between local and non-local students.

Homesickness is heavily influenced by such factors as discrimination and social connectedness. If these factors are left unchecked they could lead to unfortunate consequences for students adjusting to academic life. Thailand has a goal of becoming a hub of international education in Southeast Asia (Maxwell, 2015). This means that addressing homesickness at the university level may be a priority.

Academic and social integration are components of Tinto (1975) Student Integration Model of Attrition. Research indicates that there are similarities between reasons students do not complete college and homesickness (D'Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine, & Ginn, 2014; Rienties, Tempelaar, Van den Bossche, Gijssels, & Segers, 2009). Academic integration is the scholarly and intellectual development of a student while at university (Tinto, 1975). In the western context, it was found that Asians have a lower overall academic integration compared to Western students (Rienties, Luchoomun, & Tempelaar, 2014; Rienties et al., 2012). In addition, Kelly and Moogan (2012) found that local students outperformed international students academically due in part to issues the international students had with academic integration and homesickness.

Social integration is peer group associations, extracurricular activities, and faculty relationships that students have while at university (Tinto, 1975). Several studies have found that non-Western students have much lower social

integration when compared to Western students and that social class can also be a factor (Rienties et al., 2011). These barriers to social integration can be frustrating and the social rejection can trigger stronger perceptions of homesickness.

It is not enough for students to develop local friendships as they often need to have social interaction with people who are also from their home country. For example, Lin and Kingminghae (2014), in a study in Thailand among Chinese international students, found that relationships with other Chinese students were beneficial. Developing relationships with local Thai students did not benefit all students but only those who were interested in the host country. In general, the more international students who are from the same country at the same university the less homesickness these students experience.

Tinto (1975) found that social and academic integration are key to college success. However, homesick students are often struggling with these two components of college success. As such, understanding the extent to which academic and social integration affect homesickness can help to quantify the depth of the problem.

Cellphone involvement is the level of addiction a person experiences toward their cellphone (Walsh, White, & Young, 2010). Several symptoms indicate cellphone addiction. Nomophobia is the fear an individual experiences when they are worried that they do not have their cellphone with them (Yildirim & Correia, 2015). There are also other symptoms such as deprivation and using the phone during inappropriate moments such as during a learning experience (Roberts, Yaya, & Manolis, 2014). Another symptom is the inability to pay attention to others because of the focus on one's cellphone which contributes to poor academic performance (Roberts et al., 2014).

Cellphone addiction has also been found to be associated with academic stress (Thomas, 2016). This is critical as academic stress could impede academic integration. If addiction to cellphones can impact sleeping and academic performance, this could be associated with a student's experience of homesickness as they struggle with school.

Resilience is defined as the success an individual has in spite of difficult challenges (Cefai, 2008). Ginsberg (2011) defines resiliency as competence, confidence, character, contribution, coping, and control. Resilient students have positive views of self, the world, and the future (Mak, Ng, & Wong, 2011). Resilience has also been linked to homesickness in at least one study (Yakunnina et al., 2013). Students, who are flexible and able to cope, experience less homesickness (Suanet & Van de Vijver, 2009). In addition, academic and social integration have been linked with resilience (Dyrbye et al., 2009). One study found that a lack of academic and social integration lowers resilience (Wilks & Spivey, 2010).

From the review of the literature, there is evidence that homesickness may be linked with academic integration, social integration, mobile phone involvement and resilience. If students are struggling with any of these variables they may also be struggling with homesickness as well. Cellphone involvement may be particularly detrimental as it may cloud academic and social integration, as well resilience and homesickness (Roberts et al., 2014; Thomas,

2016). A resilient relationship is based on the fact that those who have resilience are generally better able to cope with any problem including homesickness (Dyrbye et al., 2009; Yakunnina et al., 2013). Therefore, the following null hypotheses have been developed:

H1: Academic integration does not influence the following variables.

H1A: Homesickness, H1B: Social integration, H1C: Resilience.

H2: Social integration does not influence the following variables.

H2A: Homesickness, H2B: Resilience.

H3: Mobile phone involvement does not influence the following variable.

H3A: Homesickness, H3B: Academic integration, H3C: Social integration, H3D: Resilience.

H4: Resilience does not influence the following variables.

H4A: Homesickness.

Figure 1 provides a model of the hypotheses of this study.

Methods

Sample

Participants were students at a university in Thailand. Stratified sampling based on gender was employed. There were 220 respondents in this study. In the sample, 64 percent were female while 36 percent were male. By class

level, 38 percent were Freshmen, 12 percent were Sophomores, 27 percent were Juniors, and 25 percent were Seniors. Lastly by major, 13 percent of the respondents were studying Business, 16 percent Education, 55 percent English, 6 percent Religion, 5 percent Science, and 5 percent did not respond.

Research Design and Data Collection

A cross-sectional research design was applied in this study. The researcher collected data at the university by providing a survey with two sections for students to complete. The first section addressed demographic variables including academic level, gender, and major. The second section consisted of 61 Likert-type statements that measured the perception of the student regarding each latent variable. The Likert scale was a five-point scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Instruments

The homesickness scale was adopted from Archer, Ireland, Amos, Broad, and Currid (1998). This scale measures students' perception of their sense of feelings of being homesick. Sample items include "I communicate with my family every week" and "I've settled in really well at the university." The Cronbach Alpha for the modified 23-item scale was .84.

The academic integration scale was adopted from Davidson, Beck, and Milligan (2009). Sample items include "On average across all your courses, how interested are you in the things that are being said during class discussions?" and "I believe that many instructors deliberately impose unreasonable requirements on students and enjoy their distress." The Cronbach Alpha for the modified eight-item scale was .7.

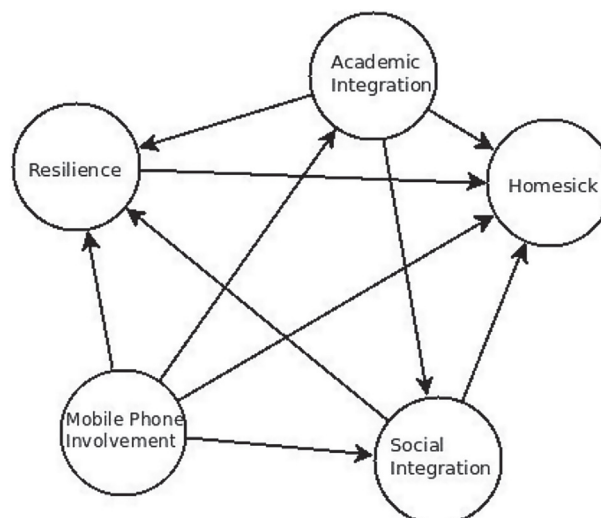


Figure 1 Model of hypotheses

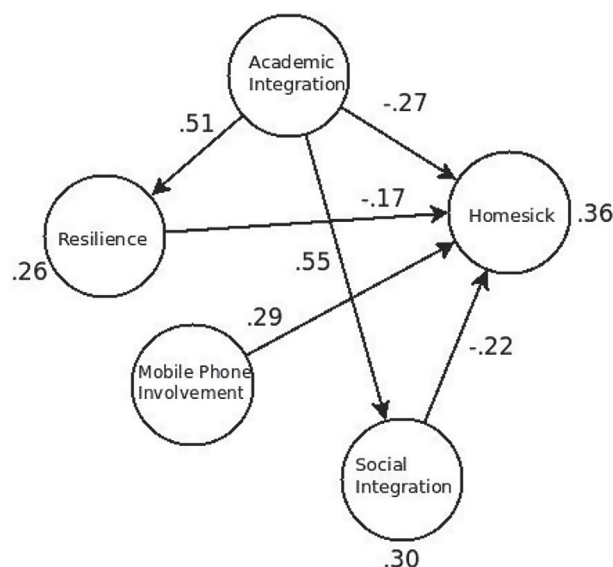


Figure 2 Final structural model with beta coefficients (along lines) and r-square values for the three parameters in the final model

Social integration was also adapted from Davidson et al. (2009). Sample items include “I am impressed with the students here” and “I am very connected with the students, faculty, and staff of this campus.” The Cronbach Alpha for the modified eight-item scale was .8.

The cellphone involvement scale was adopted from Walsh et al. (2010). Sample items include “I often think about my cellphone when I am not using it” and “I feel connected to others when I use my cellphone.” The Cronbach alpha for the modified eight-item scale was .75.

The resiliency scale was adopted from Wagnild and Young (1993). Sample items from this scale include “My life has meaning” and “I have self-discipline.” The Cronbach Alpha for the modified 14-item scale was .81.

Data Analysis

Structural equation modeling was used for the analysis of the model. A two-step approach was used in developing a structural equation model (Blunch, 2013). This process involved first analyzing the measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis. The second step was the analysis of the structural model, which meant assessing the relationships between the latent variables. The quality of the analysis of the measurement and structural model were assessed using several fit indices.

Results and Discussion

The initial results of the confirmatory factor model indicated issues with the measurement of the latent variables as the fit indices indicated a poor fit χ^2 (1759) = 3679.4, $p < .05$, Normed χ^2 = 2.1, CFI = .55, TLI = .54, IFI = .56, RNI = .55, and RMSEA = .07. In order to improve the measurement model, observed variables were removed. Of the 61 observed variables in the study, 31 were removed. After removing the weaker observed variables,

the final measurement model showed improved model fit χ^2 (395) = 606.0, $p < .05$, Normed χ^2 = 1.53, CFI = .89, TLI = .88, IFI = .89, RNI = .89, and RMSEA = .049. Table 1 provides the correlations, means, standard deviations, and alphas of the latent variables.

Based on the hypotheses of this study, academic integration has a moderate influence on homesickness ($b = -.27$), social integration ($b = .55$), and resilience ($b = .51$). In terms of homesickness, the more satisfied students are with their intellectual growth the less they dream about home, dislike where they study, and or doubt that their life has meaning. The negative relationship between academic integration and homesickness supports the findings in one other study (Rienties et al., 2009).

Regarding the positive relationship between academic and social integration, a strong perception by students of intellectual growth leads to a strong sense of connectedness and an overall satisfaction with their social life. This relationship confirms the findings of Rienties et al. (2012). Students need intellectual and social growth in order to indirectly deal with any potential issues with homesickness.

The positive relationship of academic integration with resilience indicates that a student who is in an environment in which the instructors are reasonable and providing a stimulating learning experience will also have a sense of determination and self-discipline and will find ways through difficult situations. These results are consistent with at least one study (Dyrbye et al., 2009). This implies active learning rather than passive learning experiences provide the mental stimulus that many students need (Severiens & Schmidt, 2009).

The influence of social integration on homesickness was weak ($b = -.22$) and not statistically significant with resilience. For homesickness, as students develop close friendships on-campus and have a positive impression of the other students, this lessens slightly the perceptions of

Table 1

Latent variable descriptive statistics

	Cellphone	Resilience	Homesick	Academic	Social
Cellphone	1				
Resilience	.10	1			
Homesick	.26	-.37	1		
Academic	.01	.49	-.46	1	
Social	.04	.33	-.42	.53	1
Mean	2.87	3.59	2.50	3.40	3.28
Std	.69	.58	.78	.65	.66
Alpha	.75	.77	.84	.79	.78

The structural model analysis assessed the statistical significance of each parameter in the model. Of the 10 null hypotheses, six were rejected. Table 2 provides a summary of the hypotheses and beta coefficient results

Table 2

Statistical testing of null hypotheses

Hypothesis	Result	Standardized Coefficient	Unstandardized Coefficient
H1: Academic integration does not influence the following variables			
H1A: Homesickness	Rejected	-.27	-.35
H1B: Social integration	Rejected	.55	.43
H1C: Resilience	Rejected	.51	.48
H2: Social integration does not influence the following variables			
H2A: Homesickness	Rejected	-.22	-.35
H2B: Resilience	Not rejected		
H3: Cellphone involvement does not influence the following variables			
H3A: Homesickness	Rejected	.29	.31
H3B: Academic integration	Not rejected		
H3C: Social integration	Not rejected		
H3D: Resilience	Not rejected		
H4: Resilience does not influence the following variables			
H4A: Homesickness	Rejected	-.17	-.23

The r^2 value for resilience was .26, for social integration the r^2 was .30, and the r^2 for homesickness was .36. The final fit indices indicated an adequate fit with $\chi^2(427) = 677.64$, $p < .05$, normed $\chi^2 = 1.59$, CFI = .87, TLI = .87, IFI = .87, RNI = .87, and RMSEA = .052. Figure 2 provides a diagram of the final structural model with beta coefficients and r-square results

feeling restless and thinking about home. These results confirm the work of another study (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011). The observation that this relationship is weak is unusual given the social needs of students.

The lack of a relationship between social integration and resilience contradicts the work of Wilks and Spivey (2010). It is possible that the way that resiliency was measured influenced this. Generally, resiliency is internally focused with such statements as “I am determined” and “I am friends with myself”. Such statements as these do not attempt to measure relying on others or being connected with a group. As such, in this study, resiliency was measured in an individualistic, intrapersonal way.

Cellphone involvement was found to only influence homesickness ($b = .29$). As students use their cellphones for no reason, lose track of how much they are using their cellphone, and even feel connected to others when using their cellphone, they will often think more about home, and will believe that they cannot concentrate on their work. There is evidence that connecting with family and friends back home can actually increase feelings of homesickness (Keck, 2014).

The lack of a relationship between cellphone involvement with either academic and or social integration contradicts Archer (2013). At least in this study, being unable to reduce cellphone use and or feeling distressed over being without one's cellphone has no link with the perceptions of intellectual growth or having close friends at college.

Lastly, resilience was found to influence homesickness weakly ($b = -.17$). In general, the ability to take things in one's stride, believe in one's self during tough times, and to find something to live for lowers perceptions of being annoyed with the people around one's self, feel restless, and thinking about home. According to the model, the idea that blanket resilience can be used to overcome most problems is at least partially refuted in this study.

This study was cross-sectional in nature and as such only provides a one-time glimpse of the perceptions of the respondents involved in the study. Furthermore, it was assumed that that the answers provided were truthful. Lastly, this study only infers theoretical causation as there was no direct control of any of the variables involved in this study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

A significant recommendation for institutions with students who struggle with homesickness is that a student may need to reduce cellphone use and perhaps specific contact with home. Dunbar (1992) has suggested that people can only maintain about 150 relationships at a time. If students focus is their relationships back home, then they cannot establish new relationships where they are studying and this could strengthen homesickness.

For further study, a closer look at the use of technology in general to maintain family relationships and how this

increases homesickness could help in understanding how deep the effect of these relationships are. Lastly, a practical application of the theory developed here and its success in dealing with homesickness would help in substantiating the strength of the model.

The findings of this study indicate that homesickness is influenced by factors that are similar to college attrition. What this means is that students who are away from home need to develop a strong sense of local community to provide motivation to persevere in the face of attrition.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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