

# Importance of Understanding a Culture in the Era of Social Media

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## Abstract

This review paper focuses on why understanding a culture is essential in this era using cases of cultures presented in the media and different responses to the Covid-19 pandemic from various countries in the era of social media, it is easy to be introduced to a new culture. However, accepting other cultures that are different from our own is difficult. The barriers to appreciating other cultures cause cultural misunderstanding. Minor things like gestures or phrase use might cause misunderstandings. Additionally, cultural appropriation has become a concern since it may lead to stereotype formation and inhibit individuals from learning about other cultures and engaging in cultural exchange experiences. Due to the diverse cultures of people from different environments, the variation in COVID-19 policies and the reactions to those policies from people differed in each country. As covered in two cases of media and Covid-19, culture plays a huge role in people's lives, and facing other cultures is unavoidable in a global age.

## Introduction

In the modern world of over eight billion people, it is easy to be introduced to a new culture through social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, OTT (Over The Top) platforms like Netflix and Disney+, or global news. Most people from other backgrounds introduce us to new cultures, and we are exposed to their cultures regularly. However, accepting other cultures that are different from our own is difficult. According to STOSSEL, this is due to stereotyping, a human

instinct that makes people to misunderstand one other. Furthermore, other characteristics of culture, such as language and beliefs, might act as a barrier that hinders individuals from communicating effectively. However, with an effort to understand and open up to others, it would be much easier to live in harmony with people from various backgrounds. This paper will discuss why it is important to understand different cultures and how we might do so better.

## **Definition of Culture**

Culture consists of both material and non-material elements. Material culture is something physically made by the community and non-material culture is an intangible aspect of culture. According to Holland, non-material cultures include people's values, identity, and language. Culture cannot be defined without either one of these but this paper will focus on non-material cultures.

Lebrón (127) states that culture is the unique characteristic of a social group. He also mentions that culture is essential to understanding how the social system changes. According to Lee "Culture refers to society and its way of life. It is defined as a set of values and beliefs, or a cluster of learned behaviours that we share with others in a particular society, giving us a sense of belongingness and identity." In a similar context, Lee says that cultural understanding is becoming even more important because of the call to interact with many individuals from other countries and other cultures.

For this paper, the definition of culture will be "the habits of human beings that have been passed down from generation to generation, including the viewpoint of language, lifestyle, values, and beliefs that reflect a certain group of population."

## **Why Is It Difficult To Understand Other Cultures?**

It is commonly known that Cultures vary because of how diverse environments have affected people's way of life in different regions.

Shonk asserts that while interacting with various cultures, individuals frequently depend on stereotypes and perceive other cultures from their perspectives. When cultural understanding is necessary, like when negotiations are taking place between parties with various origins, this kind of attitude is disastrous. John Dovidio, a professor of psychology, says that people automatically, unconsciously, and immediately categorize people based on people's appearance, which is stereotyping. This suggests that stereotyping is an unavoidable human nature. However, the current world situation requires people to understand other cultures. Workplaces around the world are getting more diverse as time goes and the possibility of needing to work with people from different backgrounds is increasing. Therefore, it is important to get ready and have an open mind to these changes. This requires people to develop practice acceptance and understanding of other cultures.

## **Cultural Misunderstanding**

Cultural misunderstanding is caused by those barriers to appreciating other cultures. Cultural misunderstanding occurs when one talks or acts in a way that is acceptable in their culture but offensive in others. Trivial things like gestures or the usage of words might cause misunderstandings (Gadd). For instance, the gesture "thumbs up," which is widely used in various nations like the U.S. and Korea, is often used to indicate satisfaction or to say "good work." However, the connotation of thumbs up

is not the same in every nation. Countries like Iran, Greece, Russia, Sardinia, and some regions of West Africa consider the thumbs-up sign to be an insult comparable to the middle finger.

Words might also lead to misunderstanding. In Spanish, for example, the term *Fresa* means "strawberry." However, in Mexico, it has a negative connotation used to describe teenagers (Lingoda). Even amongst countries that speak the same language, the meaning of the same term might vary. If a Spaniard goes to Mexico and uses *Fresa* as a term for strawberry, and the Mexican interprets it as a synonym for a teenager, they may have a misunderstanding.

### **Case 1: Culture Portrayed in Media**

Since it is easy to access the media on the internet through OTT (Netflix, Disney+, etc) or social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube, it is easy for people to get exposed to different cultures around the world. Because of exposure to many cultures, barriers to understanding others from different origins are gradually dissolving. However, many individuals tend to see the situation from their perspective or through preconceptions, which can lead to cultural conflict.

Korean culture, which has been heavily influenced by Confucianism, differs significantly from other countries of the globe, with the exception of those in Asia. Education and respect for others are two examples - Korea has a seniority-based society. Understanding the notions depicted in the media is crucial yet difficult since cultures differ considerably. Not

just due to Confucianism, but also because of cultural differences, there are several references in the film that cannot be comprehended if the viewer is unfamiliar with the culture or if the media was poorly translated. This explains why Asian-based films are so popular currently.

Despite the cultural difference, some Asian/Asian-based films such as *Parasite*, *Squid Game*, *Pachinko*, *Crazy Rich Asians*, and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* have become popular around the world. Compared to films in English, Asian films, especially the ones in their local languages are difficult to be successful worldwide. This is due to culture and language because these factors work as a barrier for people to try new things - watching a film with an unfamiliar concept.

Focusing on *Parasite* by Bong Joon-ho. Winning numerous awards globally including four Oscars and Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Language Film, *Parasite* proved its popularity around the world. Since *Parasite* was the first non-English-Language film to win an Academy Award for Best Picture, it was surprising. There are a few reasons why *Parasite* could be successful.

Other than its intrinsic values, there were extrinsic factors that made the success of *Parasite* possible. South Korea is largely driven by capitalism and social hierarchy is definite, especially relating to real estate. *Parasite* used the house and spaces - ground level, semi-basement, and basement - to describe this phenomenon of inequality (Hwang). Because this problem is not limited to Korea and occurs in other nations, the

topic of capitalism, inequality, and the affluent and poor that the film touched on piqued the curiosity of viewers from other countries. The film also briefly mentions the American dream, which involves searching for success and opportunity by entering the American community, which is relatable to numerous people.

It is undeniable that the success of *Parasite* was also due to other factors such as the spread of K-pop. K-pop fans have also contributed to the popularity of Korean films including *Parasite*. Although the aim of K-pop was not to advertise Korean films such as *Parasite*, it brought an indirect impact by attracting audiences that are interested in Korea. This shows that reaching as many audiences as possible is important, implying that effective marketing can help to result in successful outcomes (Park). As can be seen in the case of *Parasite*, to achieve global success, it is important to focus on the cultural backgrounds and current phenomena of the world that the audience can relate to.

### **Cultural Appropriation**

Cultural appropriation has recently become a critical issue. Young defines cultural appropriation as the action of taking something produced by members of one culture by members of another. A more modern and relevant definition is “The use of objects or elements of a non-dominant culture in a way that reinforces stereotypes or contributes to oppression and does not respect their original meaning or give credit to their sources” (Cuncic)

. Cultural appropriation is a concern since it may lead to stereotype formation and inhibit individuals from learning about other cultures and engaging in cultural exchange experiences (Raypole). Since cultural appropriation deals with diverse elements such as language, art, music, literature, clothing, customs, history, and religion, it is important to obtain adequate knowledge before taking an action. Considering that cultural appropriation and appreciation can vary by a little difference, knowledge of this topic is even more important.

One recent example of cultural appropriation is from *La La Land*. Despite being rated as one of the greatest movies by the majority of the audiences, obtaining an average audience rating of 8 out of 10, it could not avoid the criticism of cultural appropriation. The film is inspired by jazz, a music form that developed in African-American communities. Because the African-American community founded this genre, the fact that black culture is intrinsically linked to jazz is undeniable.

In the movie, Sebastian, a white man, tries to conserve the black culture of jazz. The reality is that the majority of the cast is white and cultural diversity was addressed effectively in this film. The popular opinion is, that considering that the film made its focuses on jazz, it should have had more black casts and put the effort into dealing with the cultural root of jazz more deeply.

Cultural differences and lack of enough research can cause issues of cultural appropriation in the media and they often get criticized. Thorough

research on virtually every aspect of the culture should be conducted, including the history and ethnic values of the people from that background. This way, the possibility of the media being called out for cultural appropriation will be minimized. However, there are always chances that errors may be made, thus apologizing and amending are equally important actions to take if necessary.

### **Is It Important To Learn The Language?**

Learning a language is an essential part of effective communication. By learning either one language or culture, one can better understand the people they are dealing with. When one first learns a language, they get exposed to different expressions or cultures of that country. Learning another culture enables one to get used to the natives' lifestyle and naturally get used to the language. Because language and culture are closely related, one cannot fully understand society by learning only one of them.

Culture or characteristics such as British humour and Kyoto's sarcasm can be seen as examples that can cause cultural understanding. Getting used to these habits will require both language and cultural skills. Nuruladilah asserts that language is a medium used to transmit the culture of a particular group and thus implies they are inextricably linked together. Additionally, culture contributes significantly to shaping the language of a community. Mohamed concludes that as a part of the culture, language reflects people's attitudes, beliefs, and worldviews and therefore language is essential.

Even for movies or series, language plays significant roles. Burrow-Goldhahn states that translation is important as it enables the transmission of knowledge, protects cultural heritage, and is essential to the global economy. As mentioned, the language and translation can protect the cultural heritage but if misused, they can rather misrepresent the culture. Translation can be successful only if the translator has sufficient knowledge of the culture and language and convey the accurate meaning and style in the translation.

### **Case 2: Impact and Conflicts Due To Covid-19**

Wood and Wright stated that natural disasters could act as catalysts for social unrest, civil conflict, and state repression. They also assert that pandemics such as Covid-19 have the same effect. The disturbance due to Covid-19 was unavoidable. As soon as the Covid-19 pandemic started, governments worldwide started to implement policies such as movement restrictions and lockdowns to minimize the pandemic's impact. However, these policies regarding the pandemic could not satisfy everyone and led to conflicts within and outside the country. According to the report by Kishi which used the data from ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project), due to the pandemic, states' conditions became unstable overall. Although the frequency of conflicts decreased, political violence increased in most countries.

Despite the difference in cultures, it can be seen as governments have violated human rights in

the process of implementing policies to prevent the spread of the virus. According to the United Nations, human rights are the rights guaranteed to all human beings and include, among other things, the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery, freedom of speech, and the right to work. The violation of human rights can be shown from the examples such as censorship, silencing the criticisms, and the use of unnecessary police forces (Silva). Even democratic countries such as South Africa used army force to make sure that the policies were adhered to.

### **Different Responses to Covid-19**

Due to the diverse cultures of people from different environments, the variation in policies and the reactions to those policies from people differed in each country. Researchers at Winston Centre for Risk and Evidence Communication of the University of Cambridge conducted surveys regarding people's attitudes toward the risk of Covid-19 and how their thoughts about government policies. They collected data from various countries: the UK, the US, Australia, Mexico, Spain, Germany, and Italy.

The researchers first investigated whether people think the government's responses to the pandemic were firm enough. Despite the different situations that the countries are put under, most people replied that they think the government restrictions were not firm enough (Naranjo). Although the replies were almost similar, it could be seen that how people think

differs from the traits of whether the country has individualistic or pro-social traits (Soest). In the case of Italy, people were more ready to sacrifice for the public good. Still, people from countries such as Germany and UK seemed to be caring for themselves as individuals than the public.

In the countries where most people think that the government's response is not firm enough, for example, Mexico and Italy, it was likely that the people were ready to sacrifice for the public good. In contrast, in the case of Australia and Germany, where the proportionality of people who prioritize their welfare was higher in the countries with relatively fewer people who think that the government's response is not firm enough.

In another study by Mohammad and his team, it was revealed that the knowledge and attitudes towards the pandemic differed due to cross-cultural differences. The study finding showed that Europeans had the least knowledge on Covid-19, and people in the United States least followed the restrictions, while the people of the Middle East and Asia were most aware and afraid of the coronavirus. The study also emphasized pandemic management requires support from the population, which expresses the importance of public involvement in preventing the spread of the virus. To back this idea, the study presented data that shows that the United States and Europe had the most casualties compared to other regions.

The difference between tight and loose cultures is one of the causes of people's ethical values. According to Geller, a cultural psychologist,

what determines tight and loose cultures are the social norms and points out that “tight cultures have strong social norms and little tolerance for deviance, while loose cultures have weak social norms and are highly permissive.” Countries such as China, Malaysia, and Pakistan are considered to be countries with tight cultures while the United States, Spain, and Brazil have loose cultures.

Geller studied the relationship between tight-loose culture and how well the restrictions are complied with. The people from a country with a tighter culture followed the restrictions in a better way such as wearing masks and keeping social distance. In a pandemic situation, it is shown that countries with tight cultures took more advantages. However, in other situations, loose-culture countries also have benefits.

### **Conclusion**

As covered in two cases of media and Covid-19, culture plays a huge role in people’s lives, and facing other cultures is unavoidable in a global age. Conflict due to differences in cultures is also unavoidable but it is a matter of how wisely people can resolve this problem for the best result. The media that people come in contact with now contains various cultures and ideas such as cultures from different countries and conflicting ideas such as LGBTQ+. Everyone has different reasons and backgrounds that influence the way they account. Therefore, it is important to be open-minded to these concepts. Similarly, forcing one's value on others should be avoided at all costs.

People from a country with tight culture tend to have difficulties in understanding those from a loose culture and vice versa. However, these characteristics are determined by a few factors such as population density, past experiences, and resource status. Although countries with tight cultures took more advantages during the pandemic, loose cultures also have benefits such as being more open to new ideas, and more tolerant and enthusiastic in expressing their opinion. It might be less challenging for people with a loose culture to accept other cultures that are different from theirs.

It cannot be determined whether one culture is better than the other. However, there can be a better choice when it comes to a specific situation and it will work best if people are accepting enough to change their minds for a better result even if the action needed is not common in their culture or values.

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