The main goal of the research is to explore the connection between international students’ acculturation strategy and the potential for subsequent word of mouth about the host institution and the host country.

The qualitative research included 20 in-depth interviews with international students from Europe and outside Europe as well. The main interview theme incorporated topics about host country and host institution induced culture shock, applied coping (acculturation) strategies and the subsequent possibility and reasons for encouraging or discouraging friends to study in the host country and at the host institution. Based on the qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts, both European and non-European citizens, who studied in Europe, suffered similar level of culture shock. The individual stories indicate that those international students who collected little to zero information about the host culture before commencing the study abroad program were mostly unable to integrate in the new culture and their willingness to spread positive word of mouth was negligible.

The following factors emerged as patterns for successful acculturation process and subsequent positive word of mouth: proper preparation and information collection about the behavioral norms in the host culture, minimum intermediate speaking skills in the local language and support received from the host institution and local students. The results indicate that higher educational institutions could foster positive word of mouth with co-national assisted mentor programs; preliminary trainings for professors in order to appropriately approach international students of various cultural backgrounds and by offering widely advertised local language courses.

Keywords: international students, culture shock, acculturation strategy, word of mouth in education, social interaction abroad.

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the topic is ever increasing as the number of international students enrolled globally have surpassed 4.5 million by 2015 (OECD, 2017) and it is expected to grow to 7 million by 2021. International students often want to study abroad to learn about a new country, a different culture, however they are rarely aware of the difficulties of intercultural adjustment.

Nowadays higher educational institutions compete for the enrolment of international students and one the most important recruitment channels is positive word of mouth spread by students who studied in a given institution ([1], [2], [3]). An unsuccessful acculturation process due to culture shock poses a risk of dissatisfaction with the entire study abroad program that may result negative word of mouth connected both to the host country and host institution. The acculturation of international students has been widely researched since the late 80’s, however not many research is rare on the connection between the success level of acculturation and word of mouth.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture shock

Based on Oberg ([4]) culture shock is an occupational disease, which occurs due to the stress caused by the different social interactions in the host country, and accordingly requires medical attention.

Initial culture shock and acculturation research were oriented to look for remedy in clinical psychology ([5]). The clinical psychology paradigm shifted towards culture learning, stress handling models and social identity theory, which recommended culture specific preparation to support the acculturation process ([6]).
The modern approach of the phenomenon is that culture shock is the experienced physical and mental acclimatization upon encountering with a new culture ([7]). Malota ([8]) identified five categories that have an influence on the strength of culture shock: cultural distance, biological factors, personal and personal competence factors and control factors.

2.2 Acculturation strategies

Zhou et al. ([9]) separated three acculturation categories:

- affective (psychological) component: appropriate preparation can support the ability cope with stress
- behavioral (sociocultural) component: culture specific skillset can be acquired and it improves communication abroad
- cognitive (identity) component: understand the cultural identity change upon encountering with a new culture

Berry ([10]) defined four acculturation strategies based on the mix of own cultural identity and the culture identity of the host country. Potential combinations of cultural identification:

- Integration: high level of home and host culture identification
- Assimilation: high level of host, low level of home culture identification
- Separation: high level of home, low level of host culture identification
- Marginalization: low level of home and host culture identification

2.3 Word of mouth in higher education

International students consider the brand value of higher educational institutions ([11]) and while word of mouth from relatives is a key determinant in the host institution choice ([12]). Leutwyler and Meierhans ([13]) surveyed Swiss international students after their exchange program and noted that students are more likely to study abroad in case at least one of their parents participated in higher education. Institutions have an opportunity to be part of this organic line of recommendation in case they successfully engage with potential study abroad students at this decision point ([14]).

3 RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative research included 20 in-depth interviews with international students from Europe (10 interviews) and outside Europe as well (10 interviews). The main interview theme incorporated topics about host country and host institution induced culture shock, applied coping (acculturation) strategies and the subsequent possibility and reasons for encouraging or discouraging friends to study in the host country and at the host institution.

Purposive and quota (both non-probability) sampling techniques were applied, where the sampling criteria required subjects who participated in an at least 3 months long study abroad program after 2015 autumn and at the time of the interview they had spent already at least 2 months in the host country.

Qualitative content analysis was chosen to systematically analyze the content in its original context based on a coding manual ([15]). Three coding researchers to improve validity ([16]) analyzed the interview transcripts. The qualitative content analysis was inductive; accordingly, there were not any predefined coding categories. Based on the extant literature the research goals were translated into an interview thread that could induce a vast amount of content on study abroad motivations, culture shock, HEI satisfaction and WOM), however the under researched connection between these concepts deemed it insufficient to predefine the exact coding categories and subcategories. ([15]).

4 DISCUSSION

Based on the qualitative content analysis of the in-depth interviews, a theoretical model is proposed, starting with the encounter with foreign culture, followed by the external stimuli when confronted with the new culture, which, depending on the strength, causes stress or shock. These stimuli first test the psychological tolerance of the individual (personal, situational and social factors mediate the success of stress management) followed by socio-cultural adaptation (cultural learning), satisfaction and word of
mouth. According to the recommended theoretical model, the sense of identity that emerges at the end of a foreign study program influences the word of mouth related to the host institution.

4.1 Encountering with a new culture
Encountering an unknown culture always poses challenges and the first impression can leave a deep impression. Both European and non-European students had mixed feelings about the first encounter with culture: “I had mixed feelings, I was happy and excited, but I was worried about leaving my parents’ home. I felt lonely soon enough “or” I was excited and happy, but at the same time I was worried about my future”.

4.2 Stimuli (stress or shock)
The stimuli typically came from the host country, when local habits caused a collision at either a visual or a conceptual level, but lack of stimuli also caused difficulties, when it was in fact the reason to study abroad. The initial experience of students coming from outside Europe was negative, mainly due to the lack of preparation and relatively higher cultural distance: "It was shocking to see couples kissing on the open street”.

4.3 Affective (psychological) adjustment
If the stimulus is followed by a proper emotional response, then it means that the stress coping strategy was successful on the psychological level ([9]) and it increases the stress tolerance to handle strong stimuli. The most frequent factors ([8]) that mediate stress (or shock) were language differences. Those international students, who have developed a stress management mechanism to lead a comfortable day-to-day life, would generally recommend the host country and host institution to their friends.

4.4 Behavioral (sociocultural) adjustment
The acquisition of culture-specific behavioral standards ([9]) is a higher level of adaptation, by which the student can prevent or manage the stress situations more effectively: instead of continuous psychological stress management, it is more efficient to behave in an accepted manner in the new culture. However, a significant proportion of international students did not reach the level of cultural learning, but rather expressed their opinion of the host culture as an external observer: "The Chinese system of values is very different from the European, for example, the opinion of the family is very important, but it does not matter to me”.

4.5 Cultural identity strategy and social interactions
Cultural identity is determined by the degree of identification with the culture of the host country and the home country ([10]). In case of affective adjustment, the students only gave a response based on their own culture, however through behavioral adjustment they were able to prevent the stress situation (or deal with it more effectively).

Students who have managed stress well and tried to adapt their behavior to local habits have deepened their understanding and acceptance of the culture (and other foreign students): “As my German language skills improved, I got closer to the locals and I feel they have been fully accepted”.

4.6 Satisfaction and word of mouth in higher education
The importance of word of mouth in family and friends ([12]) appeared in several cases, who had already suggested the institution during the foreign program. Satisfaction and positive word of mouth appeared especially at students who successfully integrated into the new culture, gained a wide circle of friends and established a good relationship with their teachers: “The classes were good, I liked my projects and the professors were very helpful and I made many good friends. I volunteered when I had the opportunity; I hope I can come back again…”.

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The greatest amount of positive word of mouth is expected from foreign students who are well integrated into the new culture, and by the end of the foreign study program their personality has developed in a positive direction and through handling cultural issues with the toolkit of the local culture. These students
took advantage of all forms of social interactions: they made friends with local and foreign students, and also established a good relationship with local professors and university coordinators. Successful acculturation indicates that international students will spread positive word of mouth about the host institution. Based on the results institutions should send more information about their programs before it starts, and institutions should also aim to collect information about the adjustment of international students during the early weeks of their study abroad experience. Supporting the acculturation process through professional university programs, language programs and student association programs international students can be exposed to acculturation via multiple stakeholders and personal issues may be detected earlier.

Further research could focus on the personality of international students as a moderator for handling cultural stimuli and spreading word of mouth ([17]). The theoretical model could be further investigated with quantitative research methods to determine the strength of the connection between acculturation success and word of mouth.

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