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Cultural Integration of Digital Nomads in Thailand

Integrating Western Cultural Values with Thai Culture through Adaptation Strategies

International Business

Bachelor's thesis

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In recent years, digital nomadism has emerged as a transformative phenomenon in the global workforce, driven by a growing desire to break free from traditional office settings. This thesis investigates the cultural integration process of digital nomads in Thailand, one of the most popular destinations for digital nomads, focusing on multifaceted and complex challenges arising from cultural differences in values, norms, social structures, and communication styles. The main research question throughout this thesis is why digital nomads face challenges integrating into local Thai communities, and how they adapt culturally. The main research question has ultimately been divided into three separate sub-research questions, which examine cultural differences, the role of background factors, as well as adaptation strategies, each contributing to the broader main research question.

This thesis applies several theoretical frameworks including Hofstede's Dimensions, Cross-Cultural Communication Theories, Cultural Intelligence and Intercultural Competence Theories, Acculturation Theory, The U-Curve Model, Concepts of Social Capital and Networks, as well as Social Cognitive Theory. A literature review approach was used to analyze how digital nomads employ various strategies to navigate cultural differences in Thailand. The findings reveal that Western digital nomads often struggle with challenges related to hierarchical structures, collectivistic values in Thai society, indirect communication, as well as structured and cautious nature of Thai people. Digital nomads' background factors such as nationality, age, gender, education, professional roles, or prior travel experience significantly affect the degree of cultural challenges encountered and their approach to adaptation strategies, highlighting the need for a flexible, proactive, and holistic approach to integration.

Furthermore, this thesis not only provides actionable strategies for digital nomads seeking better cultural integration in Thailand, but policymakers and local communities can also use this thesis' insights to foster more inclusive environments that attract and accommodate digital nomads. Academically, this thesis bridges gaps in existing research by applying cultural theories to digital nomadism, which is currently an underexplored research area.

Key words: Digital Nomadism, Cultural Integration, Digital Nomads in Thailand, Cultural Challenges, Cultural Adaptation Strategies, Western Culture, Thai Culture, International Business

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Diginomadismi on viime vuosina noussut maailmanlaajuisesti merkittäväksi ilmiöksi, koska yhä useammilla on halu irtautua perinteisistä toimistoympäristöistä. Tämä tutkielma tutkii diginomadien kulttuurisen integroitumisen prosessia Thaimaassa, joka on yksi suosituimmista kohteista diginomadeille. Tutkielmassa keskitytään diginomadien ja Thaimaan paikallisten välisiin kulttuurieroihin, kuten arvoihin, normeihin, sosiaalisiin rakenteisiin ja viestintätyyliin sekä niistä syntyviin haasteisiin. Tutkielma pyrkii vastaamaan, miksi diginomadit kohtaavat haasteita integroituaan paikallisiin thaimaalaisiin yhteisöihin, ja kuinka he voivat sopeutua kulttuurisesti. Kyseinen tutkimuskysymys on jaettu kolmeen alatutkimuskysymykseen, jotka tarkastelevat diginomadien ja paikallisten kulttuurieroja, diginomadien taustatekijöiden vaikutuksia koettuihin haasteisiin ja integroitumiseen sekä sopeutumisstrategioita.

Tutkielmassa sovelletaan useita teoreettisia viitekehyksiä, kuten Hofsteden kulttuuriulottuvuuksia, kulttuurien välisten viestinnän teorioita, kulttuurisen älykkyyden ja kulttuurienvälisen kompetenssin teorioita, akkulturaatioteoriaa, U-käyrämallia, sosiaalisen pääoman ja verkostojen käsitteitä sekä sosiaalikognitiivista teoriaa. Tutkimusmenetelmänä on kirjallisuuskatsaus, ja sitä hyödyntäen on pystytty analysoimaan diginomadien erilaisia sopeutumisstrategioita Thaimaan kulttuurieroihin. Tulokset osoittavat, että länsimaalaisille diginomadeille vaikeita haasteita ovat Thaimaan hierarkkiset yhteiskuntarakenteet, thaimaalaisen yhteiskunnan kollektiiviset arvot, epäsuorat viestintäkeinot sekä thaimaalaisien varautuneisuus ja rakenteellisuus. Diginomadien kansallisuus, ikä, sukupuoli, koulutus, ammatti ja aikaisempi matkustuskokemus vaikuttavat merkittävästi koettuihin kulttuurisiin haasteisiin, ja heidän valitsemiinsa sopeutumisstrategioihin, mikä korostaakin joustavan, ennakoivan ja kokonaisvaltaisen lähestymistavan tarvetta kulttuurisessa integroitumisessa.

Tämä tutkielma tarjoaa käytännöllisiä strategioita diginomadeille, jotka pyrkivät integroitumaan kulttuurisesti Thaimaassa. Lisäksi tutkielman tuloksia voivat hyödyntää myös päättäjät ja paikallisyhteisöt, joilla on mahdollisuus edistää osallistavampien ympäristöjen luomista diginomadien houkuttelemiseksi ja tukemiseksi. Akateemisesti tämä tutkielma edistää nykyistä tutkimusta diginomadeista soveltamalla kulttuuriteorioita diginomadismiin, joka on tällä hetkellä niukasti tutkittu aihealue.

Avainsanat: diginomadismi, kulttuurinen integraatio, diginomadit Thaimaassa, kulttuuriset haasteet, kulttuuriset sopeutumisstrategiat, länsimainen kulttuuri, thaimaalainen kulttuuri, kansainvälinen liiketoiminta

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Work methods are rapidly evolving in today's global landscape. For some, new work methods could be more exciting, convenient, or even more effective compared to traditional work methods. Thus, the new ways of working can challenge the old ways, encouraging more people to make the switch. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the concept of remote working was introduced to many, which became a more common way of working around the world. In 2023, around 28% of people already worked mostly remotely compared to just 13% three years prior (PayScale 2024). The growing trend of working remotely along with technological advancements has reshaped the global workforce and opened the door for people who are seeking flexibility, adventures, and new experiences – all while working at the same time. This group of people can be called as digital nomads.

Digital nomads can be commonly defined as individuals who rely on technology to work remotely, while also often traveling internationally (Reichenberger 2018). For digital nomads, flexibility and a desire to break away from traditional office settings are factors that contribute to digital nomad lifestyle decisions (Hannonen 2020). Most of the definitions for digital nomads consistently describe them as mobile, independent of location, and professionals using digital technology. However, researchers differ in their definitions in the focus and range of certain characteristics, such as the level of autonomy (Reichenberger 2018) or the type of work digital nomads do (e.g., freelancing, entrepreneurship, salaried positions) (D. Cook 2023). Depending on the researcher, there are also other similar terms used to describe digital nomads such as global nomads or location-independent workers (Fikry et al. 2023). The concept of a digital nomad is rather broad, and researchers have found numerous sub-concepts linked to digital nomadism. Variations derived from the concept of digital nomads include: flashpackers who typically work while traveling but with a larger budget than backpackers, prioritizing more comfort in their experiences; and neo-nomads who focus on trading products and services, whereas digital nomads mainly work online (Fikry et al. 2023).

There are several factors that contribute to the growth of number in digital nomads, but it is possible to identify three major trends that arguably facilitate digital nomadism the most. Firstly, globalization along with the digital revolution has facilitated interconnectivity and greater mobility for digital nomads by providing a global infrastructure that ensures remote work from nearly any location (Sanul 2022). Secondly, the gig economy has grown quickly with the emergence of digital platforms that facilitate freelance work. Digital nomads are closely connected to this economy as many of them

often must depend on short-term and contract-based jobs that offer flexibility and independence most of the digital nomads seek. These individuals can use various platforms to secure remote jobs while balancing travel and leisure, although some of the jobs can be insecure with low pay. (Sutherland & Jarrahi 2017; Wood et al. 2019.) Thirdly, technological advancements have played a key role in the rise of digital nomadism, as digital devices and applications are essential tools for their work (Nash et al. 2018). Nash et al. mention that digital nomads benefit from the widespread availability of high-speed internet, cloud-based tools, and mobile devices, which allows digital nomads to work virtually anywhere. Authors continue that remote work tools, such as video conferencing and project management platforms, have made global collaboration easier, turning traditional office work into a flexible, location-independent model. This digital infrastructure has not only made remote work more accessible but has also very likely encouraged more people to adopt the digital nomad lifestyle.

As of March 2024, Thailand ranks third as the most visited country by digital nomads worldwide (Nomad List 2024b), while its capital city Bangkok ranks second as the most visited city by digital nomads worldwide (Nomad List 2024a). Nomad List (2024a) ranks Chiang Mai, a northern Thai city, as tenth most popular city as well. There are plenty of factors, reasons, and preferences digital nomads take into consideration when choosing their travel destination. These can vary individually but some factors can be seen trending more than the others for many digital nomads. Lacárcel et al. (2024) suggest various important factors that affect digital nomads' choice of destination. For instance, affordability can be seen as a key consideration for many digital nomads, who often choose locations with a lower cost of living to maintain a comfortable lifestyle while working remotely. Reliable and high-speed internet is also essential, making places with poor connectivity less appealing, while those with stable and fast internet are more attractive. Cultural richness, such as local food and traditions, plays a significant role in destination choices as well, as digital nomads often seek to immerse themselves in new cultural experiences. Additionally, many are drawn to locations with co-working spaces that foster networking and collaboration with like-minded individuals, making vibrant co-working communities a strong motivator. Flexible visa policies are another important factor, as destinations that allow long-term stays without frequent visa renewals are more desirable. Then there are factors, which can more or less depend on individual's own preferences such as a pleasant climate, convenient time zones, personal connections to family or friends, and diverse leisure activities.

When it comes to Thailand, it practically checks all the boxes for factors digital nomads prefer when making location choices. According to a case study of Chiang Mai (Jiwasiddi et al. 2024), Thailand is an affordable country, especially for digital nomads who come from Western countries. Particularly in Chiang Mai, but also in other parts of Thailand, the tech-oriented infrastructure tempts digital

nomads to work in co-working or co-living spaces, which provide high-speed internet and a conducive work environment. As reliable and fast internet connectivity is a top priority for digital nomads, Thailand stands out by ranking sixth in the global internet speed rankings (Speedtest 2024). Furthermore, Orel (2020) states that Thailand has built work-leisure hubs and eco-villages, as well as introduced smart city initiatives, which attract digital nomads and generate communities for them to share knowledge and form support networks. Both Orel (2020) and Jiwasiddi et al. (2024) also emphasize the appeal of Thailand's rich cultural heritage and natural landscapes, which provide an attractive environment for longer stays. Moreover, Thailand has just recently announced a "Destination Thailand Visa", which allows digital nomads and other types of remote workers or freelancers to stay in Thailand for a longer period of time without a hassle (ThaiEmbassy.com 2024). In addition, Thailand's tropical climate and diverse range of leisure activities, supported by its tourism infrastructure, could influence the digital nomads' choice of location as well, with some of the reasons for visiting the country overlapping with those of the over 28 million tourists who arrived last year (Ministry of Tourism & Sports of Thailand 2024).

As previously stated by Lacárcel et al. (2024), many digital nomads enjoy immersing themselves in new cultural experiences, making the concepts of cultural integration and cultural adaptation particularly significant. Cultural integration refers to the process by which various cultural elements (see Section 2.2 and 2.3) merge to form a cohesive whole, or to the way individuals from different cultural backgrounds interact and align their behaviors, attitudes, and practices, resulting in a more cohesive society (Hoyt 1961; Kuran & Sandholm 2006). Cultural adaptation, on the other hand, has various definitions that vary depending on the researcher and the concept has multiple aspects to it. Cultural adaptation can be defined as a process by which individuals adjust to unfamiliar cultural environments, involving changes in behavior, perceptions, and emotions (Anderson 1994). The author presents two main school of thoughts that offer different aspects to cultural adaptation. Firstly, cultural adaptation could be seen as a learning process, where individuals acquire the skills and knowledge needed to navigate social norms and cultural expectations. Secondly, cultural adaptation could also be seen as a behavioral adaptation, where individuals modify their actions based on feedback from the new culture. Conclusively, cultural adaptation requires both understanding and internalizing the values and practices of the host culture.

Cultural integration and adaptation are particularly crucial for long-term digital nomads who plan to spend a longer period of time in a new host country. Thompson (2019) states that digital nomadism comes with the cost of social isolation and loneliness. By making the effort to integrate into the new host culture, digital nomads could potentially engage in more meaningful interactions and

communications with locals and have a better sense of belonging. Not only could this have an effect on digital nomads' social life, but it could also affect their overall well-being and quality of life. Furthermore, local people and local communities can benefit from digital nomads as well. It is evident that digital nomads contribute to local economies by purchasing goods and services, but they also can participate in knowledge sharing and skill development for the locals (Christiansen et al. 2023). In addition, digital nomads can participate in cultural exchange, in which they can gain local perspectives and in turn, bring global perspectives to locals, which can be mutually enriching. At best, digital nomads could even enhance innovation in local communities by mentoring and collaborating with locals (Christiansen et al. 2023). For short-term digital nomads, cultural integration might not be as relevant as it is for long-term digital nomads as they are staying temporarily and do not have enough time to learn the language or adjust to different social norms. As it is often the case with regular tourists, short-term digital nomads could just learn the basic cultural elements such as greetings, which leads to surface-level interactions with locals, in comparison to a deeper level of social investment to the community.

1.2 Aim of the Thesis

As Thailand has emerged as one of the most popular digital nomad destinations (Nomad List 2024b), it is important to understand how emerging work methods and global trends, such as digital nomadism influence the local culture and vice versa. The number of digital nomads is likely increasing rapidly, as remote work is becoming more mainstream (PayScale 2024). It is a trend that is also likely to continue as technology advances and work becomes even more flexible. Digital nomads still often struggle to adapt and integrate culturally (Christiansen et al. 2023), which could result in isolation or social tension between digital nomads and locals. By having an understanding of the cultural challenges digital nomads face, it could be essential in achieving social cohesion and harmonious coexistence between digital nomads and local people.

In this thesis, the focus will be on digital nomads from a cultural perspective, with particular attention to their experiences in Thailand. Digital nomadism is currently rather an under-researched topic, with research currently focusing more on understanding the phenomenon (Hannonen 2020; D. Cook 2023; Fikry et al. 2023) or examining the phenomenon from an economic point of view (Thompson 2018; Wood et al. 2019; Jiwasiddi et al. 2024). The lack of research on how digital nomads adapt and integrate culturally leaves an incomplete understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. Therefore, this thesis not only aims to contribute to the international business literature and academic research, but it can also provide valuable insights for policymakers, local communities, businesses, as well as

current and future digital nomads, to optimize for more sustainable digital nomadism while reducing potential cultural tensions. To achieve the aim of the thesis, key cultural challenges faced by digital nomads will be identified, and cultural adaptation theories will be applied within the context of Thailand.

The main research question in this thesis is: *Why do digital nomads face challenges integrating into local Thai communities, and how do they adapt culturally?* The purpose of the main research question is to address the complex process that involves both cultural challenges digital nomads face and adaptation strategies they can use to overcome the challenges. To get a comprehensive answer for the main research question, it has been further divided into three separate sub-research questions, which function as building blocks to the main question. The first sub-research question is: *What are the key cultural differences that digital nomads encounter in Thailand?* This sub-research question aims to establish a foundational understanding of the main cultural barriers that exist between digital nomads and local Thai people. The focus is to identify cultural challenges and define cultural gaps to understand why digital nomads struggle with cultural integration. The second sub-research question is: *How do digital nomads' backgrounds affect their cultural adaptation?* With this sub-research question, the aim is to analyze how cultural challenges differ among individuals, why some digital nomads might have fewer or more challenges than others, and how individual factors or traits can affect digital nomads' ability to integrate. The third sub-research question is: *What strategies do digital nomads use to integrate into local communities and adapt to Thai culture?* The focus on the final sub-research question is on the adaptation process and various adaptive strategies digital nomads can use to overcome cultural challenges, ultimately closing the circle by answering the main research question.

The structure of this thesis after this chapter will consist of two theory chapters, conclusions, and a list of references. The first theory chapter "2 Digital Nomadism and Thai Culture" answers the first sub-research question and partially the second sub-research question. The second theory chapter "3 Cultural Integration and Adaptation Strategies" answers the third sub-research question and partially the second sub-research question. Finally in conclusions, the topic along with the research questions will be concluded, research delimitations are addressed, as well as implications for future research will be given.

2 Digital Nomadism and Thai Culture

2.1 Theoretical Foundations and Key Aspects

The aim of this chapter is to introduce digital nomad characteristics, present an overview of Thai culture, identify challenges that digital nomads encounter when integrating into Thai communities, as well as discuss digital nomads' background factors in relation to cultural adaptation. The two main frameworks used in this chapter to evaluate the interaction between digital nomads and Thai culture are Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory as well as theories and concepts of Cross-Cultural Communication. In addition, the concepts of cultural stereotypes and cultural friction are used to get a deeper understanding of the cultural differences that lead to challenges.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory offers a structured approach that helps to understand how practices, values, and behaviors differ across countries (Hofstede 2011). It is particularly useful for analyzing cultural integration as the theory provides a way to systematically compare the values of the home country to the host country's values. The framework consists of six dimensions, which are Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs. Restraint. In this chapter, the main focus is on the first three dimensions, as they provide practical and valuable insights into the cultural challenges digital nomads are likely to face when adapting to new cultures in different countries.

Cross-cultural communication refers to the exchange of information between individuals who are from diverse social, ethnic, or gender backgrounds, and who do not share the same cultural values with each other (Eubanks et al. 2010). Cross-cultural communication also involves adaptation to new communication and behavior patterns beyond national or regional boundaries (Nair-Venugopal 2003). As communication styles differ between cultures, these differences can lead to misunderstandings, particularly in new and unfamiliar environments. It is therefore essential for digital nomads to understand how misunderstandings and challenges in communication arise, as it could affect the adaptation process to the local culture. In this chapter, the main focus of cross-cultural communication theories is on the concepts of high-context vs. low-context communication (Broeder 2021), verbal and non-verbal communication (Purnell 2018), as well as face-negotiation theory (Ting & Kurogi 1998), as they are relevant concepts to explore key communication barriers.

2.2 Digital Nomad Characteristics

Most digital nomads come from Western countries (Nomad List 2024e). According to the statistics, nearly half of all digital nomads come from the USA, while the UK ranks second with a share of only 7% of digital nomads. Other common Western nationalities among digital nomads include Canada, Germany, and France. Notable digital nomad nationalities, which could be considered from Eastern countries are from Russia, with a 5% share, and India, which accounts for only 1%. Statistics (Flatio 2023a) also show that 52,6% of digital nomads are between the ages of 30 and 39, while the second largest age group is from 18 to 29 years with a share of 22,4%. Only 5,3% of digital nomads are over 50 years old. The vast majority of digital nomads (91%) also hold higher education, with half of them holding a bachelor's degree (Nomad List 2024c). Digital nomadism is also more popular amongst men, as 61% of digital nomads are men while 39% are women (Nomad List 2024d). Most digital nomads work as freelancers (35%) or full-time remote employees (31.5%), while 20.4% are digital entrepreneurs or self-employed individuals, such as content creators (Flatio 2023b). Regardless of being a gig worker, salary employee, or self-employed, common jobs for digital nomads are, for instance, digital marketing, video language tutoring, computer programming, or software engineering (Thompson 2018).

Figure 1 (The Culture Factor Group 2024) below shows the values of Hofstede's dimensions in four of the most common Western countries digital nomads come from. The graph has been accessed and modified from The Culture Factor Group, which actively collects data from scientific journals and studies.

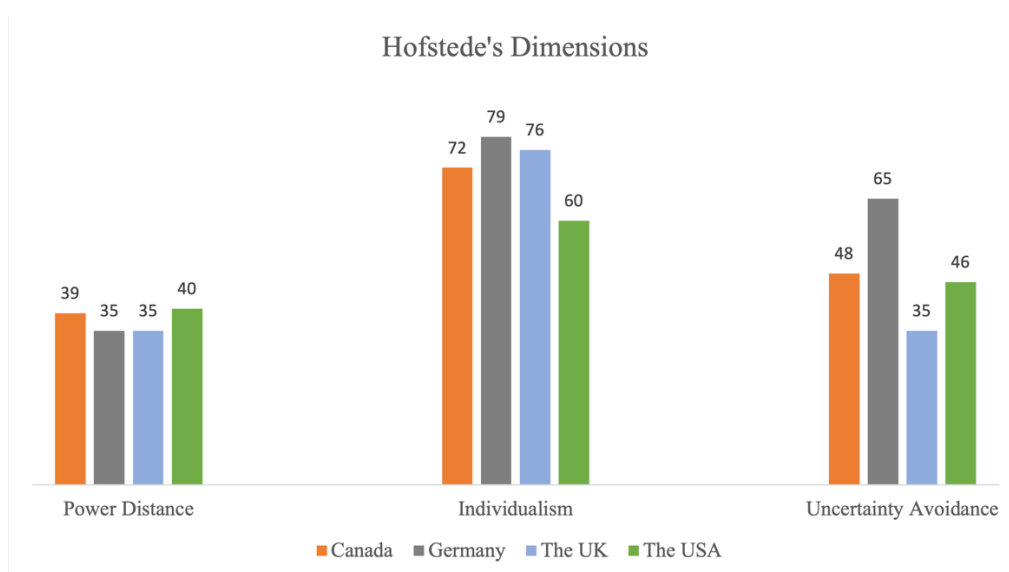


Figure 1 Hofstede's Dimensions (modified from The Culture Factor Group 2024)

Figure 1 shows that all four countries score very similar values in every category. For instance, these countries score low on power distance, which means that there is a smaller emphasis on hierarchy, allowing individuals of lower status to engage more freely with those of higher status. Also, authority figures in these cultures are considered approachable, and decision-making can be more decentralized. (Hofstede 2011.) The examined Western cultures are additionally highly individualistic, which means that individuals emphasize self-reliance and independence. Decision-making is also often based on personal interests or preferences rather than group or community consensus. (Hofstede 2011; Minkov 2018.) As for uncertainty avoidance, the figure shows that Canada, The UK, and The USA all score rather low in this category, as they are more uncertainty-accepting cultures. Such societies tend to be open to new experiences, relaxed about ambiguity, and have fewer regulations, which fosters innovation and flexibility in decision-making and social behavior. Germany, however, is somewhat more uncertainty-avoidant compared to the other Western countries, which means that there is a preference for more stricter rules, structured systems, and formal processes to reduce unpredictability and ensure stability. (Minkov & Hofstede 2014.)

Due to the nature of the nomadic lifestyle, digital nomads often share many common traits, cultural tendencies, as well as personal values. Despite the backgrounds of digital nomads, they value personal freedom, flexibility, and work-life balance the most (Reichenberger 2018). As digital nomads rely heavily on technology for their work (Nash et al. 2018), it can be said that digital nomads are also somewhat tech-savvy people with digital skills. Prester et al. (2019) also note that digital nomads are usually creative individuals who possess innovative problem-solving skills. Since digital nomads have a strong motivation to be mobile, travel, and break free of traditional work routines (Orel 2020), they must be self-disciplined, responsible, and trustworthy to be capable of managing leisure distractions to maintain productivity. In addition, many digital nomads could also exhibit entrepreneurial qualities and self-learning capabilities enabling them to adapt to new work methods, technologies, and opportunities.

When it comes to communication styles, Western cultures such as The USA or Germany belong to low-context cultures. In these low-context cultures, communication is explicit and direct, with a primary focus on the content of the verbal message itself, rather than the surrounding context. Information is conveyed clearly through words, minimizing ambiguity, which means that people are less dependent on non-verbal communication or shared experiences for interpretation. In addition, the straightforward manner of speaking in individualistic low-context cultures could be seen as efficient as well. (Kim et al. 1998; Purnell 2018.)

Although digital nomads share many traits and preferences, individual background factors can still influence digital nomads' challenges associated with cultural integration. Nationality can influence the difficulty digital nomads can face when integrating into Thai culture. Since most digital nomads come from Western cultures, which are both geographically and culturally distant from Thailand, adapting to the Thai culture (e.g., language, values, and traditions) may be more challenging for them compared to those that come from geographically and/or culturally closer countries, such as Laos, which shares some cultural elements and linguistic similarities with Thailand (Draper et al. 2019).

Age can also affect digital nomads' ability to integrate into new environments and cultural settings. Mamman (1995) argues that older individuals tend to have more difficulties adapting culturally than younger individuals. In the case of digital nomadism, older individuals could often find it more difficult to adopt the nomadic lifestyle due to a more settled lifestyle with established careers and family commitments, as well as difficulties with technological equipment. As for the gender, research generally shows that individualistic cultures are usually more gender equal compared to collectivistic cultures, indicating that women could face slightly more cultural challenges in Thailand (Mamman 1995). However, the cultural challenges discussed in the research applies more to the corporate world instead of local communities, which can lead to the misconception that female digital nomads surely struggle more than men integrating culturally into Thailand. A more significant issue with different gender roles could be that they can discourage female digital nomads from choosing Thailand as a destination in the first place, compared to their male counterparts.

Mamman (1995) also notes that people with a higher-level education are able to adapt to unfamiliar situations better than those with a lower-level education, as educated people hold a bigger capacity to learn new things and challenges of life. It is also noteworthy that education can be viewed as valuable and even prestigious, which could open more doors to diverse social interactions in the new host country. Furthermore, digital nomads' professional background as well as prior travel experience could also influence the extent of cultural integration challenges. For instance, digital nomads who work in professions involving frequent social interactions may find it easier to also interact with Thai locals, whereas digital nomads who prefer working independently and spend more time alone may struggle more with cultural integration into Thailand. Moreover, individuals who have extensive prior travel experience may likely face fewer cultural barriers compared to first-time travelers or newcomers, as they have developed more intercultural skills through previous traveling.

Digital nomads may have stereotypes regarding Thailand, its culture, and local Thai people, which could impact their cultural integration. In case the stereotypes turn out to be unrealistic and inaccurate,

it could lead to further unexpected challenges and difficulties in adapting to the local culture. Most commonly, individuals from Western cultures could often portray Thailand as a low-cost, and tropical never-changing paradise (Howard 2009). Scuzzarello (2020) states that Westerners have an image of Thai people to be smiling always, friendly, and pure. According to statistics (Transparency International 2024), Thailand ranked 108th out of 180 countries in terms of corruption. This could foster a perception among some Western digital nomads that laws and customs can be disregarded, knowing that there is a possibility to get away without consequences. Furthermore, some Westerners in Thailand may justify their economic privilege by viewing themselves as morally superior to locals, while holding superficial or misinformed perceptions of Thai culture (Scuzzarello 2020). Western individuals also often have a limited understanding of Thai society, with many of their social interactions remaining limited to other foreigners, which further reinforces stereotypes about Thailand (Howard 2009). Thus, cultural integration is crucial in challenging or overcoming stereotypes as well, as these preconceived ideas of Thailand can conflict with the realities of Thai society and culture.

2.3 Thai Culture

The traditional Thai culture is deeply rooted in Buddhism, with a mix of animism and supernaturalism as well (Malikhao & Servaes 2017). Buddhism influences Thai perspectives on life, family, and moral values, as concepts like karma, merit-making, and mindfulness are integrated into Thai people's everyday lives and social practices (Niffenegger et al. 2006). The friendly, modest, and conflict-averse demeanor of the Thai people also aligns with the Buddhist principle of the middle way, shaping interpersonal interactions, fostering non-confrontational behavior, and emphasizing compassion in relationships (Niffenegger et al. 2006; Malikhao & Servaes 2017). To avoid confrontation and direct conflicts, as well as prioritize harmony, Thais have a cultural norm of “mai pen rai,” (ไม่เป็นไร), which translates to "never mind" or "it's okay," encouraging a laid-back attitude and reluctance to openly express negative emotions (Malikhao & Servaes 2017). The authors state that the social expectations of suppressing own emotions to avoid conflicts, which could also be referred to as “jai yen” (ใจเย็น, literally "cool-hearted") stem from a young age. In addition to avoiding conflicts, traditional values of Thai people include the concept of “kreng-jai” (เกรงใจ, meaning respect, consideration, and politeness), the concept of “tob thaen bun-khun” (ตอบแทนบุญคุณ, meaning paying back in kind or return gratitude), having a relationship orientation of social smoothing, as well as being able to peacefully coexist with different ethnic or religious groups (Malikhao & Servaes 2017).

Figure 2 (The Culture Factor Group 2024) below shows the values of Hofstede's Dimensions in Thailand. The graph has been accessed and modified from The Culture Factor Group similar to Figure 1.

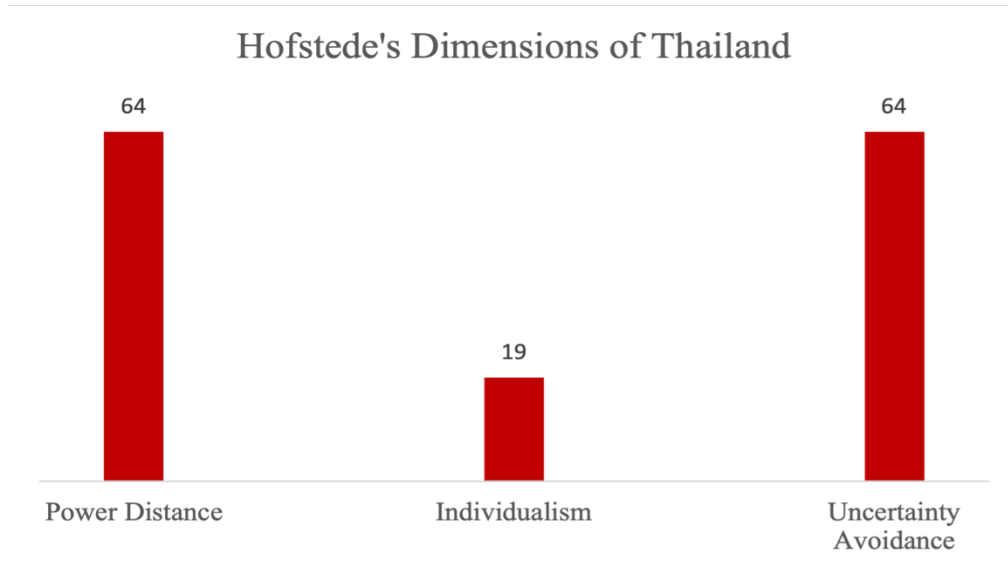


Figure 2 Hofstede's Dimensions (modified from The Culture Factor Group 2024)

Figure 2 shows that there is a relatively high power distance in Thailand, which means that there are more or less social inequality and hierarchy (Hofstede 2011). Thai culture strongly emphasizes respect for authority and hierarchical structures, with social interactions largely governed by one's status in society, which is influenced by factors such as age, occupation, and wealth (Pinyuchon & Gray 1997; Thanasankit & Corbitt 2002). This strong sense of hierarchy concerns government, civilian society, and business, where individuals are expected to "know their place" in the social order. Respect for parents, elders, and those in positions of authority is deeply ingrained, and the Thai monarchy is held in particularly high regard, reflecting the broader cultural value of respecting those in positions of power (Niffenegger et al. 2006; Malikhao & Servaes 2017).

Traditional Thai values emphasize collectivism over individualism, where the community and family are central, and individuals are expected to prioritize the needs of their family and community over personal desires, in contrast to more individualistic cultures (Pinyuchon & Gray 1997). This sense of interdependence is reflected in the strong value placed on family ties, social cohesion, and the importance of belonging. Thai culture also emphasizes maintaining harmony, and social relationships are often classified into two categories: in-group, where there is mutual trust and informality, and out-group, where interactions are characterized by distrust and a more formal orientation (Niffenegger et al. 2006; Malikhao & Servaes 2017).

Thailand is also an uncertainty-avoidant country like Germany, as discussed before, where unstructured situations and uncertainty might feel uncomfortable for Thais (Hofstede 2011). This can be evident in business settings for instance, where there is often a preference for face-to-face interactions instead of online meetings, or for preferring cash and writing receipts to avoid uncertainty (Niffenegger et al. 2006). As for the traditional gender roles, Thai families are considered patriarchal with men generally holding positions of authority and women typically managing household responsibilities. Despite the patriarchal structure, women are highly respected within the family, and gender roles have historically been shaped by these traditional norms. Moreover, upholding family honor and fulfilling family duties are seen as vital aspects of Thai family life. (Pinyuchon & Gray 1997.)

Communication in Thailand can be regarded as high-context, meaning it tends to be indirect and relies heavily on the surrounding physical and social environment. A large part of the conveyed meaning in Thai communication is embedded in non-verbal cues such as body language (e.g., Thai “wai” greeting), facial expressions, tone (where the same word can have multiple meanings depending on the tone), and the broader context of the interaction, rather than being directly stated through words or sentences. To fully understand the intended message, one must often interpret it within the appropriate social and cultural context. (Kim et al. 1998; Purnell 2018.)

In addition, Thai people tend to feel more comfortable communicating at a closer physical distance, requiring less personal space compared to those from individualistic cultures. Unlike in many Western low-touch cultures, physical contact is more common, although certain actions, such as touching someone's head or using feet to touch others or perform tasks, are viewed as highly disrespectful (Purnell 2018). Moreover, individuals of lower social status are expected to avoid direct eye contact with those of higher status, reflecting the hierarchical nature of social interactions (Purnell 2018).

The concept of “face” or “saving face” is also highly important in Thai culture, as it refers to maintaining one's social self-worth or dignity in the eyes of others. This identity-based resource can be threatened or enhanced in various social situations, such as conflicts, negotiations, or interpersonal interactions. In collectivist cultures like Thailand, there is a strong emphasis on preserving mutual face, reflecting a concern for group harmony and approval from one's in-group. (Ting & Kurogi 1998.) It is also fairly common that in Thailand, the response “yes” might signify that the speaker hears or understands the other person rather than indicating agreement with what has been asked or explained (Purnell 2018).

Thai culture is however constantly evolving due to the effects of globalization. Malikhao & Servaes (2017) argue that Thai society has experienced a form of cultural schizophrenia, as Thais find themselves caught between Western influences and their own traditional culture. As the traditional Thai culture emphasizes power distance and inequalities, modern Thai culture is shifting towards more equal relationships, especially between younger people and the elderly. Urbanization and moving away from rural hierarchical settings have challenged the value of respecting elders and authority figures by the younger generation, as they are shifting towards youth-centeredness and self-expression (Niffenegger et al. 2006; Malikhao & Servaes 2017; Witayarat 2023).

Additionally, the collectivist values that have historically shaped Thai society are gradually giving way to individualism, driven by globalization and the rise of mass media. The mass media and rapid advancement of communication technologies, particularly social media, have had an influence on the attitudes and behaviors of young Thais, offering spaces for discussion and contributing to the changing perceptions of cultural norms (Malikhao & Servaes 2017; Witayarat 2023). There is also a shift towards greater gender equality in Thailand, as traditional expectations of women as housewives give way to more egalitarian views on household responsibilities and childcare. Nowadays, young men are increasingly more open to sharing domestic duties, challenging the longstanding patriarchal system (Witayarat 2023).

As for the communication, more open, honest, and direct statements and opinions have become more prevalent, especially among the younger Thais (Niffenegger et al. 2006). While traditional Thai culture is often seen as static and unchanging, modern Thai culture is viewed as fluid, diverse, and dynamic. It reflects a blend of local traditions and Western influences, a hybridization that affects many areas of Thai life, including media consumption and spiritual practices. While this evolution of Thai culture is shaped largely by globalization, it does not imply that Westernization has overtaken Thai culture; instead, the two coexist and interact in various ways. (Malikhao & Servaes 2017; Witayarat 2023.)

2.4 Key Cultural Differences Between Digital Nomads and Thai Culture

Digital nomads can potentially face numerous challenges when trying to adapt to Thai culture and integrate into Thai communities. After reviewing the key cultural traits of both digital nomads and the local Thai population in the previous subchapters, it has become evident that their cultural characteristics differ significantly in nearly every aspect; Western digital nomads are accustomed to low power distance, individualistic way of life, and direct communication, whereas Thai people are used to high power distance, collectivistic way of life, and indirect communication. The differences

for instance, in work culture, cultural attitude, social interactions, as well as communication styles may cause cultural friction, which can in turn interfere with digital nomads' cultural integration attempts.

In Section 2.2, stereotypes were discussed from the perspective of digital nomads, but local Thai people may have their own stereotypes of Western digital nomads as well. Chaisiri (2016) states that Thai people like to use the term “farang” (ฝรั่ง) to describe a foreigner (more specifically a Westerner), encompassing both positive and negative stereotypes. The term is widely used both formally and informally including in media and daily interactions, and it denotes someone as an “outsider”, emphasizing cultural and behavioral distinctions from Thais. While Thais can simply use the term “farang” to identify Westerners, it can imply a sense of separateness or “otherness” for Westerners. Oftentimes, the Thai media portrays “farangs” as “free-spending holiday-makers or rich potential husbands” (Howard 2009). As many of the Thais have a stereotype of Westerners being wealthy, they may be considered privileged as well. According to a survey in Howard's article (2009), most Thai people surveyed had positive impressions of Westerners in Thailand. However, some had negative impressions of Westerners such as having bad manners, bad habits, bad temper, and even being bullies to local people. This can be due to some Westerners' lack of respect for local norms and customs. Additionally, because of the nomadic lifestyle of digital nomads, Thai locals could also view them as temporary visitors with no real intentions of adapting to Thai culture or integrating into Thai communities. Stereotypes from both digital nomads' and Thai locals' points of view can be a starting point for cultural friction.

Differences in power distance, individualism/collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance between Western digital nomads and Thai people can further increase cultural friction between these two. Western digital nomads could find Thailand's high power distance challenging especially because of the hierarchy. First, as a foreigner, it can be difficult to place oneself into the Thai hierarchy and to understand in which place one belongs in there. Second, it can be confusing and complex to address, communicate, and engage with local Thai people, if there is not a full understanding of the hierarchical dynamics. For instance, Westerners who are used to more informal interactions may wrongfully treat older individuals or communicate in an inappropriate manner with Thai elderly. There could also be problems with local Thai authorities more easily and often due to both sides being accustomed to different ways of interaction. The difference between power distance could be visible in everyday interaction; cultural misunderstandings could occur from formal greetings to even digital nomads' inappropriate or disrespectful body language perceived by Thai locals.

Western digital nomads who come from individualistic cultures may also find challenges in Thai collectivistic cultures. As it has been previously analyzed, Western digital nomads enjoy self-reliance and independence as a part of their individualistic way of life, and they may struggle to end the prioritization of personal desires as well as adapt to Thai's collectivistic way of life. Digital nomads can, for instance, be quick to express their honest opinions, which could harm the collectivistic thinking of group harmony and consensus. It should also be important for digital nomads to build trust among locals and enhance group loyalty, but it could often be difficult for digital nomads who do not stay in one place long enough. This could lead Western digital nomads to fall into out-group (see Section 2.3) relationships for local Thais, which further makes adaptation and integration attempts even more difficult.

Digital nomads by nature are spontaneous and flexible individuals, which matches the uncertainty-accepting culture of Western countries (except for Germany). This, however, conflicts with the uncertainty-avoidant culture of Thailand. Digital nomads who are used to unstructured situations and norms can find it difficult when local Thai people are more cautious and structured. A great example of Thailand's uncertainty avoidance is from the COVID-19 era. A study by Pongpirul et al. (2020) highlights Thai Airways' comprehensive COVID-19 protocols, reflecting Thailand's preference for thorough procedural measures. Repeated temperature checks and strict in-flight safety procedures reflect the high uncertainty avoidance in Thai culture. Similar approaches can be seen in other sectors as well, such as telecommunications and banking, where extended processes aim to ensure compliance and reduce risk. Western digital nomads, however, may find these steps and processes highly frustrating and excessive.

Communication styles cause even more challenges between digital nomads and Thai locals. As Western digital nomads are accustomed to speaking directly and explicitly, Thai people may find it rude. On the other hand, the Thai style of indirect communication may cause misinterpretations and misunderstandings among digital nomads. For example, a Thai person could say "maybe" or give an open-ended answer to a question, which in turn the digital nomad could misinterpret it as an indecision rather than understanding it as a denial. In addition, the use of non-verbal communication by Thais such as body language, facial expressions, and tones can be confusing and difficult to understand. For instance, it could be difficult for Western digital nomads to truly know the emotion or intention behind the non-verbal cues of Thai people. Also, the concept of saving face can be unknown to many Westerners. They could unintentionally cause Thai people to lose face by bringing up sensitive topics in the conversation or criticizing something as they try to be honest. Losing face

can be extremely embarrassing for local Thai people, and if a Westerner causes it to happen, it can lead to distrust and even to the end of a relationship.

This chapter aimed to characterize the culture of digital nomads and Thai locals, as well as discuss some of the key challenges digital nomads can face when adapting to Thai culture and integrating into Thai communities. The next chapter will discuss cultural adaptation and integration strategies, and how digital nomads can actively navigate the discussed challenges in real time.

3 Cultural Adaptation and Integration Strategies

3.1 Introduction to Adaptation Strategies and Key Frameworks

Digital nomads belong to a unique demographic group due to their hybrid nature. Their cultural integration strategies may differ from tourists' strategies, as tourists may stay in Thailand for a shorter period of time, consisting only of shallow cultural adaptation. On the other hand, digital nomads may lack the support networks, or a longer-term investment compared to expatriates living in Thailand. How can digital nomads then integrate into local communities and Thai society successfully, or how can they at least facilitate the process?

This chapter aims to explore the various ways digital nomads can navigate through cultural challenges discussed in the previous chapter, focusing on approaches to cultural adaptation and integration. There are various factors affecting the choice of adaptation strategy or the integration process. Therefore, the background factors of digital nomads are also taken into consideration throughout this chapter. While digital nomads can generally encounter multifaceted and challenging cultural differences as they travel, there are some cultural adaptation frameworks to make their integration journey easier and the transition smoother.

In this chapter, the cultural adaptation and integration strategies are examined through five subchapters of different theoretical lenses to get a vast and comprehensive understanding of the whole process. Subchapter 3.7 will synthesize all the theoretical lenses at the end of this chapter. The examined theoretical lenses are: Cultural Intelligence (CQ) Theory, Acculturation Theory, the U-Curve Model, concepts of Social Capital and Networks, as well as Social Cognitive Theory. Cultural Intelligence provides an extensive framework to assess digital nomads' ability to interact effectively with culturally distinct Thai locals. As CQ refers to the ability to adapt and display appropriate behavior in new cultural contexts, it can be distinguished as a unique skill (Thomas 2006). Acculturation refers to the changes that take place when different cultures come into contact, resulting in alterations to the original cultural patterns of one or both groups (Sam & Berry 2010). According to the authors, acculturation is often used interchangeably with the term "integration", and it provides useful strategies for supporting the cultural integration of digital nomads. Moreover, the U-curve model of adaptation helps to explain the emotional stages digital nomads can experience when adapting to new cultures, including both emotional highs and lows in the process (Ahmad et al. 2014). The concepts of Social Capital and Networks provide insights into how digital nomads establish supportive networks to facilitate a smoother adaptation process (Woolcock & Narayan 2000; Lin 2017).

Finally, the Social Cognitive Theory serves as a comprehensive framework for understanding the behavior of digital nomads through the reciprocal interaction of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (Bandura 2001). In this thesis, the emphasis is specifically on the aspect of observational learning within the Social Cognitive Theory.

3.2 Cultural Intelligence and Intercultural Competence of Digital Nomads

Ang et al. (2007, 337) define Cultural Intelligence (CQ) simply as “*an individual's capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings...*”. According to the authors, CQ consists of four dimensions: the first dimension, Metacognitive CQ involves awareness and control over one’s cultural knowledge, allowing for effective planning and adaptation in intercultural interactions. This dimension emphasizes adjusting one’s mindset to navigate diverse cultural settings. The second dimension, Cognitive CQ involves understanding cultural norms, practices, and systems through learning and experience. It includes knowledge of various legal, economic, and social systems, as well as cultural values, helping individuals identify both similarities and differences across cultures. The third dimension, Motivational CQ is the ability to focus energy on effectively engaging and learning in cross-cultural settings. Individuals with high motivational CQ are naturally interested in other cultures and confident in handling cross-cultural situations to overcome related challenges. The final dimension, Behavioral CQ refers to the ability to display culturally appropriate verbal and non-verbal behaviors in interactions with people from other cultures. It can involve adapting one’s tone, gestures, or expressions to suit the cultural context, with flexibility and appropriateness as central aspects.

Developing a comprehensive CQ skillset can benefit digital nomads crucially when they encounter new cultures. For instance, Metacognitive CQ enables digital nomads to anticipate Thai cultural expectations, including high power distance and collectivist values like respect for hierarchy, community orientation, and non-confrontational communication (Ang et al. 2007). By consciously adjusting their behavior (e.g., by researching Thai customs prior traveling to Thailand), digital nomads can prevent misunderstandings or actions that may unintentionally disrespect local norms – such as showing proper respect toward elders or authority figures and refraining from public criticism or discussing sensitive topics openly.

Through Cognitive CQ, digital nomads can learn about Thai cultural practices such as the concept of “*kreng-jai*” (see Section 2.3), and further the significance of family and community connections. This understanding helps them avoid behaviors that may be seen as culturally insensitive, like displaying excessive individualism or questioning group decisions, thus improving their social interactions (Ang

et al. 2007). Furthermore, by recognizing these nuances, they can appreciate why certain interactions in Thailand differ from those in Western contexts, and allow digital nomads to engage more appropriately in local customs as well as build positive relationships within the community. Digital nomads with high Motivational CQ can be more likely to proactively engage with Thai society, demonstrating curiosity and persistence in understanding the local culture (Ang et al. 2007). This intrinsic drive would be essential for digital nomads to build connections, especially since locals may perceive digital nomads merely as temporary visitors (Thomas 2006). A profound interest in the culture may motivate digital nomads to, for example, attend local events, learn the Thai language, and participate in community activities, which could then foster deeper integration and acceptance within Thai society.

Given the significance of polite, high-context, and indirect communication in Thai culture, Behavioral CQ enables digital nomads to engage in culturally respectful behaviors (Ang et al. 2007). This could include using a softer tone, employing traditional Thai greetings such as the “wai” (see Section 2.3), and recognizing when direct eye contact, personal space, or certain physical gestures may be viewed as inappropriate. By practicing these adaptive behaviors, digital nomads could more effectively integrate into the local environment and diminish the perception of being “outsiders”. In brief, CQ as a whole can work as a bridge for adaptation, allowing digital nomads to understand, respect, and navigate the Thai cultural framework. It can help digital nomads build trust and form relationships with local Thai communities more easily, which in turn can lead to a more fulfilling experience staying in Thailand.

Moreover, Intercultural Competence (IC) as a concept, is closely related to and often overlaps in some ways with CQ. Li (2020) defines Intercultural Competence as an individual’s capacity to think and behave in ways that are suitable within different cultural contexts. While CQ focuses on adaptability in cross-cultural situations, IC provides a wider framework that includes essential knowledge, skills, and sensitivity for effective intercultural communication. IC deepens CQ by encouraging meaningful engagement and understanding within cultural contexts, promoting better cooperation, and reducing misunderstandings in diverse settings (Johnson et al. 2006; Li 2020). Both CQ and IC are similar concepts and can facilitate the cultural adaptation process. As IC deepens the CQ theory beyond adaptability, having a high IC on top of the CQ skillset may give digital nomads an enormous edge when trying to achieve longer-term integration beyond cultural adaptation in Thailand (Johnson et al. 2006; Li 2020).

The diverse amount of background factors of digital nomads can also influence their CQ levels as well as their Intercultural Competence. For instance, it can be argued that digital nomads, who grew up in diverse and multicultural countries or cities, could have higher levels of CQ and IC. As they would often have to interact in a culturally diverse environment, they would naturally develop better levels of CQ and IC, compared to digital nomads that come from a homogeneous area. Research (de Waal et al. 2020) also shows that early exposure to different cultures, such as being raised cross-culturally (e.g., as a part of parents' work abroad), greatly strengthens intercultural competence by encouraging open-mindedness and acceptance of diversity. Additionally, individuals with previous cultural experiences, such as personal or professional travel, including working, studying, or living abroad, typically exhibit higher levels of CQ and IC (Crowne 2008). These experiences help develop skills in cultural adaptation and enhance interactions in diverse cultural settings. It can also be argued that individuals with a higher-level education, such as a university degree, could perhaps have higher levels of CQ and IC compared to those with lower-level or no education background at all. Also, much younger individuals are likely to exhibit less CQ and IC, while older individuals may have the advantage of having more life experience and possibly more exposure to diverse cultural contexts, as well as developed resilience and adaptability, exhibiting higher levels of CQ and IC (Schwarzenthal et al. 2017). In addition to the age factor, the authors state that individuals who are able to reflect on their own cultural heritage and background relate to higher levels of CQ and IC as well.

Digital nomads can develop and improve their CQ and IC levels, for example, through formal education, travel, and even everyday experiences. For instance, digital nomads could attend CQ and IC lessons or workshops, participate in multicultural events, or build skills through simple daily interactions, like chatting online with someone from a different cultural background or even learning through trial-and-error travel experiences. Numerous pathways exist to develop and improve these competencies. Furthermore, it is important to note that the concepts of CQ and IC are foundational theories, while other theories discussed next, such as Acculturation and U-Curve Theory, provide additional layers of understanding in the adaptation journey of digital nomads.

3.3 Acculturation Strategies for Digital Nomads

When individuals or groups from diverse cultural backgrounds are in long-term contact with another culture, they experience both cultural and psychological adjustments (Sam & Berry 2010). This process of acculturation includes maintaining elements of their original culture while adopting aspects of the new one, with adaptation as the intended outcome. Acculturation may lead to changes in behaviors, values, or identity to integrate with the dominant culture while preserving one's own

heritage. (Sam & Berry 2010.) The authors outline four primary acculturation strategies, which depend on the level of an individual's interaction with the host culture as well as how much one's own original culture is retained. The first strategy, known as assimilation, involves individuals adopting the host culture's norms and values, often reducing or even abandoning their original culture. The second strategy, integration, entails engaging with the host culture while preserving strong ties to one's own culture, which typically supports better adaptation and social integration. The third strategy is called separation, where individuals prioritize their original culture and avoid involvement with the host culture. Finally, the marginalization strategy occurs when individuals feel disconnected from both their original and host cultures, which can lead to social isolation. The acculturation framework can become critically important especially for digital nomads, as they must frequently adjust to new cultural settings due to their nomadic nature. The different strategies provide alternative options for cultural adaptation, from which digital nomads can choose based on their current lifestyle, personality, or cultural engagement goals. However, it is good to note that these strategies may not always be fixed as digital nomads may move between them depending on, for instance, external factors such as their experiences, length of stay, and interactions with locals (Sam & Berry 2010).

In practice, digital nomads using the assimilation strategy in Thailand may have fallen in love with the Thai culture, embracing it fully. They may participate in local events or festivals, learn the language, eat Thai food daily, or even convert their religion to Buddhism. It is possible that digital nomads who use the assimilation strategy may potentially stay longer in Thailand, visit there more often, or eventually even move to Thailand, find a Thai spouse, and start a new chapter in their life as more of an expatriate. Digital nomads using the integration strategy, may eagerly absorb various Thai cultural elements but still preserve their own cultural habitats. They may, for instance, participate in local events and engage with Thai locals actively, but also participate in community events similar to the nomad's own culture, and engage with other digital nomads or expatriates who share the same home-country culture. In contrast, digital nomads who use the separation strategy may find their own culture more comfortable or even superior to the Thai culture. They may only interact with locals when it is absolutely necessary and otherwise engage with other like-minded Western foreigners. Moreover, the marginalization strategy comes into play when digital nomads do not maintain their own culture as they lack interest or opportunity for that, as well as have no interest in learning Thai culture or interacting with locals (Sam & Berry 2010). This can be mentally exhausting for digital nomads, as it can lead to a feeling of being an outsider and isolation.

Studies (Sam & Berry 2010) show that integration can be the most effective strategy for long-term cultural adaptation, as it combines benefits from both cultural communities, such as access to

resources, social support, and reinforced identity. Digital nomads who adopt this strategy generally experience better psychological and social outcomes, including higher life satisfaction, reduced stress, and stronger social networks. Digital nomads using the integration strategy can also improve emotional well-being and avoid feelings of alienation, supporting both self-esteem and a balanced cultural identity. Additionally, engagement with Thai culture helps them acquire essential skills for smoother social integration, while the support systems from both their own and Thai culture provide valuable resources for navigating cultural transitions. (Sam & Berry 2010.) However, it is good to note that integration can require a high level of openness and adaptability, which may be easier for digital nomads with higher levels of CQ and IC.

However, not every digital nomad will choose the same acculturation strategy, as their background factors can shape the direction of the strategy that they are more comfortable choosing. Background factors such as nationality, cultural orientation, personality, and personal values can all affect the preferred choice of acculturation strategy; Western digital nomads from individualistic cultures may prefer assimilation as their acculturation strategy due to the preference for individualistic adaptation over group identity, whereas individuals from collectivistic countries would lean towards integration or separation strategies (Schwartz et al. 2014; Bekteshi & Bellamy 2024). Furthermore, Dow (2011) states that factors such as age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status can affect the choice of acculturation strategy and the degree of adaptation. For instance, according to the author, younger digital nomads with a higher level of education and socioeconomic background may use integration or assimilation as their acculturation strategies, whereas older digital nomads with a lower level of education and socioeconomic status may resort to separation. In addition, having a lot of past travel experience as well as an open-minded and flexible personality may lead digital nomads to choose integrative strategies instead of separation or marginalization. While acculturation strategies can help explain the general adaptation approaches of digital nomads, the U-Curve model offers a more nuanced view of the emotional journey digital nomads undergo in the adaptation process.

3.4 Emotional Stages of Adjustment: The U-Curve Model

It is very likely that digital nomads, among other foreign visitor groups, will have to go through different emotional stages as they try to adapt to Thai culture. These stages can be illustrated with Lysgaard's U-Curve model, which consists of four different emotional stages: honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment (Ahmad et al. 2014). Each phase can bring up different challenges in the adaptation journey, and they have to be managed differently based on, for instance, digital nomads' background factors. Furthermore, by understanding the concept of the U-curve model and each of its

phases, digital nomads can more effectively control their emotions as well as know what to expect in their adaptation process. Unlike expatriates with long-term plans or tourists with short-term plans, digital nomads vary with their lengths of stay and engage in different levels with the Thai culture, affecting how each experiences these phases individually. Figure 3 (Alamri 2018, 79) below depicts the U-curve model with each of its phases.

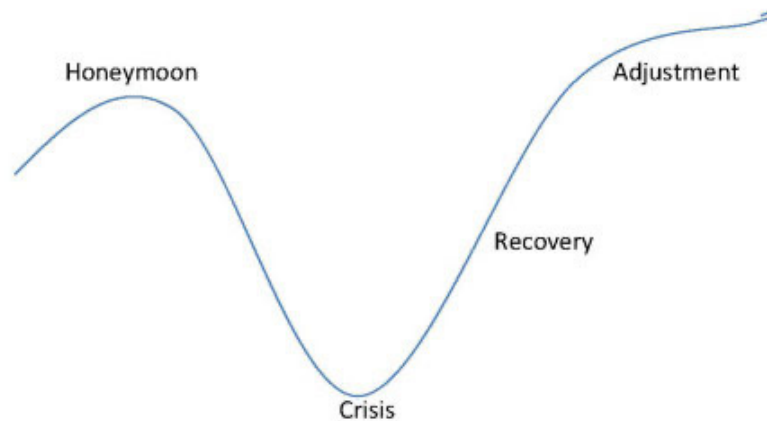


Figure 3 Lysgaard's (1955) U-shaped curve (adapted from Alamri 2018, 79)

The initial stage of the U-curve model involves a sense of excitement and curiosity about the new culture. Individuals tend to view their surroundings positively, appreciating the novelty and fresh experiences, often described as a "honeymoon" phase due to the generally positive emotions around cultural immersion. However, adjusting to social interactions in a new country can also bring some anxiety and stress to some individuals. (Ahmad et al. 2014.) In the case of Western digital nomads traveling to Thailand, they will most likely be initially intrigued by the significant differences in culture such as food, temples, street food markets, infrastructure, or in general the low living costs and paradise-like landscapes. Everything seems new and different, and it seems that cultural challenges, whether they would be differences in power distance or communication, are not yet recognized or seen as an inconvenience. In the honeymoon phase, it is possible that new digital nomads or first-time travelers may stay in this phase longer than experienced travelers (and in general transition to the next phases slower). On the contrary, it can be assumed that older individuals and more educated nomads can transition to the next phases quicker than younger or less educated individuals.

In the crisis phase, also known as culture shock, individuals often struggle with adapting to cultural differences, which can lead to frustration or anxiety. They may feel isolated or misunderstood due to variations in language, customs, or daily routines. Even small differences, such as missing familiar

foods or adjusting to different work hours, can contribute to these feelings. (Ahmad et al. 2014.) For digital nomads staying in Thailand, in this phase, they may begin to see the hierarchical structure and values, or communication challenges arising from the high-context communication styles of local Thais. The same assumptions of background factors affecting the honeymoon phase can be considered in the crisis phase as well. In addition, digital nomads who exhibit higher levels of CQ and IC may manage the crisis phase better, thus reducing the emotional lows as well as possible feelings of isolation.

In the recovery phase, individuals start to develop coping strategies and gain a better understanding of the host culture, helping them to overcome initial challenges. As they become more familiar with social norms, language, and daily routines, interactions become easier, and emotional stress decreases. (Ahmad et al. 2014.) Digital nomads may also come up with several adaptation strategies, and they may recognize which approaches suit them individually the most. For instance, digital nomads can develop their CQ and IC (see Section 3.2), use acculturation strategies (see Section 3.3), utilize networks or virtual communities (see Section 3.5), or learn by observing (see Section 3.6). These adaptation strategies altogether lead digital nomads from the recovery phase to the final phase of the U-curve model, which is the adjustment phase. In this phase, individuals reach a level of comfort and effective functioning in the host culture. They adjust their behaviors and attitudes, establishing a stable balance between their original cultural identity and the new cultural setting. (Ahmad et al. 2014.) Digital nomads that reach the final phase of the U-curve model can be more likely to spend their time in Thailand stress-free, making day-to-day interactions smoother and enjoyable. In practice, this means that digital nomads could adjust their communication with locals to be more indirect, take the concept of saving face into consideration, seek group consensus with locals as well as respect the Thai hierarchical structure.

For digital nomads to achieve the final phase of adjustment, they must have used adaptation strategies effectively to balance their own cultural identity with Thai cultural norms (e.g., integration strategy of acculturation), leading to successful acculturation. It is also notable that longer-term nomads may more likely reach the final phase of the U-curve model, as they stay in Thailand longer and have the opportunity to go through each stage over time. Shorter-term digital nomads may not have enough time to fully integrate and go through all four stages before their stay ends, thus they may only stay in the honeymoon phase.

3.5 Building Social Capital Locally and Virtually Through Networks

Social Capital Theory suggests that social connections offer valuable resources that digital nomads could leverage for personal or collective benefits. Social capital consists of trust, norms, and networks that enable coordination and collaboration within groups. (Lin 2017.) Lin's research describes social capital as the resources within a network that individuals can access and use to achieve goals, such as finding employment or receiving emotional support. Social capital is often categorized into two types: bonding social capital, which focuses on inward-looking networks that reinforce close relationships and shared identities; and bridging social capital, which emphasizes outward-looking networks that connect people across diverse groups, promoting inclusivity and broader social ties (Patulny & Lind Haase Svendsen 2007). In the context of digital nomads, they could utilize social capital to facilitate their cultural adaptation process. There are multiple ways to build social capital, such as creating social networks and connecting with existing ones to broaden network capacity, fostering mutual assistance and social support (J. R. Cook 2016). Similarly, involvement in community activities, such as volunteering, strengthens trust and community bonds, thereby enhancing social capital (Wilson 1997). For digital nomads, effective strategies to build social capital may include engaging with local and online networks, co-working spaces, and expatriate communities to develop a supportive network.

The two main approaches for a digital nomad to build social capital can be divided into local networks and virtual networks. Local networks, such as co-working spaces and community meetups, help build bonding social capital by providing physical spaces for face-to-face interactions, which fosters trust, social connections, and relationships both with Thai locals as well as other expatriates or fellow digital nomads. These meeting places can strengthen both bonding and bridging social capital, particularly more effectively in rural areas, by promoting knowledge exchange and interpersonal trust. (Angelstam et al. 2021.) For digital nomads in Thailand, co-working spaces are valuable not only for increasing creativity and effectiveness, and reducing the sense of isolation, but also for connecting with locals, overcoming language barriers, and reducing cultural misunderstandings through interactions and informal conversations (Orel 2019; Green 2020; Lhakard 2022). Physical proximity in these spaces enables digital nomads to pick up on social expectations, cues, and Thai customs, which can be essential for integrating into Thai culture.

Virtual networks, on the other hand, can offer practical and emotional support for digital nomads by providing accessible platforms like expatriate forums and social media groups, which help build bridging social capital. (Green 2020; Lhakard 2022.) Virtual networks offer the possibility for digital

nomads to connect with other people globally across cultures, which can especially support newcomers as they adjust to new and unfamiliar environments. Through these digital spaces, digital nomads can quickly access advice on local customs, share experiences, and learn cultural nuances in real-time, easing the adaptation process. (Daniel et al. 2003.) Chiu et al. (2006) highlight that virtual communities build social capital by fostering norms of reciprocity and shared language, which are essential for effective intercultural communication. Moreover, virtual networks enable digital nomads to prepare even before arrival and adapt continuously with continuous online support, which can complement in-person experiences with constantly available guidance.

However, it is good to recognize that both local and virtual communities can support either separation or integration as acculturation strategies. Some digital nomads might use virtual networks mainly to stay connected with their own culture (separation strategy), while others might actively participate in Thai-focused groups to facilitate integration (integration strategy). Relying heavily on online communities composed only of expatriates, however, may lead to increased isolation and potentially hinder cultural integration. But when virtual communities are used efficiently, they can potentially balance the cultural identity of digital nomads and act as a cultural bridge between digital nomads' own culture and Thai culture. (Daniel et al. 2003.)

Digital nomads' background factors can also affect how they build social capital and how easy it is for them to network. For instance, it can be assumed that younger digital nomads may utilize virtual communities and social media more than older digital nomads, whereas older digital nomads may prefer local communities, face-to-face interactions, and local events. This may be because the younger generation has been born into a highly digitalized world with a much more capable skillset to actively engage online compared to the older generation. A study by Eriksson et al. (2010) also found that higher education greatly enhances an individual's likelihood of accessing social capital, while being a male can also significantly increase access to certain forms of social capital. Digital nomads' professional backgrounds could also play a role; for example, digital nomads that either currently work or have worked as entrepreneurs could possess more knowledge of different online platforms and communities to network with compared to those of corporate work backgrounds. In addition, the length of stay in Thailand can affect the ability to network and gain high-quality relationships, with long-term digital nomads having an advantage over those who stay for a short period of time. Finally, digital nomads' personality and personal competencies can also affect their ability to build social capital. It can be assumed that extroverted digital nomads who possess high levels of CQ and IC are more likely to engage actively in networking as well as find social capital

building relatively more effortless compared to introverted and culturally more incompetent digital nomads.

3.6 Learning by Observation: Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory provides a framework for understanding how symbolic communication influences human thoughts, emotions, and behaviors (Bandura 2001). The theory posits that individuals are both shaped by and actively shape their social environments through their actions and choices. In this subchapter, the focus will be specifically on the concept of observational learning. (Bandura 2001.)

Observational learning enables digital nomads to adopt new behaviors, skills, or attitudes by observing others instead of learning solely through direct experience. Bandura (2001) emphasizes this process as fundamental to human learning, allowing individuals to quickly gain knowledge without the risks or inefficiencies of trial and error. The author shares four key subfunctions of observational learning, which are: attention, where individuals focus on relevant behaviors being modeled; retention, where they store these behaviors for future use; production, where the learned behaviors are enacted; and motivation, where rewards or incentives drive individuals to apply the observed behaviors. The Thai culture can be highly complex for Western digital nomads as there are different values and several unwritten rules, so being able to learn by observing can be useful for digital nomads – especially for those who may feel uncertain about direct participation in a new culture, but still are able to learn by observing local customs and behaviors. Thus, it can be said that observational learning is somewhat of a low-risk adaptation strategy, as digital nomads can reduce the risks of being embarrassed or making mistakes while adapting culturally.

In practice, digital nomads could observe how local Thai people behave in different contexts, how they communicate, and what the norms are in certain situations. By observing, digital nomads could for instance, learn to use Thai gestures or greetings such as the “wai” greeting (see Section 2.3), adjust their facial expressions and body language, gain a better understanding of the hierarchical social structure, and know how to communicate with people between this structure, learn to address and respect elderly people in a polite manner, as well as understand appropriate topics for discussion and which discussions are out of limits (e.g., so that locals don’t lose face). It is also noteworthy that the length of stay in Thailand could affect the effectiveness of observational learning. Long-term digital nomads will have more time to observe, internalize, and apply culturally adaptive behaviors, allowing them to delve deeper into Thai culture. Conversely, short-term digital nomads, with limited time for

in-depth observation, may rely more on initial, surface-level learning without fully integrating these behaviors into their routines.

Digital nomads' background factors can also affect their ability or the strategy they choose to engage in observational learning. It is fair to assume that Western digital nomads coming from culturally distant countries need to invest more effort in observational learning compared to those, who come from culturally similar countries to Thailand. Age can also influence learning preferences: older digital nomads may lean towards a "copy-the-old" approach, where they rely more on stable behavioral patterns observed in community elders. In contrast, younger digital nomads tend to be more flexible, often adopting a "copy-the-young" approach by focusing on peer behaviors that reflect current trends. (Deffner & McElreath 2022.) Highly educated digital nomads may possibly find the process of observing and learning easier than digital nomads with a lower level of education. Furthermore, digital nomads with prior exposure to diverse cultures and vast travel experience may possess a refined sense of observation, enabling them to quickly recognize and better interpret local customs in comparison to newcomers and less experienced travelers.

3.7 A Holistic Framework for Cultural Integration

The aim of this subchapter is to consolidate the integration and adaptation strategies discussed throughout this chapter into a cohesive framework. By integrating insights and findings from Cultural Intelligence, Acculturation Theory, the U-Curve Model, concepts of Social Capital and Networks, and Social Cognitive Theory, this synthesis offers a structured and comprehensive approach to understanding how digital nomads can effectively navigate cultural challenges in Thailand.

The proposed framework is structured around three interrelated stages, which are (1) Awareness and Understanding, (2) Behavioral and Emotional Adaptation, and (3) Social and Relational Integration. The first stage, Awareness and Understanding emphasizes cognitive preparation and learning through Cultural Intelligence and Observational Learning. Both theories emphasize learning and understanding other cultures, but also adjusting their behaviors to the host culture's expectations. The second stage, Behavioral and Emotional Adaptation consists of Acculturation Theory and the U-Curve Model. These theories deal with emotional responses to adaptation with a focus on different aspects (behavioral strategies vs. emotional stages). Finally, the Social and Relational Integration leverages the concepts of Social Capital and Networks to facilitate community engagement and support.

All of the theories aim to explain how digital nomads can adapt to Thai cultural contexts, whether through cognitive, behavioral, emotional, or social strategies. Most theories emphasize the importance of understanding cultural norms, values, and practices as a prerequisite for effective adaptation (e.g., both CQ and Acculturation Theory stress the need for cultural awareness). Adaptation strategies across these theories also often involve modifying behaviors to align with Thai culture (e.g., CQ's behavioral dimension aligns with observational learning from Social Cognitive Theory). Moreover, Social Capital Theory and Networking stress the value of relationship building, which, for instance, ties into practical applications of Acculturation Theory (e.g., integration strategy) and the U-Curve Model's recovery phase, where relationships help mitigate cultural shock.

However, there are some differences between the discussed theories as well. For instance, the scope of the focus varies between the theories: CQ and Social Cognitive Theory focus on individual-level adaptation, whereas Social Capital Theory and Networking focus more on relational and community-level dynamics. In addition, Acculturation Theory and the U-Curve Model address broader, phased emotional and behavioral responses to cultural transitions. Some frameworks can also be more prescriptive, whereas others can be more descriptive. For example, CQ and Social Cognitive Theory offer more actionable strategies for digital nomads to enhance adaptability, whereas Social Capital Theory focuses more on the importance of building social ties rather than providing step-by-step adaptation methods.

To provide a clear summary of the theoretical frameworks discussed in this chapter, the table below compares their key aspects, benefits, and challenges. Additionally, the three stages of the proposed cultural integration framework – (1) Awareness and Understanding, (2) Behavioral and Emotional Adaptation, and (3) Social and Relational Integration – are indicated in brackets alongside each theory. The table helps to illustrate individual contributions and complementary roles of different theories in guiding digital nomads through the cultural adaptation process in Thailand.

Table 1 Comparative analysis of cultural adaptation frameworks and strategies

Theory/Concept	Focus	Key Approach/Tools	Benefits	Challenges
Cultural Intelligence (1)	Cognitive and Behavioral Adaptation	Anticipating cultural norms, adjusting behavior	Enhances cultural understanding and respectful engagement	Requires proactive effort and ongoing learning
Acculturation Theory (2)	Behavioral and Emotional Adaptation	Integration, Assimilation, Separation, Marginalization	Balances cultural identity and engagement	Effectiveness varies by individual and context
U-Curve Model (2)	Emotional Stages of Adaptation	Navigating honeymoon, crisis, recovery, adjustment	Helps to manage emotional expectations and resilience	Emotional crises can disrupt adaptation
Social Capital & Networks (3)	Relational Integration	Building local and online communities, co-working spaces, events	Reduces isolation, improves communication	Quality of networks depends on active participation
Social Cognitive Theory (1)	Observational Learning	Learning cultural norms through observation	Accelerates adaptation to subtle social cues	Limited in understanding deeper cultural nuances

Collectively, these theories and concepts offer a holistic understanding of cultural integration, emphasizing the dynamic interaction between personal and relational strategies. By combining insights from these theories, digital nomads can adopt a flexible, multifaceted approach to adaptation, addressing cognitive, emotional, and relational aspects simultaneously.

The aim of this chapter was to explore strategies and approaches through five theoretical perspectives that digital nomads can use to integrate into Thai society, addressing the cultural challenges outlined in the previous chapter. The next and final chapter offers answers to the research questions first introduced in the introduction chapter, discusses key insights and reflections, as well as addresses research delimitations, implications, and recommendations for future research.

4 Conclusions

4.1 Discussion and Key Findings

The purpose of this thesis was to identify cultural challenges digital nomads face in Thailand, as well as analyze cultural integration strategies digital nomads can use to overcome the challenges. There were three sub-research questions presented at the beginning of this thesis, which all helped to form the bigger picture and answer the broad main research question. The research questions, as well as summarized answers for them are following:

SUB-RQ1: *What are the key cultural differences that digital nomads encounter in Thailand?*

In this thesis, several cultural differences between digital nomads and Thai locals that pose challenges to integration were highlighted. A key difference lies in power distance: Thai culture generally respects hierarchy and authority, while many digital nomads from Western backgrounds prefer more equal and low-hierarchy interactions. Another significant difference is between collectivism and individualism: Thai culture emphasizes group harmony and strong family ties, whereas digital nomads often value independence and personal freedom. Communication styles also vary greatly, with Thai culture favoring high-context, indirect communication, and “saving face,” which can be difficult for digital nomads as they are used to direct and low-context communication.

SUB-RQ2: *How do digital nomads’ backgrounds affect their cultural adaptation?*

Background factors such as nationality, age, gender, educational level, professional experience, and prior international exposure influence how digital nomads approach cultural integration. For instance, those from individualistic cultures with lower education levels or limited multicultural experience often face more initial challenges. In contrast, digital nomads with high cultural intelligence and intercultural competence, high levels of education, or substantial travel experience generally adapt more easily, displaying resilience and openness in modifying their behavior. These findings confirm that background factors have an impact on the degree of cultural friction digital nomads encounter and play a crucial role in shaping their adaptation strategies.

SUB-RQ3: *What strategies do digital nomads use to integrate into local communities and adapt to Thai culture?*

To overcome cultural challenges, digital nomads should use a wide variety of adaptation strategies rather than relying solely on one approach. Cultural Intelligence along with Intercultural Competence

allows digital nomads to interpret and respond to social cues effectively. Acculturation strategies, especially integration, help digital nomads adopt aspects of Thai culture while maintaining their own cultural identity. The U-Curve Model guides them through emotional transitions, and building Social Capital via local and virtual networks provides essential practical and emotional support, along with new relationships. Observational Learning, as outlined in Social Cognitive Theory, further assists in adapting to non-verbal and context-specific communication cues.

To give a summarized answer to the main research question (*Why do digital nomads face challenges integrating into local Thai communities, and how do they adapt culturally*): Digital nomads face several challenges integrating into Thai communities largely due to cultural and communication differences rooted in their backgrounds. Thus, digital nomads should integrate through a range of strategies that enhance cultural understanding, foster connection, and contribute to a more successful, meaningful, and enriching integration experience.

As previously stated, digital nomads have the best chance to effectively integrate into Thai culture when they actively combine several cultural integration strategies and approaches. Digital nomads need to know how to select appropriate strategies based on their backgrounds and experiences to successfully navigate the complexities of Thai culture. It is possible to depict three hypothetical integration scenarios, which demonstrate how the number of adaptation strategies used influence integration outcomes. In the first scenario, digital nomads do not use any integration strategies, and they make no effort to integrate. These surface-level interactions will likely lead to cultural misunderstandings and feelings of isolation. Digital nomads are thus at heightened risk of becoming “outsiders” in Thai society, disconnected from meaningful cultural experiences and local relationships. In the second scenario, digital nomads use only some integration strategies. Digital nomads who adopt this kind of partial strategy may achieve moderate integration, allowing them to navigate social interactions more easily, though with limited cultural depth. For instance, digital nomads might engage in basic Thai conversation and pick up on general social cues but could still face challenges with hierarchical expectations or subtle nuances in indirect communication. While this approach may be enough for short-term stays, it is likely insufficient for deeper, long-term integration. In the third scenario, digital nomads proactively use all the integration strategies discussed in this thesis. They are able to navigate complex social interactions, respect cultural hierarchies, establish supportive networks both locally and online, facilitate communication between digital nomads and locals, as well as foster lasting connections. In this scenario, digital nomads are capable of successfully achieving full (long-term) integration, leading to meaningful and fulfilling experiences in Thailand.

4.2 Research Delimitations

This thesis was limited to the cultural integration of digital nomads in Thailand. Other topics, such as economic impacts or specific policy recommendations, were excluded from this thesis. The thesis was also geographically limited to Thailand in general and the findings from this thesis may not be universally transferable to other popular digital nomad hubs. The main target population in the analysis was primarily digital nomads from Western countries, as the large majority of digital nomads come from the USA or Europe (Nomad List 2024e). The choice to limit the analysis to Western digital nomads was also based on the fact that Western cultures contrast with Thailand's culture significantly. In addition, when analyzing the background of digital nomads and how it affects cultural adaptation, it may be problematic to generalize the findings, as findings, for example, from one nationality may not be universally applicable to all digital nomads from that nationality. Especially when considering the fact that, for example, the USA is culturally very diverse itself.

There were also limitations in literature regarding cultural integration and adaptation of digital nomads. For that reason, this thesis relied more on applying different theories of international business as well as cultural adaptation theories to this topic. Due to the transient and nomadic nature of digital nomads, it was also difficult to apply some traditional theoretical frameworks to the context of digital nomads. For instance, digital nomads may not stay long enough in one country to fully go through all four stages of the U-curve model. This may result in inaccurate, underestimated, or misinterpreted findings regarding cultural integration of digital nomads.

4.3 Research Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

These findings benefit not only digital nomads but also local Thai communities, policymakers, fields of international business and cultural studies, as well as society at large. For Thai communities, this thesis highlights the value of cultural sensitivity toward digital nomads, encouraging locals to view them as potential long-term members of society rather than temporary tourists. For policymakers, understanding the adaptation journey of digital nomads can guide the creation of policies that support cross-cultural exchange, such as promoting Thai language learning or further expanding co-working spaces to bridge cultural gaps. Recognizing digital nomads as a part of the local ecosystem not only supports sustainable tourism but also fosters mutual cultural appreciation within communities. For fields like international business and cultural studies, this thesis adds novel and valuable insights to the existing research from a relatively underexplored perspective. And finally, at the societal level,

these findings promote harmonious relationships, reducing cultural friction, and contributing to a richer, more diverse community in Thailand.

For future research, the analysis of digital nomads' cultural integration could be expanded to non-Western digital nomad demographics. Additionally, cultural integration of digital nomads could be analyzed in other popular digital nomad destinations, such as in South America or Europe, where cultural challenges differ from Thailand. To further enrich this field, future research could also incorporate empirical research into this topic, such as conducting surveys or interviews with digital nomads about what cultural challenges they encounter and what strategies they use for cultural integration. Furthermore, empirical research on background factors affecting digital nomads' cultural integration could be useful to complement theoretical insights and assumptions with practical evidence.

As globalization has influenced global mobility, and global mobility is becoming the staple of modern workforce, digital nomads are standing in a unique position as both contributing and benefiting from global cultural exchange. Perhaps never before has there been such a high need for cross-cultural competence in this increasingly interconnected world; thus, cultural adaptation continues to be an essential skill to navigate new and diverse environments across the globe.

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