

When East Meets West: Cross-Cultural Challenges in a Tourist's Guide to Love

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the portrayal of intercultural communication barriers in *A Tourist's Guide to Love* (2023), with a particular focus on interactions between American and Vietnamese characters. Drawing on Barna's six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication, the research applied a qualitative film analysis to examine how cultural challenges were depicted. Key scenes revealed recurring issues such as assumption to similarities, followed by nonverbal misinterpretations and language differences. To find out how these challenges were tackled, DeVito's Principles for Effective Intercultural Communication was referred to. Education oneself was found to be the most frequent strategy of all. The study highlighted the value of media representations in reflecting realworld cultural encounters and underscores the role of films in promoting cross-cultural understanding. Its insights may benefit professionals working in multicultural settings, particularly in fields like tourism and international business, by shedding light on cross-cultural challenges that one may encounter when they are in contact with people of other cultural backgrounds. Future research could extend this analysis by using different research approaches.

Keywords: Intercultural communication, crosscultural challenges, American culture, Vietnamese culture, Barna's six stumbling blocks

INTRODUCTION

The world continues to witness a surge in the movement of people as they travel across different regions, all because of globalisation. The recent migration analyses reported that mobility remains central (IOM, 2024). This is evident as tourists' arrivals are now more frequent than ever as travel demands and connectivity have been restored following the reopening of international borders, (UN Tourism, 2024). Such mobility allows communities to come into contact with one another as they travel to different cities and heritage sites around the world.

With rising mobility, growing contacts expose travellers to mismatched norms and meanings. Due to such a fast pace of cultural and conversation exchange, some challenges have been magnified (Astawa & Wijaya, 2024; Ting, 2023), impacting their overall travel experience. For this reason, cross-cultural competence is now increasingly important, especially for travellers who navigate varied settings (Astawa & Wijaya, 2024; Ting, 2023). Generally, such competence can be honed through structured intercultural learning like collaborative online international learning (Lyu, 2024; Hackett et al., 2023). In the context of daily practice, one's cultural intelligence and skills can be shaped as they prepare, observe, and adapt to the communities that they interact with. This includes adjusting their language, tone, and timing, apart from many other aspects. Over time, one's competence ideally grows as they continue to reflect and observe feedback from their social interactions. However, honing cross-cultural competence can be a great challenge for many people (Lyu, 2024; Ting, 2023).

As an attempt to address this, the study, therefore, decided to examine cultural challenges and strategies that travellers can consider in order to grow their cultural intelligence and skills. This was done by studying A

Tourist's Guide to Love, a Netflix show which highlights the cultural exchanges and contacts between an American character, Amanda Riley, and the Vietnamese locals. In doing so, two (2) research questions were put forth: (i) *What are the cultural challenges faced by the American character in the film?* and (ii) *How does the American character overcome the cultural challenges in the film?* The findings are hoped to shed light on the importance and role of crosscultural competence, especially in the context of international mobility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Telecinematic Discourse as an Approach to Studying Cross-Cultural Communication

Telecinematic discourse systematically examines the ways narratives in films are scripted and intercultural encounters are staged. A large diachronic corpus study by Werner (2020) revealed the gradual rise of emotionality and informality in North American films, suggesting that film and TV dialogues are becoming an evolving, highly complex register. Another study of American mainstream film scripts, through lexical-bundle analysis, found that formulaic multiword patterns are used in films to conflict, characterisation, and audience engagement (Xua & Wijtsopon, 2023). These studies suggest that films are indeed a research avenue worth exploring due to its complexity.

This complexity of films is attributed to the sensory data that traditional text-based methods may not be able to capture. This includes the analysis of nonverbal cues and body language which are insightful in describing not just human experience but also social phenomena (Borish et al., 2021; Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2020). One example of this is the study by Fitzgerald and Lowe's (2020) involving documentary films. Another reason why films are a valuable research area is due to the access that researchers may have upon exploring sensitive topics and lived realities, which may not be viable via conventional means (Baumann et al., 2020; Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2020). Due to the advancements in technology, using films in research has been more feasible than ever as audio-visual media are now highly accessible.

Barna's (1994) Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication

Barna's (1994) framework generally elaborates the breakdowns that often take place when multiple cultures come into contact. Barna (1994) outlined six (6) recurring barriers to communication across cultures namely (i) assumption of similarities, (ii) language differences,

(iii) nonverbal misinterpretations, (iv) preconceptions and stereotypes, (v) tendency to evaluate, and (vi) high anxiety. The framework allowed the cinematic moments of cultural barriers in A Tourist's Guide to Love, which were integral parts of the film plot, to be broken down into analysable communicative events.

DeVito's (2019) Principles for Effective Intercultural Communication

DeVito's (2019) Principles for Effective Intercultural Communication put forth flexible guidelines that remain relevant across dissimilar settings. In the framework, five (5) actionable choices were outlined: (i) educating oneself, (ii) recognising differences, (iii) confronting one's stereotypes, (iv) reducing one's ethnocentrism, and (v) adjusting one's communication.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

To explore the cross-cultural communication that took place in A Tourist's Guide to Love, the study adopted a qualitative approach. This is in line with Kim & Vietze's (2023) assertion that such a research approach is a widely accepted design that can thoroughly capture lived experiences and interpret cultural phenomena. According to the researchers, qualitative research allows context, language and behaviour (which are essentially needed to understand cross-cultural challenges in telecinematic discourse) to be extensively examined. In order to qualitatively study the film, content analysis was employed upon analysing the textual and visual data to not only identify the challenges faced by the American character, Amanda Riley, but also the strategies that she took

in order to overcome them. According to Alyaqoub et al. (2024), this method is particularly suitable for studying film dialogues and scenes. In the study, the analysis of the film contents involved coding and categorising the film scenes, according to Barna's (1994) Six Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication and DeVito's (2021) Principles for Effective Intercultural Communication as the guiding research frameworks. This allowed for systematic interpretation of dialogues and character interactions, thereby uncovering how cultural differences are navigated in a filmic representation (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2021).

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample of study included the scenes where Amanda Riley, a travel executive from an American tourism company, Tourista, was on an undercover mission in Vietnam. Through her short visit, she studied Vietnamese tourism, with the hope of acquiring a small local tour company, Saigon Silver Star. The company tour guide Sinh Thach (who was Amanda's love interest) guided through her stay, showing the wonders that the country has to offer. What started as a business venture eventually grew into an undeniable chemistry between the two. The scenes from *A Tourist's Guide to Love* were sampled using purposive technique, a non-probability technique allowing elements to be selected based on their relevance to the research objectives. The technique is asserted to be effective when analysing specific cultural or communicative phenomena (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). In the context of the present study, purposive sampling allows the researchers to sample only the scenes depicting intercultural contact, as put forth by the research objectives.

Data Collection and Analysis

To ensure consistency and reliability, the study followed a systematic process of the data collection and analysis. Guided by a coding guideline, the process began with transcribing relevant film scenes, before they were coded using a pre-defined codebook as recommended by Saldaña (2021). This aligns with the approaches used by other studies including Alawi's (2021) exploration of cultural identity through a semiotic analysis of two international films and Sabre and Mohandas' (2023) study on cross-cultural communication challenges in a film. Using transcripts ensures that verbal and nonverbal cues in the dialogue are captured accurately.

The data was then analysed through deductive coding to identify the cultural challenges and strategies guided by Barna's (1994) and DeVito's (2021) frameworks. A coding scheme, as the research instrument, was developed according to the two research frameworks. This allows patterns and themes to be consistently identified and classified across the dataset (Younas et al., 2022). To ensure accuracy and transparency throughout the coding and categorising process, the coding scheme was enhanced through inter-coder reliability. This involved comparing the independent coding of multiple coders according to the predefined code definitions. According to Halpin (2024), this ensures the coding process is systematic and replicable. This process was eventually followed by a basic quantification process to count the frequency of each category. Overall, the process took four weeks to allow multiple rounds of reviews and refinements, ensuring that each scene was extensively analysed for cultural challenges and adaptive strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1: What are the cultural challenges faced by the American character in the film?

The findings in Table 1 show that the most prominent barrier that the American character faced was the assumption of similarities (5 instances). She often presumed that Vietnamese customs and behaviours mirrored her American expectations, which created misunderstandings. This reflects Hall's (1976) distinction between low-context and high-context communication, where much of the meaning in Vietnam is embedded in cultural context rather than explicit words.

The example of presumed similarities includes the way businesses are done in Vietnam. In the film, Amanda, who was unfamiliar with the culture, was shocked to learn about the practice of haggling or bargaining. She thought that the prices of goods were fixed and non-negotiable.

Nonverbal misinterpretations and language differences, on the other hand, emerged as the second most frequently encountered cultural barrier by the character, each with 3 instances. In one scene, Amanda who went to visit Sinh Thach's (a tour guide who was Amanda's love interest) village misinterpreted his grandmother's facial expressions and intonations as disapproving. In actuality, the grandmother was fond of her presence as she made his grandson happy. But due to language differences, Amanda was not able to understand Sinh's grandmother and so she misread the unspoken messages. For a short period of time, this affected her time at the village.

Table 1 Cross-cultural challenges faced by the American character

Cross-cultural challenge	Frequency
High anxiety or stress	2
Tendency to evaluate	0
Preconception & stereotypes	2
Nonverbal misinterpretations	3
Language differences	3
Assumption to similarities	5
Total	15

On contrary, the least frequent barrier was the tendency to evaluate, which was absent in the film (0 instances). This suggests that implicit form of cultural frictions was evident instead of strong evaluative tendencies, which may have been observed by other studies. In the film, Amanda did not explicitly judge Vietnamese practices against American standards. Her lack of overt evaluation suggests a more positive framing of intercultural interactions. Overall, Amanda's challenges were shaped more by unconscious assumptions than by negative evaluation. This aligns with DeVito's (2023) emphasis on maintaining positivity to foster effective communication in intercultural contexts.

RQ2: How does the American character overcome the cultural challenges in the film?

Table 2 presents the most prominent strategy that Amanda, the American character, employed was educating oneself (8 instances). In the film, she consistently sought to learn about Vietnamese traditions, practices, and values. Her openness to learning enabled her to build stronger intercultural connections. In the film, the character frequently resorted to the use of a digital platform (namely Google Translate) to help her quickly learn the ways to say her thoughts. Despite the lack of any kind of prior learning about the Vietnamese culture and language, the use of digital tools is shown to be effective for immediate interactions. As seen in the part where Amanda met Sinh's grandmother (where their dynamic was initially tense). However, by educating herself, particularly through the use of digital tools, language differences were effectively managed by Amanda, as she eventually got along with Sinh's grandmother. The strategy strongly supports DeVito's (2019) framework, which emphasises audience awareness, message clarity, and adaptability as key to effective intercultural communication: all of which was done by the character.

In contrast, the least frequent strategies were recognising differences, confronting stereotypes, and reducing ethnocentrism (2 instances each). While less common, these strategies were still significant in shaping Amanda's growth, as they reflect her ability to gradually challenge assumptions and accept cultural differences.

Table 2 Strategies employed by the American character to overcome the cultural challenges

Strategy	Frequency
Educating oneself	8
Recognising differences	2
Confronting one's stereotypes	2
Reducing one's ethnocentrism	2
Adjusting one's communication	3
Total	17

Overall, Amanda's adaptation relied most on self-education and communication adjustment, supported by efforts to acknowledge and confront cultural differences. One noticeable discovery was that despite the many challenges faced by the character, she eventually still managed to have a fruitful relationship and encounter with the Vietnamese culture. This was possible because most of the cultural challenges were immediately addressed and tackled by Amanda. In other words, though most challenges are common and inevitable (due to cultural differences), if they are managed appropriately, it is still highly possible for one to arrive at effective intercultural communication and interaction. Towards the end of the film, Amanda eventually grew accustomed to the Vietnamese culture and language. This proves that intercultural competence is an ongoing process, which grows as one interacts with other cultures. This includes both positive and negative interactions. The findings align with Goodman and Yan's (2021) observation that effective cross-cultural communication is essential to prevent conflict and build mutual understanding.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the cultural challenges and strategies employed by the American character upon interacting with Vietnamese characters in the film *A Tourist's Guide to Love*. Through an analysis of telecinematic discourse, the study attempts to shed light on how communication takes place across different cultures. This was done by demonstrating how telecinematic discourse can serve as a practical tool for raising cross-cultural awareness, particularly in fields like tourism, education, and international business. Based on the findings, cultural orientation programmes are suggested to emphasise the tendency of assumptions, nonverbal cues, and language differences as potential barriers to intercultural communication. While doing so, educating oneself and adjusting communication can be put forth as effective strategies to ensure seamless interactions. Future research should consider exploring how telecinematic discourse can be integrated into intercultural training programmes, particularly in workplace context. Other than that, future research studies on cross-cultural communication should also consider investigating telecinematic discourse from a different approach. This can be done by employing methods that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches.

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