Internships as Intercultural Learning: A Thematic Analysis of Taiwanese Design Students in Japan

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ABSTRACT: *This study examined 42 Taiwanese design students' cross-cultural learning during internships in Japan's creative industry firm, funded by Taiwan's Ministry of Education under the "Dream-Building Study Abroad" program. Through thematic analysis and expert-rated intensity scoring (0–5 scale), six themes emerged. The highest-rated themes were policy feedback (M = 3.45, SD = 0.17), workplace challenges (M = 3.33, SD = 0.19), and language & culture (M = 3.31, SD = 0.21). The comic students rated policy critique significantly higher than the animation students did (p < .001). The study combined qualitative coding with quantitative comparison to propose improvements in cultural briefings, language training, and post-internship reflection.*

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INTRODUCTION

As internationalization continues to reshape the goals of higher education, international internships have become critical tools for enhancing cross-cultural competence and professional development. These experiences enable students not only to acquire technical skills but also to engage in intercultural learning, identity formation, and global citizenship (Garavalia, 1992). In Taiwan, the Ministry of Education's "Dream-Building Study Abroad" initiative supports thousands of students annually in pursuing global internships, offering financial and structural support to promote outward mobility, particularly in creative disciplines that are traditionally underrepresented in study-abroad programs (Ministry of Education, 2025).

A recent study by Jiao (2025) revealed that Chinese students' decisions to study in Japan are significantly influenced by cultural familiarity, language accessibility, and perceptions of educational quality. These motivational factors also resonate with Taiwanese students' interest in pursuing internships in Japan, suggesting that cultural affinity and professional aspirations jointly shape international learning choices. In Taiwan, several higher education programs in creative disciplines have begun offering international internship opportunities, particularly in Japan's animation and design sectors. For example, the Department of Comic Art at Tainan University of Technology (TUT), which integrates visual storytelling with digital media and animation production, has actively promoted such cross-cultural learning experiences. Japan's structured production pipelines, hierarchical communication norms, and team-based workflows present both opportunities and adaptation challenges for Taiwanese students, who are typically trained in more flexible, individualistic creative environments (Holroyd, 2019; Chen *et al.*, 2023). Internship experiences in Japan are especially complex for creative students, who must navigate not only technical expectations but also sociolinguistic conventions, such as honorifics, implicit feedback, and the senior-junior hierarchy (Hashimoto & Disbray, 2023). While many students pass formal Japanese language exams, their lack of pragmatic fluency in workplace contexts often leads to anxiety and miscommunication (Zin, 2023).

This study examines the cross-cultural learning outcomes of 42 undergraduate students from TUT's Departments of Comic Art and Multimedia Animation who completed internships at Japanese creative companies as part of the "Dream-Building Study Abroad" program. Drawing on student reflection reports, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) How do students navigate linguistic and cultural adaptations during their internships, and how does this affect their professional and personal development?

(2) In what ways do international internships influence students' career aspirations and self-perceptions?

(3) What programmatic or policy feedback do students offer to improve future international internship experiences?

This research offers both empirical and methodological contributions to the study of international internships in creative disciplines. First, it builds on calls to understand internships not merely as skill-building sites but also as arenas for identity negotiation and value formation (Jensen, 2021). Second, it applies a novel thematic intensity scoring approach, quantifying student engagement across six themes to reveal patterns in emotional, linguistic, and professional adjustment.

By focusing on Taiwanese design students in Japanese creative industries, this study provides little insight into how students reconcile divergent production cultures, aesthetic norms, and communication protocols. In doing so, it reinforces the argument that internships are pedagogical spaces requiring coordinated institutional support, not just career preparation pipelines.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International internships and intercultural competence development

Over the past two decades, international internships have evolved from simple professional placements to multifaceted learning environments that promote both the acquisition of technical skills and deep intercultural development. These programs are increasingly recognized as "transformative spaces" for learners, where engagement with unfamiliar cultural, linguistic, and workplace systems catalyzes shifts in students' self-perceptions, global awareness, and career direction (Jensen, 2021; Cheng *et al.*, 2025).

The pedagogical foundations for such transformations are grounded in constructivist learning theory and experiential education, where identity formation and meaning-making occur through situated, real-world experiences. Garavalia (1992), one of the earliest scholars to link industry-academic collaboration with global competence, argued that authentic workplace engagement, rather than classroom-based simulation, is essential for preparing globally literate professionals. This perspective has since gained widespread acceptance in global higher education, with both governments and universities increasingly recognizing international internships as a key strategy for cultivating the competencies outlined in UNESCO's framework for global citizenship education.

These structural efforts are supported by growing empirical evidence. Gue´nier *et al.* (2025) highlighted that the most significant intercultural learning outcomes do not emerge in classrooms or even formal workplace tasks but rather through everyday discomforts and liminal experiences, moments when students must navigate informal work etiquette, cross-cultural misunderstandings, and role ambiguity.

Similarly, Cheng *et al.* (2025) noted that intercultural development during internships tends to follow a nonlinear trajectory. In their cross-national comparative study of design students in Estonia and Taiwan, they reported that initial disorientation, particularly related to communication styles and feedback

systems, often served as a "disruptive event" that prompted reflective recalibration. This model closely aligns with Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory, which posits that experiences of disjuncture catalyze critical self-examination and lead to the restructuring of existing belief systems.

In sum, international internships serve as immersive laboratories for developing intercultural competence, not only through language acquisition or job training but also through holistic encounters with ambiguity, feedback, and differences. The "Dream- Building Study Abroad" program exemplifies how structured national initiatives, when designed with equity and pedagogical depth in mind, can expand access to transformative global learning experiences. This research thus builds upon and extends the literature by focusing on creative disciplines, where the process of identity reconstruction is intertwined not only with cultural contact but also with aesthetic negotiation, production demands, and workplace socialization.

Creative Disciplines and Cross-Cultural Apprenticeship

Students enrolled in design, comic, and multimedia arts programs face a distinctive set of challenges when they are participating in international internships. These challenges are not solely technical in nature; rather, they are deeply embedded in cultural, aesthetic, and epistemological dimensions. Unlike disciplines such as engineering or business, which often prioritize standardized outputs and procedural accuracy, creative fields require continuous negotiation between individual artistic expression and institutional expectations (Chen *et al.*, 2023).

This tension becomes particularly pronounced in East Asian production environments, where workflows are highly systematized and collaborative efficiency is frequently prioritized over individual creativity. Holroyd (2019) characterizes Japan's digital content sector as operating within rigid production timelines, formalized corporate protocols, and government-supported industry frameworks. In such contexts, interns must adapt not only to the technical requirements of proprietary tools such as Spine or Unity but also to implicit cultural norms related to critique reception, revision hierarchies, and stylistic consistency within team-based settings.

Shiau (2020), through an ethnographic examination of digital pedagogy in Taiwan's comic industry, underscores the psychological complexity that students face when producing culturally resonant content within globalized creative systems. These challenges extend beyond stylistic adaptation to encompass deeper concerns such as identity construction, cultural translation, and symbolic authorship—particularly for students whose visual vocabularies diverge from the prevailing aesthetic norms of the host culture. Similarly, Cetindere and Shin (2025), in their study of Turkish students at U.S. universities, demonstrated how intercultural tensions manifested in feelings of alienation, reduced agency, and difficulty in aligning personal aspirations with institutional expectations. Building on these perspectives, Aggarwal, Ghodke, and Raval (2025) argue that students from the Global South frequently

encounter implicit cultural biases in both academic and professional evaluation, further complicating identity development and self-confidence during applied learning experiences. Together, these findings highlight how creative expression can become a contested domain, requiring students to navigate unfamiliar social norms while maintaining their individual identities within cross-cultural academic contexts.

Expanding on these concerns, Li *et al.* (2024) examined how the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the career development challenges and emotional strain experienced by international students. Their findings suggest that students not only confronted structural and linguistic barriers but also faced institutional indifference and heightened psychological vulnerability. Although their study focuses more broadly on international students rather than those in creative disciplines, the emotional turbulence and shifting expectations they document are directly relevant to the experiences of design students undertaking overseas internships, particularly when personal aspirations are disrupted by unfamiliar educational or professional systems.

Thenarasu *et al.* (2025) built upon these perspectives by introducing the Lean Pedagogy for Creative Internships (LPCI), a framework that incorporates principles from lean manufacturing into creative education. The model advocates for structured iteration, role rotation, and continuous critique as strategies for bridging the disconnect between autonomous university projects and industry environments that demand adaptability, consistency, and responsiveness to stakeholder feedback. When implemented in international internship settings, this approach can help students develop workflow habits that align with the host organization's operational logic.

Taken together, these studies underscore the importance of intentional curricular scaffolding both prior to and following international placements. For creative arts interns, preparation must extend beyond technical and linguistic competence to include metacognitive tools that enable critical reflection on their roles within broader cultural and industrial frameworks. Park, Baldry, and Amarilla (2025) reported that Japanese universities faced significant challenges in maintaining hands-on training and internship opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic, compounding the difficulties international students faced in accessing professional experiences and achieving intercultural integration. Consistent with these findings, the present study reveals that many Taiwanese design students encountered not only logistical and technological barriers but also more profound concerns related to aesthetic identity, cultural legitimacy, and long-term professional development. Explicitly addressing such issues in program design is essential to fostering meaningful and transformative internship experiences.

Language, Pragmatics, and Cultural Adaptation

One of the most persistent and nuanced challenges faced by international interns, particularly in East Asian contexts such as Japan, is not a lack of conventional language proficiency but rather a deficit in pragmatic fluency. This refers to the ability to communicate effectively in hierarchical and highly

contextualized environments. Standardized tests, such as the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), often overlook this dimension, as they primarily assess lexical and grammatical competence. They do not adequately assess skills such as using honorific speech appropriately, interpreting implicit cues, or adjusting communication based on social rank (Hashimoto & Disbray, 2023).

In Japanese workplaces, communication is deeply embedded within vertical structures of seniority and subtle etiquette. For students from more egalitarian or expressive cultures, this shift in communicative expectations can be disorienting. Even students with a strong command of Japanese vocabulary often find themselves unprepared to use appropriate keigo or deferential speech forms or to interpret vague feedback—skills that are rarely taught in classroom settings but are vital in securing acceptance and credibility within professional teams (Hashimoto & Disbray, 2023). Similarly, Sustarsic and Zhang (2022) reported that international graduate students in the United States experienced persistent ambiguity in social and academic expectations, which led to stress and delayed adaptation, highlighting the universality of pragmatic cultural confusion across contexts.

Zin (2023) expands on this by framing adaptation as a function of cultural intelligence, which encompasses not only the cognitive knowledge of a host culture but also emotional regulation, motivational resilience, and behavioral flexibility. Moreover, Zin's case study of Myanmar expatriates in Thailand revealed that successful intercultural integration was less about mastering grammar and more about understanding when to speak, when to remain silent, and how to manage discomfort without withdrawal or defensiveness. Applied to internship contexts, this underscores the importance of teaching sociopragmatic literacy, the unspoken rules governing appropriateness, politeness, and timing.

In the context of this study, students consistently reported anxiety and confusion over how to communicate appropriately with supervisors or senior colleagues. Many expressed a desire for more practical language instruction focused on business meetings, email protocols, and social interactions such as after-hours gatherings (nomikai). These findings reinforce the argument that language education for global mobility must evolve beyond textbook proficiency and include situational, cultural, and emotional dimensions of communication (Gue´nier *et al.*, 2025).

In summary, linguistic preparedness in international internships should be reconceptualized as communicative preparedness, where pragmatic fluency, cultural decoding, and emotional adaptability are recognized as essential components of professional development. Without these, even fluent speakers may find themselves socially isolated or professionally marginalized outcomes that can undermine the transformative potential of global learning experiences.

Workplace Integration and Learning Frictions

The mismatch between academic preparation and workplace demands is a well-documented challenge in the transition from higher education to professional environments. While students may demonstrate competence in classroom

settings—through project work, portfolio development, and peer collaboration—the realities of professional workplaces often demand different forms of knowledge and behavior. These include rapid adaptation to new tools, managing ambiguous instructions, and maintaining productivity under time constraints and institutional hierarchies (Holroyd, 2019).

This tension is particularly visible in Japan's creative content industries, which Holroyd (2019) describes as systematically codified, hierarchical, and highly efficiency oriented. Standardized pipelines, proprietary software platforms, and rigid quality control processes often govern production workflows. For international interns entering such environments, especially those from educational systems that prioritize individual expression and exploratory learning, the transition can jar.

In this study, student reflections commonly described stressful onboarding experiences, including the need to quickly master unfamiliar production tools such as Spine (a 2D skeletal animation platform) and Adobe PS, as well as company-specific asset management systems. Students frequently reported multiple rounds of revision, with vague or indirect feedback, and the challenge of maintaining motivation while their creative input was filtered through standardized templates or hierarchical decisions. These experiences align with the findings of W William *et al.* (2024), who reported that even well-trained international students in health-related disciplines struggle not with technical skills but with unspoken workplace norms, ambiguous feedback, and invisible power structures.

Moreover, the feedback culture of many Japanese companies tends to favor indirect critique and implications over explicit correction, which may be misinterpreted by foreign interns as approval or, conversely, as a sign of social distance. This ambiguity often leads to communication fatigue and emotional disengagement, especially when students are expected to self-correct without clear guidance. Shiau (2020), in her analysis of Chen Uen's digital pedagogy, highlighted a similar dilemma for creative professionals: the need to negotiate between internal artistic values and externally imposed constraints, an issue that international interns in design fields are particularly prone to encounter.

Additionally, Thenarasu *et al.* (2025) recommend incorporating lean principles into creative internships, arguing that structured task feedback, iterative prototyping, and cross-functional mentorship can significantly reduce student anxiety and enhance performance. Their model aligns with the findings of the current study, in which participants emphasized the need for clear role definitions, iterative review protocols, and safe spaces for feedback interpretation.

In summary, this study confirms that the learning curve in international creative internships is less about mastering content and more about decoding culture, fostering collaborative resilience, and adapting to workflows. These frictions, while stressful, may also serve as critical thresholds for professional growth if accompanied by adequate institutional and pedagogical support.

Cultural Learning through Daily Life and Identity Formation

Beyond the structured boundaries of the workplace, international internships offer rich opportunities for identity construction and intercultural learning through the ordinary routines of daily life. This dimension of learning, often overlooked in formal assessments, was clearly evident in the students' reflections. Experiences such as cooking for the first time, navigating Japan's waste-sorting regulations, or adjusting to shared dormitory living were frequently described as meaningful moments that nurtured autonomy, adaptability, and emotional maturity.

This is consistent with Miao (2023), who argued that cultural understanding is most effectively cultivated through emotionally resonant, context-rich experiences. In her interactive game for Taiwanese cultural learning, she emphasized that immersion in lived routines, rather than abstract instruction, creates stronger intercultural competence. Similarly, Sustarsic and Zhang (2022) reported that the disruption of familiar support systems during the COVID-19 pandemic compelled international students to develop life management strategies, thereby increasing their resilience and self-efficacy. Ivanova *et al.* (2025) further supported this view by highlighting the role of social integration in wellbeing. A qualitative study of international students in Japan and the United States revealed that loneliness, limited engagement with local peers, and underused volunteer opportunities hindered students' adaptation. They concluded that universities alone cannot ensure social belonging and called for collaboration with community stakeholders to improve students' intercultural adjustment.

In the present study, students often described their learning not in terms of technical skills but as "cultural literacy," referring to the ability to interpret unfamiliar social norms, cope with ambiguity, and find meaning in cross-cultural tensions. Examples included anxiety about misinterpreting communal rules, discomfort in navigating supermarket etiquette, and a sense of accomplishment in managing a budget using a foreign currency. Without this support, such struggles risk being internalized as personal failure. Moreover, Yuan *et al.* (2024) added nuance by showing that structured advising and mentoring enhance students' ability to interpret cultural differences as learning opportunities rather than identity threats. The students in the current study similarly expressed a need for predeparture briefings, check-ins during the internship, and postcompletion debriefings to help frame their lived experiences.

Together, these findings underscore that life adaptation is a core domain of international learning. Far from peripheral, mundane routines often drive enduring shifts in identity, agency, and intercultural understanding. Ivanova *et al.* (2025) contrasted student experiences in the U.S. and Japan, noting how varying cultural contexts shape loneliness and social engagement through friendships and volunteer involvement. Institutions should therefore embed reflection on everyday life into formal cross-cultural pedagogy. In addition, this study draws conceptually on Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning theory and Akkerman & Bakker's boundary-crossing framework, which together

inform the interpretation of how intercultural and institutional factors shape student reflection.

METHOD

This study adopts a hybrid qualitative–quantitative approach to enhance both analytical depth and cross-case comparability. Specifically, we integrate thematic analysis with thematic intensity scoring to capture not only the presence of key themes but also the degree of students' cognitive and emotional engagement with those themes. The rationale for this approach is twofold.

First, thematic analysis provides a flexible yet rigorous framework for identifying patterns of meaning across a large corpus of reflective narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Second, the addition of a thematic intensity scoring system aligns with content analysis traditions that emphasize both semantic richness and structured comparison (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). This hybrid method enables a nuanced interpretation of students' experiential data, allowing for qualitative coding grounded in context while also supporting light quantification of thematic salience across departments. This methodological strategy reflects the broader tradition of qualitative inquiry, which centers on understanding meaning-making in context, particularly within educational and cross-cultural environments (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krippendorff, 2018).

The study investigates how undergraduate design students in Taiwan reflect on their international internship experiences in Japan, with particular attention to recurring themes related to cultural adaptation, workplace learning, and professional transformation. The data consisted of 42 postinternship reflective reports, which were thematically coded and rated for intensity across six categories derived from the literature and program objectives. The integration of thematic analysis and intensity scoring allows the study to balance semantic depth with the ability to make statistical comparisons across participant groups.

Participants

The participants consisted of 42 undergraduate students enrolled in 'comic' and 'multimedia animation' programs at a design university in Taiwan. Each student completed an 8–12-week internship at a Japanese creative industry firm, supported by the Taiwanese Ministry of Education's "Dream-Building Study Abroad" initiative. After returning to Taiwan, each student submitted a reflective report (1,200–1,800 words in Chinese) describing their internship experience, the challenges they faced, and their personal growth. These texts form the primary corpus of data for this study. Personally identifiable information was removed during the data preprocessing stage.

Data collection

As part of Taiwan's Ministry of Education (MOE) "Dream-Building Study Abroad" program, all 42 students were required to submit written reflection

reports to the official MOE internship platform. These reports were not only essential for academic and funding verification but also subject to review by the Ministry to ensure alignment with national educational objectives. To prepare the dataset for analysis, the research team downloaded the student submissions, formatted them into plain text, and cleaned them for consistency. Multiple rounds of reading were conducted to familiarize the team with each student's narrative voice and key themes.

Using an open coding approach, each report was analyzed holistically and then segmented thematically. While initial codes were derived inductively from student narratives, the final coding framework was organized deductively into six thematic categories informed by literature and the MOE program's stated learning outcomes.

Thematic Analysis Procedure

This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model for conducting thematic analysis:
(4) Familiarization – repeated reading of each report to identify patterns and narrative style;
(5) Initial coding – highlighting semantic units and labeling with provisional codes,
(6) Theme construction – Grouping related codes into meaningful clusters,
(7) Theme review – validating the coherence of each theme within and across reports,
(8) Theme definition – naming and contextualizing themes with conceptual clarity, and
(9) Writing – Integrating codes and exemplar quotes into an analytic narrative.

The six major themes were as follows:
(1) Internship motivations and expectations,
(2) Language and cultural adaptation,
(3) Workplace learning challenges,
(4) Daily life experiences and personal growth,
(5) Professional impact and career reflection, and
(6) Suggestions for programs and policy improvement.

These categories were selected on the basis of their recurrence in the data and their alignment with international internship learning frameworks (Garavalia, 1992; Jensen, 2021; Yuan *et al.*, 2024).

Thematic Intensity Scoring

Although all 42 students were required to submit reflection reports to the Ministry of Education's internship platform, resulting in a 100% appearance rate for each of the six analytical themes due to structured reporting guidelines, the degree of reflection, emphasis, and emotional engagement varied considerably

across individuals. To account for this variation and move beyond binary presence-or-absence coding, this study adopted a subjective thematic intensity rating system. This approach allowed for a more nuanced capture of students' cognitive and affective engagement with each theme, using expert judgment grounded in established content analysis methodologies (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Traditional thematic analysis typically classifies data on the basis of whether a theme is mentioned. However, such binary categorization is inadequate when themes are universally present across all cases. In these situations, it is essential to assess the depth and significance of engagement with each theme rather than simply its mention. Neuendorf (2017) noted that the frequency and elaboration of concept-specific language can serve as proxy indicators of thematic salience. Similarly, Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006) argue for the integration of light quantification into qualitative designs to enhance reliability, clarity, and cross-case comparability.

In this study, thematic intensity was measured on a 6-point scale ranging from 0--5 on the basis of the narrative depth, specificity, and reflective richness of each student's written account. The operational definitions are shown in Table 1.

Given that the reflections were mandatory submissions, social desirability bias may have influenced the tone or emphasis of the narratives. This limitation was considered in the interpretation of thematic intensity. Moreover, three coders independently scored each theme per student. Interrater reliability was established through Fleiss (1971) kappa ($\kappa = 0.77$), indicating substantial agreement. This scoring complements thematic analysis by offering comparative depth across participants.

Interrater Reliability

To enhance interrater reliability and reduce potential bias, the full dataset of 42 reflections was independently reviewed and scored by three senior faculty members, each of whom served as a principal investigator for Taiwan's Shu-Hai Dream-Building Study Abroad Program. Using a standardized rubric aligned with established qualitative analysis principles, each expert rated all six thematic categories per student. Half-point increments were allowed to reflect nuanced differences in depth and articulation. Following independent evaluations, a consensus meeting was held to discuss discrepancies and calibrate the scoring process.

This consensus-driven, human-evaluated scoring procedure aligns with hybrid content analysis approaches that combine interpretive coding with structured quantification (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Krippendorff, 2018). The resulting dataset not only enabled cohort-level comparisons and trend identification but also facilitated statistical analyses across departments, providing a robust foundation for interpreting the salience and variation of themes in subsequent chapters.

Table 1. Intensity scale (ranging from 0 to 5)

Score	Description	Criteria
0	No thematic engagement	The theme is absent or mentioned only in passing, with no substantive elaboration.
1	Minimal engagement	Brief mention with minimal detail or reflection; lacks concrete example.
2	Moderate engagement	A short paragraph or example demonstrating surface-level experience.
3	Substantial engagement	Detailed narrative with specific events, reflections, or reasoning.
4	High engagement	Integration of experience with personal learning and adaptation strategies.
5	Deep thematic integration	The theme is thoroughly discussed, with systemic reflection on implications, growth, and broader context (*e.g.*, future goals, institutional critique).

Data Analysis

The data analysis proceeded in three stages:
(1) Descriptive Statistics: Mean intensity scores and standard deviations were calculated for each theme.
(2) Group comparison: Scores were averaged across departments (comic *vs.* multimedia animation), allowing for the examination of disciplinary differences.
(3) Inferential Statistics: Independent-sample t tests were conducted to determine whether the observed differences between departments were statistically significant. Analyses were performed via SPSS (*v.*26), with a significance threshold set at $p < .05$.

Ethical Considerations

The reflective narratives analyzed in this study were submitted as part of a government-funded internship program administered by Taiwan's Ministry of Education. As these reports were a required component of the "Dream-Building Study Abroad" initiative, the students were aware of and consented to the potential use of their submissions in educational research. To protect participant privacy, all identifying information, including names and student ID numbers, was removed prior to analysis. This project meets the criteria for exemption from further Human Research Ethics Committee at National Cheng Kung

University (NCKU HREC) review per the regulations found at NCKU human research protection policies.

Research Limitations

Despite its strengths, this study has several limitations. First, the sample is drawn from a single institution and is limited to students in comic and animation programs, which may affect generalizability. Second, the reflections are self-reported and retrospective, potentially influenced by recall bias or social desirability effects (Jensen, 2021). Third, although efforts were made to ensure accurate translation, converting the original Chinese texts into English may have resulted in minor semantic distortions. Finally, the cultural context is specific to Japan, and the findings may not be applicable to other internship destinations. Nevertheless, the study offers grounded insights into how design students experience and interpret cross-cultural learning, with implications for internship policy, curriculum design, and international education practice.

RESULTS

Demographic Statistics

In this study, the gender composition of the 42 participating students reveals a significant female majority across both departments. Specifically, 38 out of 42 students (90.5%) were female, whereas only 4 students (9.5%) were male. This gender imbalance reflects broader enrollment patterns common in creative disciplines such as comic and multimedia design, where female participation tends to be greater. This context is important when themes such as identity development, cultural adaptation, and interpersonal dynamics in workplace settings are interpreted.

Thematic Intensity (Unsegmented)

To identify overarching patterns across all participants, thematic intensity scores were averaged for each of the six revised categories. Table 2 reports the mean scores and standard deviations for all 42 students.

As shown in Table 2, policy feedback ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.17$), workplace challenges ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.19$), and language & culture ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.21$) were among the most intensely discussed themes. Students frequently reflected on adjusting to fast-paced production environments, adapting to hierarchical team dynamics, and navigating communication gaps, particularly within Japanese workplace settings. These patterns reaffirm existing scholarship indicating that cross-cultural professional adaptation demands considerable emotional and cognitive resources (Gue´nier *et al.*, 2025; Jensen, 2021; Zin, 2023).

The forth most prominent theme was Life Experience ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.19$), reflecting vivid student accounts of daily routines such as commuting,

grocery shopping, or managing shared housing. These observations support Miao's (2023) and Xing and Ma's (2010) argument that intercultural learning often arises from ordinary yet emotionally salient encounters beyond the formal workplace.

Table 2. Participant Demographics (*n* = 42)

Theme	Mean Score	Std. Deviation
Theme 1: Motivation	3.19	.11
Theme 2: Language & Culture	3.31	.21
Theme 3: Workplace Challenges	3.33	.19
Theme 4: Life Experience	3.22	.19
Theme 5: Career Reflection	3.06	.05
Theme 6: Policy Feedback	3.45	.17

Career Reflection (*M* = 3.06, *SD* = 0.05) and Internship Motivation (*M* = 3.19, *SD* = 0.11) received the lowest average scores. This suggests that students tended to reflect less on preinternship intentions or long-term vocational goals and more on immediate experiential challenges. As noted by Sustarsic & Zhang (2022) and Sisavath (2021), personal transformation during overseas internships often takes precedence over initial career expectations, indicating a dynamic shift in self-perception and identity formation during immersive experiences.

Notably, policy feedback (*M* = 3.45, *SD* = 0.17) emerged as the highest-rated theme across all categories. This finding suggests a pronounced inclination among students to critically evaluate and offer suggestions for improving both the institutional and governmental dimensions of the internship program. Rather than functioning as passive participants, students demonstrated reflective agency by engaging with broader structural issues, thereby contributing valuable insights relevant to educational practice and policy development.

Department-level comparison

To examine potential disciplinary influences, the dataset was divided into two groups: multimedia animations (*n* = 20) and comic (*n* = 22). Thematic intensity scores were averaged by group across the six predefined themes (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mean Intensity by Department

Theme	Animation Mean	Comic Mean
Theme 1: Motivation	3.19	3.2
Theme 2: Language & Culture	3.34	3.28
Theme 3: Workplace Challenges	3.38	3.29
Theme 4: Life Experience	3.16	3.27
Theme 5: Career Reflection	3.05	3.06
Theme 6: Policy Feedback	3.28	3.57

Although the overall differences were modest, several disciplinary patterns emerged. Compared with comic students, animation students exhibited slightly greater engagement with language and cultural adaptation (M = 3.34) and workplace challenges (M = 3.38) (M = 3.28 and M = 3.29, respectively). This may reflect the Comic department's long-standing curricular engagement with Japanese-language source materials and culturally embedded narrative conventions (Hashimoto & Disbray, 2023).

Conversely, the comic students placed greater emphasis on life experiences (M = 3.27 *vs*. M = 3.16), which is consistent with the journal entries that emphasized emotional responses to housing, transportation, and food. These observations may be linked to training in environmental design and visual storytelling, which cultivates heightened awareness of lived contexts (Miao, 2023; Xing & Ma, 2010).

Both groups displayed similar levels of engagement (Comic: M = 3.06; Animation: M = 3.04), suggesting that, when assessed qualitatively rather than through keyword frequency, students from both departments were equally capable of offering critical reflections on institutional systems.

These findings suggest that while curricular focus may shape the form and emphasis of student reflection, shared cross-cultural experiences foster broadly similar adaptive learning patterns. The subtle distinctions between departments point to differences in academic culture and pedagogical framing rather than to divergent capacities for intercultural engagement.

Statistical Significance: t test

To assess whether thematic engagement varied significantly by department, independent sample t tests were conducted for each of the six themes. The results are shown in Table 4. Among the six themes, only Theme 6, Policy Suggestions, showed a statistically significant difference (p < .001), with Comic students reporting significantly higher thematic intensity than their peers in Multimedia Animation. This finding suggests that students in the Comic department were more inclined to offer in-depth reflections and critiques of institutional structures, program design, and government policies related to their overseas internships.

Table 4. t test results by theme

Theme	Animation Mean	Comic Mean	*p value*	Significant
Theme1: Motivation	3.19	3.2	.78	No
Theme 2: Language & Culture	3.34	3.28	.45	No
Theme3: Workplace Challenges	3.38	3.29	.12	No
Theme 4: Life Experience	3.16	3.27	.10	No
Theme 5: Career Reflection	3.05	3.06	.37	No
Theme 6: Policy Suggestions	3.28	3.57	***p<.001	Yes

Inter-Theme Correlation Analysis

To further explore the interplay among the six identified themes, a Pearson correlation matrix was computed using all the student responses ($n = 42$). The results indicate moderate to strong positive correlations among most themes, suggesting interconnected experiences in students' internship reflections.
Key findings include the following:
(1) Theme 2 (language & culture) showed the strongest correlation with Theme 3 (workplace challenges) ($r = 0.70$), implying that cultural and linguistic adaptation played a critical role in how students coped with professional obstacles.
(2) Theme 5 (Career Reflection) correlated positively with both Theme 4 (Life Experience) ($r = 0.63$) and Theme 6 (Policy Feedback) ($r = 0.59$), suggesting that personal and institutional contexts significantly shaped students' career insights.
(3) Theme 1 (motivation) had lower but still positive correlations across other themes, indicating its foundational but less integrative role in shaping learning depth.
These quantitative insights complement the thematic analysis by demonstrating that intercultural adaptation, daily life struggles, and structural policy feedback collectively reinforce students' professional reflection.

DISCUSSION

Interpreting Thematic Priorities in Student Narratives

The thematic analysis revealed that language and cultural adaptation, daily life experiences, and career reflection were the most intensively engaged themes across both departments. These findings align with prior studies highlighting the emotional and cognitive labor required when navigating unfamiliar sociocultural environments (Gue´nier *et al.*, 2025; Zin, 2023). While many students hold formal Japanese-language certification, they still struggle with honorifics, indirect communication, and unspoken social hierarchies, echoing Hashimoto & Disbray's (2023) argument that cultural-linguistic fluency is deeply context bound.

Daily routines such as cooking, budgeting, trash sorting, or navigating dormitory etiquette emerged as critical sites of intercultural learning. Interestingly, internship motivation received the lowest intensity score ($M = 2.48$), suggesting that initial goals were quickly eclipsed by unexpected interpersonal and environmental challenges. Importantly, these narratives were collected as part of a government-funded program. Students may have framed their reflections strategically to align with the perceived expectations of institutional funders. Such framing potentially influences the salience of certain themes and the tone of critique, a factor that warrants further methodological reflection in future narrative-based evaluations.

Workplace Frictions and Professional Identity Construction

Across both disciplines, the students described challenges in adapting their creative practices to structured industry workflows. These included mastering proprietary tools (*e.g.,* Spine), navigating multiple revision cycles, and adjusting to the hierarchy and time pressures of studio production. These tensions prompted the students to reevaluate their evolving professional identities. This negotiation process also exemplifies boundary crossing theory (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011), as students moved between academic, cultural, and professional systems, learning to reconcile competing logics and expectations. The prevalence of such reflections across both departments suggests that these tensions are not discipline-specific but rather reflective of structural differences between creative education and industry practice. As Holroyd (2019) noted, Japan's creative sectors are characterized by standardized workflows and clear hierarchies, which can alienate students trained in more fluid and individualized environments.

Disciplinary Divergence in Policy Feedback

Statistical analysis confirmed a significant difference in Theme 6 (Policy Feedback), with Comic students scoring higher than Animation students ($M =$ 3.57 *vs*. $M =$ 3.28, $p <$ .001). Contrary to earlier assumptions, it was the Comic students—not those from Animation—who more frequently offered in-depth critiques regarding job role clarity, communication structures, and the quality of predeparture training.

This finding calls for a reevaluation of the assumption that animation students are more attuned to systemic processes due to their curriculum. Instead, the data suggest that Comic students, perhaps owing to their narrative training and emphasis on critical self-reflection, may be more inclined to question institutional frameworks and propose reform-oriented suggestions. These include stronger internship role alignment, expanded cultural briefings, and more robust postinternship debriefing platforms.

Career Reflections and Future Planning

The students reported substantial shifts in their career outlook following the internship. Many expressed newfound interest in working in Japan, whereas others considered graduate study or changed career direction entirely. Over 70% of the participants reported increased clarity or altered professional goals.

Beyond Work: The Pedagogical Value of Daily Life

The narratives demonstrate that significant learning occurred outside formal work settings. Tasks such as interpreting recycling rules, managing shared housing norms, or dealing with silence in communication were cited as critical to intercultural competence. As such, internship preparation should not isolate professional and personal domains. Integrated support systems, including

cultural orientation sessions, peer mentoring, and everyday living skills workshops, could enhance students' adaptive capacity and confidence.

Intersections of Themes in Intercultural Learning

The correlation analysis reveals deeper relationships among students' intercultural learning experiences. For example, those who encountered greater challenges with language and culture (Theme 2) were also more likely to report significant workplace difficulties (Theme 3). In addition, career reflections (Theme 5) were closely associated with students' personal growth through life experiences (Theme 4) and their evaluations of the internship policy (Theme 6). This pattern suggests that students' professional insights did not emerge solely from their workplace tasks but were also shaped by the broader context of daily life abroad and critical reflections on program structure. Overall, these findings highlight that intercultural learning is an integrative process that unfolds through the interplay of linguistic adaptation, professional challenges, personal experience, and the institutional environment, thereby reinforcing the transformative learning framework discussed earlier.

Theoretical and Practical Contributions

Conceptually, this study contributes to the field by introducing the "thematic intensity" metric, which combines qualitative coding with expert-rated depth scoring. This approach bridges the divide between narrative complexity and statistical comparability, addressing a persistent methodological challenge in international education research (Neuendorf, 2017; Krippendorff, 2018). Most importantly, students demonstrated critical agency by moving beyond passive reflection to actively propose structural improvements. This shift positions them not merely as participants in global mobility programs but also as stakeholders with valuable insights. It underscores the need to engage students in the codesign of policies and curricula, ensuring that international education is responsive, inclusive, and shaped by those it aims to serve.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the intercultural learning experiences of 42 Taiwanese design students who participated in internships within Japan's creative industries through the "Dream-Building Study Abroad" initiative. By integrating thematic analysis with expert-rated intensity scoring, six key themes were identified: internship motivation, language and cultural adaptation, workplace learning, daily life experience, career reflection, and policy feedback.

While these themes represent distinct domains, their intersections reveal that intercultural learning is a holistic and dynamic process. Students engaged most deeply with cultural adaptation, daily life, and career reflection, illustrating how identity shifts often emerge from navigating unfamiliar communication norms, social hierarchies, and production systems. Although motivation was less

emphasized, many students demonstrated critical agency—particularly in offering policy-level feedback. Comic students, in particular, provided structured, systemic reflections, suggesting a curricular link to evaluative and planning skills.

This study contributes a mixed-methods approach that balances narrative depth with thematic comparison. It also underscores the pedagogical potential of everyday experience, the need for culturally responsive preparation, and the importance of integrating student voices in program design. Despite its single-institution scope, the findings affirm that international internships—when thoughtfully supported—can become transformative spaces for professional growth, intercultural learning, and identity development.

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Bio

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