

Inclusion Abroad: Student Homestay Satisfaction Narratives

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Homestays comprise a large component of study-abroad (SA) programs, but the experiences of students vary considerably in these environments. This paper reports on perceived inclusion in the family during homestays among Japanese university students who participated in yearlong study-abroad programs. Through a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with eight participants, the study examines how students' perceptions of being treated "like a family member" or "like a boarder" influenced their homestay experiences. The findings indicate that family inclusion during SA is an important condition that can influence emotional well-being, quality communication with host family members, and adjustment to unfamiliar surroundings. In situations with limited inclusion, the results included feelings of emotional distance and limited communication between the student and host. Ultimately, this analysis underscores the importance of inclusion in homestays and discusses the implications for both SA preparation and student support.

ホームステイは留学プログラムの主要な要素であるが、学生の体験は様々である。本論文は、長期留学プログラムに参加した日本人大学生におけるホームステイ中の家族的包摂感に関する分析を報告する。8名の参加者への半構造化インタビューの帰納的テーマ分析を通して、学生が「家族の一員として」あるいは「下宿生として」扱われているという認識が、どのようにホームステイ体験に影響するのかを検討した。結果として、家族的包摂感は感情的安定、ホストファミリーとのコミュニケーションの質、留学中の適応に影響を与える重要な要因であることが示唆された。また、包摂が限定的な場合、感情的な距離やコ

ミュニケーションの希薄化が見られた。本研究はホームステイにおける包摂の重要性を示し、留学準備および学生支援への示唆を提供する。

Homestays are a widely promoted component of many study-abroad (SA) programs, as they can provide a space for learners to increase their linguistic and cultural competency while also contributing a base of emotional support during a time of adjustment. However, despite these admirable aspirations, the reality shown through research and narratives on homestays during SA programs illustrate a more nuanced picture, consistently revealing sometimes vastly varying experiences depending on the host or host family. These differences can range from highly supportive environments, where sojourning students are welcomed as a full family member, to homestays where students feel unresolved emotional, physical, and cultural distance from their host family, encounter frustrating misunderstandings, and experience high levels of stress (Benson, 2017; Jackson, 2010; Kinginger, 2011). With such a wide range of homestay variance, the preconceived benefits of homestays cannot be generalized and should be examined more closely.

Previous studies have identified several factors that shape homestay experiences, including interaction between hosts and students (Pryde, 2014), differences between students' expectations and reality (Diao et al., 2011), and differences in lifestyles and means of communication (Kobayashi & Viswat, 2015). Though this research has led to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of homestay environments, less attention has been given to how students interpret inclusion within the host family, specifically whether they feel as though they are treated as a family member or closer to a temporary guest or boarder.

In this paper, we argue that perceived family inclusion is an important condition in homestay experiences, particularly for Japanese learners experiencing long-term homestays in English-speaking (inner-circle) countries. We hypothesize that this perceived inclusion influences how students think about their daily interactions in the

family, manage difficulties or misunderstandings, engage with their host families, and use the target language in everyday interaction. This paper focuses specifically on how participants narrated their position within the host family, and how that position shaped their broader homestay experience.

Literature Review

Researchers often characterize language learners who place a high value on having access to natural language usage (Collentine, 2004; Dewey, 2008; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004), and being immersed culturally (Hassall, 2006) as benefitting the most from SA programs. Research on homestays has traditionally emphasized the potential linguistic and cultural benefits that come from living with host families (Shiri, 2015); however some later studies have demonstrated that these benefits vary significantly among those participating in SA homestays (Di Silvio et al., 2014; Kinginger, 2011). While homestays are often perceived as ideal supportive environments, they have been shown to produce varied outcomes due to interpersonal, contextual, and affective factors.

Research that has examined interaction between hosts and students has highlighted how differences in, for example, communication styles within the home can influence students' opportunities for engagement. Pryde (2014) found that the frequency and quality of conversations between hosts and students varied considerably, leading to some students having less meaningful interaction. Schmidt-Rinehart and Knight (2004) demonstrated that analyzing the student, host, and program perspectives reveals many complicated details that can be overlooked when only one perspective is used to evaluate homestays. Akkuş Çakır (2021) reported similar variability among sojourners in the context of a homestay in Turkey, finding that host families mediated learners' access to broader social and linguistic environments, and that the depth of relational engagement within the household substantially shaped reported gains. These findings reinforce the view that homestays operate as relational, rather than purely linguistic environments: they should be treated as living arrangements in which outcomes arise through daily interaction, not as standardized learning settings.

More recent research has emphasized the emotional element of homestay experiences. In Benson's (2017) study of students from Hong Kong living in homestays in Australia, Britain, and Canada, he characterized homestays as places that could be a "dream" or a "nightmare". Benson used this contrast to capture how a similarly structured arrangement in sharing a home with a host family could generate polarized experiences,

depending on their relational and contextual factors. This framing highlights the emotional intensity that can arise from living in an unfamiliar house with new people. When students experience strong emotions in a homestay, it can shape their overall view of the SA program. Furthermore, it can influence their motivation, well-being, and engagement during the program. This illustrates the need for more in-depth analysis of which factors can lead to positive, mixed, and negative homestay experiences.

While there is specific research on the role of homestays during study abroad, little attention has been given to students' experiences and perceptions of inclusion within the host family. Though studies might note whether students feel "comfortable" or "supported" in homestay environments, few examine how students interpret their position within the host family itself. Qualitative accounts, in particular, often reveal that learners make meaningful distinctions between being treated as a family member and being positioned as a temporary guest or boarder (Aveni, 2005). Kinginger (2011) argues the social relationships learners develop during study abroad influence their learning opportunities. This suggests that students' chances to participate partly depend on how accepted they feel within their host families. Greer and Wagner (2023) make a related point from a conversation-analytic perspective, arguing that homestays should be understood in terms of participation and membership, rather than abstract notions of "input." In their account, learners gradually expand their participation in family routines as they are integrated as members of the household, whereas limited social cooperation from hosts constrains both participation and relational development. Their framing aligns with the present study's focus on perceived inclusion, though in their case this was approached through analysis of recorded interaction rather than through learners' retrospective accounts.

In homestays, acceptance may occur simply by engaging in everyday practices such as sharing meals, having regular conversations, and receiving some manner of emotional support. These types of practices may allow students to better adjust and engage with their new living space, but when they do not experience these things in the home, it can lead to feelings of exclusion despite living in the same house as the host family. Building on this work, the present study focuses on students' experiences of family inclusion as a way of understanding homestay experiences. Rather than treating inclusion as a secondary outcome, this paper examines how students' perceptions of how they were treated within the host family shaped their emotional well-being and adjustment during long-term study abroad.

Methodology

The data for this study were drawn from Japanese third-year university students who each participated in a mandatory, yearlong study-abroad program across five English-speaking countries. We use long-term here to refer to study-abroad placements of approximately 10 or more months in duration, in contrast to the short-term programs (typically two to eight weeks) that have dominated much of SA literature. All participants completed a homestay placement for the duration of their sojourn. Semi-structured interviews (see appendix) were conducted with eight participants who were purposively sampled to represent a range of homestay experiences, spanning positive, mixed, and challenging cases.

Interviews were conducted in English several months after the participants had returned from their study-abroad experience and were later transcribed, analyzed using an inductive thematic approach. Coding proceeded through repeated readings and line-by-line annotation of each transcript, with categories developed iteratively to capture how participants described their relationships with host family members and their perceived position within the household. Four broad categories emerged from this process: inclusion practices (everyday actions through which participants felt accepted as members of the household), transactional framing (descriptions of the homestay as primarily a service or accommodation arrangement), emotional response (affective reactions to inclusion or its absence), as well as coping and redirection (strategies for managing limited inclusion, including investment in social ties outside the home). For this study's results, these categories were further condensed into the three patterns of strong inclusion, limited inclusion, and perceived exclusion, as reported below. Close attention was paid to how students contrasted being treated as “part of the family” with being positioned as temporary guests or boarders.

All participants provided informed consent, and the study was conducted in accordance with each author's institutional research ethics guidelines. To protect participant anonymity, interview data is reported using non-identifying descriptors (e.g., “one participant”), and no identifying information is included.

Findings

Analysis of the interview data indicated that students' homestay experiences were strongly shaped by their perceptions of family inclusion. The participants consistently distinguished between homestays in which they felt included as members of the household and those in which they felt they were treated as a temporary guest or a

boarder. This distinction was evident both in retrospective evaluations and in students' descriptions of everyday interaction, emotional well-being, and adjustment during study abroad.

Interview narratives provided an insight into how students interpreted these experiences in relation to their homestay hosts. The three patterns of perceived inclusion that emerged were strong inclusion, limited inclusion, and perceived exclusion. Students who reported the most positive homestay experiences consistently described feeling included as full (or almost full) members of the host family. Some of these participants did mention special events or exceptional support when explaining inclusion, though they primarily pointed to everyday practices such as shared meals, routine conversation, and the consistent presence of family members in the home. One common refrain among these positive-group participants is the way they felt embraced by their host family, often described in uncomplex terms. One participant stated that their hosts “*thought me as one of family.*” Reflecting further on this experience, the same participant emphasized the stability of the relationship, noting that “*every day when I went home, they were there.*” Notably, participants described family inclusion through these accounts not as something they had to earn through effort or accommodation, but as a relational status the host family extended to them through ordinary, repeated practices. Thus, inclusion was freely given, rather than negotiated; its quality was derived from routineness, rather than from a single significant event.

Importantly, strong inclusion did not imply constant interaction, nor a lack of personal boundaries. Participants emphasized the importance of balancing family participation with personal privacy. One student explained that the host family “*totally keep [sic] my personal time as well. And also family time,*” indicating that inclusion was considered a supportive element of the homestay experience. This balance appeared to create a sense of safety and belonging without demanding continuous engagement.

This is not to note a complete lack of negative experiences, but even when difficulties occurred, they were retrospectively characterized as early challenges that were short-lived, perhaps attributable to limited English proficiency, initial feelings of anxiety, or simply adjustment to the life cycles and communication strategies of their homestay family members. Broadly, positive-group participants indicated a relatively quick adaptation period, with one participant noting that it took “*only three days, four days*” to feel comfortable in the homestay, linking this adjustment to the host family's open communication. Taken together, these accounts indicate that inclusion helped students cope with early challenges and reduced the emotional strain associated with adjusting to homestay life.

A second pattern was identified, where students' basic needs were covered, but family inclusion was limited; students often described these experiences as neutral or mixed. While personal space and meals were provided as expected, there were few chances for meaningful interaction. Students in this group tended to view these homestays as a transactional arrangement. One participant explained that the host family treated the homestay as *"here's a place to sleep... we'll serve you food."* The same participant summarized the distance by stating, *"I just had my life. And they had their own life."* These comments reflect a perception of the homestay feeling closer to a boarding house situation of living under the same roof without a sense of closeness, where the student remained peripheral to everyday family life. Notably, participants in this group attributed the distance to the host's disposition (the family's own framing of the arrangement as service rather than relationship) rather than language barriers. One participant described his host mother sitting on the sofa watching television while he ate at the dining table, the two of them in the same room without conversation, an arrangement that reflected the family's stance toward the homestay rather than any communicative incapacity on either side.

Faced with limited inclusion, students often adopted coping strategies. Some sought communicative and social opportunities outside the home, spending more time forging friendships with peers. One student explicitly separated the homestay from the rest of the study-abroad experience, explaining that *"it was completely separated, this was my homestay, and this was my study life."* While this strategy allowed students to become acquainted with peers, it reduced the homestay's role as a place for meaningful interpersonal connections.

The students who experienced limited inclusion did not necessarily express strong dissatisfaction. Several factors appeared to ease any emerging grievances. First, students in this group described the homestay as meeting their basic expectations of safety, food, and shelter; some explicitly framed it from the outset as a transactional arrangement, rather than as a relational one. Therefore, the absence of closeness was not experienced as a violation of expectations. Second, participants who redirected their social investment toward peer networks tended to report that this redirection partially supplemented what was missing within the household. Therefore, the homestay tended to function primarily as accommodation, rather than as an enriching component of the study-abroad experience. In these situations, students' reduced sense of inclusion was reflected in how much they chose to communicate with host family members. Several participants mentioned setting intentional limits on interaction to avoid discomfort or conflict.

A final group of participants described homestay experiences marred by perceived exclusion. Students in this category reported prominent and, on occasion, aggrieved feelings of emotional distance, heightened stress, and a breakdown in everyday interaction with their host families. Although their material needs might have been met (sometimes to a bare minimum), they emphasized feeling treated as estranged boarders, rather than as members of the household in any meaningful sense.

Participants who experienced exclusion often pointed to specific moments that signaled a deterioration in their relationship. One interviewee recalled that after a conflict with the host family, *"I cried actually,"* describing this incident as a turning point after which interaction largely stopped. In some cases, students described limiting communication to avoid further conflict, which resulted in a cycle of increasing isolation within the household. Language ability did appear to play a contributing role in such cases, although not as the primary cause. Rather than triggering exclusion, limited English often constrained participants' ability to defend themselves or repair the relationship once a conflict had occurred. One participant whose first homestay deteriorated after a stolen bicycle described being unable to respond to his host family's accusations because of his limited English at the time, a constraint that deepened the mistrust and ultimately led him to leave the placement.

The emotional impact of perceived exclusion was described as extending beyond the homestay itself. One participant stated explicitly that their negative experience within the homestay *"affect[ed] overall study-abroad experiences,"* indicating that homestay-related stress continued to shape emotional well-being and engagement in other areas of study abroad, such as classroom learning and social engagements. Even when students developed social networks outside the home or changed host families, the absence of family inclusion continued to influence how they evaluated their homestay and study-abroad experience as a whole.

These cases suggest that feeling included in the family served as a threshold in how students understood their homestays. When students felt included, they were more willing to engage with host family members and better able to overcome typical early challenges of studying abroad. When inclusion was limited or absent, students' engagement diminished and their homestay became less central within the broader study-abroad experience.

These accounts show that simply providing housing and meals does not ensure a positive homestay experience. Feelings of acceptance, safety, and belonging influenced how homestays, and the study-abroad experience more generally, were interpreted. In

this sense, homestays should be viewed not only as living arrangements but as places in which inclusion is shaped through everyday interaction.

Discussion

Within the data used for this study, students' perceived inclusion within the family emerged as a defining aspect of homestay experiences during long-term study abroad. It influenced how they understood everyday interactions, dealt with emotional challenges, and participated in home life. Those who felt included as members of the host family appeared better able to manage the early emotional difficulties that accompanied homestay life (homesickness, miscommunication-related stress, uncertainty about household routines, and adjustment to unfamiliar daily rhythms), and often came to view their homestay as a supportive component of their study-abroad experience. Conversely, the students who experienced limited inclusion seemed to have less engagement with their host, even in cases where their necessities were met.

These results mirror previous studies that illustrate variance in homestay experiences (Benson, 2017; Kinginger, 2011) and extend this research by examining how inclusion is experienced within host families. While earlier studies have noted differences in interactional opportunities and emotional outcomes, the present analysis suggests that students' sense of their place within the household may help to distinguish positive, mixed, and negative experiences. In this respect, inclusion influences how students take part in everyday family life, which in turn relates to emotional well-being and willingness to communicate. This convergence is theoretically meaningful, considering the methodological distance between the present study and other recent SA-related research. Greer and Wagner (2023) traced membership through analysis of moment-to-moment interaction in a single homestay, while the present study traces it through participants' retrospective narratives across multiple homestays. Thus, that both lead to broadly compatible conclusions about the centrality of inclusion strengthens the case that family-level inclusion is a meaningful unit of analysis in homestay research. Additionally, language ability appeared to function as a resource for navigating the relational complications of homestay life. For instance, participants who had developed sufficient English to articulate concerns and respond to misunderstandings were better positioned to recover from early conflicts, while those whose English was still limited at the moment of conflict often withdrew from the interaction altogether.

One practical implication is that providing accommodation and meals on its own does not ensure a positive homestay experience. The students' accounts indicate

that homestays operate as social environments in which belonging develops through interaction. When students perceived themselves either as outside of or not an integral part of the family, they often redirected their social and communicative efforts towards their peers, reducing the significance of the homestay in the broader study-abroad experience. Students' accounts of redirecting their social and communicative efforts correspond with observations that SA participants typically exercise agency when faced with constrained environments (Kinger & Farrell, 2004).

As inclusion emerged as a key factor, there are practical implications for study-abroad support. Pre-departure orientations and host-family briefings often emphasize rules, schedules, and what the costs include, but may give less attention to expectations about interaction and inclusion. Clarifying these expectations for both students and host families may help prevent misunderstandings and reduce stress. Programs might also benefit from checking in early on students' perceptions of inclusion, as this could make it easier to identify emerging difficulties before they become more serious.

Taken together, these results highlight the value of attending to the interpersonal dimensions of homestay living. Viewing homestays as environments in which belonging develops through interaction, rather than as uniform or guaranteed experiences, may help researchers and practitioners better understand the diversity of student outcomes and support learners more effectively. Here, the term "threshold condition" is used descriptively to capture a shift in how students interpreted and engaged with their homestay experiences.

Conclusion

In this study, we examined how Japanese university students perceived family inclusion during long-term homestays as part of their study-abroad programs. Interview narratives showed that feeling treated as a member of the household, rather than as a temporary guest, was important for students' emotional well-being, engagement, and overall adjustment.

This study considers perceived inclusion in the host family to be a key factor in homestay experiences. In doing so, it shows that typical, day-to-day interactions during homestays can strongly influence how students experience their time abroad. Rather than viewing homestays mainly as a source of basic necessities and a convenient commute, it may be more accurate to view them as temporary "homes" and places of belonging where many students hope to feel comfortable and included. Although basic provisions are essential, the absence of family inclusion can lessen the educational and

personal value of the homestay within the broader SA experience. This deficiency can manifest as stress, feelings of isolation, and an urgency to seek companionship and comfort outside of the confines of their host family. And whether such comfort exists depends on individual circumstances. At worst, learners who do not find it satisfactory may come away from what should be a highlight of their life and language learning feeling disillusioned about the L2 culture and even unmotivated about their future study.

Several limitations need to be acknowledged: the qualitative findings come from a small interview sample of eight student narratives, and the analysis does not encompass the full range of factors that may influence homestay experiences. Furthermore, the interviews were also conducted after students had returned to Japan, several months after the homestay period had ended, thus it is possible that some of the accounts may have been influenced by retrospective biases.

Despite the project's limitations, educators and administrators preparing students for future study-abroad programs could use these findings as they highlight the importance of discussing expectations around family inclusion before departure. Therefore, this suggests several practical orientations for pre-departure preparation, including the following: incorporating case-study discussions of varied homestay scenarios, particularly in limited and exclusionary cases, so that students arrive with a realistic expectation of homestay life, coaching communication strategies that help students assert their needs, ask clarifying questions, and navigate early misunderstandings before they harden into avoidance, and explicitly framing “feeling like a boarder” as a known pattern, rather than a personal failing. For program coordinators in host countries, periodic check-ins focused specifically on inclusion, rather than on logistics alone, may help identify difficulties early enough for productive intervention. Increasing students' awareness of the potential realities of homestay life, especially in inclusion or exclusion, may help them to manage their experiences more effectively. Understanding that many Japanese students want to feel included in their host family could also help with placements, while contributing to more positive outcomes and, overall, more meaningful SA experiences. Nevertheless, greater specification and evaluation of such measures lie beyond the scope of the present analysis, affirming a direction for future work.

Bio Data

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7. [For students who had problems] Do you think the university or travel company could have done more to help you? Was there anything that you think you could have done differently?
8. [For students with good experiences] What did the host family do to make your experience so positive? Did this positive feeling last through the SA, or did it peak at some point?
9. How was life with the homestay family similar or different from with your family in Japan?
10. In your opinion, how important is the homestay portion of the study abroad year?

Appendix

Homestay Interview Questions

1. Where did you do your study abroad?
2. What was the length of your homestay, and did you change homestay families during your study abroad?
3. Had you ever experienced a homestay situation before this one?
4. Overall, would you describe your homestay experience as positive or negative? Explain.
5. How did the homestay experience compare to your expectation (before you started SA)?
6. Tell me about the initial period. How long did it take you to settle in (immediately? a few days or weeks?) Was there a change from the beginning to the end of the first week or month?