

“IT’S ALMOST LIKE HAVING A ‘LITTLE BRAZIL’ INSIDE OF CANADA”: THE ROLE OF COMFORT IN CREATING COMMUNITY

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Abstract: The desire for self-improvement and the need for acceptance have a significant impact on the experiences of Brazilian international students at Lakehead University. By examining the links between the desire for self-improvement and need for acceptance, we argue that Brazilian students have actively created a coping mechanism based on the notion of comfort. More particularly, these students seek out comfort in the form of connecting with other Brazilians in large part due to cultural similarities and the need for assistance. This results in the creation of co-national relationships, which refer to forming community and familial bonds with other Brazilian international students. The term designated for this community at Lakehead University is “Little Brazil”.

Many Brazilian international students attending Lakehead University have come to Canada with hopes of gaining experience in a foreign country, thereby becoming better situated in an ever more globalized job market. In exploring the relationship between the desire for self-improvement and acceptance by their new Canadian peers, we find that Brazilian students are driven to seek comfort and support in co-national relationships. Co-national relationships in this case refer to those bonds formed between individuals coming from Brazil while they are in Thunder Bay; the result of such relationships is the formation of a “Little Brazil” at Lakehead University. While there is a large amount of literature on the divide between international and non-international students, there is little research on how the need for comfort drives the development of co-national relationships. In turn, there is even less published about informal international student communities like Little Brazil within the literature on the experiences of international students. We, however, have found that the idea of Little Brazil is significant, as it is passed

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on to new international students from Brazil when they arrive here, thereby perpetuating a cycle. The focus of this paper will be on the aspect of comfort in the formation of Little Brazil, which is significant to the community of Brazilian international students that come to Lakehead University through government programs such as Science Without Borders. The program facilitates the arrival of new Brazilian students every six months, fostering a group of Brazilian students so large they may not even get to know everyone in Thunder Bay's existing Brazilian community.

This project was carried out by members of ANTH-2517 Ethnographic Methods, a research methods course in the winter of 2014. The data was accumulated qualitatively, utilizing six guiding questions developed in class, based on a preliminary literature search. As well, pertinent follow-up questions were included at the discretion of the interviewers. Each interviewer met with a willing Brazilian international student for an interview, which ranged in length from half an hour to a couple of hours. These eight interviews were subsequently summarized and transcribed by the interviewer, and then coded.¹ Based on our coding, three major themes were determined as important factors leading to the construction of Little Brazil: self-improvement, acceptance, and comfort. We focus in this paper on the theme of comfort.

Feeling closed off from local students or overwhelmed by their classes, the Brazilian international students often turn to co-nationals. They seek out other Brazilian roommates and students in order to find help, support, and friendship because they share (in greater and lesser degrees) a language and culture. This notion of a shared language and culture becomes a source of comfort for the Brazilian students. This can however, impact the learning and self-improvement processes, which are two of the main reasons why Brazilian students choose to study abroad. As well, because Little Brazil is already established, it is often comfortable and easy for

¹ The eight interviews conducted were as follows: KV, TK, KP, CE, RC, JV, TL, AS. Interviews were carried out in March 2014 on these dates: March 14, March 12, March 13, March 17, March 5, March 24, March 19, March 12.

incoming Brazilian international students to join and utilize the resources of this informal locally created community.

For example, both new arrivals and established students will seek advice from other Brazilian international students, rather than from the institution or local students. Thus, it is possible that incoming students will not feel the need to try to interact and make local friends or branch out. We will argue more particularly that these students seek out comfort by connecting with other Brazilians in large part due to their cultural similarities, as well as the need for assistance.

When attending university, missing home is a huge obstacle for many students, both international and non-international. Due to greater distances, and cultural or language differences, this can often be magnified for those students from abroad. A student who feels alone may surround themselves with others who share their language and culture, making the adjustment process and the school year easier and more comfortable. However, in the interviews it became apparent that these Brazilian international students found the comfort from many sources. Those students interviewed demonstrated that people from “home” continue to provide support for international students (whether by using Skype or by visiting in-person). As this support is also from other Brazilians, this perpetuates the internal support system that results in Little Brazil. The home support is important, especially during holidays and special days throughout the year, when family and / or friends are viewed as integral to the enjoyment of the day. For instance, KV (a female third year electrical engineer from Northwestern Brazil) and TK (a 21 year old female software engineer from Northeastern Brazil) both explained how the arrival of a friend’s family from Brazil over the Christmas break provided comfort. They also explained that the presence of this other family for the holidays made them feel at home during a time that could have been lonely. Another interviewee, KP (a female engineer from Northwestern Brazil) shared how her friends in Brazil surprised her for her birthday over Skype, making her cry with joy. This same interviewee also mentioned that her fellow Brazilian friends in Thunder Bay became a surrogate family whilst she is studying abroad. Thus, friends and family (even if it is not the interviewee’s family) have a huge impact on the comfort and positivity of

the experiences. Again, this impact is based on a shared language and culture; KP summarizes their relationships when she describes her Brazilian roommates “like a family. They are all such good friends”.

This prominent search for comfort through the construction of relationships extends beyond roommates and classmates, into what KP terms “networking”. Networking is part of the greater search and desire for comfort, and leads to the creation of the larger Little Brazil in Thunder Bay, which extends outside of households and classrooms. It is very common for the Brazilian students, while studying here, to network and form friendships with many other students from all over Brazil, and thus the majority of their friends end up being from Brazil. This closeness is accomplished using multiple platforms, including university groups and social media. In fact, the only formal university group TK belongs to is the Lakehead University Brazilian Association. Another support system that provides comfort is church. There is even a Bible study in the Agora run by Brazilian students, and only recently have Canadian students started joining the group. In addition, there is a “Brazilian International Students at Lakehead University” Facebook page used by students already living in Thunder Bay and those who will be coming in the future. A popular use of this Facebook page is to meet people (especially potential roommates) and is the method by which KV found her place to live. Again, a result of these networking platforms is that the majority of Brazilian international students’ friends and roommates are predominantly Brazilian as well.

While one of the goals of studying abroad is to learn about Canadian culture and the English language, by seeking comfort in co-national relationships, many Brazilian international students learn far more about Brazilian culture than Canadian culture. An aspect of Brazilian culture that is very important in providing a comfortable experience for the students is food. Many of the students explained that their level of comfort and ease adjusting to living in a new country increased once they found the ingredients to make “their own” food. Food was not only cited as leading to increased comfort, but CE, a male in Applied Bio-molecular Science from Pires de Rio, also explains that he finds Brazilian food healthier. As well, KP likes the spices and salt in the Brazilian food. Overall, they felt better physically

after being able to prepare and eat Brazilian food. Due to the diversity of Brazilian students studying at Lakehead University, the types of Brazilian foods they eat are also diverse. While the Brazilian international students may not be expanding their palate in terms of international or North American food, they are expanding their Brazilian palate, while feeling comfortable by eating the food they enjoy – the food from their home country.

Language is another source of cultural comfort for the Brazilian students. Therefore, it is also a factor when exploring why Brazilian students seek out co-national relationships for comfort. This is best summarized by RC, a female engineer, who indicated that “it may be easier to live with Brazilians instead of other nationalities, because at least they all speak the same language”. If surrounded by other Brazilians, the students spend the majority of their time speaking Portuguese, which is easier and more comfortable for them. However, while co-national relationships where Portuguese is primarily or solely spoken are fantastic support networks for feeling at ease, the size of the community, and the reliance on these relationships results in a decrease in English speaking and an increase in Portuguese speaking. The result is a negative impact on the opportunity to learn and improve English speaking and comprehension. In fact, JV (a 23 year old male mechanical engineer from Brazil) said he has learned more Portuguese while in Thunder Bay than he has English. He was not the only one. There was some surprise expressed by other interviewees who explained that they couldn't always understand the different dialects of other Brazilian students. Instead of learning English together, the students would learn different dialects and slang from across Brazil.

While a reliance on relationships based in Portuguese communication can hinder the process of improving English communication skills, the comfort of speaking a shared native language can also assist in improving English communication skills. Some students who share a language may feel more comfortable to experiment and learn English away from native English speakers, in front of whom they may be embarrassed to speak English. This is the case with TK, who along with her roommates, worked on learning English by teaching each other. They used a jar:

when anyone spoke Portuguese, they had to pay 25¢ per word. Such a technique was adopted as a way to deter Portuguese, and learn more English as a group. In this way, the co-national relationships provided support and assistance.

Due to their shared culture, language, and situation as Brazilian international students at Lakehead University, as outlined above, the main source of assistance the students use is each other. The individuals they go to for assistance are often those that they came to Thunder Bay with as part of a group, people they knew from their hometown, or other Brazilians they met when they arrived, becoming classmates or even roommates. The Brazilian governmental program that facilitates their studies, Science Without Borders, is a very large program that results in the arrival of new students every six months. As such, there is a support system and network already in place here for new students when they arrive. This support system also starts before they arrive. KV explained how useful it was that the students already in Thunder Bay gave her advice (such as not to buy winter clothes in Brazil, but to wait until she arrived here). Once here, the students continue to advise each other. The same interviewee, KV, said that she had a dry nose. Instead of seeking out medical help, she went to Wal-Mart to buy nasal spray on the recommendation of the other Brazilian students. Assistance also extends to help with homework, splitting chores at home when they are roommates, dealing with stress, and learning English in some cases.

Already having Brazilian students here for support and advice is seen as the best option for incoming Brazilian international students who often do not turn to institutional supports, Canadian students, or other international students for the help they need. Turning to other Brazilians here is not the only way they seek assistance. We encountered the case of JV. He called his father, a doctor, when he cut himself. JV treated himself instead of seeking out a doctor, as he would if he were at home in Brazil. This shows that he finds his comfort and strongest bonds there.

While this class project exemplified that comfort contributes greatly to the formation of Little Brazil, more extensive research and analysis of the

interrelationships between notions of self-improvement, acceptance, and comfort would allow for a better, more complete understanding of the situation faced by Brazilian international students.

These interpretations could also be expanded upon and studied further by examining the advantages and disadvantages in seeking comfort, and its subsequent effect of creating a sense of community away from home. Through further interviews utilizing a larger pool of interviewees, the research into the formation of Little Brazil could be expanded upon and supported better. This sort of research can be utilized more broadly to investigate other international students' co-national groups at various other universities across the globe. This would allow for comparative studies between institutions to see if the formation of international student communities, like Little Brazil are prevalent elsewhere, and if they arise from similar conditions. Having an understanding of the formation of these different communities could benefit the university itself, the organizations and governments funding educational programs, the international students, and the local (national) students, as all parties involved seek to achieve their goals and make the experience of the international students as positive and comfortable as possible.

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