

The Influence of Anxiety on Sociocultural Adjustment among International Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to investigate whether anxiety will inversely influence international students' sociocultural adjustment in the context of pursuing education in higher learning institutions in Malaysia; specifically in Universiti Utara Malaysia. The data used for this study was derived from the questionnaire survey conducted randomly among the international students in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) who came from 27 different nationalities. A total number of 397 valid responses were successfully obtained. Multiple regression analysis was performed to test the model. For the relationship between anxiety and sociocultural adjustment, although a significant relationship is found, the direction of the postulated relationship is positive instead of negative. The result may have some implications to management and policy makers.

Keywords: *Anxiety, Sociocultural Adjustment, International Students.*

Introduction

Nations, multinational corporations (MNCs), small and medium enterprises and other institutions are directly or indirectly basing their strategic decisions on some aspects of globalisation. The education field is not spared from the phenomena and universities, both public and private are jumping on the bandwagon to secure a piece of the globalisation pie. International students, often thought as a lucrative source of income for many countries (Bird and Owen, 2004) are taking advantage of this opportunity to not only experience the diverse culture but most importantly to be able to learn alongside students from various backgrounds and gaining first-hand experience of being taught by renowned members of the academic staff.

Inevitably, globalisation brings about interactions and relationships between people who are culturally different. Brislin (2000) and Hofstede (2001) indicate that people exposed to

overseas experiences as a result of working or studying often encounter stressful situations that challenged their coping processes. For international students, in addition to language issues and academic concerns, they are also being plagued by problems acclimatising to the social and cultural aspects of the host country, with previous scholars highlighting social integration, financial crisis, family stress and isolation as common problems faced by international students (Mallinckrodt and Leong, 1992; Parr, Bradley and Bingi, 1992; Zhai, 2004). Study by Rajapaksa and Dundes (2002) found that international students felt more lonely and homesick than their local counterparts and felt that social support from the local community is significant in helping them adjust to the host country's environment. Thus, based on the earlier findings, the crux of the challenges faced by international students when studying overseas is the challenge to socially integrate with the host country's environment.

Exporting Higher Education

Exporting higher education services emerged in Malaysia in the late 1980s and early 1990s and is now becoming global phenomena. Malaysian international education sector has grown tremendously during the past decade and Malaysia is fast becoming a centre of educational excellence in the region. Flow of international students in Malaysia has increased steadily since 1996, when various higher education reforms were introduced to facilitate the entry of international students into higher education institutions (Abu Bakar and Abdul-Talib, 2013). Malaysia is currently the 11th largest exporter of education globally and has become one of the best options for pursuing tertiary education for many international students. Malaysian government recognises the importance of education as a critical asset of the nation and it has been identified as one of the services sub-sectors for further growth and development. Total number of international students was only 5,635 in 1996 and the number rose to 11,733 in 1998 to 93,040 for the year 2011. In 2014, a total of 135,502 international students were enrolled in Malaysia public and private higher education institutions (Economic Transformation Programme Annual Report, 2014). Moreover, Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has targeted that the number of international students' enrolment will rise to 200,000 by the year 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education Annual Report, 2011). Malaysia has emerged as an important destination for students from more than 100 countries and majority of the students come from Southeast Asia, Middle Asia, Middle East and Africa. Universities in Malaysia are generally categorized as public and private universities and currently there are 20 public and 35 private universities all over Malaysia.

Research Objective and Significance of Study

The increase of international students in Malaysian universities requires the management of the universities to be more responsive to the cultural sensitivity and adjustment of these students. Anxiety is a common psychological problems face by international students. Anxiety cause difficulties across social, occupational, and everyday functioning (Castle, Kulkarni, and Abel, 2006) and it has also been shown to adversely influence academic performance and contribute to learning difficulties (Dyrbye, Thomas, and Shanafelt, 2006). In

this paper, we seek to examine whether anxiety influences international students' sociocultural adjustment. This primary objective of this research is investigate the influence of anxiety on the international students' sociocultural adjustment.

Specifically, we wanted to address the following research questions: 1) What is the relationship between students' level of anxiety in predicting their sociocultural adjustment ability? (2) Does anxiety has any effect on students' sociocultural adjustment?

Anxiety and Sociocultural Adjustment

Anxiety

Bailey (1983) suggested that anxiety is a factor of the learner that influences learning and consists of the type of psychological state that deals with the emotional reactions and motivations of learners. In addition, anxiety is a class name feeling, mood and temperament. It is a single feeling response to a particular object or idea; it is the general reaction toward something liked or disliked, the dynamic or essential quality of an emotion; the energy of an emotion (Snow, Corno, and Jackson, 1996). Cultural anxiety is regularly regarded as a problem that might occur when a person relocate into a foreign culture and has to acclimatise. Highly sensitive people do feel pressured to assimilate into the new environment which may lead to high anxiety; however, there is no built-in mechanism in their present culture in order to detect any shortcomings.

Furnham and Bochner (1986) suggested that social adjustment entails the abilities of "expressing attitude, feelings, and emotion, adopting the appropriate proxemics posture, understanding the gaze patterns of the people they are interacting with, carrying out ritualized routines such as greetings, leave taking, self-disclosure, making or refusing requests, and asserting themselves" (pp. 14–15). Hence, some of them might engage in cultural faux pas which might lead to them not being able to adjust better to the new environment. A study by Lueke and Svyantek (2000) found that most unsuccessful expatriates tend to be reluctant to interact with host nationals and to participate in local social life, which reduces their commitments to the host countries' culture.

Adjusting to a different environment is never easy, especially in a different cultural environment. Searle and Ward (1990) suggest that the process of adjusting to a new culture socially and culturally entails learning and applying new cultural knowledge; therefore, a comprehensive model of sociocultural adjustment should be cast in a social learning-social cognition framework wherein variables that enhance cultural learning, promote behavioural and social competency, and facilitate a cross-cultural perspective should be included. Newcomers will experience anxiety regarding the inability to predict or anticipate what would be the repercussions from their actions when interacting with culturally different others or trying to 'blend' into a different environment in an unfamiliar new culture (Koltko-Rivera, 2004).

Sociocultural Adjustment

Different cultures have different norms to guide behaviour. Thus, the cultural adjustment demands of international students can be substantial due to the differences between their cultural backgrounds and those of the host country. Surrounded by a new culture, international students may realize the differences between their own culture and the host country's culture. Compared to expatriates, international students tend to experience greater adjustment difficulties and thus more stress (McKenna and Richardson, 2007). The pressure of being independent in a foreign country makes them feel homesick, lonely, and, at times, isolated from host nationals. A research study conducted by Lin and Yi (1997) concluded that many overseas students showed symptoms of depression, which were a result of a lack of concentration, and low motivation with respect to academic study and social life. If an international student cannot handle these challenges and adjust according to the host culture, he or she may tend to feel less satisfied with their performance and even quit. Therefore, adjustments to cultures of host countries are equally important for international students.

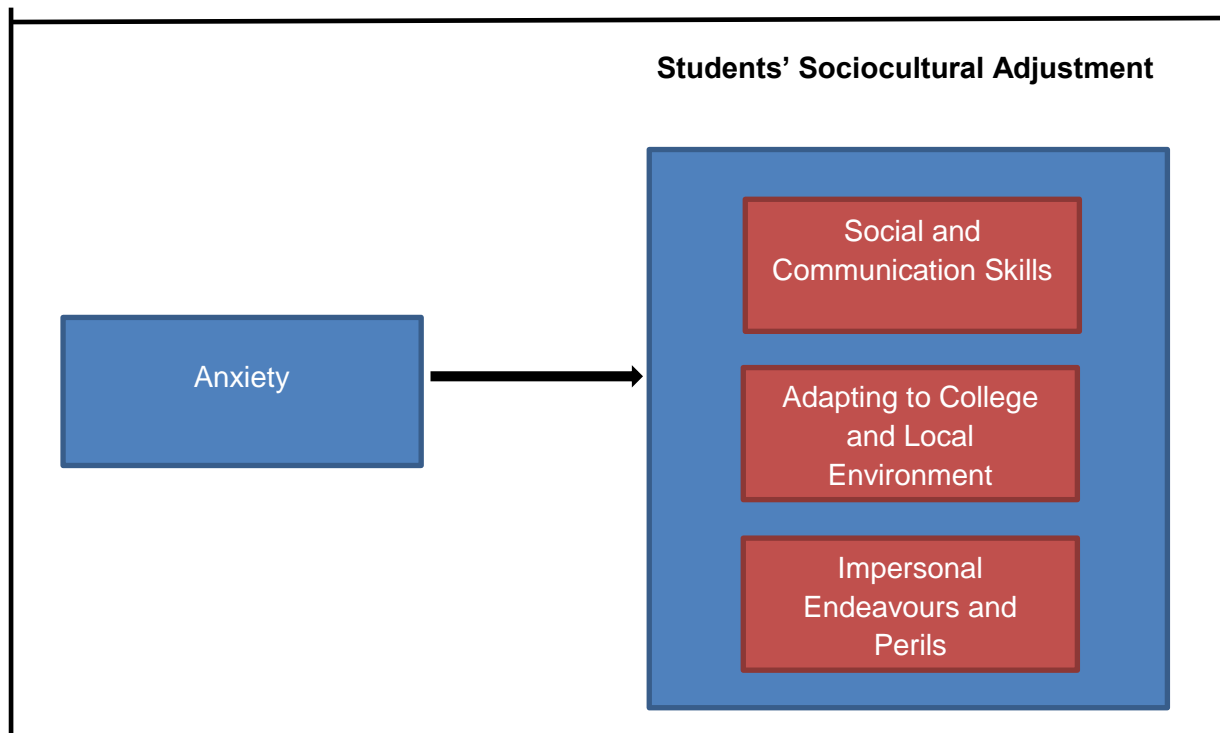
Drawing from the above discussion, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: Anxiety will inversely influence social and communication skills.

H2: Anxiety will inversely influence adaptation to college and local environment.

H3: Anxiety will inversely influence impersonal endeavours and perils.

Figure 1: Operational Framework of Anxiety and International Students' Sociocultural Adjustment



Research Methodology

Respondents

This research employs a cross sectional survey on international students who are studying in Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). UUM is one of the 20 public universities, has a total of 1,648 international students coming from 42 countries. Questionnaires were distributed randomly to the target study population. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed of which 403 were returned but 6 questionnaires were found to be incomplete, giving a total of 397 usable questionnaires.

Measurement

Anxiety is measured using the The Symptom Checklist (SCL)-90, developed by Derogatis (1977), a self-report inventory designed to screen for a broad range of psychological problems, was used as a part of the questionnaire (Derogatis, 1977). In the present study only the anxiety scale, consisting of 15 items was used. The anxiety SCL-90 measures anxiety by rating how often the participants have experienced the following within the past month: nervousness or shakiness inside, tension and trembling, feelings of fearfulness, spells of terror or panic, and, apprehension and dread. The previously mentioned symptoms are self-rated, ranging from 1 being 'not at all' to 5 being 'extremely'. In order to measure the level of sociocultural adjustment, Furnham and Bochner's (1982) Social Situations Questionnaire (SSQ) was used in the present study. The Social Situations Questionnaire (SSQ) consists of 40 items that focused on the skills that are required to manage everyday social situations in new cultural contexts. In this study, we have labelled the items into three factors (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Wilson, 2011). Factor one labelled as Social and Communication Skills, factor two as Adapting to College and Local Environment and factor three as Impersonal Endeavours and Perils.

Results

In order to test and address the hypotheses, several analyses were performed. Data analysis was performed using SPSS. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was used to establish the principal constructs. Scale reliability is tested using internal consistencies measures (cronbach coefficients). Summary of the demographic profiles respondents are presented in Table 1. Summary of the reliabilities and number of items derived from the factor analysis is presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Summary of Selected Demographic Details

	Frequency	Proportion of Sample (%)
Gender		
Male	279	70.3
Female	118	29.7
Age		
Below 20	27	6.8
20-25	305	76.8
25-30	39	9.8
30-35	10	2.5
35-40	12	3.0
Above 40	4	1.0
Education Level		
Undergraduate	309	77.8
Masters	63	15.9
Doctorate / DBA	25	6.3
Marital Status		
Single	350	88.2
Married	40	10.1
Others	7	1.8

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for All Variables

Variables	Number of Items	Reliability	M	SD
Anxiety	14	.926	1.8331	.68732
Sociocultural Adjustment				
a. Social and Communications Skills (C1)	7	.829	1.8526	.65185
b. Adapting to College and Local Environment (C2)	7	0.832	2.0735	.68632
c. Impersonal Endeavours and Perils (C3)	3	0.682	2.1743	.77687

Table 3 presents the overall correlation values of all variables in this study. All variables correlate positively with each other. Strong positive correlation was found between Sociocultural Adjustment and SCA component 1 ($r=.611$). The relationship between anxiety and all three components of Sociocultural Adjustment were found to be positively related and

were ranged between .393 and .611. As recommended by Pallant (2010), the correlation values should be between .300 and .700. This may suggest that the strength of the relationships between the variables to be moderate.

Table 3: Pearson Product-Moment Correlation between All Study Variables

	Anxiety	Social and Communications Skills	Adapting to College and Local environment	Impersonal Endeavors and Perils
Anxiety	1.000			
Social and Communications Skills	.611	1.000		
Adapting to College and Local environment	.507	.528	1.000	
Impersonal Endeavors and Perils	.393	.413	.462	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

Regression Analysis on the Influence of Anxiety on Sociocultural Adjustment

In general, based on the descriptive statistics, respondents showed moderate response or towards neutrality for anxiety and all of the dimensions of sociocultural adjustment. To examine the relationship between anxiety and all of the dependent variables (three dimensions of sociocultural adjustment), regression analyses were conducted.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses H1, H2, and H3. In this analysis, anxiety was treated as independent variable whereas the three dimensions of Sociocultural Adjustment were treated as dependent variables. Through regression analysis procedure, the model explains 42.4 percent ($R^2 = .424$) of the variance in Anxiety. Table 4 shows the level of influence of the three dimensions of *Sociocultural Adjustment* ($\beta = .452$, $\beta = .221$ and $\beta = .104$, respectively). Therefore, Hypotheses H1, H2 and H3 were partially supported. All hypotheses were significant but in opposite direction.

Table 4: The effect of Anxiety on Dimensions of Sociocultural Adjustment

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	sig.
	B	Std. Error	β		
<i>(Constant)</i>	.292	.105		2.795	.005
Social and Communications Skills	.476	.052	.452	9.176	.000
Adapting to College and Local Environment	.221	.051	.221	4.366	.000
Impersonal Endeavours and Perils	.092	.042	.104	2.209	.028

F= 86.145; Sig. F= .000; N= 347; Dependent Variables: Dimensions of Sociocultural Adjustment

Discussion and Conclusion

In addressing the influence of the international students' anxiety on their sociocultural adjustment, although it was found that there are significant relationship between anxiety and all dimensions of sociocultural adjustment, however, results showed that the relationships are positive instead of negative. Thus, hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 were partially supported in the study. This comes rather as a surprise because previous studies (Stephan et al., 1999; Hullett and Whitte, 2001) demonstrated that anxiety inversely related to adjustment.

.One possible explanation to support this findings is that majority of the international students (respondents) who were enrolled in Universiti Utara Malaysia come from East Asian (e.g Thailand, Myanmar, Pakistan,), Middle East (e.g. Libya, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen) and African regions (e.g. Chad, Algeria, Nigeria, Somalia) that are classified as high uncertainty avoidance countries (Hofstede, 2001). Uncertainty avoidance is defined as the degree to which members of the society attempt to avoid ambiguity and anxiety by depending on rituals, societal norms, behavioural codes, and beliefs (Hofstede, 2001). Besides that, 67.5% of the respondents have been in Malaysia for more than 1 year and over the time, they have learned to manage the uncertainties inherent in living in a different culture. They were able to decrease the attendant anxiety by developing rules, rituals and structure to cope with recurring cultural issues. When the level of anxiety is higher, students from high uncertainty avoidance countries tend to be more cautious in their behaviours and tend to make extra effort to be more culturally compliant. Feeling anxious would help them to keep them on their toes and in turn they will put in more efforts to get to know the host country's culture. For instance, in UUM, the international students are given ample opportunities to immerse themselves in the local culture by being invited and included in any

cultural events such as the festive celebrations, cultural performance during special commemorative events and being invited to temporarily live with local hosts on weekends. International students who are experiencing low stress and less anxiety in the host country may feel complacent and happy with their own culture without making any serious efforts to learn the local language, get to know the local's customs and values, and generally try to adapt to the local culture.

Schreier et al. (2010) also suggest that within collectivist countries, strict social norms designed to ensure group harmony may evoke social anxiety due to feared negative consequences if those norms are violated. Schreier and colleagues (2010) also found that in most Asian countries, maintaining group harmony may be by being submissive and being quiet which in turn may raise anxiety to conform to the norm. In short, it is expected that the collectivists would be prepared to put in more effort to assimilate into the host country's culture. However, the same study; Schreier et al. (2010) also found that collectivists also have a high tolerance of socially reticent and withdrawn behaviours in a society. This can be a little baffling because on one hand, you have to conform to the new society's culture but at the same time, if you are collectivist you are more receptive of people not taking part in assimilation effort because fear of creating social disharmony.

With that said, for the respondents in this particular study, anxiety although expected should be better managed or even reduced as it had a negative effect on international students' sociocultural adjustment. However, this unexpected relationship may solely be because the majority of the respondents are from collectivist countries and the host country; Malaysia also belongs to a society where most are collectivists. With this kind cultural dimension, a high social anxiety is expected and the onus is for everybody to maintain group harmony through conforming to the norms and values of the society.

This study has certain limitations that provide venues for future research. First, only one method of collecting data was used; which is self-report questionnaire. We acknowledge that some concerns might exist in that self-reported measures have social desirability and common method bias problem. It is possible that some participants paid little attention or even provided inaccurate information when completing the self-report questionnaire. Therefore, future research should include other methods such as interview or observations to ensure more stable data. There are several limitations of the current study that need to be acknowledged. Another direction for future studies would be to examine the interaction between gender, culture, and social anxiety. Investigation of demographic variables on the chosen constructs may offer a better explanation of cultural related factors.

Second, this study did not consider the possible moderating effects on adaptation-outcome. Potential moderators such as cultural distance (i.e. home vs. host country) may help to further enhance our understanding about the phenomenon under investigation. Third, the findings in the present study do not generalize to all international students in Malaysia as the samples of international students were selected randomly from only one university, Universiti Utara

Malaysia and the majority of the participants were Asian and African international students. Therefore, for future studies, international students from different continents or regions especially from a Western background who are pursuing tertiary education in various universities throughout Malaysia should be included, which we believe may help to further verify the findings of this study. Future research might also examine the influence of Hofstede's cultural dimensions like power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity traits on social anxiety. Lastly, this study is cross-sectional in design. Future researchers should consider longitudinal study since the level of individual CQ and cultural adjustment varies over time. This is because longitudinal study would provide better knowledge on these changes that took place over the time.

As for the relationship between anxiety and sociocultural adjustment, although a significant relationship is found, the direction of the postulated relationship is positive instead of negative. One possible explanation regarding anxiety's relationship with sociocultural adjustment can be pin down to the majority of the respondents are coming from a collectivist background. As such it is normal for the social anxiety to be high and the pressure to conform to the society led to them making the effort to socially integrate into the host country's environment. Future studies should consider some of the points raised in the previous section to improve on the investigation of similar variables in the future. In a nutshell, this study has managed to discover the importance and influence of being in a certain generation and type of society to better explain the relationship anxiety and the sociocultural adjustment of the international students.

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