

Cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Moroccan higher education: the case study of Sub-Saharan African students at Mohammed First University

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Abstract

Purpose – This article intends to explore the Sub-Saharan African students' perceptions on their cross-cultural adaptation to the Moroccan society by probing into their adaptive strategies adopted in order to overcome day-to-day challenges as well as factors impeding their adaptation processes. To this end, three central research questions are advanced: (1) what are the factors that influence Sub-Saharan students' cross-cultural adaptation to the Moroccan society? (2) How do Sub-Saharan students perceive the role of host communication competence, host interpersonal relationship, ethnic proximity, host receptivity and personality type in facilitating or hindering their adaptation? And (3) how do they undergo their cross-cultural adaptation to the Moroccan society?

Design/methodology/approach – The main aim of this article is to explore African Sub-Saharan students' perceptions on their adaptation to Moroccan society as well as factors affecting their adaptive experiences. Due to the complex nature of this research, opting for mixed-methods research, the combination of both qualitative and quantitative, would best serve the objective of this study. For this purpose, qualitative methods (interviews) are used to collect non-numerical data about factors that facilitate or hinder the cross-cultural adaptation of Sub-Saharan students in Morocco in the first phase, and then quantitative methods (questionnaires) are used to collect numerical data about their perceptions of their adaptation in the Moroccan society in the second phase.

Findings – The results of the present study revealed that a large number of Sub-Saharan African students are well adapted to the Moroccan culture, but with discrepant degrees. Their adaptation is mainly influenced by an array of intersected factors. Firstly, the participants showed that the more they were aware of the Moroccan culture and language, the more likely they would be able to function properly and effectively in different social settings. Secondly, it was found that establishing social ties with the host members was perceived as significant for easing their adaptation due to the cultural, emotional and academic support these ties provided. Thirdly, host receptivity was perceived as an important factor that facilitated the students' cross-cultural adaptation. With the case of some participants, host receptivity, however, hindered their adaptation because they were subject to different types of discriminatory and racist behaviours by some Moroccans. Lastly, intercultural personality traits displayed in flexibility, prior cross-cultural move and intercultural empathy were found to contribute to the students' overall functional fitness in the

Originality/value – This is the first research to tackle the issue of Sub-Saharan African students' cultural adaptation in Morocco.

Keywords Cross-cultural adaptation, Moroccan society, Sub-Saharan African students

Paper type Case study



Introduction

Cross-cultural contact between people from different cultures is a primordial human phenomenon. Throughout time, people have been on the move across cultural boundaries for a host of reasons encompassing economic prosperity, education, business transactions and other missionary journeys. A spectrum of research studies has examined the outcomes of inter-cultural encounters from multifaceted disciplines – notably social psychology, anthropology, sociology, education, to name but a few. Relevantly, in recent years, cross-cultural adaptation has become a timely research topic as the mobility of people – international students, expatriates, diplomats, immigrants and refugees – has increased more than ever before.

Intercultural contact can be replete with uncertainties and unconformities as the newcomers to a new culture bring with them specific cultural values, communicative styles and sense-makings that might be incompatible with those of the host culture. Likewise, cross-cultural adaptation can be laden with challenges if the migrants do not meet the norms stipulated for appropriate and inappropriate behaviours in the host culture (Kim, 2001). Newcomers are, then, supposed to be cross-culturally competent if they are actively seeking to achieve a functional fit in the new environment.

In the same line of thought, the cross-cultural adaptation of Sub-Saharan African students to the Moroccan society is likely be a challenging experience as they come with a bank of cultural and linguistic repertoires or models that might stand as barriers for a smooth communication with Moroccans. Therefore, having an in-depth knowledge of the cultural nuances governing communicative styles, beliefs, values, behaviours and sense-making of the Moroccan culture are amongst the salient requirements for making cross-cultural adaptation a success. On an equal footing, Moroccans are invited to revisit their thoughts, behaviours and perceptions towards foreigners and also to provide possible means and facilities that ease the integration of international students into their community.

In light of the aforementioned thoughts, this article seeks to explore the Sub-Saharan African students' perceptions on their cross-cultural adaptation to the Moroccan society by probing into their adaptive strategies adopted in order to overcome day-to-day challenges as well as factors impeding their acculturation processes. To this end, three central research questions are advanced: (1) what are the factors that influence Sub-Saharan students' cross-cultural adaptation to the Moroccan society? (2) How do Sub-Saharan students perceive the role of host communication competence (HCC), host interpersonal relationship, ethnic proximity, host receptivity and personality type in facilitating or hindering their adaptation? And (3) how do they undergo their cross-cultural adaptation to the Moroccan society?

Literature review

Cross-cultural adaptation is a keystone concept used by many immigration studies scholars to describe the common process whereby (im)migrants learn about the host culture and its language in order to attain a level of functional "fit" in the new environment (Berry, 2018; Sam and Berry, 2016; Kim, 2001). By the same token, other key terms such as cross-cultural adaptation, adjustment and coping are employed interchangeably in the literature of cross-cultural adaptation research designating the same process whereby immigrants adapt to new cultures. Existing literature identifies four models or paradigms undergirding the study of cross-cultural adaptation. These models are categorised into two main blocks – notably acculturation models encompassing assimilationist, pluralist and fusion and a cross-cultural model including a multidimensional framework. Each model adopts a specific conceptual framework of enquiry.

Assimilationist model

The assimilationist model, known as the unidimensional paradigm, focusses on those “phenomena which result when groups of individuals have different cultures and come into first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original pattern of either or both groups” (Redfield *et al.*, 1936, p. 149). At the core of this definition is the inevitability of change in the culture of a given group after being adapted to another culture. As such, assimilationist research enquiries concentrate squarely on assimilation (adoption and internalisation of the host culture by newcomers) as the only possible outcome of cross-cultural adaptation. Research data supporting this model were merely recorded amongst long-term immigrants. Rudney (2014), for instance, found that intra-European migrants’ values became more congruent with those of the cultural values of the host society than with those of their home culture. As such, acculturation or adaptation is conceptualised as the infeasibility to retain one’s ethnic cultural identity at the expense of adopting the core values of the host culture, a view that is repudiated by the pluralist or bi-dimensional model, which perceives acculturation as a matter of choice whereby individuals can preserve their ethnic cultural identity while adjusting to the host milieu.

Pluralist model

The pluralist model, labelled as the bi-dimensional paradigm, was developed by John Berry (1980) to counteract the assimilationist’s claim of the inevitability of losing one’s original culture after having contact with another culture. Berry identifies two basic issues migrants confront: the desire to maintain their original culture in the host culture, or the desire to be in contact or affiliation with the host society. Based on these two issues, four acculturation orientations or strategies are identified: integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation (Berry, 1980). The integration strategy is apparent in individuals who choose to both maintain their cultural heritage and at the same time become an integral part of the host culture. Assimilation is adopted when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with the mainstream culture. Accordingly, individuals’ desire to stay in the host country reinforces their assimilationist tendencies. Equally, the length of residence would certainly impact the newcomers’ assimilation, especially if they seek a long term residence and get totally melted into the host culture. This would happen – the case of Sub-Saharan students in Morocco – if they have the opportunity to work and settle legally in the host country. Conversely, separation strategy is observed when individuals put a value on holding onto their original culture and avoid a total contact with the hosts. Finally, marginalisation is manifest when individuals show non-conformity to both cultures (Berry, 1997a, b, p. 9). In a nutshell, this model assumes that immigrants have the freedom to pursue the acculturation strategy they prefer in the host society. The validity of this model is documented in a series of research studies, especially in countries that call for either multi-culturalism or uni-culturalism (Horenczyk and Munayer, 2003; Zick *et al.*, 2001).

However, one of the shortcomings associated with Berry’s model is that it disregards policies and ideologies of the host-culture that can exert a greater pressure on how immigrants undergo the acculturation processes (Kosic *et al.*, 2005). Similarly, the attitudes of the host members play a significant role in shaping the migrants’ acculturation.

Fusion model

Eric Kramer (2000) puts forward “cultural fusion model” as an alternative to Berry’s model of acculturation strategies maintaining that immigrants do not only retain their home culture or they assimilate to the host culture; rather, they fuse or mix both cultures in a new merged culture. Therefore, cultural adaptation is not only a matter of choice of characteristics of both cultures, but a combination or fusion of those characteristics (Arends-Toth Lafromboise *et al.*,

1993). Similar to fusion model is Bicultural Identity Integration, advanced by Benet-Martínez and Haritatos (2005) to investigate how individual migrants with hyphenated cultural identities combine both cultures, if they perceive them as being compatible, in a third emerging culture or separate the two if they perceive them as being conflictual and oppositional.

The three models of acculturation expounded so far attempt to account for acculturation strategies adopted by immigrants and host countries. Hence, acculturation or adaptation has been conceptualised in terms of the adoption of the host culture (the assimilationist view), the maintenance of home culture and adoption of the host culture (the pluralist view) and the metissage of the two cultures (the fusion view). However, those models suffer from a few limitations: first, they focus squarely on identification orientation observed amongst immigrants, thus overlooking other factors such as HCC and interpersonal relationships and personality traits that have a pivotal role in facilitating or hindering immigrants' adaptation. Second, concerning assimilationist model, some research findings (e.g. Kagnici's, 2012 research) reveal that there is no association between length of residence in the host culture and assimilation as many immigrants may shun contact with the hosts as they limit themselves solely to their co-ethnic members. Third, since those models embrace dissimilar disciplinary and ideological stances, they do not offer a clear-cut and comprehensive explanation and depiction of cross-cultural adaptation phenomenon. In view of this, Kim (2001) combines those models into a coherent system of depiction and explanation of what happens when someone crosses cultural borders. Her model is a multidimensional and dynamic one that focusses on the entirety of the evolutionary process that an individual undergoes vis-à-vis an unfamiliar environment.

Multidimensional

You Yung Kim (2001) advances the theory of cross-cultural adaptation – known as a multidimensional model – which she defines as “the dynamic process by which individuals, upon relocating to new, unfamiliar, or changed cultural environment, establish (or re-establish) and maintain relatively stable, reciprocal and functional relationships with those environments (2001, p. 31)”. This model delineates factors that facilitate or hinder immigrants' cross-cultural adaptation as reflected in their levels of functional fitness, psychological health and development of an intercultural identity.

Communication factors

Kim places communication at the heart of cross-cultural adaptation as it is the vehicle through which strangers acquire knowledge about the norms of the host culture and hence come to terms with host nationals. She envisages migrants' communication activities in terms of two dimensions: HCC – the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively in accordance with the host communication norms and host interpersonal competence (HIC) – the ability to build relationships with host members who help newcomers to have insights into the mind-sets and behaviours of local people and knowledge about frames of reference for checking and validating their behaviours in specific social settings. In this connection, when assessing Asian and European students' host interpersonal communication as manifested in forming social relationships with host members, Kim and Kim (2016) evince that students who had intimate interpersonal ties with host members were well adapted to the American society than those who did not. In a similar vein, Yu and Wright's (2015) findings reveal that factors reported by international higher degree research students in Australia to facilitate their socio-cultural and academic adaptation hinged on interacting with other students, integration into the community and relationships with supervisors. However, a lack

of HCC is the major reason that makes adaptation to a foreign culture more challenging and even causes acculturative stress for newcomers.

Environment factors

Host environment factors can either aid or hamper newcomers' cross-cultural adaptation. Kim identifies two environmental dimensions: host receptivity and host conformity pressure. The former refers to the degree to which the host culture is open to, welcomes and accepts strangers and provide them with various forms of social support (Kim, 2001, p. 94); while the latter designates the extent to which the host environment challenges strangers to adopt its normative cultural and communicative practices. The actual conformity pressure may not manifest only at the perceptual level but also at the legal level, depending largely on the host country' migration policies as well as the host members' perception and attitudes towards strangers – the latter is part and parcel of the hosts' culture and idiosyncrasies. In this regard, the findings of a master thesis by Laji (2015) disclose that host country receptivity was amongst other variables reported by students to facilitate their adaptation to the Indonesian society. Likewise, Sommier's research findings (2012) show that students' perceptions of conformity pressure exercised by the host society in terms of enforcing uniformity and maintaining difference affected the way they adapted or acculturated to the host milieu.

Predisposition factors

Cross-cultural adaptation is influenced not only by communication and environmental factors but also by the internal factors of migrants themselves. Kim references age, education and previous international experiences as indispensable variables foregrounding the individuals' adaptivity processes. These factors occur in three aspects: preparedness for change, ethnicity proximity and personality characteristics. First, preparedness condition is reflected in the degree to which strangers are prepared for change and are ready for understanding the challenges of crossing-cultures. Second is ethnic proximity, which refers to the degree of the strangers' overall ethnic similarity and compatibility vis-à-vis the mainstream culture. Personality characteristics are rendered in openness, empathy and intercultural communication competence. In a study conducted by Kagnici (2012), it was found that demographic factors such as age, length of residence and accommodation did not predict the university adjustment of international students; however, multicultural personality variables displayed in open mindedness, cultural empathy, flexibility and emotional stability did predict university adjustment.

In light of the aforementioned models and empirical research findings, to what extent could these factors have the same impacts on the participants of the present research, bearing in mind that it is conducted in a different context? And what are other indicators that these participants might report to be of paramount importance to their cross-cultural adaptation to the Moroccan context?

Morocco's model of integration

Morocco has been a host country for countless international students pursuing their higher education in Moroccan universities as well as a transit hub for immigrants trespassing to the European continent. In response to the needs of migrant population, Moroccan government ratified the National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum (NSIA). In partnership with several Moroccan civil society organisations (CSOs), the NSIA targets the following issues.

The National Strategy for Immigration and Asylum by the ministry in charge of Moroccans living abroad and immigration affairs. The version is in Arabic; the translation is mine

Human issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Respect for human rights➤ Fight against discrimination and human trafficking➤ Management of migratory flow
Integration Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Facilitation of access to health system➤ Facilitation of access to education and training, housing and employment➤ Communication and sensualisation
Foreign policy and governance issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Shared responsibility➤ Regional and international governance➤ Enhancement of regional and international cooperation
Economic, social and cultural issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Immigration is an opportunity, not a threat to economic, social and cultural prosperity

It is worth stressing that due to the paucity of empirical and action research studies verifying the role of Moroccan NGOs in facilitating the integration of immigrants in the Moroccan society as well as the scarcity of evaluation portfolios of these NGOs, the materialisation of such action plans remains opaque as to their outreach to the whole migrant population in Morocco (Saidi, 2020). Also, despite all the insightful research findings that the previous researchers have provided on the cross-cultural adaptation, it is not yet clear as to which extent the implications of those findings can be applied to the adaptation of international students worldwide. As this study is conducted in Morocco, which is culturally and socially different from the places in which previous studies were conducted, it is likely that different results may be found. Likewise, it seems that there is no research that has been conducted in Moroccan context about the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Moroccan universities in general and Mohammed First University in particular. In view of this lacuna, the present article seeks to explore the cross-cultural adaptation of African Sub-Saharan students at Mohammed First University adopting Kim's model of cross-cultural adaptation.

Methodology

The main aim of this article is to explore African Sub-Saharan students' perceptions on their adaptation to Moroccan society as well as factors affecting their adaptive experiences. Due to the complex nature of this research, opting for mixed-methods research, the combination of both qualitative and quantitative, would best serve the objective of this study. For this purpose, qualitative methods (interviews) are used to collect non-numerical data about factors that facilitate or hinder the cross-cultural adaptation of Sub-Saharan students in Morocco in the first phase, and then quantitative methods (questionnaires) are used to collect numerical data about their perceptions of their adaptation in the Moroccan society in the second phase.

Participants and sampling

The participants of this study are mainly international students coming from different Sub-Saharan African countries and pursuing their higher education studies at Mohammed First University, Oujda city (the oriental region of Morocco). To involve as many participants as

possible, the study employed a purposive snowball sampling, a technique that involves using informants or participants to identify additional cases or respondents to be included in the study (Patton, 2002). A total of 30 participants were interviewed and 83 responded to the questionnaire survey (faculty of law, science and letters and human sciences). In Berry (1997b), total 34% are male, 66% females aged from 20 to 27 years old. Out of 83 participants, 90% are undergraduate students 7% are MA students while only 2% are PhD students. All respondents are originally from Sub-Saharan countries: Sudan 14%, Senegal 12%, Niger 6%, Mali 23%, Guinea Bissau 17%, Burkina Faso 12% and Burundi 2%. A total of 58% of the respondents are Francophone, 3% are Anglophone, 33% are bilingual while only 6% are Arabic speaking. Almost all the participants' length of longevity in Morocco ranges from one year to six years.

Sex	Male			Female				
	28 (66%)			55 (34%)				
Age	20	23	24	26		30		
	53%		33%		4%			
Educational Level	Program	Years	1 year	2 Years	3 years	4 years	5 years	6 years
	BA student	75 90%	35	25	15	■	■	■
	MA student	6 7%	■	■	■	■	■	■
	PhD student	2 2%	■	■	■	■	■	2
Country of Origin	Gabon	11		Burkina Faso	10			
	Senegal	10		Mali	19			
	Madagascar	14		Niger	5			
	Sudan	12		Burundi	2			
Language Background	Anglophones			Francophones		Arabic Speaking		
	31 (36%)			50 (85%)		5 (6%)		
Length of stay in Morocco	Less than 1 year	2—4 years		4—7 years		7—10 years		
	29 (35%)	48 (58%)		4 (5%)		2 (2%)		

Instruments of data collection

This study employed two distinct instruments of data collection, notably interviews, and self-administered questionnaires, all of which go hand in hand with the mixed-methods approach adopted in this research. With regard to interview questions, on the HCC, interviewees were asked to share their experiences about the difficulties they encountered when interacting with Moroccan people as well as the coping strategies they used to deal with these difficulties and how they would describe such interactions. Concerning host interpersonal relationship, interviewees had to elaborate on their levels of social contact with Moroccans and their relationships with their professors. As for host receptivity, interviewees were requested to share their experiences about type of attitudes of Moroccan people towards them and how these attitudes affect their adaptation. With respect to intercultural competence, questions

included the ability to function appropriately and effectively with people from dissimilar cultures and willingness to adapt to another culture. The second tool, questionnaire, included a five-point Likert-type Scale (5 = totally agree; 4 = agree; 3 = neutral; 2 = disagree; 1 = totally disagree) was employed in order to gauge the respondents' responses vis-à-vis the advanced items. It consists of two sections: the first section targeted background information about the respondents such as sex, age, educational level, country of origin and length of stay in Morocco. The second section dealt with HCC, HIC, the respondents' perceptions of the host receptivity and intercultural competence.

Procedures of data collection

This study was conducted in Oujda city, particularly at Mohamed First University campus. The process of data gathering unfolds through a two-phase procedure. In the first phase, interviews were conducted through face-to-face at the university campus. In the second phase, an online questionnaire was distributed via Facebook and WhatsApp groups which I created exclusively for Sub-Saharan African students. Equally, I made sure that every participant has the chance to fill in the survey. This took approximately 10 weeks to get the participants fill in the questionnaire.

Ethical issues

A number of ethical issues have been taken into account throughout the process of undertaking questionnaires and interviews. First, the participants who were interviewed were sent a consent letter assuring them that their narratives will be reported anonymously and likewise each interviewee will be assigned a given code for his/her identity. Second, the respondents to the online questionnaire were informed that their identities will not be revealed and the provided information will be treated anonymously and will be used to accomplish the mission of the study.

Findings

In compliance with mixed-research design, the results are displayed synchronically and in that, the qualitative results are presented and explained first, followed by quantitative results. Generally, data obtained from both qualitative and quantitative analysis can be classified into four themes, namely language and cultural barriers, interpersonal relationships, host receptivity and intercultural personality.

Host language competence and cultural awareness

The first question of the interview aimed to discover how awareness of the host language and culture facilitated the participants' cross-cultural adaptation to the Moroccan society. Almost all the participants had consensus on the fact that a lack of the basics of Moroccan dialect (Arabized Darija) and culture posed some challenges for them in their daily lives – in using the public transportation, in asking about directions and in doing shopping. One participant reported,

In the downtown some sales persons neither speak French nor English, so when I want to buy something I find it difficult to bargain due to lack of Moroccan Arabic. Actually, a lack of a shared language was a barrier for me in such contexts.

On the other hand, knowing the basics of Moroccan language was highlighted by some of the interviewees to be of major importance for their proper functioning in the host culture. For example, one participant (who had a good level of Moroccan language) asserted, "knowing Moroccan language made it easier and comfortable for me to make more friends,

get my social and administrative issues done and integrate with the Moroccan society as whole”.

An absence of cultural awareness was, in turn, raised by the participants to be a barrier to their well-fit in the Moroccan society in certain social settings. A number of interviewees confirmed that most miscommunications between them and the host members were due to cultural differences in conveying meanings rather than sharing a spoken language. A participant stated,

What I observed is that Moroccans tend to be indirect in some situations. It is up-to you to decide what they actually mean, especially when they are hesitant to offer you something that you need. However, later on, I recognised they tend to be implicit because they want to save face and maintain a positive interpersonal relationship.

The quantitative findings revealed that there is a convergence between the length of stay in Morocco and the acquisition of the basic chunks of Moroccan language and culture. For instance, (58%) of the participants who had less than one year of stay in Morocco expressed inadequate awareness of the Moroccan language and culture. Likewise, (35%) of the respondents whose period of stay ranges from two to four years showed almost the same view. By contrast, (5%) of participants who had a length of stay that ranges from four to seven years showed a high degree of knowledge of the Moroccan language and culture.

The intersection between language background and the mastery of the Moroccan language and culture was also found to be significant. On the one hand, respondents whose language background is either French or English scored a high level of incompetence of the host culture and language. On the other hand, respondents who are from Arabic speaking countries showed a greater mastery of the Moroccan language and its cultural norms.

Interpersonal relationships

The second interview question sought to inquire about the extent to which social relationships that Sub-Saharan students established with the host members during their stay in Morocco boosted their adaptation to Morocco. Most of the participants maintained that social networks with local people were very crucial to their adaptation thanks to the psychological, cultural and academic support they provided. For instance, perceiving social contact with the hosts as a source of cultural learning, a participant maintained,

Actually, having Moroccan friends helped me a lot in learning about the customs and values of their culture such as popular food, music and traditional clothes. Upon a point of time, I became fond of the Moroccan Couscous and I was learning how to cook it [...] etc.

Establishing social relationships with the hosts was also considered by the participants to ease their feelings of alienation and homesickness. Hinting to the importance of having host friends in alleviating acculturation stress and anxiety, a participant recounted,

At first, everything seemed strange for me: language, people and places. During the first months of my residence at campus dormitory, I felt alone and homesick as I did not know nobody. The best thing I did was making local friends who really supported me socially and emotionally. Later on, some of them became very close to me. We were hanging out altogether, discussing and teasing with each other. Briefly, having Moroccan friends is very important for the integration of any new international student.

The statistical data reinforce the above findings in that (36%) of the participants who scored a high level of social contact with host nationals in terms of participation frequencies in social activities (such as playing sport, hanging out and doing academic tasks) faced less challenges and found it easy to integrate to the Moroccan society than those (12%) who rated less social ties with host people.

Host receptivity

The third interview question purported to probe into the participants' conceptions and experiences pertinent to the impact of host receptivity on their adaptation. The participants were exposed to both different contexts: university campus and Oujda city. Some participants reported that they felt very welcome in these contexts. This friendly approach had a positive impact on their stay in Morocco, particularly Oujda city. Reporting on the assistance of administrative staff and faculty advisors, a participant expressed,

In fact, faculty staff helped me a lot in my faculty registration procedures and paper authentication. They were very kind and helpful. Sometimes, they even prioritise us over Moroccans. Actually, that gesture made me feel at home. In addition, my professors are very nice. They are willing to answer my questions and provide further explanations of any sort.

However, feelings of discrimination and inferiority were reported amongst a group of participants. Obviously, such feelings inhibited their psychological and socio-cultural adaptation. For instance, a participant commented,

Sincerely, some local people affected my stay in a negative way. They used to label me 'Mon Amis', an expression which has a negative meaning for me. This word is used specifically for illegal migrant who beg in the streets. Also, there were many cases in which I felt not accepted in their minds in an indirect way because of my skin.

Findings obtained from the questionnaire are generally consistent with the interview text data. A high number of the participants (49%) agreed on the fact that Moroccan people kindly accept and welcome them in their society. By contrast, a small segment of respondents (23%) strongly disagreed on this idea, marking that they did not feel being accepted by the host members. This discrepancy was interpreted either in terms of two views: cultural and religious differences and Moroccans' stereotypical views towards foreign students.

Intercultural personality

The fifth interview questions dwelt on the significance of intercultural personality – manifested in cultural empathy, prior cross-cultural contact, open-mindedness and flexibility – in enhancing the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Morocco. Mentioning the role of prior cross-cultural contacts in increasing one's tolerance and appreciation of cultural differences, another participant laconically said,

Thanks to my experiences in being in different countries (Algeria, Egypt and Congo), I have learned that each culture has its own specific behaviours, beliefs and values. One has to be supportive and tolerant to the behaviours and life-style of the culture of people who are different from you. That is the perfect way of integration.

Flexibility is another personality trait that was present in the participants' narratives. Referring to the ability to accommodate their behavioural strategies to the context of interaction, a participant stated,

For me flexibility is a skill that one has to acquire. This skill helps you develop positive attitudes and react towards challenging situations with humour. Actually, there were many situations in which I had to use different techniques such as language of signs in order to get what I want and avoid conflict or misunderstanding with Moroccans.

The interview text narratives are supported by the statistical data. In reference to all the variables, which measure the participants' flexibility, cross-cultural communication competence, empathy and open-mindedness; 46% out of the total sample rated a high level in empathising with and accommodating behaviours that might sound strange to them, being flexible and having unbiased attitudes towards the norms and values of the cultural other.

Discussion

The importance of HCC in augmenting the strangers' cross-cultural adaptation is well documented in the scholarship of cross-cultural adaptation as a salient factor underlying a successful adjustment of sojourners (Kim, 2001). The qualitative results of this study show that the participants had overlapping views, demonstrating that a lack of a common language made it difficult for them to get along with Moroccans in certain social contexts; on the same degree, having a note of knowledge of Moroccan language and culture was emphasised by the interviewees to help them function properly and effectively in the Moroccan society. Moreover, the quantitative results suggest that awareness of the host language and culture seemed to converge with length of residence and language background. Indeed, those findings accord with the previous research studies accentuated in the literature (Kim and Kim, 2016).

Ample research data, in turn, support the role of interpersonal relationships in boosting the strangers' cross-cultural adaptation to new cultural milieus (Kim, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Equally significant, both qualitative and quantitative results evince that interpersonal relationship formation with host nationals was signalled extremely important in facilitating the students' cultural, personal and academic adjustments to the Moroccan culture. Those results are consistent with the empirical findings of Yu and Wright (2015) and others, who investigated friendship networks of international students in relation to their connectedness, homesickness, and satisfaction levels and found that students who had host nationals in their network of friends felt more satisfied, less homesick and content compared to the students who had less host nationals in their network of friends.

Host receptivity is, on a similar degree, deemed in the literature as a key variable that influences the newcomers' adaptation to unfamiliar cultural milieus (Kim, 2001; Ting-Tomy, 1999). In a similar context, the results of this study qualitatively and quantitatively disclose, on the one hand, that some participants experienced the friendly and inclusive approach of Moroccans which eased their psychological adjustment to the host milieu. Sound evidence supporting this is Laji's (2015) study which claims that host country receptivity was amongst the main variables reported by international students to facilitate their adaptation to the Indonesian society. On the other hand, others perceived host receptivity as hindering their adaptation as they underwent various discriminatory behaviours.

Furthermore, there exists a plenty of empirical studies that acknowledge the role of multicultural personality in accelerating cross-cultural move of sojourners (Samovar *et al.*, 2015). This research finds out that there is a set of intercultural skills which the participants identify as fundamental for their coping with the mainstream Moroccan culture – amongst which are prior-cross cultural experiences, flexibility, empathy and openness. Those areas are in line with Akhtar *et al.*'s (2015) findings, asserting that the cross-cultural adaptation of African students in Chinese universities was highly influenced by prior-cross-cultural experience, which had positive associations with satisfaction and adaptation.

Conclusion

Cross-cultural adaptation is a multifaceted phenomenon because it entails interplay of a variety of factors that either increase or decrease the adjustment of newcomers to new cultural environments. The results of the present study revealed that a large number of Sub-Saharan African students are well adapted to the Moroccan culture, but with inconsistent degrees. Their adaptation is mainly influenced by an array of intersected factors. Firstly, the participants showed that the more they were aware of the Moroccan culture and language, the more likely they would be able to function properly and effectively in different social settings. Secondly, it was found that establishing social ties with the host members was perceived as significant for easing their adaptation due to the cultural, emotional and

academic support these ties provided. Thirdly, host receptivity was perceived as an important factor that facilitated the students' cross-cultural adaptation. With the case of some participants, host receptivity, however, hindered their adaptation because they were subject to different types of discriminatory and racist behaviours by some Moroccans. Lastly, intercultural personality traits displayed in flexibility, prior cross-cultural move and intercultural empathy were found to contribute to the students' overall functional fitness in the mainstream Moroccan culture.

In light of the above findings, the study suggests a number of practical implications that might make cross-cultural adaptation of international students to the Moroccan community a successful journey. Firstly, the study confirms the validity of Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation. Secondly, higher education policymakers, educators and curriculum designers should think about internationalising the teaching and learning practices in order to cater for the needs of all international students. Thirdly, the host faculty members and administration staff should provide international students with special training programmes designed to teach them the basics of the local language, familiarise them with the host cultural norms and practices, and foster meaningful interactions with members of the host country. Fourthly, international students should try to establish fruitful interpersonal relationships and engage in healthy interactions with members of the host country in order to make their social and academic experience in Morocco a productive one. Fifthly, for cross-cultural adaptation of international students to be successful, host members should refine their views and attitudes towards foreign students. Likewise, international students as well as national students should develop their intercultural communication skills if they are aspiring to make intercultural contact a rewarding event. Lastly, civil society organisations that are active in the area of integration and protection of regular and irregular immigrants should take part in organising cultural, social and educational activities that promote mutual cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of cultural and civilisational differences amongst international and local students.

However, it is worth-noting that regardless of its promising findings as well as the suggested implications, this study suffers from a number of limitations. First, the sample size was not representative of international students for making generalisable findings and understanding about the students' cross-cultural adaptation. Had the sample size been larger, the findings would have been more accurate and unbiased. Second, due to the pandemic, there was less access to a large number of international students. Third, data drawn from participant observation need more in-depth analysis because the latter demands a specific timeframe and a long stay with the cultural group under investigation. Fourth, the results on host receptivity could have been more solid if the study included Moroccan participants in order to obtain their perspectives towards foreign students. Lastly, this study did not dwell on variables such as sex, age and socio-economic backgrounds, which might have added comprehensive insights to the findings.

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Further reading

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Dear Participants,

The following survey questionnaire is part of a Master dissertation and aims at examining (cross-cultural) adaptation of Sub-Saharan students in Moroccan society.

Your cooperation is highly *required* and *appreciated* in order to meet the intent of my research. Your responses are *confidential* and will be used only for the purpose of this research.

1- Sex Female Male

2- Age

- 20-23
- 23-26
- 26-30
- 30-35

3- Country of origin.....

4- What is your language background?

- Francophone
- Anglophone
- Both
- Arabic Speaking

5- What is your educational level?

- Undergraduate student
 - (MA) Master student
 - PhD students
- | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 st
year | 2 nd
year | 3 rd
year | 4 th
year | 5 th
year | 6 th
year | 7 th
year |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|

6- Indicate your length of Residence in Morocco.

- Less than 1 year
- 2-4 years
- 4-7 years
- 7-10

7- Did you attend any intercultural training program before coming to Morocco?

-Yes No [if no, state anything]

-What was the main purpose of the training/ orientation program?

- 1- Cultural training
- 2- Language Training
- 3- Other (please specify).....

8- The following items are concerned with your Moroccan language ability and cultural knowledge.

- I can speak Moroccan Arabic and use it to communicate with people around me to get what I want.
Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree
- I find it difficult to communicate appropriately when talking to Moroccans because the way they use verbal and nonverbal communication is different from the way we do in our culture.
Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree
- I have a good understanding of the Moroccan culture such as Moroccan food, music, and holidays.
Strongly Agree Neutral Strongly Disagree

9- The following items are concerned with your interpersonal relationship and communication with the Moroccan people.

- How often do you hang out (shopping, having a walk) with Moroccan friends, and discuss significant social issues with them?
Never usually rarely always
- How often do you participate in club activities such as playing sport with Moroccan friends?
Never sometimes always
- How often do you prepare for academic tasks or exams with Moroccan friends?
Never sometimes always
- I have good rapport with my professors.
Yes not sure No

10- The following items are concerned with attitudes of Moroccan people toward you.

- Moroccan people accept me into their society.
Strongly Agree **Neutral** **Strongly Disagree**
- Moroccan people discriminate against me using racist words like 'black'.
Strongly Agree **Neutral** **Strongly Disagree**
- Moroccan people want me to adopt their life style and behave the way they do.
Strongly Agree **Neutral** **Strongly Disagree**
- During the lecture, the professor considers foreign students and gives them the floor to participate and speak their thoughts.
Strongly Agree **Neutral** **Strongly Disagree**
- Moroccan staffs rarely help me in getting my administrative issues done.
Strongly Agree **Neutral** **Strongly Disagree**

11- The following items are concerned with the type of attitudes you have when interacting with people from another culture.

- When Moroccan people behave in a way that sounds weird for me, I try to empathise with them and interpret their behaviours from their own context.
Never **Sometimes** **Always**
- When I talk to the Moroccan people, I try to adjust and accommodate my behaviour according to the context of interaction.
Never **Sometimes** **Always**
- When I encounter conflict with Moroccans, I try to work out all approaches to solve it.
Never **sometimes** **always**
- At the university, I try to behave according to the code of conduct of the classroom and administration.
Never **sometimes** **always**

12- The following items are concerned with the degree to which you perceive similarities and differences between your culture and the Moroccan culture.

- I find it difficult to adapt to the university context because the way Moroccan professors lecture is different from ours.
Strongly Agree **Neutral** **Strongly Disagree**
- I find it difficult to get along with the Moroccan food and religious, educational and administrative system.
Strongly Agree **Neutral** **Strongly Disagree**
- I find it difficult to adapt to the Moroccan society because Moroccan religion, culture and educational and administrative systems are different from ours.
Strongly Agree **Neutral** **Strongly Disagree**

Appendix 2 Interview questions

Instructions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Please, try to think of that interview as a conversation in which you are free to be completely honest. There are no "right" or wrong answers to any of these questions.

N.B: Feel free to answer the questions using English, French or Standard Arabic.

- (1) Do you know the basics of Moroccan? If yes, in which situations do you use Moroccan language to get what you want?
- (2) During daily contacts with Moroccan people, you may have some difficulties in communicating your ideas. Could you tell us more about specific difficulties you encountered while communicating with Moroccans?
- (3) Do you think that knowing about the Moroccan culture (e.g. food, music and values) is important for you to function properly in the Moroccan culture?
- (4) Do you have Moroccan friends? If yes, how did these friends help increase your personal, academic and cultural adaptation to the Moroccan culture?
- (5) What do you think about the attitudes of Moroccans towards you? Have you ever been treated differently, either discriminated against or treated nicer? Could you tell us about specific experiences?

- (6) Do you think that cultural and educational differences made it difficult to adapt to the Moroccan culture?
- (7) To what extent are you able so flexible that you are able to empathise with behaviours of people from different cultures?
- (8) When talking to Moroccans, do you accommodate your communication behaviour according to the context of interaction?
- (9) How would you describe your experience of living in Morocco?

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