

Acculturation Challenges Faced by Malaysian Muslim Students Studying Abroad

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ABSTRACT

Every year, thousands of Malaysian students are sent to study abroad by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE) which causes several underestimated stress, especially those faced by the Muslims. This qualitative study aimed to explore the challenges of acculturation among Malaysian Muslim students studying abroad. The researchers adopted a phenomenological design approach to develop in-depth understanding of the topic. The six respondents in the study were former Malaysian students studying in Australia, the United States of America, South Korea, India, Jordan, and the United Kingdom. The respondents were interviewed, and the interview protocol guided the interview until the data reached saturation. The data obtained were analyzed in stages, starting with descriptive coding, topic coding, analytical coding, and themes identification. This process was done using Atlas.

ti 8 software. The main findings highlight two research themes: the challenges to expose Islamic identity and practicing the Islamic lifestyle. Findings also suggest that Malaysian Muslim students should consider improving Islamic knowledge as it reflects the impressions of other religions on Muslims as a whole. This study's findings are important for the student sponsorship and student welfare section of the university in providing an appropriate counselling program for international students dealing

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with acculturation issues. We also suggest that future research explore acculturation challenges to identify the holistic need of the multicultural counselling service.

Keywords: Abroad, acculturation, Malaysian Muslim students, multicultural, phenomenology, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first-century remarks indicate the rapid increase of migration worldwide. According to Higher Education Statistics of Malaysia, there are over thousands of Malaysians migrating overseas to pursue their study (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). The most recent record was in 2018, which reveals 78,459 Malaysians were studying abroad during the year. As mentioned in the record, some of the students were self-funded, and some were sponsored by third parties such as government and non-government organizations. The famous countries with most students are the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Taiwan, Egypt, China, Indonesia, the United States of America (US), Russia, India, and Japan.

Tagg (2014) reported that Malaysian students preferred to pursue their studies overseas rather than in Malaysia because they fulfilled the desire to seek distinguished professors in their field of interest. They presumed to obtain the best education to secure respectful and high paid careers in the future, primarily among those undertaking doctorate degrees. Moreover, family encouragement also supports the decision-making process for studying

abroad (Tagg, 2014). Some of the students have extended families in the host countries to help bridge the students and the new cultural environment during the adaptation phase. Such findings are similar to those of Deloitte (2008).

Tagg (2014) also provided additional evidence that studying abroad was an opportunity for students to gain a new experience of living in a different cultural environment and new knowledge from a foreign country. The widespread of Malaysian students all over the world has brought about our concern about their survival, especially among Muslims. However, in the early transmission of pandemic COVID-19, Malaysian students studying abroad have to abide by the order to remain at home in their respective countries and no urgency of coming back to Malaysia. They must continue attending lectures as per their institution of study. This situation becomes even more challenging when most of the countries had to announce the lockdown. Therefore, students could not go anywhere. In summary, the pandemic COVID-19 causes an abrupt increase in mental health problems, especially among international students (Dickerson, 2020). The problem may get worse if the students are also having acculturation issues during the pandemic. Therefore, the current research's significance is to thoroughly examine the religious challenges and issues faced by Malaysian Muslim students during the acculturation process (Ahmad et al., 2014; Salleh & Hussin, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Acculturation is defined as the product of intercultural self-adjustment (Berry, 2006; Ward et al., 2001; Masgoret & Ward, 2006). Living in a new environment at a new place requires the students to comply with the dominant culture's values and norms. Individuals must undergo the negotiation process in the new dominant culture and consider whether to retain or lose their origin culture (Berry, 1997; Falavarjani & Yeh, 2017).

The main domains of acculturation are psychological and sociocultural. Ward et al. (2001) defined psychological acculturation as the emotional response and sociocultural acculturation as the behavioural response. These responses represent the students' strategies to fit into the dominant culture (Ward et al., 2001). Berry (2006) added on the definition of psychological acculturation as the students' psychological well-being as they underwent the process. Masgoret and Ward (2006) also elaborated more on the sociocultural acculturation as the continuation of social interactions within the students and the locals.

Back in 1980, Berry (1980) introduced four types of acculturation modes. These modes represent individuals' interacting styles when they are acculturating in between the original culture and the host culture. First, the integration of cultures. The person retains his origin culture values, but still maintains good relationships with the host culture. Second, the assimilation of cultures. The person does not retain his original culture values but keeps good

relationships with the host culture. Third, the separation of cultures. A person who separates cultures tends to protect his original culture values and ignore the host culture. Lastly, marginalization of cultures, for which neither keeping good relationships with one's origin culture nor the host culture. Malaysian Muslims students may develop unique survival experiences according to how they adapt to the challenges and the responses of people in the new community.

Maintaining good physical health is one of the keys to a good acculturation process (Cramm & Nieboer, 2019). Researchers found that older Turkish immigrants could maintain a lower multi-morbidity rate when they have a higher self-management ability while living among the Dutch. It means that the immigrants experienced fewer acculturation issues, which could harm their health (Abouguendia & Noels, 2001).

Nevertheless, putting two religions together may open many doors of challenges (Alamri, 2015; Ghumman & Ryan, 2013). Even among the locals themselves, the female Muslims who wear hijab still have to endure being discriminated against in sports (Alamri, 2015) and employment hiring (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Ward et al., 2016). When Islam becomes a minority religion, people must overcome challenges to practise Islam peacefully. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the challenges Muslim Malaysian students encountered when they practised Islam in the countries they were studying.

In the acculturation process, individuals involved are disposed to become vulnerable

to stress, namely acculturation stress. Berry et al. (2002) defined acculturation stress as the individuals' reaction towards life dealings, specifically in the intercultural context. It refers to mental, emotional, cognitive, and social experience (Abouguendia & Noels, 2001).

However, studies found that students were able to get well adjusted to the new culture environment when they occupied themselves with specific skills, such as the speaking-like-locals ability. Mahmud et al. (2010) also found that international students who developed local speaking ability were believed to have better access to local values and norms. With such competence, the students hold the privilege of being able to initiate conversations, communicate about concerns to lecturers and staff, and to accommodate themselves in every aspect of life abroad. Meanwhile, students who lacked the ability to speak the locals' language, hardly communicated with the locals (Mahmud et al., 2010).

Past researchers agreed that having a different religion impacted Muslim students who went to other countries to further their studies (Akram-Pall, 2016; Chen et al., 2019; Dana et al., 2019; Goforth et al., 2014; Loewenthal & Solaim, 2016; Ward et al., 2019). During the acculturation process, individuals may endure psychological and emotional challenges, causing mental health issues (Abouguendia & Noels, 2001).

Following the tragedy of September 11th in the United States of America (USA), discrimination and hate crimes against Muslims increased rapidly, especially

towards Muslim Americans (Frumin & Sakuma, 2016; Lichtblau, 2016). Muslim Americans were treated more negatively than other American ethnic groups (Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018). Resulting from the tragedy, the researchers took an advanced effort to follow up on Muslims' social impacts, especially on Muslim Americans.

In the early of 2011, McDermott found that Muslim female medical students faced negative stereotype treatments while in the US. Most Americans had an anti-Muslims sentiment that was publicly displayed. The Muslim female students felt social isolation by their American friends because they were wearing the *hijab*. The students believe that the common stereotypes emerged due to the lack of understanding about Islam. Loewenthal and Solaim (2016) also added that Muslim women who prioritized Islam managed acculturation by integrating multiple religious values or vice versa. Otherwise, Muslim women who neglected Islam would acculturate by assimilating religions or marginalizing religions.

According to Dana et al. (2019), this issue remains to be a hot topic among Muslims in the US. They found that religious discrimination perceived among Muslim Americans has become more damaging because of the *hijab* issue. Wearing a *hijab* caused people of other religions to cast a suspicious look at Muslim women. Since the declaration of "Muslim ban" policy in the US, the discrimination upon Muslim women became worse (Tabassum & Saeed, 2019). Their findings surprisingly reveal that Muslim men get discriminated even

more than Muslim women who do not wear a *hijab*. They suggested that Muslim men portrayed that aggressive look, which alarmed the locals since the September 11th terrorist attacks (Dana et al., 2019). Therefore, the hijab-wearing issue has always been famous in connection to religious discrimination among Muslim Americans irrespective of gender.

Abouguendia and Noels (2001) stated that individuals might have to confront psychological and mental health challenges during the acculturation process. Goforth et al. (2014) investigated psychological adjustment among Muslim Arab American adolescents. They examined the effects of acculturative stress and religiosity on psychological adjustment by referring to Erikson psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1968). Researchers believe that the Arab American ethnic may develop a critical religious identity from adolescents to adulthood as opposed to the September 11th tragedy. It affects how they adopt multiple religions and cultures while shaping their original Arabic culture (Abu-Laban & Abu-Laban, 1999). Goforth et al. (2014) revealed that adolescents who acquired a stronger religious identity tended to develop a stronger Islam orientation than the host culture. Becoming close to God indicates less acculturative stress and a better psychological adjustment.

In addition to psychological and mental health issues, Akram-Pall (2016) explored acculturation challenges that might lead to depression. The respondents were among South Asian Muslim immigrants in Canada.

They reported mixed feelings of loss and fear. They admitted that self-isolation in the room was a better idea than being isolated due to hijab-wearing in the Christian crowd. They felt the loss of their religious identity. The conflict of cultures made it more complicated to protect their social identity and family tradition.

Muslim women avoided shaking hands with men (Chen et al., 2019) and that interfered with their interactions with locals. Being a Muslim was associated with the fear of being distinct from the norms (Falavarjani & Yeh, 2017). Consequently, the respondents disclosed the feeling of depression. They segregated themselves as they struggled to acculturate. Akram-Pall (2016) concluded that the respondents had a tremendous feeling of loneliness throughout the acculturation process; therefore, they were vulnerable to depression.

Recently in 2019 in Christchurch, New Zealand, there was a tragic mass shooting of Muslims worshippers, of which 51 people were killed, and 40 people were wounded. Since the tragedy, Muslims started to get attention, support, and care. Ward et al. (2019) studied the challenges Muslims in New Zealand face. The study shows that Muslims in New Zealand face major discrimination because of their religious identity as Muslims.

However, researchers found that lack of knowledge about Islam causing some of the non-Muslims to have a narrow perception about Muslims (McDermott, 2011; Ward et al., 2019). Muslims are still discriminated against in the education and employment

sectors (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Ward et al., 2016). Most Muslim international students are having difficulties performing five-time prayers on the university campus in non-Muslim countries (Ali & Bagheri, 2009). Students are reportedly feeling discomfort to perform ablution and pray (Chen et al., 2019).

Abdul Latiff et al. (2014) investigated issues and challenges faced by Malaysian students in Australia and the UK during their acculturating process. The researchers sought to understand how the students adapted to the new environment and managed cross-cultural problems they had encountered. One of the issues raised was religious discrimination, of which they had been forced to take off their hijabs in the examination hall. They also experienced being attacked by a group of teenagers who threw raw eggs at them in public. Salleh and Hussin (2017) also found the same discrimination issues in religion. Malaysian students in the UK encountered racism during the election time, and some of them even spat on Malaysian students because of different religious identity. All those discrimination incidents lead to emotional instability, such as upset feelings and lower self-esteem among Malaysian students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The qualitative research design reveals research problems involving an exploration where only a handful knows and truly understands the issues and phenomenon studied (Creswell, 2007; Johnson & Christensen, 2004). The focus is on detailed

findings and descriptions. Thus, qualitative research's objective focuses on extracting and interpreting the meaning of life events that happened to an individual (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Merriam, 1998).

The criteria of the qualitative approach are in alignment with that of the current study. These criteria include; i) understand the process of events and actions involved, where only students studying abroad can express, translate, and contribute meaning to the phenomenon experienced, and ii) understand the development of the adaptation process for challenging situations experienced by the respondents as Muslims in the foreign countries.

In the framework of the qualitative approaches, phenomenology is the most appropriate approach for this study. The primary purpose of using the phenomenology approach is to explore the meaning of one's life experience as described by the individual himself (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2007; Frost 2011). The basic assumptions underlying the phenomenological design include one's perception of the world they live in and how their existence defines its meaning. It provides descriptive results, reflecting and interpreting the occurrence in the context of the individual (Creswell, 2007).

The focus is on their experiences and how conscious awareness shapes them. The conscious awareness allows the researchers to comprehend the actual reality solely based on the respondents' first-hand experiences and their understanding. Therefore, the researchers decided to adopt the phenomenological approach

within the qualitative research design as it is the most appropriate approach for the phenomenon studied. Furthermore, the Malaysian students in the present study were the experts, of which they were the ones who understand the most about what they had encountered while studying overseas.

The samples in the phenomenological approach involve those related to the issues, actions, and activities studied (Frost, 2011). Merriam (2009) stated that purposive sampling was based on the assumption that the researchers wanted to explore, determine, and get a clear perception of specific phenomena. Therefore, the samples should be selected among those whom the researcher can learn from the most. This technique can help researchers obtain rich and thick data (Ahrari et al., 2019; Aziz et al., 2020; Krauss et al., 2020; Rami et al., 2020).

This study used the purposive sampling method based on the following criteria: Experienced studying abroad with a minimum of two years study period. Six ex-students fulfilled these criteria and were willing to be the respondents of the study. Table 1 summarizes the profile of the respondents.

Getting the respondents began by advertising on social media and inviting people to participate in ongoing research. Interested respondents contacted the researcher directly. The researchers selected the respondents who studied in different countries to have a deeper understanding of the diversity of acculturation issues. In this study, the researchers did not make gender a limitation for one to be the study's respondent. However, the researchers considered other factors based on the information acquired from the interviews with the interested respondents, such as the country and the duration of studying abroad. These factors influence how Malaysian students deal with acculturation (Abdul Latiff et al., 2014; Goforth et al., 2014).

The researchers used the interview protocol as a guideline throughout the interview process and included probe questions during the interviews to strengthen their understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Frost, 2011; McLeod, 2001; Seidman, 2006). The interviews were conducted at each respondent's preferred setting in Malaysia. Two of them chose their offices, three chose to be interviewed at the cafes, and one at the park. The decision

Table 1
Respondents profile

Respondents	Country of Study	Duration (years)	Year Graduated
PK1	Australia	3.5	2018
PK2	South Korea	4	2018
PK3	United States of America	3	2019
PK4	India	4	2019
PK5	United Kingdom	2.5	2018
PK6	Jordan	4	2019

making on choosing the interview settings depended on the availability of time and transportation.

Despite giving the freedom to choose preferable interview settings, the researchers considered both factors before accessing the research respondents. The researchers made sure that the respondents felt comfortable enough to cooperate during the whole data collection process. All interview sessions were set to no time limit. Each interview took about 45 minutes to an hour with the frequency of two to three times, depending on the readiness of the respondents to share their experiences and the consideration of data saturation. The data saturation was considered to have occurred when the respondents repeated the same input in the interviews.

The research data obtained from the audiotaped semi-structured interviews were analyzed. The process of data analysis began by transcribing the interviews with the respondents in the verbatim form. To ensure data credibility, the verbatim transcripts were given back to the respondents to review the content of the interviews in the sessions that were conducted. After the respondents agreed with the content of the interview, the researchers began the first level of data analysis where all of the data were read repeatedly to get an overview of the phenomenon that occurred. This process is crucial as a step for data coding to form the emergent theme(s). In line with this purpose, the researchers used the Atlas.ti 8 software to analyze the data. This software helped the researchers get the theme in

stages; descriptive coding, topic coding, analytical coding, and themes.

The descriptive coding process required the researcher to code each item that was perceived to provide the researcher with the background as well as the experience of the respondents. Topic coding is a process of categorizing the code that has almost the same topic. The researchers focused on the code that gave categories, reflecting on evolving ideas that had almost the same meaning. The next step is analytical coding, which is to combine and categorize the codes that are created at the previous stage. From a data set, the researchers needed to shrink the data sets and developed data classification systems. The data from the same topic were categorized together, leading to the final process, which was to create the theme. The data from the same category were combined and formed a theme. For this study, the final results of the data analysis formed two emergent themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study found two themes consisting of all the challenges experienced by the Muslim Malaysians for being Muslims, while studying overseas, which was in Australia (PK1), South Korea (PK2), United States of America (PK3), India (PK4), United Kingdom (PK5), and Jordan (PK6). The themes are challenges to expose Islamic identity and to practice Islamic value. More elaborations and discussions from each respondents' personal experiences are provided in the sections that follow.

To Expose Islamic Identity

The respondents described that one of the drawbacks of being a Muslim while studying abroad was the strength to carry their religious identity fearlessly, especially when being alone. PK1 stated that some Muslim Malaysians were poorly treated in Australia because the doers were close-minded, which led to negative perceptions about Muslims. The doers probably lacked in maturity and knowledge. Therefore, they were still unable to accept a multi-religion society at their place fully. Nonetheless, PK1 compared the attitude with those in the university. People in the university were very understanding, and very few would discriminate against others. PK1 believed that the level of education and age determine the locals' acceptance of Muslims.

On the other hand, PK3 defined the hardships to maintain religious identity in the United States of America (US) that arose when the Muslim Malaysians faced the minority people who still exhibit their Islamophobia attitude. She described the Islamophobic people as the minority because they were among the homeless, from a very low education background, and drug addicts. In different circumstances, people in the university inhibited their racism. PK3 believed that they read about Islam and had a wider perspective on Muslims. She shared her friend's experience being attacked at the bus stop and was saved by a white American lady.

Our results for PK1 and PK3 are also consistent with past research. According to Ward et al. (2019), individuals with a lower

educational background are associated with being close-minded. This group of people exhibited racism towards the Muslims because they had a little exposure to the environment with cultural variations (Abdul Latiff et al., 2014; McDermott, 2011). Both PK1 and PK3 in the present study believed that people in the university were highly tolerant compared to people outside the university with lower educational levels, such as teenagers, by acquiring deeper knowledge and understanding about Muslims. Their typical mindset weakened their negative stereotypes. Hence, current researchers suggest that the religious discrimination that occurred to the respondents in the present study was determined by the type of mindset the society holds about Muslims.

PK2, who studied in South Korea, reported being looked down by the local classmates. According to her, most Koreans would hardly initiate a conversation with international students who came from non-English speaking countries. This time, PK2 said she felt discriminated against due to having a different religion and different nationality. This mentality they had on Muslim Malaysians was shown not only in the classrooms but also in the neighbourhood. This result aligns with that of past research, of which discrimination happens not only in the social aspect, but also in education (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Ward et al., 2016). Therefore, current researchers suggest that the religious discrimination that occurred to the respondents in this study were determined by the type of mindset the

society holds about Muslims and stereotypes attached to a nationality.

(PK1, Australia) *“But as far as I’ve heard, some of my female friends used to get disturbed by the locals, especially from youngsters and teenagers. They threw raw eggs, pizza boxes, and sometimes they got followed by drunk men to home. Cases are very rare to happen, but this kind of treatment still exists.”*

(PK3, the US) *“... but then one of my friends got attacked at the bus stop. They said things like ‘Go home! Go home! This is not your place! You do not stay here!’, and saying stuff like we hide bombs in our hijabs and so on...”*

(PK2, South Korea) *“There was one time when I was the only Muslim in a class. And I was the only Malaysian. I know I must make friends with my classmates, so I always initiate conversation. Koreans do not start first. We must speak before them. Or else they would not talk to us. They always look down on us, who came from the non-English speaking country.”*

Contrarily, Malaysian Muslim students in Jordan were blessed with the opportunity to be surrounded by beautiful Islamic practices because of the similarity in their religious background, which has strengthened their religious orientation. This is consistent with the findings of

Goforth et al. (2014), who found that Muslims with a strong orientation to Islam faced little stress during acculturation. However, PK6 mentioned the challenges that became their concern was their safety in the neighbourhood. She described the challenges encountered in terms of keeping themselves safe.

PK6 explained briefly about strong family support (*assobiyah*) among the Jordanian people. They protect their families very strictly, and when they fight, they shoot guns, put on fires, and many more. The problem was, they channelled their extreme behaviours to Muslim Malaysian students. According to PK6, Malaysian are weak, soft, and kind. The Jordanian people like Malaysians a lot. Sometimes, they took advantage of the students and caused chaos. This result is consistent with the findings of a study conducted by Salleh and Hussin (2017). The respondents in both the previous and current research faced similar fear and worried about safety. Their safety was threatened during their living in Jordan.

(PK6, Jordan) *“...when they can’t annoy each other’s Arabic families, they would do it to us, the outsiders... there were many times they intruded into our houses... some of my friends even got sexually harassed...”*

To Practice Islamic Value

The respondents described the challenges to practice Islamic routines as they do in Malaysia during their staying abroad

because of the situations that restricted them. PK2 reported that she felt emotionally discriminated against when her friends held some night parties, and she could not join them. PK2 defined losing the opportunity to celebrate the precious moment with her close friends just because she is a Muslim. She believes that she felt offended every time they went to parties without her but was always alert that she has a religious identity to be protected.

PK2 then expressed gratitude because although she is a Muslim, her friends still treated her well. They would offer her another gathering to replace those she could not attend. They accepted her nicely in other aspects too. The decision made to withdraw from joining every gathering was a tough decision. Choosing to have faith, PK2 maintained her stand. This finding is supported by Loewenthal and Solaim (2016), where Muslim women maintain wearing hijab because they strongly believe in God's commands.

PK3 added that it was never easy to keep on Islamic faith identity the whole time and surrounded by Islamophobic people. To strengthen the faith, Muslims must fulfil the five times prayers. Muslims even had tough times just to find a prayer space (Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Chen et al., 2019). In the United Kingdom (UK), PK5 defined the very common tough times of being a Muslim Malaysian in the UK was when they wanted to perform prayers. She said that was the main concern they must bear during living in a non-Muslim country. Prayer rooms were very limited. They must

find strategies on how to take ablution, what suitable clothes to wear, and where to perform prayers.

Regardless of the unsupportive environment and facilities to perform Muslims' obligations, the respondents never stopped their obedience to God, a decision that is parallel to past findings (Dana et al., 2019; Loewenthal & Solaim, 2016). Thus, it can be concluded that to retain one's self-identity and religious identity is very challenging for Muslim women who live in non-Muslim countries. Based on this evidence, the researchers suggest that discriminations are still happening because the discriminators do not accept Muslims as part of their society. People will have a better understanding if they know what they are against. More exposure to Islamic practice and values could build more understanding of Islam. Hence, it lessens the negative stereotypes.

(PK2, South Korea) *"I have this circle of Korean friends, a very small one. Every time a new semester started; we held a gathering to welcome everyone. But the problem is they much prefer to do it in a pub or night club. They drank, ate pork and all. So even though I am one of the members of that circle, I have to decline to join them and just stay in my room..."*

(PK5, the UK) *"Some big malls provide prayer rooms. Small malls with no prayer rooms at all. Even at the college, there was one room*

provided for praying. But the thing is we need to share with both genders. No curtains in between or whatsoever only one space in a room..."

In India, PK4 defined challenges as conflicts faced during the festive season. As we know, Indians are mostly Hindus. They value animals, such as cows as something meaningful like a god. PK4 raised the conflicts they must face at every Eid Ul Adha celebration season. She also mentioned challenges among the Muslims in India and Malaysia. These two countries hold on to different *madhabs*: *Madhab* Hanafi for Muslim Indians and *madhab* Syafie for Muslim Malaysians. Due to the clash views on *madhabs*, the Muslim Malaysians had to follow their practices. They were prohibited from eating stingrays. In addition, as women, they were not allowed to visit the mosque and were discriminated against for not wearing a niqab.

Conflict of cultures often creates confusion and dilemma among international students, and when this occurs, they have to decide on the acculturation strategies that suit them best. This decision is endless because the decision to adapt to cultures can be an ongoing decision. Acculturation challenges that are not countered carefully might cause one to end up with mental health problems, such as depression (Akram-Pall, 2016). The Muslim Malaysians in India were challenged because of the different *madhabs*.

PK4 stated that the Muslim Indians were hardly tolerable. Some of their practices

were not acceptable, but they insisted the Muslim Malaysians follow their way of Islamic practice. Their attitude was rigid, and PK4 expressed distressed feelings that Muslim Malaysians could barely practice the Syafie *madhab* freely. Since the psychological impact was acute on our respondents, it interfered with their social interactions with the people in the community. This finding corroborates with that of previous research (Chen et al., 2019).

(PK4, India) "Every year we had our Raya Haji celebration, so we slaughtered cows. Among Hindu believers in India, cows mean god. So, every time we celebrated Raya Haji, there were conflicts between us, the Muslims and Hinduisms."

Overall, our respondents did not suffer any mental health problems during the acculturation process because they had resided in the countries for a long period, which condition lessened the acculturative stress (Akhtar & Kroner-Herwig, 2015). They managed to adapt to the host cultures by integrating both the Malaysian culture and their host culture. Our results are in tandem with the result of previous studies that international students who balance their original religious identity and their relationships with the people from the new culture will be less likely to be bothered by social interaction issues (Chen et al., 2019).

Therefore, they did not encounter provocative situations, which controlled their psychological and mental health stability (Akram-Pall, 2016). The current

study suggests that our respondents were getting sufficient support and guidance from other Malaysians (Pazil, 2019). PK1 and PK3 who had studied in Australia and the US respectively reported they have never experienced any personal religious confrontations. Even though they were aware of such cases, they did not allow it to affect them psychologically.

Besides, all our respondents stated that there were strong Malaysian communities in each country to the extent that they regarded each other as family. The family-like intimacy among them was due to the sharing of the same spaces, experiences, and familiarities in living abroad (Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016). For example, PK2 had a small circle of Korean friends and a big group of friends among Malaysians. PK3 said there were so many Malaysian seniors at her place.

The number of Malaysians who became permanent residents of the US is also quite proportionate to the number of Malaysian newcomers. Meanwhile, in the UK and Jordan, PK5 and PK6 lived in a smaller community of Malaysians. They bonded very quickly, and everyone's absence was easily noticeable. The seniors assisted most of PK6's settlement during the early years in Jordan. Therefore, these arguments explain the reason for having good mental health well-being during the acculturation process is due to the surrounding with supportive people.

Even though the current research findings enclose exclusive experiences from various countries, it still has some

limitations to be considered. Firstly, the nature of the data collected provides only a brief overview of the experiences about a particular time in the past. Future studies could benefit from exploring the actual experiences of students who are still studying abroad. Furthermore, it may be useful to select Malaysian Muslim students from countries with the smallest and largest Muslims community to understand a clearer acculturation pattern.

Secondly, the interviews were conducted in the English language, which might lead to different issues for different students. Hence, future research should consider using the language that the respondents are comfortable with to avoid factors, such as language issues that might affect the interpretation of the research findings. Lastly, despite the current researchers providing deeper qualitative insights into the phenomenon studied, future research may consider analyzing the topic quantitatively for a more meaningful acculturating trend.

The main implication of this study is that the findings will bring impact to international Muslim students and university campuses. First, the findings raise more awareness about acculturative stress among students who intend to further their study abroad. The existing international students will also begin to see professionals, such as counsellors and advisors, to ask for help. Muslim international students could benefit from those acculturation challenges to improve their Islamic knowledge for mental and psychological preparation. The importance of strengthening one's

confidence about their own religious identity could affect their response towards the stigma they may face in their future endeavours.

Next, the current findings raise awareness among administrators at universities and scholarship bodies in need to provide various supports for international students. Malaysian students seldom seek counselling or psychological help when encountering problems (Salleh & Hussin, 2017). They are cautious about disclosing personal problems to strangers. Thus, they would turn to friends instead. Stress during acculturation among international students could be scaled down. Universities could organize culturally sensitive programmes to reach out to international students who might need help.

CONCLUSIONS

The transmission of COVID-19 pandemic still has not found its definite cure. Despite causing many unpleasant effects, there are still international students who portray high levels of resilience and adaptability. It is because they managed to go through the acculturation process from an early stage. Since the pandemic can have adverse consequences for international students' mental health, it has been recommended that universities continue to provide evidence-based online counselling services. Most campuses have risen to this challenge by moving their counselling services online and providing free consultations by email, phone, or video calls. Reaching out to

international students can help eliminate some of the stigmas they may feel about accessing their issues.

Counsellors should practice having flexible and open-minded perspectives, as well as engaging in self-care and self-compassion. These components would enable counsellors to help students forming groups that can help each other. Counsellors should be also aware of the unique context for each international student and be curious about their experience. International students also are encouraged to take an active role in managing their mental health conditions by reaching out to their support systems, whether on-campus or off-campus. Receiving or providing support for others can be helpful. If things start to get overwhelming, they should seek help from the counselling centres or other helpful professionals.

In conclusion, the findings from the present study could benefit student service organizations and student affairs at universities. Firstly, universities should understand the requirements of acculturation and its process. This understanding could help to reduce adjustment problems raised among international students by focusing on the policies on the needs of international students. Secondly, universities should take initiatives to address social interactions between international students and local students by providing opportunities through organized events. This alternative is to improve self-management and self-organization skills through the platforms provided during their long stay.

Thirdly, universities should also have the awareness in encouraging international students to try a different hobby or interest and in motivating them to widen their circle of friends, such as through sports in order to reduce the feeling of loneliness. Lastly, about rebalancing the relationships of existing social contacts and the new ones, counsellors in universities should take this opportunity to help international students plan their strategies and coping skills for future endeavours.

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