

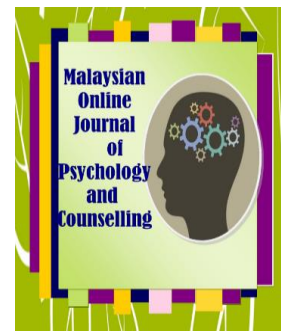
## LEAVING THE BIRD'S NEST: THE EXPERIENCE OF MALAYSIAN STUDENTS STUDYING ABROAD

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### ABSTRACT

Pursuing an education overseas has always been a desirable option for Malaysian students. It provides an opportunity to travel the world, with an extra advantage of gaining credentials from a foreign country, which is strongly assumed to augment their career pathways. Evidently, there are numerous challenges faced by Malaysian students studying abroad. As such, this qualitative study has been conducted to explore their experience in terms of managing their emotions and adjustment to the lifestyle overseas. Six participants who are currently studying abroad were recruited to participate in this study, where in-depth interviews were conducted for the purpose of data collection. Three main themes were generated, E.G. experiences of the new environment when studying abroad, barriers faced when students are studying abroad and coping strategies used by the students in managing their emotions. the findings of this study were discussed and suggestions for future research were given.

**Keywords:** *Malaysian Students, Study Abroad, Social Adjustment, Managing Emotions*



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## INTRODUCTION

Pursuing an education overseas has always been a desirable option for Malaysian students. A survey conducted by Anderson Market Analytics of over 1,100 Malaysian students revealed that 72.2% of them have hopes of pursuing their studies abroad, and securing the status of a permanent residence at their chosen countries. The countries in order of ranking for the local students are the United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia, Singapore, and India. They believe that obtaining a degree from a foreign land would increase their chances of securing their ideal jobs (The Sun Daily, 2009). It provides an opportunity to travel the world, with an extra advantage of gaining credentials from a foreign country, which is strongly assumed to augment their career pathways.

Comparatively, Tagg (2014) highlighted that Malaysian students opt to study abroad in order to search for a distinguished professor in a specific field. Hor Poh Choo, an associate director with Sunway Education Group's International Office, stated that Malaysian students are encouraged to aim for globally well-known pre-university programs to acquire the essential qualifications that will qualify them for positions at overseas institutions. (Sani, 2019). Evidently, there are numerous reasons that Malaysian students go overseas to pursue an education, which is why it would be important to look into what happens once they do go abroad. As such, this study aims to look into the students' experience of emotions and adjustment upon going to the foreign host university.

## Problem Statement

Studies have delineated that studying abroad has a positive impact on students' levels of engagement (Ryan & Twibell, 2002), as well as their personal and educational development (Gonyea, 2008). It is also related to higher levels of engagement, especially during their senior year experience, as students are more engaged upon returning from their educational experience abroad (Gonyea, 2008). While there is an increase in this academic endeavor among Malaysian students, there seems to be a lack of research that documents and examines the study abroad experience in terms of how well they adapt to the lifestyle at the university, which is why the current study aims to utilize the U-curve theory by Lysgaard.

On top of that, studies have yet to examine how well Malaysian students are able to manage their emotions while abroad. Specifically, it has yet to address specific aspects of Chickering's theory of student development. When a student is able to manage their emotions such as overcoming fears, utilize positive coping mechanisms for stress and healing their past emotional pain, then a student's emotional development will occur (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As such, the current study will employ Chickering's second vector, i.e. managing emotions.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To explore how Malaysian students who are studying abroad adjust/adapt to their new surroundings.
2. To understand how Malaysian students manage their emotions upon going to a new university abroad.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do Malaysian students who are studying abroad adjust/adapt to the new surroundings?

2. How well do Malaysian students manage their emotions upon going to a new university in abroad?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Studying Abroad

Contrary to simply travelling or visiting a foreign country, studying abroad is way more than just a brief stay. It allows students the opportunity to actively engage with others, which in turn provides a fulfilling learning experience. At the host country, students will inevitably learn about the cultural and social norms and get acquainted with the educational methods (Pompe & Rinehart, 2002). They will have to adjust and adapt to various situations, be it culturally, academically, socially, or monetarily. If they are unable to keep up with it, their academic functioning, results, and overall psychological well-being could be greatly affected.

### Cultural Shock and Adaptation

Adaptation and adjustment are often used interchangeably, whereby both notions describe changes or alteration towards people or groups of people (Dziubacka and Grincevičienė, 2010). The levels of adaptation and acceptance are not deemed through conforming to the foreign country's social or cultural norms, but instead of feeling comfortable and recognizing the new surroundings. The transition from culture shock to adaptation is a result of the student's capability to learn and behave in new ways, which in turn decreases the anxiety of thinking of how to act in the new setting (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1990). The willingness to create new relations with the foreign country's residents would also ease the adaptation and acceptance process by shortening it.

### Emotional Management

Emotional Intelligence entails having the capacity to identify, modulate, and manage one's emotions to properly communicate with others (Goleman, 1995; Goleman, 1998). A weak comprehension or management of one's emotions may result in unintended interactions with others, and the obstruction of beneficial inputs that won't be paid attention to when emotions are intensified (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001a). Recently, little research has been done on the development of emotional management among undergraduates in foreign countries. Nonetheless, studies seem to imply that emotional intelligence plays an essential role in greater academic performance, resilience, and conduct, and even higher GPAs (Pritchard and Wilson, 2003).

### Asian Culture and Emotions

The Asian culture places high regard on the discipline and suppression of intense emotions, and self-control in communicating with others (Lee, 1997; Liem, 1997; Uba, 1994). There is also some evidence that Asian parents work long hours (especially immigrants), and there is a cultural norm to ignore prejudice and racism faced, which may lead to the negligence of their child's emotional needs (Hong, 1993; Hongo, 1995; Lee, 1992). As concealing expression of emotions is deemed an essential aspect of preserving harmony (Chew & Ogi, 1987), Asian undergraduates may not have adequate modeling of emotional expression, awareness, or management.

Further, the acknowledgement of one's feelings may be a new concept, as the Asian culture emphasized placing another's feelings above their own (Wong and Mock, 1997). On the other hand, expressiveness is typically the norm in a Western environment, and Asian students may not be comfortable with their level of openness (Chew and Ogi, 1987). Therefore, "exploring" or "understanding" feelings could be a more suitable feat for these Asian students as they understand and acquire a sense of awareness of emotions, their proper expressions, and which ones are more suitable in a university setting. This contradicts with Chickering's vector of "managing" emotions, as it revolves around students controlling their undesirable emotions (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 83).

## **Theoretical Foundations**

### **U-Curve Theory**

Lysgaard's (1995) U-curve theory elaborates on four stages of adjustment and adaptation that students and working professionals undergo in a foreign land. This framework has been applied to understand the cross-cultural adaptation process of foreign students or trainees in the host country (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Lysgaard, 1955; Usunier, 1998). It begins with the honeymoon phase, which happens in a week upon arriving at the foreign country. Students feel excited with the new surroundings. After facing real daily situations, they experience culture shock, which is the second stage in this theory. They may experience tension, frustration, or even resentment towards the country and its people.

The third phase is adjustment/accluturation, which begins when they begin to adapt their behavior to the norms of the foreign country, and act accordingly. The final stage is acceptance and mastery, wherein students are able to function comfortably as an expatriate. The intensity of adaptation is not understood in terms of conformity, but in terms of comfort or acceptance of the host country. This covers behaviors, associations with people, and dealing with the difficulties that occur in the new surroundings (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Torbiorn, 1982).

### **Chickering's Vector of Managing Emotions**

Researchers and student affairs professionals have yet to agree on one single developmental theory to accurately encapsulates all student populations. Due to this, there are many theories that can be applied to individual students. The researchers strongly resonated with the notions of Arthur Chickering's theory, which is why Chickering's theory of identity development will be the basis of analysis in understanding student development with regards to their emotional management whilst studying abroad. Specifically, the researchers applied Chickering's second vector, managing emotions, as a theoretical foundation to uncover how the study abroad experience navigated the students to develop the necessary skills to manage their emotions.

Many students feel angry, upset, afraid, bored, tense, and longing, regardless of whether or not they are new or coming back to university after a break. If they progress to become too extreme, these emotions have the power to interrupt the students' academic progress. Nonetheless, these feelings only require a little management, such as being receptive and acknowledging them with caution. Chickering and Reisser (1993) mention that it may be difficult to admit that small doses of feeling bored or tensed is normal, and that a little stress can actually enhance performance. Growth happens

when students are able to deal with these emotions head on by facing their fears, sourcing healthy outlets to release stress, and curing emotional pain before relationships with others are affected.

The aim is for students to be aware of their emotions, and practice emotional regulation instead of repression. There may be students who are unable to open up, while others may be too direct and require some form of adaptable reins. Positive emotions should also be acknowledged; not in terms of managing them, but in bringing them into the realm of awareness. It is crucial for students to learn how to balance their emotions, which incorporates going past the limits of the self, and understanding or relating to others.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This current study is a qualitative research design which aims to gather and interpret data for the research. This research method will allow the researcher to familiarize with the theories that needs to be studied, which may then enable the researcher to create relating hypotheses that needs to be tested (Golafshani, 2003). Additionally, a qualitative research is most commonly used for studies which are conducted in the field of social and human sciences (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). Furthermore, a qualitative research provides a complex yet detailed understanding of the issue that is being studied. These complex details can solely be gathered by speaking directly with an individual, visit an individual at their home or workplace and allow the individual to speak freely as they share their experiences without taking into regards of the expectations of outcomes which were gathered from the literature (Creswell et al., 2007).

### **Research Approach**

The researchers opted for the 'in-depth interview' approach of a qualitative study, as it gives a thorough understanding of a social phenomenon rather than data gathered from an entirely quantitative method (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008). Moreover, this approach gives room for the participant to relate his or her experiences of certain topics. In-depth interviews are commonly combined with other data collection methods which gives the researcher an extensive category of information for analyses (Turner, 2010).

### **Sampling Method**

The researchers interviewed six Malaysian individuals who are currently studying abroad. Researchers were able to gather insights and experiences of Malaysian students who were studying abroad, which helped the researchers in having a better understanding of the research questions.

### **Data Analysis Method**

The Phenomenological approach was utilized to analyze the data gathered from the in-depth interviews. To avoid missing any important information, the researchers analyzed the first forms of data for cues. Then the researchers included these cues in the next interview. All six interviews were conducted via Skype and Google Hangouts since the participants were still abroad. The interviews were video recorded and transcribed to permit accurate categorization of themes from the interviewees' responses. The researchers then identified the themes from the categories and

tabulated them accordingly. By tabulating the data, it is easier for the researchers to observe the similarities and differences of the data gathered from all six interviewees. When the category or theme was identified to be irrelevant in the analysis process, the researchers rejected it and not included it in the tabulation.

## Results

Six in-depth interviews were conducted on Malaysian students who were studying abroad. The data collection emphasized on these following aspects: 1) participant's experience when first reached abroad, 2) the barriers participants faced socially and environmentally, 3) participants' adaptation towards the university lifestyle, and 4) participants' management of emotions.

### Participant's Profiles

- a) Participant 1  
The participant is a female student who is pursuing her Degree in Electronics and Engineering in London, United Kingdom.
- b) Participant 2  
The participant is a male student who is pursuing his Degree in Physiotherapy in Manipal, India.
- c) Participant 3  
The participant is a female student who is pursuing her Degree in Communication and Psychology in Iowa, United States.
- d) Participant 4  
The participant is a male student who is pursuing his Degree in Communication Technology in Taichung, Taiwan.
- e) Participant 5  
The participant is a female student who is pursuing her Degree in Medicine in the United Kingdom.
- f) Participant 6  
The participant is a female student who is pursuing her Degree in Mathematics in Scotland.

### Data Analysis

This study utilized the Phenomenological approach to analyze the gathered data. An inventory of planned questions was created before the interview. While the researchers were interviewing the participants, some questions were discarded as it was irrelevant to the topic. After discarding the irrelevant questions, additional questions that were appropriate were then added in the inventory of planned questions. The primary data received were analyzed to identify cues to be used in the following interviews. After identifying the cues, the data was placed into categories and thus themes were identified from those categories. The data was then tabulated to observe similarities and differences.

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## Theme 1: Experiences of the new environment when studying abroad

Participants	Subtopics		
	General experience	Social experience	Environment experience
Participant 1	Difficulty understanding accent, classes were face paced	Stayed with own group of friends, made friends from other countries but they were not as close, lecturers were nice and easy to talk to	Could not deal and adapt with the cold weather, had depression due to winter
Participant 2	Lecturers were welcoming	Got along with seniors, locals and students lived together, use of Hindi was advantageous, learnt other new languages	Had a great time visiting and exploring around town, familiarize self with the campus
Participant 3	Lecturers were welcoming, excited, eager, had misconceptions on the openness of American classmates	Stayed with own group of friends, made friends from other countries, have to be better than her peers to avoid being belittled or face racism	Could not deal and adapt with the cold weather, had nose bleeds, got used to the weather after some time
Participant 4	Culture shock	Stayed in off campus hostel, made friends with roommate, communication was key	Explored around the town, had good public transportation, visited cafes, night markets and museums on free time
Participant 5	Excited	Attended many events organised by university societies, spent time with people that were comfortable to be with, made an effort to get to know people who are different	Did not have trouble adjusting to the environment, travelled around
Participant 6	Did not feel there were any differences in Malaysia and Scotland	Shared meals with classmates and roommates to get to know them better, often had a get-together with flat mates and shared their culture	Could not deal and adapt with the cold weather, got used to the weather after some time

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Based on Theme 1 findings, it was found that all the participants had different general experiences when they first went to study abroad. Participant 2 and 3 mentioned that when they first arrived, their lecturers were welcoming towards them and it put them at ease. Participant 1 faced difficulties in understanding the accent of the people there and the classes were fast paced. Participant 4 experienced culture shock while Participant 5 experienced excitement when they first went abroad to study. "When I first got there I felt culture shocked. This is because the students there were more open minded and wore short pants to class. They even openly date each other! It was so far different than in Malaysia where people were modest and did not flaunt their relationship status" (Participant 4). However, Participant 6 did not feel that there were any differences between Malaysia and Scotland.

Furthermore, when looking into their social experience it was found that all the participants had made the effort to make friends with the Malaysian students as well as their roommates. Participants 1 and 3 mentioned that they stayed with their own group of friends and almost made friends with students from different countries. Participant 3 had mentioned that she had to be better than her peers in certain things in order to avoid being belittled or face racism. Participant 2 got along well with his friends, seniors and the locals while using the Hindi language which made a huge impact among his peers. Participant 5 mentioned that she was quite social as she attended many events organised by the campus clubs to meet new people and chose the club that was most suitable for her. Participant 6 often had a get-together with her classmates and flat mates to get to know each other better and share their cultures.

When asked about their experience in terms of their surroundings, Participant 1, 3 and 6 mentioned that they could not handle the cold winter weather. When asked to further elaborate, Participant 3 said, "It was very hard for me to adapt to the winter during my first year. I constantly had nose bleeds and couldn't stay outdoors for very long." However, Participant 5 did not face any difficulties adapting to the weather. Participant 2 and 4 mentioned that they travelled around the campus and city to explore their new environment. Participant 2 and 4 did not face any difficulties in terms of weather as they both were in Asian countries which did not have cold winters like the other participants experienced.

## Theme 2: Barriers faced by Malaysian students studying abroad

Participants	Subtopics	
	Barriers faced	Ways barriers were managed
Participant 1	Homesickness, cried every night	Called home every day
Participant 2	Learning new language	Exposure and communicating
Participant 3	Making friends, racism	Followed instinct, learn through trial and error, be at the top of the game
Participant 4	Tried not to get too caught up on trends	Give self-time, stayed confident
Participant 5	Could not understand accent	Exposure and communicating



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Participant 6	Felt lonely, wanted to leave with parents	Braved self and moved on
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Based on Theme 2, participants were asked about the barriers that they faced while studying abroad and how they had overcome them. All participants had different barriers that they had faced. Participant 1 felt homesick when she first got there and she cried every night. Participant 1 overcame this by calling home every day. Participant 2 faced difficulties in learning the new language as he was not accustomed to speaking “Kanada”. Participant 2 had overcome the language barrier by exposing himself to the language and communicating with his friends. “It was difficult for me at the beginning since most of them spoke in “Kanada”. I was only able to speak in Hindi. But I placed myself in situations where I had to speak “Kanada” and that’s when I started learning the language. So, exposure and communicating the language had helped a lot” (Participant 2).

Furthermore, Participant 3 faced barriers in making friends and experienced racism. Participant 3 had overcome these barriers through trial and errors and following her instincts. As for the racism, Participant 3 mentioned that she had to be at the top of her game so that her peers would not look down on her. Participant 4 faced barriers in getting caught with the trends they had in Taiwan. Participant 4 had overcome this barrier by giving himself time and building his confidence so that he would not get too caught up on the trends.

Participant 5 had difficulties in understanding the accent. Similar with Participant 2, Participant 5 had overcome this barrier through exposure and communication. Lastly, Participant 6 felt lonely and wanted to leave with her parents. Participant 6 overcame this barrier by braving herself and moved forward.

### Theme 3: Managing emotions

Participants	Subtopics	
	Emotions faced	Ways emotions were managed
Participant 1	Homesickness, nervous, excited	Communicated with family back home frequently, returned home every break, cried every night
Participant 2	Homesickness, anxious	Communicated with friends and family back home frequently, managed the anxiousness through time
Participant 3	Homesickness, nervous, excited, scared	Communicated with friends back home frequently, stick with friends who had the same interests
Participant 4	Homesickness	Communicated with family and friends frequently
Participant 5	Homesickness, nervous, excited	Communicated with family and friends frequently

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Participant 6	Homesickness, scared	excited,	Communicated with family frequently, braved self and looked forward
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Based on Theme 3, participants were asked about the emotions they experienced and how they managed their emotions while studying abroad. The primary emotion that all the participants faced was homesickness. Participant 4 only felt homesickness while the other participants faced other emotions as well. Participants 1, 2 and 5 had felt nervous. Participants 1, 3, 5 and 6 had felt excitement when they first went abroad to study. Participant 5 said, "It was all so crazy! I was super excited at the beginning but after some time, the excitement wore off and I was feeling very nervous." Participants 3 and 6 were scared when they first went abroad while the other participants did not feel scared. Participant 2 was the only participant that mentioned that he felt anxiety when he first went abroad.

Moreover, the primary method that all the participants used to manage their emotions was to communicate with their family and friends back home frequently. "I don't think I could've survived being alone abroad without speaking with my family every day. Communication with my family was what kept me going. I also returned home during every break. However, I do admit that I cried every night during my first year there. But after returning home often and calling home daily, I stopped crying every night" (Participant 1). Participant 1 also managed her emotions by going home during every break.

Participant 2 overcome anxiousness through time while Participant 3 stayed with friends that had the same interests as her. Lastly, Participant 6 braved herself and moved forward. "Even though I felt homesickness and fear, I overcame them by braving myself and constantly reminding myself that I can go through this. Communicating with my family and friends back home frequently was a huge help. Without their constant support and kind words, I couldn't have survived my first year being there" (Participant 6).

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Malaysian students' experience studying abroad in terms of managing their emotions and adjustment to the lifestyle overseas. Six participants who are currently studying abroad were recruited to participate in this study, where in-depth interviews were conducted for the purpose of data collection. Three main themes were generated, which were able to answer the research questions of this study.

### **Theme 1: Experiences of the new environment when studying abroad**

Participants of this study had varying experiences while they were studying abroad. Mainly, they experienced social and environmental adjustments, and this is consistent with what was mentioned by Pompe and Rinehart (2002). It was stated that students need to inevitably learn the cultural and social rules of the country that they are studying in, while also accustoming themselves to the educational methods. The students are required to adapt themselves in any situation that are placed in whether it is in cultural, academic, social or financial terms. If the students face difficulties in adapting to these situations, then it would affect their academic functioning, exam scores and mental health (Pompe & Rinehart, 2002).

## **Theme 2: Barriers faced when students are studying abroad**

Through their responses, it can be deduced that all participants faced varying barriers while studying abroad, mainly in terms of adjusting and adapting to the new environment. As highlighted in U-Curve theory, adjustment occurs when a student who is studying abroad is able to familiarize with the environment, norms and languages (Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, & Pisecco, 2001). However, based on the participants' response, it shows that they had difficulties in making new friends, learning a new language, and even felt homesick after a few months of staying abroad. This indicates that the students have not reached the mastery phase in U-Curve theory because they could not adapt well to the changes in abroad.

To add on, Participant 4 was the only one who experienced culture shock. This finding is consistent with Black, Mendehall and Oddou's (1990) study. When an individual transition from culture shock to adaption, it is a result from the individual's capability to adjust him or herself in new ways. This then decreases the individual's anxiousness of thinking how to act in a new place (Black, Mendenhall, & Oddou, 1990).

## **Theme 3: Managing emotions**

Based on the results obtained in Theme 3, the primary emotion that the participants felt was homesickness. Other emotions were nervousness, excitement, fear and anxiousness. When the participants went through these emotions, they were able to come up with ways to manage them. This finding is similar to what was found in past studies. When students are able to deal with the emotions that they face, utilize appropriate methods to release stress, and heal their emotional distress before it affects their relationships with others, that is when growth will happen (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Contrastingly, in some past studies (Lee, 1997; Liem, 1997; Uba, 1994) it was mentioned that in the Asian culture, discipline is highly regarded, with the suppression of intense emotions and self-control in communicating with others. However, there were no suppression of intense emotions that occurred with the participants in this study. Participants in this study had shown their intense emotions (homesickness, nervousness and fear) to their parents and friends. The participants had often called home as well. Moreover, participants of this study had freely communicated and built relationships with their new friends and lecturers which shows that there was no restraint in communicating with others.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

There are few limitations in this study and base on the limitations involved, there are few suggestions given for future research on this topic. The first limitation of this study is the fact that the students interviewed are studying at different countries, with different cultural, social, and environmental backgrounds. This could have led to the differing responses from the participants, as their adjustment and adaptation are likely to be dependent on the place that they are living in. Therefore, the sample size has to be homogeneous to obtain findings that are focused on a specific population. Another limitation was the fact that interviews had to be conducted online, as the participants were all at different countries. Future researchers should conduct a face-to-face interview with students to get more in-depth information from the participant without thinking about the time difference, or having internet connection problems.

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The third limitation is gender differences among Malaysian students who studied abroad were not examined. Researchers suggest that future researchers can focus on this to determine if gender influences how students adapt and overcome the difficulties that they face while studying abroad.

In conclusion, base on this study, there is evidence that Malaysian students facing difficulties in adjusting to the life overseas and need support in managing their emotions. Personal and professional support are important in assisting the students to make better adjustment and there are many factors that need to be consider in providing support for the students. Hence, more research should be conducted to facilitate understanding on this issues among researcher, practitioner and policy maker.

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