

## International Students' Empathy and Sensation Seeking Traits as the Antecedents of Motivation to Engage in Intercultural Communication

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### ABSTRACT

From the Non-Western context of Malaysia, this study aims to address the influence of empathy and sensation seeking of international students on their motivation to engage in intercultural communication (MTEIIC). Earlier, the investigators tend to focus more on determining the predictors of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) as of MTEIIC. The relationships of selected trait-like factors of MTEIIC is subjected to Western context and considered these factors have the potential to translate well on diverse cultures. Thus, this study considers empathy and sensation seeking and addressed on the Non-Western context of Malaysia. Through simple random sampling, the data was collected from the international students of University Utara Malaysia by incorporating survey technique. The data was analyzed in SPSS and AMOS by incorporating Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) technique. The findings of the study empirically justified that empathy and sensation seeking are the significant antecedents of MTEIIC in the Non-Western context of Malaysia. Furthermore, the culture-general nature of selected variables is also validated from the findings of this study. It is evident that international students of Malaysia are having empathetic and sensation seeking traits that are favorable for MTEIIC.

**Keywords:** Empathy, Sensation seeking, MTEIIC, International students, Non-Western context.

### INTRODUCTION

In intercultural research, there is much debate in the mainstream discourses concerning the antecedents of ICC (Arasaratnam, 2016a; Fatemi, Khajavy, & Choi, 2016; Lu & Hsu, 2008) and MTEIIC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007, 2011). Earlier investigations have pointed out numerous trait-like factors (like, empathy, sensation seeking, ethnocentrism, etc.) that contribute to ICC (Arasaratnam, Banerjee, & Dembek, 2010a, 2010b). However, there is some empirical evidence in the literature who suggests that the individual should be motivated to engage in intercultural communication before leading to ICC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011). Therefore, the researches about the predictors of MTEIIC and ICC have become the point of concern for the intercultural researchers (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007, 2011; Arasaratnam et al., 2010a, 2010b). This study considered two key influencers of MTEIIC which are, empathy and sensation seeking and addressed them on the Non-Western context of Malaysia due to some noteworthy concerns.

Firstly, the earlier scholarships focused on the trait-like factors that contribute to ICC (for example, Fatemi et al., 2016; Lu & Hsu, 2008) rather than concentrating on MTEIIC; as an important predictor of ICC. Secondly, these factors (empathy, sensation seeking and MTEIIC) are acknowledged as the culture-general variables and have the tendency to translate well upon multiple cultural perspectives (Arasaratnam, 2016b). Even though the selected influencers are predominantly addressed in the Western context (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007, 2011). Lastly, the representation of Non-Western context (Malaysia) is overlooked by the intercultural researchers (Nadeem, Mohammed, & Dalib, 2017a, 2017b, 2018b). Based on discussed concerns, this study targets to address empathy and sensation seeking as the antecedents of MTEIIC on the international students of Malaysia.

The international student population of Malaysia is much necessary to investigate the antecedents (empathy and sensation seeking) of MTEIIC. The flow of international students is kept on increasing in the public/private institutes of Malaysia. They prefer to pursue their education in Malaysia as compared to the US after the 9/11 incident, due to cultural ease (Sirat, 2008). The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) Malaysia targets to make Malaysia as a hub of international students (Chi, 2011). Because the economy of Malaysia is much influenced by the contribution of international students (Grapragasem, Krishnan, & Mansor, 2014). Therefore, a great diversity of cultures is witnessed in the Malaysian higher education institutes (Nadeem et al., 2017b). It is much crucial to address empathy and sensation seeking on the international students' MTEIIC; as they are exposed to a diversity of cultures and having frequent intercultural interactions in comparison of others. In order to witness that to what extent empathy and sensation seeking are influencing their MTEIIC, this study is conducted.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### MTEIIC

MTEIIC is the aspiration to participate in intercultural communications for the determination of learning as well as understanding about different cultures (Arasaratnam, 2004a). Kim (1991) refers to MTEIIC as "in intercultural encounters, the affective dimension of competence means 'readiness' to accommodate intercultural challenges" (p. 269). MTEIIC is the set of feelings, intentions, needs, and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication (Deardorff, 2004) could be realized as the

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base for intercultural interaction because the conversation with an unenthusiastic individual relatively fails (Martin & Nakayama, 2010).

### **Empathy and MTEIIC**

One of the personality characteristics acknowledged by many researchers is cultural empathy. In the intercultural context, empathy plays an important role in attaining effective intercultural communication (Riemer, 2007). In the same manner, Gudykunst, Wiseman, and Hammer (1977) revealed that intercultural empathy is an imperative characteristic of the individual's personality. Ting-Toomey (2012) mentioned as the ability to initiate communication with other individuals respectfully, observe and react with verbal and nonverbal sensitivity.

On the other hand, Ting-Toomey (2012) specified MTEIIC as the internal locus of control which enables the individual for the success of intercultural communication. Furthermore, MTEIIC is a personality skill that directly relates to intercultural situations. According to the suggestions of Kim (1991), there are three elements that relate with ICC: the affective dimension comprises of the individual's willingness and MTEIIC. The level of MTEIIC differs from person to person to adopt a new cultural setting (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) identified five grounded qualities of a competent communicator during intercultural contact. Further, these qualities were empirically investigated by Arasaratnam (2006) and the result depicted that these qualities are the factors that contribute to ICC. Empathy and MTEIIC are the two qualities among five that contributes positively to ICC. Regardless of having less literature regarding the empirical relationship of these two variables in intercultural contact, but there is some evidence that links empathy with MTEIIC.

A study by Arasaratnam (2006) on the undergraduate students of the university with the aim to address the relationship of the components of ICC and the extent of relation that contributes to ICC. Results of the study revealed that there is a positive relationship between empathy and MTEIIC in the presence of attitude. Furthermore, the emergence of the five variables was tested and proved that these variables contribute to ICC. That was the initial test to address the relationship of these variables, but the results were encouraging to further test the relationship of these variables.

In the same manner, Arasaratnam et al. (2010a) introduced a comprehensive model of ICC that contains different contributors that contribute to ICC. Empathy and MTEIIC were witnessed in that model that influence ICC. New paths were added according to the theory: empathy leads to MTEIIC was also introduced. Findings revealed that empathy positively contributes to MTEIIC which means that when the individual is having an empathetic attitude than he/she is motivated to interact with the people of other cultures.

Another description (Arasaratnam et al., 2010b) regarding the relationship of empathy and MTEIIC on the university student of Australia. Researchers found that a significant relationship among empathy and MTEIIC besides other variables also. This research was taken into account to retest the findings of the previous research (Arasaratnam et al.,

2010a). However, the results were consistent with the previous researches and the additional paths were also established. But the relationship of empathy and MTEIIC was positive in the context of Australia.

Arasaratnam (2016a) examined the relationship of variables among bilingualism and ICC and found that a significant positive relationship between empathy and MTEIIC on the university students of Australia. Additionally, she also found that the relationship of these two variables is similar as in the previous researches regarding ICC (Arasaratnam, 2006; Arasaratnam et al., 2010a, 2010b). Therefore, there is an association between empathy and MTEIIC in intercultural context among the university students. There is a need to address this relationship in Malaysian international students who are perusing their studies in Malaysia.

*HI. There is a relationship between empathy and MTEIIC.*

### **Sensation Seeking and MTEIIC**

A sensation seeker is defined by Zuckerman, Bone, Neary, Mangelsdorff, and Brustman (1972), as "a person who needs varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences to maintain an optimal level of arousal" (p. 308). Another description by Zuckerman (1994) "A trait defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences, and the willingness to take physical, social, legal, and financial risks for the sake of such experience". The examination of sensation seeking was initially related to extremely risky behaviors like alcohol use and smoking (Hoyle, Stephenson, Palmgreen, Lorch, & Donohew, 2002). This is a reason behind several problems regarding the behavior of the individual.

Motivation is always a reason for doing something. Motivation means that a competent individual is highly interested to have awareness and communication with the individuals of diverse cultures (Arasaratnam, 2004a). Kim (2002) defined motivation as the will to interact and become functionally suitable according to the requirements of the host country. It is reflected, as the motivation to absorb the host culture and language. Motivation to interact among the individuals of diverse cultures is a key element for cross-cultural competency, it can be influenced by several traits like personality (sensation seeking), opportunity, beliefs etc. (Arasaratnam, 2006; Spitzberg, 2000).

Arasaratnam and Banerjee (2007, 2011) proposed a model of ICC in which different contributors proposed to contribute ICC. In that model, sensation seeking is considered as the predictor of MTEIIC and results that MTEIIC efficiently affects the competency of intercultural communication. Furthermore, sensation seeking is having a positive influence on intercultural interactions. High sensation seekers are often found of motivated to interact with the individuals of diverse cultural setting. Results also revealed that there is a positive relationship among sensation seeking and MTEIIC. Arasaratnam (2009) noticed that sensation seeking is associated with MTEIIC.

Previous researches (Arasaratnam, 2004b, 2005) noticed that the reason behind the sensation seeker's MTEIIC and found that the experience of pleasure and excitement motivates them to interact with culturally different people. Morgan and Arasaratnam (2003) noticed that sensation seeks

to reflect such attitudes which worthy for the development of intercultural relationships. There are plenty of researches who revealed that sensation seeking trait of the individual influences his/her motivation (Tsai, 2010; Xu, 2010; Xu, Stanis, Barbieri, & Chen, 2010).

A relationship between sensation seeking and MTEIIC could be interpreted in such a way that the sensation seekers leads to MTEIIC and further leads to the competency in intercultural interactions (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011). Xu (2010) addressed sensation-seeking personality, previous experience, motivation and intended tempest chasing travelers in the US. The researcher found that some proportions of sensation seeking are significantly correlated with the proportions of motivation, like to interact with the individuals of diverse cultures.

Research by Wymer, Self, and Findley (2010) on adventurous traits of the sensation seekers. They measured adventurous traits (like scuba diving, rock climbing etc.) on the 39 nations and get the responses through an online survey. They claimed that sensation seeking is an attribute to people who are: being motivated to know about different cultures, feel satisfied by exploring new things and energetic to take risks. Arasaratnam (2016a) addressed the relationship of ICC with gender and bilingualism and found that sensation seeking and MTEIIC is having a significant positive relationship among them and both positively contribute to ICC. To sum up, it is noticed in the previous researches that sensation seeking and MTEIIC are having a strong empirical relationship and both contribute to ICC (Arasaratnam, 2009, 2016a; Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007, 2011; Arasaratnam et al., 2010b).

**H2.** *There is a relationship between sensation seeking and MTEIIC.*

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

For this study, the participants (international students) were approached from the one public university of Malaysia namely, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Simple random sampling was employed to select the international students of the university. The single-university was considered more appropriate as it fulfills the requirements of this study due to the diversity of cultures among the international students. The results indicated that 336 international students took part in this study.

A sum of 34 different countries has got the representation from the (N=336) international students that reveals great cultural diversity in the university. Majority of the participants who participated in the study were from Nigeria (59), Indonesia (54), China (36) and Pakistan (25). On the other side, the minimal representation of other countries likes, Bahrain, Canada, Chile etc. participated through only one participant. The participants were enrolled in different programs (like, 135 in bachelors, 39 in masters and 162 in Ph.D.) in which females were 77 and males were 259. While their age ranged from 16 to 64. Most of them stayed in Malaysia in between one to two years (242). The last and most noteworthy demographic information indicated that most of the participants were Muslims (253) and the rest of others were Christians, Buddhist, Hindu, and Atheists (83). The discussed demographic information reveals that

international students belong to diverse cultural backgrounds and likely to have frequent intercultural interactions with culturally different others.

### Measures

A five-point Likert-type scale was incorporated to capture the responses of the participants as a survey instrument for this study. The responses of the selected scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For the attainment of a single factor, few of the items from the variables were deleted through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) in Analysis of Moment Structure (AMOS). All the measurement scales were adopted from the previous investigations. The findings of the measurement scales are discussed in the following subsections.

### Empathy

Empathy was measured by the Cultural Empathy subscale of Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) through 18-items developed by Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002). The scale was having items for example, "I set others at ease" and "I notice when someone is in trouble".  $\chi^2 = 97.54$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.26$ , RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .03, PNFI = .627, GFI = .953, IFI = .979, NFI = .963, CFI = .979 and TLI = .967;  $\alpha = .92$ , M = 3.37 and SD = .931.

### Sensation Seeking

Sensation seeking was measured by the Brief Sensation Seeking (BSS) scale through its 08-items developed by Hoyle et al., (2002). This scale consists of items such as, "I prefer friends who are excitingly unpredictable" and "I like to do frightening things".  $\chi^2 = 49.19$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 2.73$ , RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .02, PNFI = .630, GFI = .961, IFI = .987, NFI = .979, CFI = .987 and TLI = .979;  $\alpha = .94$ , M = 3.44 and SD = 1.03.

### MTEIIC

MTEIIC was measured through MTEIIC scale through its 07-items developed by Arasaratnam (2006). The items of the scale like, "I would seek out friendships with people from different cultures in order to learn about their culture" and "I enjoy initiating conversations with someone from a different culture".  $\chi^2 = 11.35$ ,  $\chi^2/df = .811$ , RMSEA = .01, SRMR = .01, PNFI = .663, GFI = .990, IFI = 1.001, NFI = .995, CFI = 1.000 and TLI = 1.002;  $\alpha = .95$ , M = 3.67 and SD = .993.

## FINDINGS

The findings of the study were analyzed by considering two software's namely, SPSS and AMOS. In order to ensure the reliability and the validity of the variables, several tests were performed. For the determination of the causal relationship between two variables SEM technique was incorporated for this study.

### Measurement Model

The measurement model was assessed by taking two steps. In the first step, through CFA the validity (discriminant validity) and reliability; average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) of the constructs were ensured. Table 1 represents the results of the validity and reliability of the constructs. Furthermore, it indicates that the values of CR, AVE and discriminant validity were exceeded from the threshold values that means the constructs are reliable and validated. In the second step, the fitness indices of the measurement model were evaluated. The findings revealed that the data of the study was an excellent fit with

the measurement model of the study;  $\chi^2 = 478.048$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.55$ , RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .05, PNFI = .824, GFI = .904, IFI = .977, NFI = .938, CFI = .977 and TLI = .974. After the assessment, the measurement model was transformed into the structural model for this study through data imputation method. In the structural model of the study, multiple regressions were performed to investigate the cause and effect.

**Table 1: CR, AVE and Discriminant Validity**

	CR	AVE	Empathy	Sensation	MTEIIC
Empathy	.93	.53	<b>.73</b>		
Sensation	.94	.69	.44*	<b>.83</b>	
MTEIIC	.95	.75	.37*	.54*	<b>.86</b>

\* p < 0.001

### Regression Analysis

In regression analysis, the acceptance/rejection of the hypothesis was based on the significance of the unstandardized path coefficients. The findings of the regression analysis regarding hypothesis testing are presented in Table 2 of the study. Firstly, the findings revealed that a statistically significant relationship between empathy and MTEIIC ( $\beta = .177$ ,  $t = 3.295$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In simple words, international students' empathy is having a positive significant influence on their MTEIIC. Thus, the hypothesis (H1) was supported by the findings. Secondly, the findings indicated that a statistically significant relationship between sensation seeking and MTEIIC ( $\beta = .549$ ,  $t = 9.645$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In simple words, the sensation-seeking trait of the international students of Malaysia is having a statistically significant impact on their MTEIIC. Therefore, the hypothesis (H2) was supported by the findings of this study. To this end, it can be interpreted as the empathy and sensation seeking are witnessed as the antecedents of MTEIIC from the findings of this study.

**Table 2: Hypothesis Testing**

Path		B	S.E.	t	$\rho$	Status
Empathy	→ MTEIIC	.17	.05	3.29	***	Sig
Sensation Seeking	→ MTEIIC	.54	.05	9.64	***	Sig

\*\*\* p < 0.001

### DISCUSSION

This study targeted to empirically explore the relationships of empathy and sensation seeking on MTEIIC on the international students of Malaysia. The findings of the study revealed that empathy and sensation seeking have a positive significant influence on MTEIIC. It is also witnessed that the international students of Malaysia do possess such traits (like, empathy and sensation seeking) that are favorable for their MTEIIC. In addition, the findings of this study are in line with the very rare studies (Arasaratnam, 2016a; Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007, 2011) that confirmed empathy and sensation seeking are having a positive significant impact on the MTEIIC of the individual.

The findings of this study also confirmed the culture-general nature of the variables (empathy, sensation seeking and MTEIIC) (Arasaratnam et al., 2010a, 2010b). Previously, it is assumed that these variables have the ability to translate well among diverse cultural perspectives (Arasaratnam, 2016b). This study has validated the culture-general nature of these variables by addressing selected variables on the diverse composition of respondents. Even though the Non-Western context of Malaysia is overlooked by the intercultural researchers (Nadeem, Mohammed, & Dalib,

2018a). This study has empirically justified the Non-Western (Malaysia) representation by investigating these variables. At this end, it can be concluded that in spite of Western dominance in the literature, still, this study has provided noteworthy results regarding the antecedents of MTEIIC from the international students of Malaysia.

### CONCLUSION

This study has provided clear support to previous findings regarding the traits (empathy and sensation seeking) of the international students that are favorable for MTEIIC. The association between empathy, sensation seeking and MTEIIC is addressed for the first time in the Malaysian setting and revealing the positive results. The results of the study are encouraging about the Non-Western context of Malaysia where the participants were from different cultures as compared to the Western context. The findings of this study do reveal that empathy and sensation seeking are the antecedents of MTEIIC from the Non-Western context of Malaysia. This study confirms that the international students of Malaysia have personality traits like empathy and sensation seeking that motivates them to initiate an intercultural interaction. The findings could be different if the same study is addressed in the other Non-Western countries like Pakistan, Iran, and Indonesia. Because this study is subjected to draw inferences on the international students of the Non-Western context of Malaysia. What needs to be studied in future is the influence of these selected trait-like factors (empathy, sensation seeking and MTEIIC) on ICC; directly and indirectly on the Non-Western setting. If this link can be explored in the upcoming researches, it may provide a clearer picture of the trait-like factors influencing ICC of the individual from the Non-Western context.

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