

The impact of Muslim international students' religiosity on their intercultural communication competence: A case of Malaysia

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This study aims to highlight the importance of religion in influencing intercultural communication competence (ICC). Previous studies have identified the importance of religion and recommended to address the association between religion and ICC. Following the same line, this study considered Asian context of Malaysia as it is an Islamic state. Theoretical support was considered from anxiety uncertainty management theory. Two main categories of religion are addressed in this study: religious affiliation and commitment (religiosity). In terms of religious affiliation, only Muslim international students (N=224) were approached. For religious commitment, the religiosity of students is measured. Data was collected through survey questionnaire and analyzed in SPSS and AMOS. The findings revealed that religiosity has a strong impact on ICC of Muslim international students. In addition, they are also able to understand and give respect to the cultural and religious differences during communication with others which enables their competence in intercultural communication.

Keywords: Religion; Religiosity; Malaysia; International students; Intercultural communication competence.

INTRODUCTION

The world has become a global village due to the rapid change and transformation of higher education institutes (HEI). The ministries of higher education of various developed and developing countries are encouraging the international students to enroll in their public/private/international HEI (Nadeem, Mohammed, & Dalib, 2020b). This trend has been effectively considered by the ministry of higher education (MoHE) and HEI of Malaysia. Currently, they have captured around 0.2 million international students in their public/private/international HEI (Nadeem, Mohammed, & Dalib, 2019). In addition, they are also targeting to host more international students in their campuses by the year 2025. In the quest of meeting their targets, they keep on enhancing the services and facilities for the international students to efficiently carry out their higher education in Malaysia.

The cultural and communication similarities or differences play a considerable role regarding the adjustment of international students in a new culture (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010). These differences are likely to affect competence of international students in intercultural interaction (Slethaug & Manjula, 2012). As far as Malaysian culture is concerned, it is an undeniable fact that it is an Islamic state with Muslim-majority population. In addition, Mahmud et al. (2010) stated that the Islamic beliefs and Asian culture have a strong influence on the Malaysian culture. It is also witnessed that a huge proportion of international students in Malaysia belong to the Islamic countries for instance, Nigeria, Libya, Pakistan, Sudan, and Indonesia (Bernama, 2015). International students' desired destination of education is Malaysia due to the eminence of education and cultural ease (Aziz, 2016). The cultures of international students of Malaysia have some worthy similarities with the Malaysian culture (e.g., religion).

An interesting study in the context of Malaysia by Mamman (1995) regarding the influencers of intercultural communication competence (ICC) found that if a stranger is sharing the same religious beliefs with the host members, there are more chances of their intercultural communication to be effective. Even though they were brought up in different cultures, still they have more chances of effective intercultural interactions. Furthermore, the significance of religion in intercultural encounters relies on the religious affiliation and the level of religiosity (religious commitment) of the individual. In the west, religion may not have a strong effect on the intercultural interaction as religion is considered as a personal issue in west (Mamman, 1995). On the contrary, in the Asian context of Malaysia, religion is considered a public issue and communications with the strangers are purely based on the religious affiliation (according to the teachings of Islam). Therefore, it can be assumed that the communication between the hosts and international students in Malaysia tends to be effective if they share the same religion.

Most conceptualizations of ICC have been dominated by the western context (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Deardorff, 2006; Gudykunst, 1993). On the other hand, several other scholars have pointed the non-western context of competence such as that of Malaysia (Dalib, Harun, & Yusof, 2017), Korea (Yum, 2012), and China (Yeh, 2010). Arasaratnam (2016) pointed out that contextual variables matter in conceptualizing ICC. Several investigations have revealed that there are number of influencers; for instance, empathy, sensation seeking, and attitude etc. have a potential to influence the ICC of individuals (Nadeem, Mohammed, & Dalib, 2020a). However, insufficient attention has been given to contextual variables such as religion in the mainstream discourse of ICC (Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Wrench, Corrigan, McCroskey, & Punyanunt-Carter, 2006) due

to the domination of western context. It is also witnessed that several other non-western researchers have noticed and addressed the issue of religion in their discourses on ICC, for instance Malaysia (Mamman, 1995), Iran (Ameli & Molaei, 2012), and Nigeria (Ajitoni, 2014). Furthermore, intercultural experts strongly recommend an investigation of the association between religion and ICC in the upcoming efforts (Ameli & Molaei, 2012; Holmes & O'Neill, 2012; Nadeem et al., 2020a, 2020b; Wrench et al., 2006).

The theoretical support for this study was considered from anxiety uncertainty management (AUM) theory (Gudykunst, 1993, 2005). AUM already predicts that when the strangers (international students) are able to understand and then give respect for the similarities/differences to host members then they are likely to associate with them and they are able to behave appropriately and effectively (Gudykunst, 1993, 2005). It indicates that when Muslim international students have an understanding regarding cultural and religious similarities/differences (religious affiliation and commitment) then they easily categorize with others and it will indicate their ICC.

The current study aims to give representation to the Asian context of Malaysia in the mainstream discourses of ICC in addition to following the suggestions of earlier potential researchers, to further explore the influence of religion on ICC. This study documented two key attributes of religion: religious affiliation and religious commitment (religiosity) of international students of Malaysia. For religious affiliation, this study specifically considered Muslim international students as more appropriate respondents due to the above discussed concerns. In terms of religious commitment, a variable, religiosity, is considered to investigate how their religious beliefs are practiced by the Muslim international students and how their religiosity impacts ICC. Based on these discussed reasons, this study considers the Malaysian context and Muslim international students to fulfill the objectives of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Communication Competence

In ICC literature, it is witnessed that intercultural scholars have adopted various terms such as effective communication, intercultural adjustment, communication appropriateness, cultural competence, and intercultural sensitivity in order to address the same phenomena that is ICC (Deardorff, 2006). It is noticed that several terms are used interchangeably by intercultural researchers in determining the concept of ICC according to the literature of intercultural communication. It is the same case as the comprehensive definition of ICC. Even the experts of ICC have not agreed on any comprehensive and specific definition of ICC (Deardorff, 2006; Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). One of the most comprehensive definitions of ICC is defined by Fantini (2005) as "the complex abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p. 1)

The initial effort regarding the area of ICC started in 1960. During this era, the researchers were focused on cultural

adaptation and its features such as openness, stability, and flexibility for a new culture (Arasaratnam, 2016). In the late 1970s, the experts pointed key variables (such as, empathy, interaction management, and display of respect) that can indicate intercultural effectiveness or cross-cultural adaptation. After that era, this domain grasps the interest of the scholars of interpersonal communication competence in 1980s. Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) conceptualize ICC as appropriate and effective communication by culturally different individuals. The era of 1990s was considered as remarkable as compared to other eras because the pertinent theories of intercultural communication were developed in the same era. The theories included AUM, identity management, and identity negotiation theory (Nadeem, Mohammed, & Dalib, 2018). During 2000s, the gurus of ICC agreed upon a single comprehensive definition of ICC, and a novel study introduced a culture-general approach to measure ICC of individuals. From 2010 onwards, several versions of integrated model of ICC (IMICC) by following the culture general approach were validated on multiple cultures like, USA, Australia, and Malaysia (Nadeem et al., 2020b).

It is an undeniable fact that from 1960 until 2020, the researchers have contributed well in terms of expanding the understanding regarding the complex nature of ICC. It is witnessed that evolution of ICC occurred by following two approaches: monocultural and culture general (Arasaratnam, 2016). The monocultural approach tends to focus on the elements of one and two cultures. However, the culture general approach concentrates on the factors that are universally applicable beyond any cultural biasedness (Nadeem et al., 2020a). This approach has been effectively adopted by the western and Asian researchers in their studies and addressed various factors such as, empathy, attitude, motivation, sensation seeking, and many others influencing ICC directly/indirectly (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Nadeem et al., 2020b). The culture general variables have been validated in diverse cultural contexts and on the individuals belong to multiple cultures. Furthermore, a lacking is witnessed regarding the direct influence of religion on ICC of the individuals. Therefore, the current study tends to precisely unpack the argument of how religion affects ICC of the culturally different individuals from the Asian context of Malaysia.

Religiosity

Religious philosophies are necessary for every culture. Religion is labeled as a set of beliefs, practices, and moral claims, often codified as prayers, rituals, and religious laws, all of which are shared within cultures (Mokhlis, 2010). Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2010) maintained that religion assists many daily functions. Besides, its effect can be seen in the whole fabric of the culture. These functions comprise of clash solution, strengthening of clutch harmony, descriptions of the unexplainable, and emotive care besides societal control. Thus, religion is an association of belief and values (Mokhlis, 2010). Religion has been documented to have an influence on individuals' lives in addition to cultures. Past studies have inspected religion's effect on an individual's morals, values,

attitudes, and behaviors. Religion affects the behaviors of individuals and influence on two approaches. Initially, individual's psychological and cognitive behaviors such as thinking, experience, and emotions are strongly influenced by the religion (Chamberlein & Zika, 1992; McDaniel & Burnett, 1990). Lastly, the belief system of the individual is also influenced by religion, which results in differences in the attitudes and behaviors of those who are influenced by religion compared with other individuals in the society (McDaniel & Burnett, 1990).

Religiosity refers to the extent of an individual for being religious. Essoo and Dibb (2004) defined religiosity as "the degree to which beliefs in specific religious values and ideals are held and practiced by an individual" (p. 684). Religiosity of the individuals is usually assessed through its two subcategories: religious affiliation and religious commitment (Essoo & Dibb, 2004; Worthington et al., 2003). Reviewing religiosity in a person's performance is to scrutinize religious commitment (McDaniel & Burnett, 1990). Religious commitment contains cognitive as well as behavioral procedures. The cognitive measure can be well defined as how powerfully a person grasps his or her religious principles (McDaniel & Burnett, 1990), whereas the behavioral portion is distinct as the level of a person's contribution in prearranged religious events (Mokhlis, 2009).

Religiosity and ICC

Literature specified that religion is the component of culture and it has potential to impact behaviors of individuals (Essoo & Dibb, 2004). Other studies of religion also observed that religion is capable of influencing behaviors (Al-Hyari, Alnsour, Al-Weshah, & Haffar, 2012). To understand the behaviors of individuals, religion is more commonly adopted as an appreciated variable (Fianto, Hadiwidjojo, & Aisjah, 2014). Regardless of this, competency of the intercultural communicator is directly associated with behaviors (Lustig & Koester, 2003; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Wiseman, 2002). Therefore, it could be assumed that religion influences the behaviors of individuals like competency in intercultural communication.

Mamman (1995) stated that the importance of religion in ICC tends to lie in the type of religious affiliation as well as the religiosity of the individuals and the actions held by the individuals. Ajitoni (2014) found that religion is the contributor to intercultural communication while examining the ICC among Nigerian students. Another study by Mamman (1995) also confirmed that religiosity of internationals had a positive association with intercultural effectiveness of the individuals in the context of Malaysia. Wrench et al. (2006) examined the relationship between different variables associated with intercultural communication besides religion. They found that religion is a vital construct for researches on intercultural communication. Also, Ameli and Molaei (2012) found that religious affiliations affect the communication of individuals to be effective in nature. In the same manner, Holmes and O'Neill (2012) strongly recommended that exploring the religious

affiliations and commitment (religiosity) of the individuals intersects with ICC in future studies.

Based on above discussed studies, it can be witnessed that religion is an important constituent of ICC. Furthermore, it is strongly recommended by some studies that research analysis is required for this area. In the end, it is suggested for the communication researchers to address the empirical association between religion and intercultural communication. Therefore, this study assumed that religiosity of the Muslim international students would likely have an association with their ICC.

Anxiety uncertainty management (AUM) theory

AUM is one of the frequently considered theories among the well-known theories of intercultural communication (Gudykunst, 1993, 2005). The stranger is the core element of AUM. Gudykunst (2005) denotes everyone as the potential stranger during the initial interaction with others. He further notices a stranger as the individual who seems to be near but, far away in terms of their mindsets (Neuliep, 2012). Strangers face anxiety and uncertainty when they communicate with the people of diverse cultural backgrounds. It is observed that when the strangers are on higher/lower levels of anxiety and uncertainty, their communication is compromised. Therefore, it is suggested that strangers must manage their levels of anxiety and uncertainty to attain effective communication. The focus of AUM is effective communication (ICC), a stranger should manage the anxiety and uncertainty to acquire the mindfulness and later the mindfulness further leads to effective communication (Gudykunst, 1993, 2005). The management of anxiety and uncertainty is acknowledged by Gudykunst (2005) as the "basic causes" that determine communication effectiveness. However, there are several other factors that deter the management of anxiety and uncertainty and they are termed "superficial causes" (Gudykunst, 2005) and have a direct influence on the ICC of the individual.

In AUM theory's superficial cause, Gudykunst (2005) explains about the ability of understanding the group similarities/differences in social categorization of strangers. Gudykunst further explores that when the integration about the similarities/differences among stranger's and native's culture increases then one's ability to behave appropriately and effectively also increases, same is the case with personal similarities (Gudykunst, 1993). For better understanding of the similarities/differences of the natives, individuals must have the proper knowledge of the other person with whom the individuals interact (Gudykunst, 2005). Researchers revealed that communication tends to be more effective when individuals have more knowledge about the culturally different others (Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, & Brusckke, 1998; Wiseman, Hammer, & Nishida, 1989). Based on these arguments, it is assumed that if the strangers have a better understanding of the similarities/differences of religion (religious affiliation) in addition to practicing religion by them (religious commitment) then they will behave more appropriately and effectively (ICC).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Muslim international students were considered as the participants of this study from a public university of Malaysia (University Utara Malaysia). The participants (N=224) voluntarily participated in the study anonymously by filling out the self-administered survey questionnaire. The participants represented multiple countries, with the largest group as follows: Indonesia (N=38), Nigeria (N=38), Iraq (N=20), Jordan (N=17), Pakistan (N=23), Somalia (N=15), and Yemen (N=15). The participants consisted of 184 males and 40 females. The participants ranged in age from 18-55 in which most of the participants lay in the category of 25-35 years. The participants were enrolled in three different programs: Ph.D. (N=127), Master (N=29), and Bachelor (N=68). Most of the participants stayed in Malaysia less than two years (N=171).

Measures

A five-point Likert-type scale was used with 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The uni-dimensionality of every independent scale was confirmed through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and based on modification indices; few items from independent scale were deleted to maintain single-factor structure.

Religiosity

The religiosity of the individuals was measured by adopting the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI) developed by Worthington et al. (2003, 2012). This scale comprised of 10 items. The scale includes items such as, "My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life", and "Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life". $\chi^2 = 39.25$, $\chi^2/df = 1.26$, $GFI = .966$, $CFI = .994$, $PNFI = .669$, $RMSEA = .035$, $SRMR = .024$; $\alpha = .923$, $M = 3.32$, $SD = .943$.

ICC

ICC was measured with 15 items (i.e., "I usually look for opportunities to interact with people from other cultures" and "I feel that people from other cultures have many valuable things to teach me") which were developed by Arasaratnam (2009). $\chi^2 = 58.76$, $\chi^2/df = 1.46$, $GFI = .956$, $CFI = .988$, $PNFI = .702$, $RMSEA = .046$, $SRMR = .026$; $\alpha = .937$, $M = 3.52$, $SD = .825$.

RESULTS

Data analysis was carried out in SPSS (descriptive analysis) and then AMOS (inferential statistics) through SEM. Three different steps were taken in order to analyze the collected data for this study. In the first step, the factor loading of every retained individual item in the measurement model was examined through CFA. The values manifest that every item loaded significantly in its specific variable and their values exceed the threshold values. After confirming the loadings of items, fitness indices of measurement model were analyzed. Fitness indices indicate that data has an excellent fit with the measurement model ($\chi^2 = 253.55$, $\chi^2/df = 1.40$, $GFI = .906$, $CFI = .975$, $PNFI = .789$, $RMSEA = .043$, $SRMR = .047$).

In the second step, the validity and reliability concerns of the variables were addressed. The values confirm that the variables of the study are valid and reliable, and their values are higher than the cut-off limit of every category: α (above .70),

composite reliability (above .70), average variance extracted (above .50) and discriminant validity (above .70). These values have confirmed the reliability and validity of the variables of the current study. After this confirmation, the covariance of measurement model was removed, and paths were introduced to transform measurement model into the structural model. In addition, the fitness indices of the structural model ($\chi^2 = 253.55$, $\chi^2/df = 1.40$, $GFI = .906$, $CFI = .975$, $PNFI = .789$, $RMSEA = .043$, $SRMR = .047$) remained the same as of measurement model which further reconfirms that the data collected for this study has an excellent fit with the structural model also.

In the third step, the correlation among the variables and regression analysis were carried out. Pearson correlation test indicates that religiosity and ICC are significantly correlated with each other ($r = .43$, $p < .01$). It further reveals the presence of significant relationship between religiosity and ICC. Lastly, through regression analysis the influence of religiosity on ICC was examined. The values of path analysis (regression analysis) have witnessed that religiosity has a significant and directly positive effect on ICC ($\beta = .430$, $t = 6.414$, $p < .001$). It reveals that when the religiosity of Muslim international students is increased, their ICC also increased. Therefore, the findings of the study have supported the claim that the religiosity of Muslim international students has a strong influence on their ICC. To sum up, the findings of this study confirmed that religiosity has a potential to impact ICC of the individuals.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to address the effect of religion on ICC of the international students in Malaysia. In order to meet the objectives of the study, two important features of religion were considered: religious affiliation and religious commitment. Religious affiliation was measured through their demographic characteristics. However, religious commitment was addressed through RCI scale, to investigate the influence of religiosity on ICC of Muslim international students.

The findings of the current study indicated that the religious affiliation of international students is Islam in Malaysia. Despite of the similarity of their religion, these international students were representing different cultures and countries. It is understood that majority of international students prefer Malaysia for their higher education due to the cultural ease as it is an Islamic state. Several studies as well as the reports indicated that the international students from Islamic states are heading towards Malaysia as compared to other countries just because of similarity of religion. The target of this study was to explore that how religion affect ICC of the Muslim students. For that reason, religiosity of international students that contributed to their ICC, was measured in this study.

It is evident from the findings of this study that there is a positive and statistically significant relationship between religiosity and ICC. In addition, the religiosity of Muslim international students has a strong influence on their ICC. The findings of this study indicate that the Muslim international students in Malaysia hold religious beliefs that further influence their ICC when they interact with culturally different others.

There are various reasons due to which such findings are witnessed. First, these international students mostly belong to the Islamic states and Malaysia is also an Islamic state. For that reason, they are more comfortable in communicating and adjusting in a new cultural context. Second, international students are found more committed to the teachings of Islam (such as treating other individuals as brothers and sisters) in their daily life and these teachings contribute positively to their ICC. Lastly, Islam is a religion of peace, humanity; its philosophy focuses on giving rights to the humans and creating cultural harmony to promote peace in the universe. Individuals who practice Islamic beliefs in their lives are expected to promote peace and avoid any sort of conflicts which results positive outcomes. Therefore, these Muslim international students appeared effective in their intercultural interactions.

This mechanism is already predicted by the AUM theory. AUM explains that when the strangers can understand the similarities/differences of the other cultures then they are effective in their intercultural communication. In addition, this specific understanding helps them to categorize with the individuals of other cultures. The findings of this study are consistent with the claims of the AUM theory that Muslim international students can understand the similarities of religion (Islam) and it further affects their intercultural communication. Religion is a component of culture, this cultural component (Islam) enables them to be competent in their intercultural interaction. Furthermore, the similarity of religion among the international students enables them to categorize with the people of other cultures in a new cultural context. Most importantly, as these students appeared competent, it also indicates that they can understand the cultures dissimilarities (of religion and culture) and they are giving respect to it. Malaysia does not solely host Muslim international students in its campuses; rather, a great diversity of cultures and religions exists in Malaysia (in the form of its natives and international students). Thus, by giving respect to cultural and religious differences, the Muslim international students are competent in their intercultural communication. At the end, findings of this current study are supported by predictions and explanations of AUM and contributed significantly in terms of theory and practice.

The HEI and MoHE of Malaysia can take various benefits by considering the findings of this study. MoHE can refine or make flexible policies for such students who are Muslims or from Muslim states so that they can intensify the limit of international students in their public and private HEI. Furthermore, MoHE in collaboration with HEI can conduct numerous training sessions to teach their international students how to behave when they experience similarities and differences in the people of other cultures and that will ultimately contribute to ICC. On the other side, HEI can provide friendly environment to their international students to focus as well as practice their religious beliefs so that they can attain ICC. Furthermore, they can also teach international students how to ignore or minimize their cultural and religious differences by simply giving respect to individuals of other

cultures. As the findings indicated that international students' religious commitment has a strong effect on their ICC.

CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to explore the relationship of religiosity and ICC in the Asian context of Malaysia. Previous researches regarding ICC have witnessed the importance of religion during intercultural interactions and suggested further addressing the link among religion and ICC. This study has followed the recommendations of earlier attempts and addressed the influence of religion on ICC of Malaysian international students. The cultural context of Malaysia is considered because it is an Islamic state and majority of international students belongs to Islam. The influence of religion is assessed from two main categories: religious affiliation and commitment (religiosity). Specifically, Muslim international students were considered this study to confirm how specific religious affiliation influences ICC. Second, religiosity of these Muslim international students was employed to witness how their religious practices influence their ICC. The findings of this study revealed that religiosity of Muslim international students have a strong influence on their ICC. It also indicates that Muslim international students are able to respect the cultural and religious differences which enable them to be competent in intercultural communication as individuals from other religious and cultural groups also inhabit Malaysia. Lastly, the findings have also confirmed the predictions and explanations of AUM regarding social categorization of strangers. The upcoming researchers should address this association among different cultural contexts to validate the relationship by more effective means.

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