

An Explorative Study: The Challenges of Cross-Cultural Adaptation among Expatriates in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Abstract

The current progress of technological modernization has further enhanced the increase in the number of international migration movements around the world. The encouragement of international migration is also driven by the policies enacted by the government at the policy implementation stage, producing a dynamic and highly innovative local workforce as well as high demand from industries, institutions, and statutory bodies to fill the energy gap in professional work. International migration is an advantageous approach and has been found to positively impact a country's economic and socio-political development. Furthermore, the involvement of professionals, especially expatriates who are technologically literate, highly knowledgeable, and have extensive experience in certain fields, not only helps the country's economic growth but also contributes to the sustainability and viability of organizational management. Nonetheless, individuals involved in international migration, especially expatriates, tend to experience problems adapting to the cultural environment of the host country due to the differing cultural practices than their countries of origin. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the challenges of cultural adaptation among expatriates in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The findings of this study found that the lack of social interaction and lack of cultural interaction are the challenges faced by expatriates while adapting to the culture in Malaysia. The findings of this study also provide benefits to the organizations and agencies of the government i.e. MIDA or TalentCorp in managing expatriate issues in Malaysia in order to reduce the turnover and repatriation among expatriates.

Keywords: Migration, Expatriates, Cross-cultural Adaptation, Challenges

Introduction

International migration has been of great interest among professionals due to factors such as government policies, good salaries, post-retirement housing schemes, health benefits and better transportation. The International Migration report found that international migration statistics showed an increase from 150 million people to 270 million people in 2019 and 281 million in 2020 (International Organization for Migration, 2020). Of the total, 164 million people are international workers who are categorized as expatriates (International Organization for Migration, 2019). Expatriates are known as professional workers who have expertise, skills, and knowledge in specific fields (Haak-Saheem, 2016; Bayraktar, 2019).

Therefore, with an increase in international migrants, especially expatriates, across the world, the issue of cultural adaptation in a new country has also occurred (Giddens, 2018). Cultural adaptation is a process of self-adjustment to a new cultural environment that includes social interaction and cultural integration (Quansah, 2017). It was found that expatriates' well-being is affected when they struggle to adapt to the culture of the host country (Farcas and Gonçalves, 2017). Studies have highlighted various causes that relate to the challenges of cultural adaptation, such as inadequate mental and physical preparation (Singh et al., 2017), reluctance to accept new cultures and experience new things, and insufficient knowledge of the local culture (Harari, Reaves, Beane, Laginess, and Viswesvaran, 2018).

Furthermore, the inability to adapt to the local culture creates negative implications within organisations (Okpara, 2016). These implications include the occurrence of role ambiguity and work system ambiguity, which can result in decreased work productivity (Potter and Richardson, 2019), increased organizational expenses, and affect organizational reputation (Kraimer et al., 2016). Therefore, the effectiveness of work implementation is measured through work performance (Pringle and Blumberg, 1982; Tsegaye et al., 2019). Good work performance in the organization proves that expatriates and the management are able to be committed and handle the issues and weaknesses that exist in the organization effectively (Wang and Varma, 2018). In contrast, low and unsatisfactory work performance shows that expatriates and the organization failed to manage issues of disability and weakness (Bayraktar, 2019). This causes an increase in the amount of repatriation and the turnover rate in the organization, which then impacts the organization's performance as a whole (Akhil and Liu, 2019; Stanciu and Vauclair, 2018).

In order to investigate the difficulties of cultural adaptation among expats in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, an exploratory study is needed. The purpose of this study was to investigate the difficulties associated with cultural adaptation in the context of expatriates in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The results of this study will support empirical research and increase the number of repositories that are relevant to the study's setting.

Research Objective

- i. To explore the challenges of cultural adaptation among expatriates in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Literature Review**The Challenges of Expatriates in the Host Country****Culture Shock**

The issue of international migration that involves cultural transition has been of great interest among sociological researchers (Selmer and Luring, 2015; Doki et al., 2018; Hajro et

al., 2019). Cultural transitions often cause cultural shock among expatriates involved in international migration (Adler and Aycan, 2018). Cultural transition refers to the change of original cultural practices to a new cultural environment (Geeraert et al., 2019). Sambasivan et al (2017) found that culture shock has an impact that can affect the well-being of expatriate and organizational development. Noethen and Alcazar (2020) also stated that the lack of knowledge and experience about the local culture of the host country is a factor of culture shock. Additionally, inadequate mental, physical, and spiritual preparations is another cause of culture shock (Jyoti and Kour, 2017; Dimitrova et al., 2019). Therefore, the challenge of dealing with culture shock was found to affect the psychological balance and well-being among expatriates in the host country (Selmer and Luring, 2015). This situation causes psychological stress that can harm the emotional stability and health of an expatriate (Giorgi et al., 2020). It also contributes to disruptions and inability to complete tasks within the organization (Hussain and Deery, 2018). This in turn causes the quality of work to be disturbed and causes work performance to decline (Bethel et al., 2020).

Social Interaction with Locals

The literature highlights that, social interaction with the local population is one of the challenges that most expatriates face (Urzúa et al., 2017; Rodsai et al., 2017). This is due to high tendency of local residents to use local languages instead of international languages (Quansah, 2017; Lian and Lim, 2020). Rodsai et al (2017) found that the lack of skills in mastering the local language caused expatriates to experience difficulties in social interaction with local residents of the host country. For instance, the words 'yes' and 'no' are often used in communication by people from Western countries such as the United States when suggesting the certainty of something or a decision (Rygg, 2014; Lavorel et al., 2015; Pitts, 2016; Yeke and Semercioz, 2016). However, it is not commonly used by communities in Asia such as Japan, as most of them people tend to use the word 'maybe' when communicating (Hassan et al., 2018; Kang et al., 2019).

Expatriates may struggle to establish close interpersonal relationships with residents and local employees if they do not learn and understand the local language (Ott and Michailova, 2017; Ramlan et al., 2018; Wani et al., 2012; Bethel et al., 2020). With language and communication barriers, information sharing, consultation, and discussion are limited (Wang and Varma, 2018). Accordingly, contradiction and ambiguity in certain information can also result in a misinterpretation of a matter (Wani et al., 2012; Hassan et al., 2018).

Family Adaptation to New Culture

In some countries, expatriates are allowed to bring their families to the host country, depending on the policies and procedures of the governing country (Chen and Shaffer, 2018). Therefore, expatriates need to ensure that family members brought to the host country are able to adapt to the new cultural environment so that intercultural conflicts can be avoided (Erogul and Rahman, 2017; Sterle et al., 2018; Chen, 2019). It was found that about six percent of expatriates have gone through repatriation before the end of their employment period due to their family members not being able to adapt to the culture and environment of the host country (Singh et al., 2017; Kaur, 2018).

In addition, Abdul Malek and Budhwar (2013) found that 51 percent of expatriates are faced with a stressful situation as a result of their partner's failure to adapt to the local culture of the host country. This matter, if not given due attention, will affect the performance of expatriates in the organization as they are not able to fully focus on performing tasks

(Trompeter et al., 2016). Consequently, this could further disrupt individuals', motivation, work enthusiasm, and work commitment (Nam and Park, 2019). This indirectly results in a decline in work performance and productivity in the organization (Faeth and Kittler, 2017).

Role Ambiguity

According to Van den Brande et al (2016), expatriates' lack of understanding of the work systems and procedures in the organization can lead to the occurrence of role ambiguity. This is because each organizational culture practices different regulations, activities, and value systems according to the organizational policies and procedures (Nardon et al., 2015). In addition, some of the factors that causes role ambiguity include lack of knowledge (Wang et al., 2017), lack of initiative to learn and understand the organizational culture (Doki et al., 2018), lack of social interaction (Sambasivan et al., 2017), and conflict between expatriates and organizations (Qureshi et al., 2017; Setti et al., 2020).

Therefore, issues of role ambiguity can have negative implications for both expatriates and the reputation of the organization, which can increase organizational workload (Ng et al., 2017; Selmer and Luring, 2011). Previous research also highlighted that this can cause further psychological stress such as irritability, burnout, a lack of enthusiasm, and a loss of focus on work (Giorgi et al., 2020). In addition, role ambiguity has also been found to cause a decrease in work morale, work responsibility, and motivation to produce quality work, resulting in a decline in work performance among expatriates in organizations (Holodynski, 2013; Wang and Varma, 2018).

Other Challenges Beyond the Organizational Context

Furthermore, previous research identified several challenges outside the organizational context that affect expatriates, including food differences (Gupta and Bhaskar, 2016), climate change (Nguyen and Wodon, 2015), lifestyle (Bravo et al., 2017), and political, economic, social, and security factors (Haak-Saheem, 2016). Gupta and Bhaskar (2016) found that the difference in food preparation is a challenge that expatriates experience abroad. For example, expatriates from India who migrate to the United States find it difficult to adapt to the food in the United States as the Indian community prefers spicy dishes such as chapati, tossei and curry (Ramalu and Subramaniam, 2019).

In addition, Nguyen and Wodon (2015) found that weather differences between the country of origin and the host country were another challenging factor for the expatriates. The ability of expatriates to accept weather changes can reduce stress while living in the host country (Akhtar et al., 2015). Moreover, a study by Bravo et al (2017) shows that different lifestyles in the host country are one of the challenges that must be overcome while abroad. This is due to the differences in cultural contexts, income gaps, desires, and different geographic positions that can affect lifestyles in a country (Luo and Wu, 2015). Haak-Saheem (2016) also found that complex political, economic, social, and security factors can cause stress and subsequently cause discomfort to expatriates in the host country.

Overall, it can be concluded that there are various challenges, both within the organizational context and beyond the organizational context, that expatriates encounter while adapting to the local culture of the host country. Therefore, expatriates who are involved in international migration are required to prepare thoroughly and increase their knowledge of the host country to effectively face the challenges of cultural adaptation. In fact, this can also prevent the occurrence of culture shock and serious cultural conflicts that may influence expatriates' work performance and the performance of the organization as a whole.

Methodology

This a qualitative study that implements an in-depth interview. The interviews were conducted through an online platform, on Zoom Meeting that allowed the data to be analysed thematically. The targeted population of this study involves individuals who are expatriates working in the service sector in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This research consists of protocol interviews, which include the challenges of expatriates in the host country. The protocol interviews were used as a guide for the researcher to gather information on the research objectives of this study.

Research Results and Discussion

Research Results

Figure 1 presents the theme that emerged based on the study’s objectives, which include the lack of social interaction and the lack of cultural integration contributing to the difficulty of adapting to the cultural and work environments among expatriates in Malaysia. The sub-themes for the theme of lack of social interaction consist of the prejudiced perception of local residents and the inability to adapt to local residents. Meanwhile, the sub-themes for the theme of lack of cultural integration are insufficient preparation, cultural transition, and encountering cultural shock.

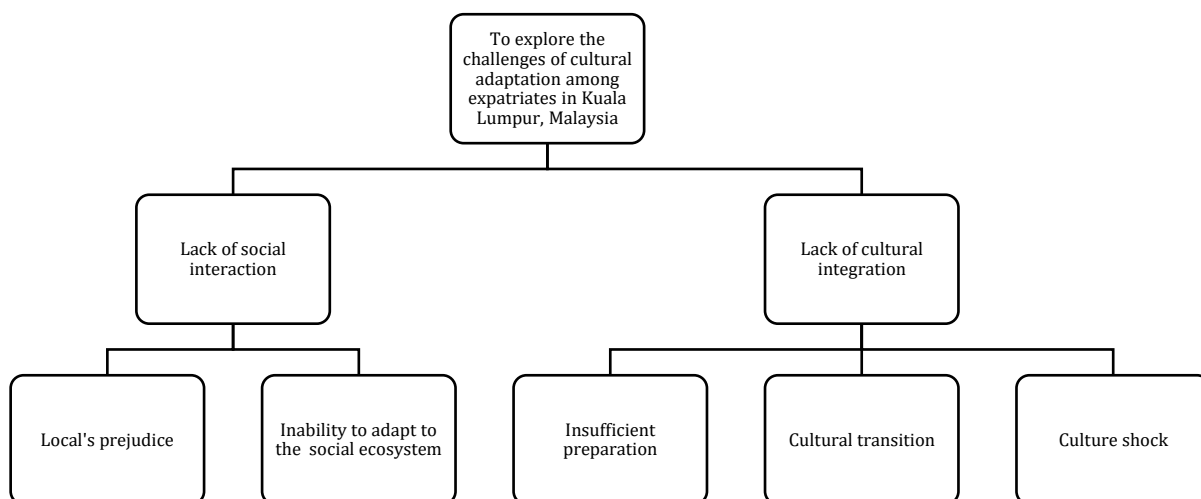


Figure 1. Formation of Themes for Difficulty Adapting to the Cultural and Work Environment among Expatriates in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

There are three categories under the sub-theme of local residents’ “prejudiced perceptions”, which include stereotypes, unfair treatment, and local residents’ impression. The results indicated that R2 and R3 experienced unfair treatment from the local population. The respondent also stated that there was discrimination and one-sided treatment from the local population on the basis of differences in skin colour, rank, gender, and nationality (R2 and R3).

Additionally, the use of dialect language, mixing of ethnic diversity, acceptance of local food, and understanding the work system in the organization are categories that make up the sub-theme of “inability to adapt to the social ecosystem”. This finding acts as serendipitous data because the difficulties experienced by the respondents regarding cultural diversity in Malaysia were not discussed by past researchers. R1, R2, R4, and R6 faced difficult situations

in adapting to the social ecosystem. The social ecosystem refers to the people around the respondent, including friends, neighbours, the community, employees, and the organization.

Based on R4's experience, the results of the analysis found that factors of "insufficient preparation" include incompetency in English and a limited understanding of the local language. Incompetency in English is another serendipitous finding in this study, as there were no findings in previous studies that discussed the lack of fluency in English in the host country. Meanwhile, the issue of limited understanding of the local language has been emphasized by previous researchers (Smith, 2018; Kaur, 2018; Richardson and Ng, 2019; Arseneault, 2020). However, R1, R2, and R4 shared similar experiences where they struggled to understand the local language, which affected their welfare in Malaysia.

There are two categories under the sub-theme of "cultural transition", which are the diversity of cultural practices and the difference in value systems and politics. This matter involves the difficulties experienced by the respondents in terms of cultural diversity in Malaysia. The findings of this study regarding these issues further contribute to the literature regarding the challenges among expatriates. The results of the analysis found that R1, R4, and R6 experienced a difficult situation in understanding the diversity of cultures, including language, the government systems, legislation, and administration in Malaysia.

Lastly, the final category of the sub-theme lack of cultural integration is "culture shock". Some of the elements that contribute to this sub-theme include changes in the shape of the earth and the equatorial climate in Malaysia, the use of mixed languages, Islamic cultural practices, and the practice of removing shoes in certain places. R1, R2, R3, and R6 stated their experiences in facing the culture shock of the land form and equatorial climate in Malaysia. This is because the terrain and climate in the country of origin are different compared to Malaysia (R1, R2, R3, and R6). Table 1 indicates the results of the matrix coding query analysis on the difficulty of adapting to the cultural and work environments among respondents of this study.

Table 1

Matrix Coding Query Analysis Findings for Difficulty Adapting to the Cultural and Work Environment

Matrix coding query	Local's prejudice	Inability to adapt to the social ecosystem	Insufficient preparation	Cultural transition	Culture shock
Reference	25	28	5	15	25
Coding reference	29	46	8	18	32

Discussion

The findings of this study proposed two main themes including the lack of interaction, and the lack of cultural integration among expatriates in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Further explanations of the main themes are discussed within several sub-themes, including local prejudices, inability to adapt to the social ecosystem, insufficient preparation, cultural transition, and culture shock.

Lack of Social Interaction

a. Local prejudice

i. Stereotype

A study by Nunes et al (2017) stated that the issue of stereotypes shown by local residents often occurs among new immigrants that have migrated to the host country. The issue of stereotyping involves false perceptions of an individual (Black et al., 1991; Dako-Gyeke and Adu, 2017). In the context of this study, a few respondents recounted the experience of local residents making initial perceptions and discriminating against certain ethnic groups in terms of skin colour and rank when working as international professional workers in Malaysia. This was acknowledged by R2, who felt that there were stereotypes among locals due to different skin colours. He stated that "I faced difficulty with the mentality of Malaysian people. years 2012 where I came, I didn't have any difficulties in terms of colour. So, now... recently, Malaysian people tend to discriminate me. because of I'm black. You know, I also feel the situation of stereotype".

ii. Unfair Treatment

Furthermore, the respondents of this study encountered one-sided and unfair treatment as a result of different social ranks and work positions. R2 mentioned that "...about Malaysian society...everyone wants to be in high rank... to me, very different if I am a lecturer and professor there...and I know sometimes I get bureaucracy. Seriously, for example, in my office in the campus... treasurer.. registrar.. when I have a problem... when I call as a Dr XXX... the way they serve you...quite different... If I call and I said I'm Prof XXX... then they said, hey! Prof...okay Prof... how can I help you... yeah... seriously... and sure, they're giving help.. but at the same times, I need to be patient... I don 't want to be rude... I want to be polite.. professional.. but at the same time I need to be patient... of course I learn Malaysian society context... working environment.. the important relationship...".

ii. Local's Response

R1 also experienced false perceptions from local residents. R1 stated that "...I also aware that Malaysian perception towards me.. being Mat Saleh.. at the first day, they act like awkward... who I am.. where are you from.. so, I can see that explanation... they reaction..owh..I can see the favor. the way you as a local asked the questions.. I'm aware... for me, it's discrimination...they give wrong perception on me ". This depicts the false perceptions held by the local population towards the respondents of this study, causing them to feel uncomfortable socializing and adapting to the local cultural environment.

In addition, R3 recounted his experience of being marginalized by local workers in the organization due to a false perception by the local population, "...sometimes lah.. I noticed...Chinese want to work with Chinese, Indian want to work with Indian... Malay want to work with Malay.. then, how about me? I asked them.. How where do I want to go? I actually senior there.. So, for me I feel like left behind... But then, somehow we worked together.. But they are really they don't want to work with other races.. its difficulties in job...".

Therefore, the issues of stereotypes, unfair treatment, and false perceptions received from a few locals in Malaysia made the respondents uncomfortable when associating with the locals. This factor is due to disparities such as social rank and skin color. This coincides with the views of Asma (1996); Asma (2005), who described Malaysian society as placing great importance on hierarchy and rank in daily life. Despite this, expatriates are often sensitive and pay attention to the cultural environment practiced by the community in Malaysia in order to

avoid the occurrence of culture shock that can affect the implementation of tasks at work (Saad and Khalid, 2015).

b. Inability to adapt to the social ecosystem

i. Dialect Language

According to the analysis, it was found that the use of dialect language by the Malaysian locals is a coincidental data point that causes culture shock among expatriates in Malaysia. A few respondents in this study revealed that the use of dialect by local residents when interacting made it difficult for expatriates to understand the topic of conversation. R1 acknowledged that local residents who use dialect make it difficult for the respondent to interact with the people around them, stating that "...other challenges is the language.. language is... aaaa... very very unique.. express the cultural... for example.. in Malaysia, they have Bahasa Melayu...local language even though in Malaysia..people in Terengganu..speak in a different language.. Sarawak, Johor Bahru pronounce something.. but it expresses culture itself even in the same country .. it's happened to me, but for me... I speak book language... I attend Bahasa Melayu class... and I used google... I also used translation... aaa... it's been challenged to me...".

This was also acknowledged by R2 where locals tend to use dialect language when interacting, and stated that "...I also faced diversity..which is I need to understand Terengganu language... Perlis language..the Malaysian people tend to speak in their own language ...It's very difficult for me to understand... So, I take the action to understand language in KL first...and I also use translate when I don't know...". Additionally, R5 also revealed that "... there is a miscommunication problem.. because there is a dialect in Malaysian society.. for other countries.. I don't understand what he is saying.. I call my friends.. my friend translates.. ". The respondents' experiences explain how the dialect language used by some local residents greatly impacts the lives of expatriates in Malaysia. However, expatriates take the initiative by using several alternatives such as Google, translation, help from local friends, and learning the standard language in order to overcome the difficulty of understanding the dialect language.

ii. Culture Diversity in Malaysia

The findings of the study suggested that the respondents had difficulty understanding the culture practiced by the ethnic diversity in Malaysia. This matter acts directly as serendipitous data in this study. Due to the varying ethnic groups, Malaysia has different cultural practices, language use, religion and beliefs, usage procedures, and food preparation according to their own ethnic perspective. R1 declared that, "...probably said...because Malaysia has more ethnic society...so, by right, it is in common group..but...in a position, I personally making choice...Malaysia cultural from Malay perspective, Malaysia cultural from Chinese perspective... Malaysia cultural from Indian perspectives.. its quite.. its tough... its challenging because its mixing in one country... its also because of multiethnicity its making challenge.. if I learn one, I lost two..if I learn two..I lost one..so, its very challenging to me.. to integrate cultural perspectives...".

R2 also shared similar experience and stated, "...in the organization, the organization makes a group with different people in the group.. mixed teammates.. So, I can relate and know how to relate with Malay, China, India, and other culture ... But, for me, it's very difficult to approach people with different cultures..likes, I need to approach Malay with Malay approach, Chinese and Indian approach...". Additionally, R6 expressed similar experience as R1 and R2,

"...in the beginning, it's very difficult for me to adapt the life over here..because of diversity.. multiethnic... but now... it's easy to know people... I can learn and understand about Malaysian people.. culture...".

The respondents' experience of ethnic and cultural diversity in Malaysia made it difficult for expatriates to adjust to the local culture. Through the results of the interviews, expatriates realized that they needed to build relationships with the local population based on the individuals' ethnic perspectives, as stated by R1 and R2 in this study. Although expatriates face difficulties in understanding the social ecosystem, they still seek to take the appropriate steps to adapt themselves to the cultural environment in Malaysia.

iii. Understanding the Work Systems and Procedures in the Organization

Based on the interview analysis, research respondents who work in local companies with a majority of local employees often have difficulties understanding the work system in the organization. It was found that local companies in Malaysia often use the local language in daily communication, including work matters. R4 stated, "...actually, the difficulties... the understanding the system in the organization.. we supposed to do multiple experiences.. the language while attending the meeting.. the management only used Bahasa Melayu.. in the meeting. .written in email... so, I need to understand.. I need to translate it.. what is going on.. If I cannot understand.. it may affect in my performance.. but when I understand.. my KPI is okay.. my publications were okay.. as a foreigner I need to take it.. as a challenge.. it was difficult.. also sometimes the commitment with the society.. I still cannot do these activities.. but in terms of publication.. I can do better...".

This encounter describes the expatriate's inability to understand the culture and work system practiced by other colleagues in the organization. This matter can further interfere with the execution of tasks and affect work performance. Additionally, it can disrupt the emotional stability of expatriates throughout their lives in Malaysia. If the problem escalates, it can also cause psychological stress such as burnout, emotional stress, and quick-tempered, irritable, and deranged minds, resulting in reduced well-being and safety among expatriates in Malaysia. Therefore, organizations should implement appropriate coping strategies to help increase self-confidence among expatriates dealing with such stressful encounters (Chen and Shaffer, 2018).

iv. Local Food

A study by Ng et al (2016) found that different ways of preparing food between the host country and the country of origin can pose a challenge for expatriates to accept new food dishes. This was acknowledged by R1 who stated, "...the challenges I probably experience...in adapted cultural... first and foremost it is food... aaaa...food... so,aaaa.. because.. aaaa... I particularly took milk came from my own country.. so, Malaysian was not that eat more milk... just eat any spicy, sometimes food I cannot.. soo spicy... cannot enjoy the meal. .it's the culture itself.. some food that I can eat...some food I'm avoiding...Malaysia has variety of food... like Malay food... I eat, I don't eat... It's a bit challenging...".

Similarly, R2 revealed that, "...the difficulties that I faced in Malaysia is food. Sometimes, too spicy.. So I communicate with the restaurant owner to adjust my dish.. I said I don't want spicy.. sweet". R4 also shared the same experience and said, "...other problem is food.. yes, but I have changed the way to cook the food.. we have some friends.. they ask the chef at the restaurant.. to cook the food what we want it.. it's was in Kuala Lumpur..KLIUC.. about IKRAM..

the restaurant accepts that to cook what we like it.. the chef also tastes it.. the way we like for food.. because we still worry about halal and non-halal food".

In addition, R5 stated that, "...the first time.. I am from Padang.. in West Sumatra.. I was surprised... my native food... spicy.. but coming to Malaysia.. sweet food... spicy but sweet... I cooked it myself for a few months.. but over time I got tired of cooking every day.. willy-nilly.. I tried eating sambal nasi lemak for the first time.. it's spicy but it's sweet.. finally, now I'm okay". R6 also faced similar situations and mentioned that, "...in the beginning, it was the food... it's big difference from my country.. I didn't know about the places.. where to buy food.. so now, I go to NSK, Giant.. I know where to buy.. also many shops and restaurants Arab food in Serdang... so, I not having difficulties food.. until now I cannot eat like chili sweet food.. but here they put chili and sweet in food". The respondents' experiences provided an insight on how expatriates have difficulties accepting and adapting to the local food in Malaysia. Nevertheless, it was evident that expatriates would take the initiative to find other alternatives to maintain their well-being while living in Malaysia.

Lack of Cultural Integration

a) Insufficient Preparation

i. Local language

The ability to increase the skills and knowledge of the local spoken language is an important effort for expatriates to communicate and interact effectively (Chan et al., 2019). It has been suggested that inadequate knowledge of the local language can make it difficult for expatriates to communicate interpersonally with the local population (Richardson, Tan, and Kiumarsi, 2018). Based on the interview analysis, it was found that respondents who have a limited understanding of the local language find it difficult to adapt to the culture in Malaysia. The diverse languages spoken by the local population, in particular, made it even more difficult for expatriates to comprehend the local language. R1 stated that, "...other challenge is the language.. language is.. very very unique.. express the cultural... for example.. in Malaysia, local people have Bahasa Melayu...Indonesia...speak in Bahasa Indonesia... so, it's tough for me.. to understand the local language...".

This point was also shared by R2 who stated, "...unfortunately, in terms of communication.. I have difficulty communicating with some locals because they cannot speak in English.. Even though it's a barrier for me, I need to find the solution to learn.. understand ... about languages..". Likewise, R4 agreed and mentioned that, "...the first challenged that I faced... it was language.. because... I don't have English.. so, I take English class.. but in USM, we have using Bahasa Malaysia.. in meeting... email written in Bahasa Malaysia... I start to understand the language... Google translate help me a lot in doing my job.. because I like to learn what I supposed to learn.. we are foreigners.. a small numbers.. it's difficult the management to translate every email.. It's difficult for me.. so, I take the challenge.. and cope this...".

Learning and understanding the local spoken language needs to be emphasized to facilitate cultural integration and social interaction between local residents, local workers, and expatriates (Wang et al., 2017). Qureshi et al (2017) highlighted that understanding the local spoken language among expatriates is significant to allow them to better adapt to the culture.

ii. Incompetency in the English language

In Malaysia, Bahasa Melayu serves as the national language; however, the English language is often used as an intermediary language for local residents to interact with newcomers (Ramalu and Subramaniam, 2019). Therefore, the inability to communicate in either the intermediary language or the local language can be a challenge for expatriates to adjust to the local population (van Bakel, 2019). The process of socialization with the local population occurs through a two-way interaction that involves the use of an intermediary or local language (Kaur, 2018). Hence, the inability to speak English is seen as coincidental data for this study, which leads to culture shock among expatriates in Malaysia.

R4 stated "...for the first time I have been here... I didn't have any English basic... it's very difficult for me... I'm having challenges to adjust... upgrade myself.. to fit with Malaysian culture..yes.. at the same time, I didn't have any experience with the local language". This depicts how the lack of knowledge and skills about the spoken language in the host country makes it difficult for expatriates to adapt to the local culture. Therefore, it is important for expatriates to understand the basics of the local spoken language to avoid cultural conflicts (Haslina et al., 2018).

b. Cultural transition

i. Cultural diversity

The results of the interview analysis proposed that diverse cultural practices performed by the local population in Malaysia contribute to the occurrence of culture shock among expatriates. Some of the cultural diversity practiced by varying ethnic groups in Malaysia, such as religion and beliefs, language, customs, arts, ideology, and leadership (Afiqah et al., 2019) can be complex for expatriates to understand the local culture. This point was acknowledged by R1 stating that "...another challenge that I want to say is experienced...Malaysia is very different from Africa.. so, the gap of interruption.. I need more in learning about Malaysia... likes in communication. . if a different background, its difficult to understand cultural background...".

R6 also emphasized on this matter, "...when I came here definitely... in my country... people like ... much they alike.. but here very mind own your business.. In the beginning its very difficult for me to adapt the life over here..cultural diversify ...but now... it's easy to know people... I can learn and understand about Malaysian people.. culture...". Therefore, the involvement of expatriates in Malaysia with different cultural diversity should be carefully monitored so that there is no cultural overlap that can cause psychological stress and affect emotional stability when in the host country (Gom et al., 2015).

ii. Differences in value, political, and social systems

The ability to obtain information related to the local political and value system can help expatriates adapt to the local cultural environment (Ward and Geeraert, 2016). Contrastingly, the inability to understand the local political and value system can lead to difficulties for expatriates in better adapting to the culture, as it may be time-consuming to research and process the information related to the local environment (Urzúa et al., 2017). R1 admitted that, "...It's very difficult to understand the local political system...at the first...for me, if I cannot understand to the local political culture.. I must go for culture clashes.. in the organization.. because I have so much conflict with other workers in the organization.. because more people cannot meet in the organization.. they work in a team workers.. for example, in Malaysia.. the Malaysian government-enforced to wear a mask.. but some

countries they don't believe wear mask...they think to mask the political symbols.. they don't believe wear mask to stop COVID..when I came into Malaysia..I need to wear a mask.. if I don't want to wear a mask.. it become more issues.. likes, other colleagues don't feel comfortable... they feel they can be exposed to the virus..so, being expatriate I need to learn about local laws culture..local custom within process norms in the organization...".

Based on R1's perspective, it is important to obtain information about the local culture for expatriates so that adaptation to the local culture can be carried out effectively. R4 stated that, "...other things it's okay.. because I expect different culture.. But, the political system and infrastructure in my own country and here is totally different.. I hope for balance.. I also need to upgrade what I know before...with the current situation...". According to Ward and Kennedy's (1993) Sociocultural and Psychological Adaptation Model, it was emphasized that new immigrants need to understand sociocultural adaptation as a whole, including the local value system and politics, to facilitate adaptation to the local culture in the new country. In line with the context of this study, expatriates are encouraged to update existing information, especially the value system and politics of the host country, to better adapt to the new cultural environment (Levine and Levine, 2014).

- c. Culture shock
- i. Climate change

A study by Bhatta and Aggarwal (2016) suggested that a change in the landscape of a new country is one of the first experiences known as culture shock among expatriates. Malaysia is made up of various landforms such as highlands, lowlands, basins, and the edge of the sea (Suzita et al., 2015). Malaysia also experiences an equatorial climate that is hot and humid throughout the year (National Policy on Climate Change, 2019). Consequently, the respondents in this study experienced cultural shock as a result of the change of the landscape and equatorial climate. This was acknowledged by R2 "...I feel impressed during arrived in Malaysia.. because it's different environment.. new environment.. green.. then I meet a lot of different people.. culture, response.. but with my positive mind.. I can act better.. in the different environment". Meanwhile, R6 said "...I was shocked.. the moment like..Woah!...but in my country... have dessert...but here in Malaysia.. green..colorful country when I came to the Malaysia".

The results of the analysis also found that the study respondents experienced culture shock when they had to adapt to the changing equatorial climate in Malaysia throughout the year. R6 stated that "...in my country...Middle East...we have very few rain twice in a year.. three time in a year.. now I can adapt with Malaysian weather... in the beginning its very hard... my friend told me to buy an umbrella.. we cannot expect the rain.. I usually kept me umbrella in my bag.. the road also prepared for the rain.. rather than my country... very sunny. . the country does not prepare for weather...but, here everything is prepared...".

The findings indicate a climate difference between the respondents' country of origin and Malaysia, which can lead to feelings of homesickness. Unattended culture shock among new immigrants can disrupt emotional stability and further create psychological stress such as disturbed thinking, burnout, easily touched souls, isolation, and a lack of self-confidence, which can negatively impact an individual's well-being (Suria and Sity, 2016). Hence, obtaining adequate information on the environment and climate of the host country is vital for expatriates to adjust to the new environment.

ii. The use of a mixed language among local residents

Furthermore, the findings of this study proposed that the use of mixed languages among local residents is another source of culture shock among the respondents. R1 stated that the use of both English and Malay languages by some local residents during interactions made it difficult for him to understand what the locals. He stated "...so...Malaysia cultural shock...aaa...I think...aaa.. I think the first culture shock I had in class is one of my Master classes..and.. the ...lecturer was teaching.. was teaching in ...English but then... the lecturer is changing to speak in Bahasa Melayu... I don't know...but.. I totally lost...actually .. It was in Indonesia?...I didn't hear yet.. I don't understand what he has said..so, I was like what's that?...what's that English? what is he saying?".

R2 also expressed, "...other than that, Malaysians are easygoing people.. Unfortunately, in terms of communication, I have difficulty communicating with some locals because they cannot speak in English..and some locals speak the local language with English..mixed...I cannot understand... Even though it's a barrier for me, I need to find the solution to learn..understand... about languages...". The inability to understand the local language further indicates the challenges expatriates face when interacting with the local population in Malaysia.

Therefore, learning and understanding the local language should be one of the top priorities among expatriates living in Malaysia (Ramlan et al., 2018). Additionally, expatriates also find it difficult to have close relationships through the formation of a harmonious social network with the local population (Borici and Celepija, 2014). As mentioned, this matter can also cause discomfort and make it difficult for expatriates to continue living in Malaysia for a long period of time.

iii. Islamic cultural practice

The study's findings revealed that the local population's practice of Islamic values and Islamic culture were identified as serendipitous data for this study. Although the respondents are knowledgeable and exposed to the Islamic religion, there are still a few respondents who seem to lack understanding of Islamic cultural values and practices practiced by local communities in Malaysia. This matter was acknowledged by R1 "...for me, I am Christian, so I have no issues to work on Friday... and their.. I did they are understand that Malaysian males their cultural...they go to mosque on Friday...so, I was probably fixing mix in around that Friday hour and I was in expecting a large from everybody in the office but first day in Malaysia can mixed in likes "eh, whats up, everybody"... mosque there .. and then they came back to work. Its'a shown work, work, work but... Malaysian take a time breakfast, religion.. take seriously in religion.. and its culture shock to me.. I had to learn...".

In addition, R3 also experienced a culture shock towards the Islamic cultural practices in Malaysia. The respondent stated, "...I was so shocked.. I know Malaysia is a Muslim country.. So, I buy Abaya.. long dress, long skirt.. But when I came to KL, I saw many foreigners.. My perception is Malaysia like Arabian country.. First thing of I think of Saudi..Saudi is a true Muslim country.. like to wear long dress..wear abaya...yeah...that's was I was thinking.. apparently, I got a long skirt.. below my knee... not over...but, when I came to KL.. I saw people...wearing short skirt..I thought this is a Muslim country.. That's like my perception .. I saw Malaysia is diversifying country...".

Therefore, adequate understanding of the Islamic cultural practices among expatriates is important to ensure the success of adapting to the local culture in Malaysia (Irma Wani et al., 2012). Understanding and knowledge can be improved through learning, questioning, and

observation to address the issue of culture shock (Zehadul Karim and Diah, 2015). Ward and Kennedy's (1993) Sociocultural and Psychological Adaptation Model emphasized the importance of understanding the values and political systems in the host country to facilitate expatriates' adaptation to the new cultural environment. In fact, the inability to understand the Islamic cultural practices that are practiced on a daily basis may cause misunderstandings among expatriates living in Malaysia.

iv. The practice of taking off your shoes in a certain place

Lastly, new insight from this study suggests that the practice of removing shoes in certain places among the local population demonstrated a culture shock experience. According to R1, shoes are known as a symbolic image of an individual in their culture. R1 stated that, "...other cultural shocks that I had... when I went to my office... I asked my colleague.. why I need to remove my shoes? I need to remove my shoes but I said..No, I dont want to remove my shoes... Yes, bro..you have to remove your shoes...but in my country..the symbol.. the shoes. ..as an accesories...looks bright, very shiny, beautiful.. wear your shoes everywhere...In my country..shoes say a lot of about you..you can take care of shoes... everyone looks shoes ... very very particular person into that..entertain..why? when I in Malaysia, I cannot wear my shoes in my office...oh no, bro... its make some kinds of mixing in Malaysia... every one remove their shoes in their office... In my country, you may wear shoes everywhere..but in Malaysia...some places can wear a shoes...but some areas don't allow to wear your shoes...".

R2 also shared similar experience about the practice of removing shoes in Malaysia. R2 stated, "...I need to remove my shoes during entering some places...it's different with my country.. So, I buy the other shoes... easily to wear and remove...". Despite experiencing culture shock at the initial stages of his arrival in Malaysia, he adapted to the new practice by buying shoes that are easier to remove. This is an approach to maintaining emotional stability and well-being when living in Malaysia (Gom et al., 2015). Overall, the culture shock faced by expatriates in Malaysia should be managed effectively to avoid critical cultural adaptation-related problems such as cultural conflict, cultural overlap, and cultural ambiguity in the future (Bayraktar, 2019).

Conclusion

In Malaysia, the service sector is the main driver of the economy and has the highest number of expatriate engagement (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017; Rafiq, 2019). Issues regarding expatriates who are unable to adapt to the cultural environment in Malaysia have been increasing. However, there is a lack of research concentrating on expatriates' challenges of cultural adaptation particularly in a diverse cultural country such as Malaysia. Expatriates not only function as professional workers but also take responsibility for improving the Malaysian economy (Haslina et al., 2018). However, they face challenges in dealing with cultural diversity within and outside of the organization (Mohamad Effendi et al., 2018). This study was conducted to explore the challenges of cultural adaptation faced by expatriates working in the service sector in Malaysia whereby the Rational Choice Theory by Homans (1961) has been referred to as the underlying theory for this study.

Findings from the semi-structured interviews presented two main themes, which include lack of social interaction (prejudiced attitudes of local residents and the inability to adapt to the social ecosystem) and lack of cultural integration (insufficient preparation, cultural transition, and culture shock), which contributed to the challenges of cultural

adaptation among expatriates in Malaysia. The results of this study have shown that the lack of social interaction and cultural integration are two important elements that needs to be addressed by the expatriates' employer in order to improve the expatriates' cultural adaption and integration. This research has contributed towards a better understanding of the specific cultural adaptation challenges faced by expatriates working in Malaysia. Moreover, the findings from this study has provided new insight particularly on the possible association between cultural adaptation and work performance as presented in the Work Performance Model (Pringle and Blumberg, 1982) and the Sociocultural and Psychological Adaptation Model (Ward and Kennedy, 1993).

Based on the results obtained from this study, the researchers recommend that organisations provide orientation courses, training, or seminars to aid expatriates' cultural adaptation in order to improve their social interaction and cultural integration in their receiving countries. In specific, the Human Resource Department should provide trainings on the aspects of local cultural knowledge, cross-cultural training, self-development programs, and social support for managing the expatriates in the organization. This effort could also be initiated by Malaysian government agencies such as MIDA or TalentCorp, as these agencies deal directly with foreign investors and talents, respectively. Besides knowledge about geography and legislation, information about the country's culture, customs, and language is also important to ensure a successful cultural adaptation. Not only would this benefit the individual expatriates in terms of their well-being, but it also has the capacity to reduce repatriation or turnover rates among the expatriates.

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