

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT IN THAILAND

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Abstract

This study investigates the adjustment of international students in Thai universities, divided into socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being. This study also explores the association between the socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being of the host culture. A total of 389 international students filled self-reported questionnaires. Findings revealed that there are no significant differences in terms of cross-cultural adjustment between genders, living with others, and length of stay in host culture. However, age groups and country groups contributed significantly to the differences in cross-cultural adjustment among international students. Interesting results were found where international students from Western countries present better cross-cultural adjustment than international students from Asian countries, particularly in academic, physical, mental health adjustment, and psychological well-being. The study also found that psychological well-being is influenced by levels of academic adjustment, physical and mental health adjustment, and living environment. The levels of interpersonal relationship adjustment and local cultural adjustment do not affect psychological well-being. Based on the results, the Departments of International Students in Thai universities should be concerned with the improvement of services and support to facilitate their international students' cross-cultural adjustment.

Keywords: cultural adjustment; international student; psychological well-being; socio-cultural adjustment

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INTRODUCTION

Studies on international students' adjustment in the host culture have been conducted since the 1950s, when an increasing number of students began pursuing degrees abroad. Ward (2008) have pointed out that an overseas exchange programs gained momentum in the 1950s, and research activities were directed towards the description and analysis of the social, culture, and psychological problems experienced by overseas students. To date, there have been an increased in number of international students studying overseas (Bretag, Horrocks, & Smith, 2002). Most international students consider that the pursuit of an overseas education would enable them to improve their education skills and learning abilities, which will prepare them for their future careers (Townsend & Poh, 2008). However, moving to a foreign country to study brings many potential challenges because of the differences in cross-cultural education systems, new environment, psychological, and social situations. Thus, international students may experience acculturative stress and such stress may have link to their adjustments practices (Berry, 2006). This is because they need to know the different cultural values, norms, and customs between their home country and the host country (Ang & Liamputtong, 2007).

International students' difficulties in adjustment during overseas study have been examined in many studies and the studies suggested that international students' adjustment is influenced by various factors. For example, they encounter academic stressors like language difficulties, different mode of education, and learning style. They

also encounter practical difficulties such as finances, accommodation, transportation, and living condition (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Furthermore, a range of socio-cultural stressors that influenced adjustment has also been identified in the previous research including difficulties in establishing a new social network, particularly with local residents (Townsend & Poh, 2008), loneliness, homesickness, and psychological aspects such as feelings of isolation, frustration, anxiety, hopelessness, regret, and depression (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Mori, 2000; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Most international students may feel they stand as a minority group in the host cultures. Therefore, they need to adjust themselves to the new culture (Mustaffa & Ilias, 2013). Cultural adjustment is suggested as a key determinant of sojourners' success in their international assignments (Ramalu, Rose, Uli & Kumar, 2010). Besides, understanding the process of how international students adjust to their host environments is very important (Gómez, Urzúa & Glass, 2014; Tas, 2013). Cultural adjustment refers to dynamic and multifaceted process of learning about another culture in order to function successfully enough within that culture to attain one's goals (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Thus, adjustment to a new academic and social environment can be a stressful process. Most college students experience stress throughout this process. However, many international students experience even more serious stress because of the additional culture shock factor and various socio-cultural factors that are involved in the adjustment process of international students (Sumer, Poyrszli & Grhame, 2008). Living and studying in different cultures require

international students to adapt to the host social and cultural environment. The cultural adjustment involves confidence in performing social and daily living tasks alone in the new country (Lee & Pistole, 2014).

In addition, the cultural adjustment of sojourners varies according to their cultural backgrounds and friendship patterns and they influence the outcome of the exchange experience (Patron, 2014). Such cultural adjustment outcomes will help in socio-cultural adjustment (Sam & Berry, 2010). Socio-cultural adjustment involves learning local cultural values and the skills needed to manage everyday activities, such as making friends, getting around in the community, and social interaction. Socio-cultural adjustment may also be influenced by psychological response, such as psychological well-being (Lee & Pistole, 2014).

Although a number of studies have been conducted on the cross-cultural adjustment of international students, focused on factors affecting cultural adjustment and psychological well-being (Olivas & Lee, 2006; Rienties et al., 2012; Zhang & Goodson, 2011), it is still uncertain whether socio-cultural adjustment factor is a determinant of psychological adjustment. Moreover, just a few studies were conducted on the cross-cultural adjustment of international students in Thailand, where the number of international students have grown significantly. In 2011, the number of international students enrolled in Thai universities was 20,115. The international programs in Thai universities offer a wide range of courses and cover almost all fields of studies (Jianvittayakit, 2012). Thus, the growing trend in the number of international students in Thailand has heightened the need for research to understand how international

students adjust and perform during their study in Thailand. One area of such concern, and of which this study sought to explore, is to ascertain the level of psychological adjustment among international students, and the socio-cultural factors accounting for it. Thus, there is a need to examine what has been investigated in order to further understand the research on this subject. In this study, the facet of overall adjustment is the main focus. It attempts to evaluate student sojourners' adjustments from a pathological perspective by measuring the relationship between different variables on socio-cultural adjustment to the host environment on psychological adjustment. The study's key socio-cultural adjustment influencers on international student psychological adjustment in Thailand provides a useful insight into the major factors impacting on students' criteria when judging the success of their study abroad experience.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this study is to investigate the adjustment levels, which are divided into socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being of international students in Thai universities. This study also explores the association between the socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being of the host culture.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study proposed the conceptual framework of a causality model to investigate the influences of international student levels of socio-cultural adjustment on the psychological well-being. The conceptual

model (see Figure 1) is applied as the basic concept of cross-cultural adjustment based on Ward, Bochner, and Furnham's (2001) acculturation and adaptation frameworks model. Socio-cultural adjustment refers to the extent to which international students can fit within the new culture. Psychological adjustment can be regarded in terms of emotional well-being (Araujo, 2011). Psychological adjustment promotes well-being while socio-cultural adaptation enhances behavioral competence required for successful daily living and interaction with the host society (Ward et al., 2001). The socio-cultural adjustment employed in this study comprises of five factors including academic, physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, local culture, and living environment. These factors are related to cultural learning approach. However, the psychological adjustment outcomes of previous studies are varied such as psychological symptoms and acculturation stress (Zhanga & Goodson, 2011). For the present study we considered the psychological adjustment outcome as psychological well-being.

The hypotheses for this study were formulated as follow: Firstly, there is a significant relationship between the levels of the five subscales of socio-cultural adjustment (academic, physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, local culture, and living environment, and psychological well-being. Secondly, there is a significant difference between international students' demographic variables (gender, age, length of stay, living with others, and country of origin, and dependent variable of psychological well-being, and the five subscales of socio-cultural adjustment.

RESEARCH METHOD

The population for this study was international students in Thailand. The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling. The selection method required the researchers to choose the sample that is known to possess a particular characteristic which is international students in Thai universities (Reinard, 2006. From 500 sets of self-reported questionnaires distributed to international students, 389

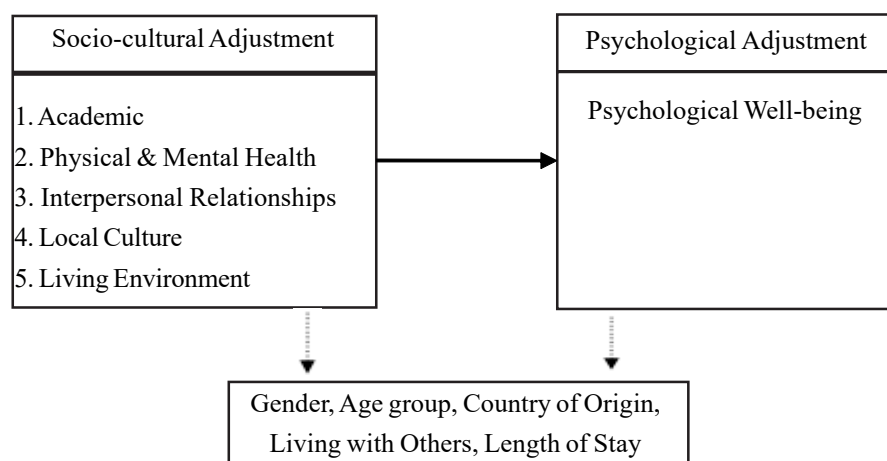


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

questionnaires were returned. The initial response rate was 77.8%. The participants involved 222 females and 167 males. Approximately 74.5% of them were single. The mean age was 23.3 (minimum of 18 years, maximum of 54 years). Most participants were enrolled in undergraduate programs (77.1%). The participants came from various countries such as China, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, India, USA, Nepal, Bhutan, Netherlands, Switzerland, and Canada. The majority were from Asian countries (75.69%). The participant's length of stay in Thailand ranged from 5 months to 10 years, an average time of 2.4 years.

Two measurements were employed in the study, socio-cultural adjustment scale and psychological well-being scale. The socio-cultural adjustment scale was developed based on amendment made to the questions concerning five dimensions (academic, physical & mental health, interpersonal relationships, local culture, and living environment) in the cross-cultural scale adopted by Uehara (1986). A total of 39 items were used to measure international students' socio-cultural adjustment, upon five-point Likert scale. Higher scores indicate higher levels of adjustment. The internal consistency reliability of the five dimension scale was high (ranged from .743 - .902). For the psychological well-being, the satisfaction with life scale was used in this study (SWLS), which was developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin, (1985). This is the most widely used measurement of life satisfaction to date. The SWLS is a 5-item measure of subjective well-being using a seven-point Likert scale. The internal consistency reliability in this study was .842.

Higher scores indicate higher levels of international students' psychological well-being.

RESULTS

The results indicated that international students reported high levels of socio-cultural adjustment and psychological adjustment. According to the five dimensions of socio-cultural adjustment, international students reported the highest better adjustment on academic system in Thailand (Mean = 3.53, SD = .66), followed by adjustment on living environment (Mean = 3.51, SD = .66), local culture adjustment (Mean = 3.42, SD = .65), adjustment on physical and mental health (Mean = 3.37, SD = .59), and adjustment on interpersonal relationships respectively (Mean = 3.34, SD = .66). International students also reported a middle level of psychological well-being relating to their study experience in Thailand (Mean = 4.71, SD = 1.04).

In terms of gender and living with others, an independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the five-dimension socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being between gender and living with others during their study in Thailand. The result, presented in Table 1, demonstrates that there is no statistically significant difference in the score for male and female. The same result was found for international students who lived alone and those who lived with others. The results implied that there is similarity in terms of socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being for both male and female respondents, and for international students who live alone and living with others

during their study in Thailand.

Furthermore, a one-way ANOVA between group analysis of variance was used in order to explore the socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being among international students group in terms of age, country of origin, and length of stay in Thailand. The results, shown in Table 1, indicate that there is no significant difference among the mean scores of three groups of age (under 20 years, 21-24 years, and older than 25 years) on interpersonal adjustment, local culture adjustment, living environment adjustment, and psychological well-being. However, there is a significant difference between the three groups of age on academic adjustment and physical and mental health adjustment. This result signifies that the process of socio-cultural adjustment regarding the dimension of academic adjustment and physical and mental health adjustment are varied across different age groups of respondents. The international students who are older than 25 years old reported better socio-cultural adjustment than the other age groups.

A statistically significant difference was found in the different country of origin groups on psychological well-being, and the socio-cultural adjustment regarding the dimension of academic, physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, and living environment, except for local culture adjustment. These results suggest that the process of socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being are varied across different country of origin of respondents. The international students who come from Western countries reported better socio-cultural adjustment than others from Asian countries. Likewise, the international students who come

from Western countries also reported high level of psychological well-being with their life in Thailand than those from other countries. However, no statistically significant difference pertaining to length of stay in Thailand was found on the socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being. (Table 1)

Association between Socio-cultural Adjustment and Psychological Well-being

The relationship between socio-cultural adjustment and psychological well-being is shown in Table 2. The socio-cultural adjustment is found to be positive and moderately correlated with psychological well-being. The result indicates that international students who performed better adjustment on academic, physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, local culture, and living environment are satisfied with their living in Thailand than those with poor socio-cultural adjustment. (Table 2)

To investigate the influences of the five dimensions of socio-cultural adjustment on psychological well-being, the standard multiple regression was conducted. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 3.

The regression model explained 26% of the variance in the psychological well-being. The study also found that psychological well-being was influenced by levels of academic adjustment, physical and mental health adjustment, and living environment. Physical and mental health adjustment was found to be the most influencing factor on psychological well-being. However, the levels of interpersonal relationship adjustment and local cultural adjustment are not predictors of psychological well-being. The results indicate that the psychological well-being of international students in Thailand is caused by

Table 1 Mean and Standard Deviation of Cultural Adjustment to General Information

General Information	Academic		Physical & Mental Health		Interpersonal Relationships		Local Culture		Living Environment		Psychological Well-being	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Gender												
1. Male (n=167)	3.47	.68	3.35	.62	3.39	.69	3.41	.66	3.47	.70	4.71	.97
2. Female (n=222)	3.58	.66	3.39	.58	3.31	.64	3.43	.64	3.54	.63	4.70	1.10
	t = -1.633 p = .103		t = -.567 p = .571		t = 1.091 p = .276		t = -.168 p = .867		t = -.987 p = .324		t = .037 p = .970	
Age Group												
1. < 20 Years (n=94)	3.46	.64	3.29	.58	3.44	.72	3.44	.69	3.53	.65	4.28	1.02
2. 21 – 24 Years (n=203)	3.49	.68	3.34	.58	3.30	.62	3.38	.62	3.45	.66	4.64	1.03
3. 25 Years and Older (n=92)	3.70	.62	3.51	.61	3.35	.69	3.48	.65	3.60	.64	4.73	1.08
	F = 4.137 p = .017		F = 3.504 p = .031		F = 1.444 p = .237		F = .850 p = .428		F = 1.658 p = .192		F = 1.057 p = .348	
Country of Origin												
1. Southeast Asia (n=102)	3.52	.47	3.36	.57	3.46	.60	3.46	.55	3.44	.55	4.57	.88
2. Asian Countries (n=74)	3.59	.80	3.24	.63	3.13	.77	3.32	.75	3.41	.74	4.52	1.02
3. China (n=106)	3.36	.68	3.32	.61	3.34	.64	3.35	.65	3.40	.65	4.40	.94
4. Western (n=88)	3.78	.71	3.51	.58	3.36	.66	3.50	.63	3.77	.63	5.40	1.05
	F = 5.23 p = .002		F = 2.91 p = .035		F = 3.56 p = .014		F = 1.43 p = .234		F = 6.71 p = .000		F = 19.43 p = .000	
Living with Others												
1. Living Alone (n=202)	3.50	.72	3.38	.62	3.34	.66	3.44	.66	3.52	.70	4.71	1.06
2. Living With Others (n=176)	3.56	.60	3.36	.54	3.35	.66	3.39	.64	3.48	.61	4.69	1.04
	t = -.877 p = .381		t = .254 p = .800		t = -.076 p = .939		t = .866 p = .387		t = .545 p = .586		t = .239 p = .811	
Length of Stay												
1. Less than 12 Months (n=88)	3.56	.59	3.35	.57	3.29	.60	3.49	.57	3.49	.62	4.47	1.07
2. 12 – 24 Months (n=138)	3.55	.71	3.39	.59	3.35	.70	3.38	.65	3.54	.66	4.87	1.12
3. More than 25 Months (n=142)	3.52	.67	3.35	.63	3.38	.62	3.41	.72	3.46	.68	4.58	.91
	F = .056 p = .945		F = .168 p = .830		F = .456 p = .634		F = .854 p = .426		F = .571 p = .565		F = 2.227 p = .085	

Table 2 Pearson Correlations for all Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Psychological Well-being	1.00					
2. Academic Adjustment	.409	1.00				
3. Physical & Mental Health Adjustment	.440	.522	1.00			
4. Interpersonal Relationships Adjustment	.336	.470	.491	1.00		
5. Local Culture Adjustment	.311	.519	.471	.635	1.00	
6. Living Environment Adjustment	.406	.534	.534	.545	.672	1.00

$p < .05$ for all correlations $> .30$

Table 3 Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Psychological Well-being

Socio-cultural Adjustment	Unstandardized B	Standardized β	t	p-value
Constant	1.276		4.077	.000
Academic Adjustment	.263	.169	2.839	.005
Physical & Mental Health	.445	.254	4.526	.000
Interpersonal Relationships	.125	.080	1.322	.187
Local Culture Adjustment	.084	.052	.786	.432
Living Environment	.248	.157	2.319	.021

the levels of academic adjustment, physical and mental health adjustment, and living environment. International students with high level of adjustment on academic adjustment, physical and mental health adjustment, and living environment tend to be satisfied with their life in Thailand.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to investigate the levels of cross-cultural adjustment (socio-cultural and psychological adjustment) of international students in Thailand. Specifically, this study explores the effects of socio-cultural adjustment on psychological adjustment. The results indicate that international students report a good adaptation in Thai culture in both psychological and socio-cultural aspects. This means that

international students have a capacity to learn a new culture, academic system, and environment in Thailand. However, the findings reveal that there are no significant differences in terms of cross-cultural adjustment between genders. Male and female international students are not different in terms of both socio-cultural and psychological adjustment, which is consistent with other cross-cultural studies (Diener et al., 2003; Matheny, Tovar, & Curlette, 2008). The study also found that international students who stay alone in Thailand have the same level of cross-cultural adjustment as those who stay with others such as friends and relatives. Likewise, there is no significant difference in lengths of stay on the cross-cultural adjustment in terms of both socio-cultural and psychological adjustment. This result is in contrast with the previous studies (Furnham

& Li, 1993; Trice, 2004), which indicated that the length of stay plays important role in cross-cultural adjustment. The longer the length of stay in the host culture, the better cultural adjustment international students have. However, the length of stay in the host culture might not be influenced by cultural adjustment. According to Li and Campbell (2006), the length of study at the university did not ensure that students had acquired the basic knowledge of academic and cultural conventions.

On the other hand, age groups' only significant difference is for score on academic and health adjustment. The older international students reported a better adjustment on their academic adjustment and presented a better health compared to those who are younger. In other words, older international students might have more coping skills and learning strategies than those who are younger. Thus, they are more likely to deal with difficult situations better than younger international students. However, age groups do not have significant difference for psychological adjustment. This result is in contrast to the previous studies (Uehara, 1988) indicating that younger international students score higher in psychological well-being and living problems.

Interesting results found that the international students from Western countries present better adjustment than other international students from Asian countries, particularly in the academic, physical and mental health adjustment, and psychological well-being. This result concerns with the role of cultural distance between the host and native culture in the adjustment process. Cultural distance (Babiker, Cox & Miller as cited in Landis and Bhagat, 1996) refers to

the extent that an international student's home culture differs from the predominant culture of the host country. Schumann's hypothesis (1976) suggests that the greater the cultural distance between two cultures, the greater the difficulty the international students will have in learning the intricacies of communicating effectively in the target culture's environment. However, the study found unexpected result that contradicts the previous studies (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Sam, 2001) indicating that international students from Western cultures reported high levels of psychological well-being and presented better cultural adjustment in Thai culture than Asian international students. In other words, international students who come from Western cultures enjoy better socio-cultural and psychological adjustment in Thai culture than Asian international students. The reasons for this result might relate to the pre-departure issue. Before going for their overseas study, Western international students learned pre-departure programs that can prepare them for both the adjustment of living in a new culture and the challenge of studying in a new academic environment. Therefore, learning in different culture such as Thailand makes them more understanding over cultural distance and they prepare themselves to face with the difficulties before departure. Another reason is that Western international students might have interactions with host nationals, such as Thai students, teachers and counsellors, through which they might learn a series of culturally relevant skills to facilitate their academic success. Thus, they can benefit from interaction with host nationals socially, psychologically, and academically which make them demonstrate a better adaptation to study life overseas (Zimmerman 1995).

Another important issue that emerged from this study is that the psychological well-being of international students is influenced by socio-cultural adjustment, especially in terms of academic, health, and living environment adjustment. In other words, international students who performed a better socio-cultural adjustment, especially relating to the educational system, health, and living conditions, are more likely to adapt well in their psychological well-being. This finding is partly consistent with the previous researches (Mohr & Klein, 2004; Ward & Kennedy, 1999) suggesting that socio-cultural adjustment is related to the psychological adjustment of sojourners. It might be expected that Thai students who are more socially skilled would have less difficulty in learning and understanding new cultural norms and values in their overseas study. This finding is consistent with previous overseas adjustment studies (Neto, 2002). Accordingly, individuals who have more pleasant experiences or who are better adjusted to their living, health, cultural environment, and academic system, would be expected to report a relatively higher level of psychological well-being (Hofer, 2008; Redmond & Bunyi 1993). This implies that greater interaction with host culture constitutes an important part of international students' socio-cultural adjustment (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). In line with previously conducted studies (Hendrickson et al., 2011), this study found that making contacts with host nationals is an important strategy for participants to learn local cultures and become psychologically adjusted.

The research reveals that psychological well-being of international students can be conceptualized through different key aspects,

such as internal and external university environments. Internal university environment aspects assert that international students' psychological well-being has a strong relationship with the quality of education perceived by the student. This perception will be influenced by many factors concerning the educational service, academic learning style, and skill-based training (Zhao, 2012). External university environment refers to the social and physical dimensions outside of the university campus in which students spend a significant amount of their academic life and engage in multiple actions with host community (Arambewela & Hall, 2013, p. 974). Therefore, this research concludes that most international students' psychological well-being is related to the degree of their socio-cultural adjustment. The better they adjust to living into the new environment, the more positive their learning experience is. Although international students have some difficulties in their cultural learning, most of them adjust well in both socio-cultural and psychological adjustment to the new learning situations. Their psychological well-being is derived from their academic adaptation, healthy conditions, environment, interpersonal skills, and confidence in learning.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results of the study, specific recommendations to Thai universities are as follows. The Department of International Students should provide services and assistance to facilitate their international students to adjust themselves better to the local culture. The findings can be used in an integrated procedure to guide the

implementation of the support programs which are designed to help international students to have a successful academic experience, keep healthy, and improve their living environment adjustment. Moreover, the Department of International Students should provide an information package to international students in order to help or support them to cope with the cultural difficulties, to develop relationship with Thai friends, and to learn how to successfully deal with acculturation stress. These supports would contribute in terms of helping international students to adjust themselves better in both socio-cultural and psychological adjustment to the host culture.

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