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Sustaining Global Development Goals Through Languages, Education, and Tourism

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CONTENT

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY AND STUDENT TRAVEL

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ABSTRACT

Today, student travel represents one-fifth of all international arrivals in a travel industry, commanding a market value of $320 billion. More importantly, student travel facilitates increased intercultural contacts with people from different cultures than before. Against this background, this paper discusses the value of student travel for developing intercultural communication skills and competency. Intercultural communication is one's ability to communicate and behave appropriately across cultures without violating social norms. Using a self-reported inventory modelled off of Deardorff Intercultural Competence framework (2006), an online survey was conducted with 105 undergraduates at a Malaysian university. Results revealed that female students appeared to be more open towards intercultural interaction than male. Moreover, students who were self-funded and traveled alone reported higher intercultural competency than others. This paper concludes that in today's higher education context, student travel is one platform that can develop students' intercultural competency in an increasingly multicultural population.

Keywords: Intercultural competence; Student travel; Gender; Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main challenges when it comes to travelling is the matter of adaptability as to whether travelers are able to adapt to the host culture or not. This is where intercultural communication competence plays a crucial role in ensuring a successful intercultural contact with the host culture. Intercultural competence allows an individual to have "the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on specific attitudes, intercultural knowledge, skills and reflection" (Deardorff, 2006). A considerable amount of research on travelling and intercultural competence have suggested that travelling bring positive outcomes on one's levels of intercultural competence (see Salisbury, 2011). In other words, through travelling, one is able to develop and further improve his/her intercultural ability as a result of experiencing another culture.

As student travel is becoming immensely popular and affordable, it opens up windows of exposure for intercultural communication allowing students to make contact with people of diverse backgrounds and cultures. United Nations World Tourism Organisation or UNWTO (2008) expected a steady growth- an estimation of 500 million by 2025- in travel among youth, with Malaysia being no exception. The Department of Statistics reported that in 2010, there were 28.25 million of youth travelers in Malaysia. As the number of student travel continues to flourish, the current study is motivated to investigate students' intercultural competency in relation to their travelling behavior in a Malaysian university. The study hopes to gain valuable insights on student travel as one of the platforms to develop students' intercultural competency to prepare them for an increasingly multicultural world population.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Intercultural Competence

Deardorff (2006) defines intercultural competence as "knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or interact; valuing others' values, beliefs and behaviors; and revitalizing one's self" (p. 247). In an intercultural communication setting, a speaker should be able to anticipate the expectations and assessments of people from different cultures, hence, he or she will be able to adapt style of communication to accommodate their communicative needs.

There are many aspects of intercultural communication competence. Chen and Starosta (1998, as cited in Penbek, Yurdakul and Cerit, 2009) stated three fundamental parts of intercultural communication competence, namely; intercultural sensitivity (effective process), intercultural awareness (cognitive process), and intercultural adroitness (behavioral process). These elements play a big role in determining whether intercultural competence can be achieved or not. Chen (1988) highlighted four important aspects of intercultural communication competence, namely: communication skills, cultural sensitivity, psychological adjustment and communication skills. Chen further divided these four aspects into subcategories such as being flexible, social and interaction skills, coping with stress and pressure of changing to a new and unfamiliar environment and understanding the social

systems, norms and values of the new culture in order to show appreciation.

2.2 Intercultural Competence Framework (Deardorff, 2006)

In this study, Deardorff's framework of Intercultural Competence (2006) is utilised to better understand the mechanism of intercultural competence and its elements. The framework is then used as a guidance to analyse the respondent's levels of intercultural competence.

The Intercultural Competence framework underlies what it means to communicate in an intercultural interaction. It depicts the continuous process of developing intercultural competence. The framework consists of five elements, namely: attitude, knowledge, skill, internal outcomes and external outcomes. The most important element in this framework is the attitudinal element which comprises of respecting other cultures; showing openness towards another culture; and tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty (curiosity and discovery). Next, knowledge element includes cultural self-awareness, deep cultural knowledge and sociolinguistic awareness. The third element, skills consist of how one needs to view the world from the viewpoint of others by listening, seeing, assessing and relating. Both knowledge and skill elements are crucial for gaining and digesting cultural knowledge. The fourth element, internal outcome consists of adaptability to adjust to a different cultural environment, flexibility to use communication styles appropriate with the context, ethnorelative view and empathy. Finally, the external outcome refers to effective communication and appropriate behaviour under any intercultural circumstances. The effectiveness can only be assessed by the individual itself whereas the other person will decide on whether the communication or behaviour are appropriate. In short, the more elements that are acquired and developed, the greater the chances for a higher level of intercultural competence.

2.3 Intercultural competency and travelling

Compared to older tourists, young travellers are more adventurous and they have a higher tendency to travel more regularly and for a longer period of time (Word Tourism Organization, 2016). This shows that they have a higher thirst for travelling. Cavagnaro (2018) shared the same view by stating that youth travellers are natural travellers where more than 60 per cent of them travel four to five times a year and they view travelling as an important part of their lives. She further stated that these youths are expected to keep on travelling as they get older. Richard and Wilson (2003) in a study on youth and students travel found several benefits that youth travellers gain from travelling which are appreciation of different cultures, sparks interest to learn about other cultures, become more tolerable, eager to travel, boost self-confidence and develop self-awareness. The study reveals several reasons for travelling among youth and students, namely: exploration of other cultures, excitement and knowledge. Furthermore, youth travellers focus more on social contact and excitement whereas the older ones seek for relaxation and individualised experiences.

A study by Eusébio and Carneiro (2015, as cited in Blomgren and Ljungström, 2017) revealed novelty and knowledge as the two most important aspects of travelling motivation among youth and students. This might indicate that youth and students are inclined to experience things that are new to them and learn about the places that they travel to (Blomgren and Ljungström, 2017). Moreover, youth and students have more time to travel and they are flexible, more open minded and open towards discovering an unfamiliar place (Blaha, 2012).

This in turn, will increase their chances to interact with the people from the host culture and develop a relationship with them (Eusébio and Carneiro, 2012, in Blomgren and Ljungström, 2017). This preference of interaction can be linked to youth desire to learn about other cultures. Such attitude helps them gain cultural enrichment as well as developing positive attitudes towards people from host cultures.

Travelling opens up windows for a lot of possibility and great experience. According to a study done by Heinzman, Kunzle, Schallhart and Muller (2015), students who traveled demonstrated higher intercultural adaptability compared to those who did not travel. In the study, the students who traveled reacted positively to the representatives of the target culture whereby they were excited to gain knowledge of different culture. They also demonstrated higher sense of discovery of new experience than others. Chang, Yuan, and Chuang (2013) stressed that when people interact and get involved in the local settings, that is when learning occurs, hence enhances their adaptability. Moreover, in order to adapt to the new environment, those who travel need to be more open in adjusting and expanding their existing cultural values in order to fit in the new environment. Gardner (1985) suggested that intercultural adaptability can be further developed by getting further involved and increasing contact with the representatives of the culture. In other words, the longer one experiences another culture, the more chance he or she may get to adjust his or her existing cultural values in adapting to the new cultural environment.

A study done by Demircioğlu and Çakir (2016), in which they compared intercultural competency of students who traveled abroad and those who did not, found that those who traveled abroad have a greater level of intercultural competence. The findings also highlighted that among those who traveled abroad, female students showed a higher level of intercultural competence compared to male students. One explanation for this is that as women are generally more receptive with what is happening around them, they are more culturally sensitive and have a higher level of empathy. Another study done by Rust, Forster, Niziolek, and Morris (2013), in which they compared the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) scores of students before and after they went for study abroad programs, revealed that those who went abroad have a significant increase in their IDI scores. This study suggests that travelling does improve students' levels of intercultural competence. Similarly, Hoffa and DePaul (2010, as cited in Salisbury, 2011) found that one of the significant benefits of studying abroad is that it can enhance students' intercultural competency. In addition, the students who either study or travel abroad are able to expand their worldview and develop their intercultural sensitivity and awareness as they meet and interact with new people and understand the host culture. In sum, interacting with the

representatives of the host culture is crucial to enhance intercultural learning (Anderson and Lawton, 2011).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample

This study population includes Malaysian and international student travellers aged between 18 to 25 years old studying at the International Islamic University Malaysia. The respondents were selected randomly from various faculties to participate in this study. They were recruited through snowball sampling where selected respondents were approached and asked to recruit potential respondents from among their acquaintances that fit to the characteristics of the respondents (Alvi, 2016).

3.2 Instrumentation

A questionnaire was adopted and modified from a study done by Scally (2015). The questionnaire was constructed to investigate students' perception of their intercultural competency based on Deardorff's Intercultural Competence framework (2006). In this study, the questionnaire consists of two sections. Section A aimed to gather the socio-demographic background of each respondent. There were seven questions regarding the socio-demographic profiles of respondents such as gender, age, nationality, year of study, source of income, style of travel and frequency of travel. Section B intended to elicit students' perceptions of their levels of intercultural competency. There were nine questions on attitude, knowledge and skills in a Likert scale design from 1, "strongly disagree" to 5, which is "strongly agree". The questionnaire was prepared in English.

3.3 Data Collection

The self-completed questionnaires were administered using Google Form, an online web survey and disseminated to the respondents through WhatsApp mobile messaging application. An online-based survey was being utilized due to the fact that it can reach a wide population in a short period of time. Moreover, it was time and cost effective. A total of 105 responses had been received and analysed.

3.4 Data Analysis

All statistical data analyses were performed using SPSS version 23.0 (IBM Corp, 2015). Descriptive statistics was employed to analyse the percentage as well as the mean score of the levels of intercultural competence. In analysing the levels of intercultural competence, the higher the score, the higher the levels of intercultural competence will be.

4. MAIN RESULTS

4.1 Socio-demographics of Respondents

The demographic data of the respondents are presented in Table 1, according to their gender, nationality, year of study, source of income, style of travel and frequency of travel. Males represented 78.1% of the respondents and females represented 21.9%. Majority of the respondents are Malaysian (95.2%) and only 4.8% of the total students are foreign students. The biggest group of respondents was in year 2 (32.4%) followed by year 4 students (25.7%), year 1 students (16.2%), year 3 students (15.2%) and lastly pre-university students represented 10.5% of the total students. In terms of source of income, the majority of the respondents (63.8%) relied on financial assistance from either family or scholarship while 36.2% obtained their source of income either from own saving or part-time job. Majority of students (85.7%) prefer to travel in groups while only 14.3% travel solo. In terms of frequency of travel, most students travelled less than twice in a year (60.9%), 29.5% of students travelled four or less times in a year and only 9.5% of students travelled more than five times in a year.

Table 1 *Demographic Profile of Respondents (N=105)*

Characteristics		Frequency	%
Gender	Male	23	78.1
	Female	82	21.9
Nationality	Malaysian	100	95.2
	Non-Malaysian	5	4.8
Level of study	Pre-university	11	10.5
	First year	17	16.2
	Second year	34	32.4
	Third year	16	15.2
	Fourth year	27	25.7
Travel frequency	Rarely (1-2 times)	64	60.9
	Occasionally (3-4 times)	31	29.5
	Always (more than 5 times)	10	9.5
Financial issues	Self-funded (own savings, working)	38	36.2
	Financial assistance (parental support, scholarship)	67	63.8
Travelling styles	Individually (solo)	15	14.3
	In groups (family, friends, husband)	90	85.7

4.2 Levels of Intercultural Competency

Table 2 below illustrates the overall averages for the major elements of attitude, knowledge and skills. From the three elements, the respondents scored the highest on the element of attitude with a score of 4.194 out of 5. This positive attitude shows that the respondents are open towards interacting with other people from different culture in a different cultural environment. On the other hand, the respondents scored the lowest when it comes to their

knowledge regarding intercultural competence. The respondents got a score of 3.689 which is still quite high. The respondents might score the lowest in the element of knowledge because they are not aware of the importance of equipping themselves with the knowledge regarding the place that they are travelling to. The last element that is crucial for the enhancement of intercultural competence is skills in which the respondents scored 3.733 out of 5 which shows that they are somewhat skilful. Being skilful is important as without having proper skills, one is not able to execute what they already know.

Table 2 *Questionnaire Overall Average*

	N	Mean	SD
ATTITUDE	105	4.1937	.70979
KNOWLEDGE	105	3.6889	.81685
SKILLS	105	3.7333	.76292
Valid N (listwise)	105		

In questions addressing students' attitudes, the respondents score the highest on the statement "It is important for me to be able to interact with and learn from different languages and cultures". This reflects the respondents' innate curiosity (Goldstein & Kim, 2006 as cited in Scally, 2015) in which they understand the importance of interacting in an intercultural environment. Table 3 illustrates that the respondents get the same positive score of 4.191 out of 5 for the next two questions which shows that they have a strong desire to interact with those of different culture and background as well as they are willing to understand the differences that exists between them. Although in average, the respondents only travel one to two times a year, nevertheless, they show a positive attitude in which they have attained the first element of intercultural competence. The positive attitude to interact with those different from them could stem from themselves studying in an International University where the students itself consists of people from different country, background and culture so they are already exposed to being in a multicultural environment.

Table 3 *Individual Response Average on Attitude*

	N	Mean	SD
A1 It is important for me to be able to interact with and learn from different languages and cultures	105	4.2000	.85934
A2 I try to understand differences in behaviour, values and attitude between myself and others of different backgrounds	105	4.1905	.77330
A3 I enjoy interacting with individuals from a different culture that is unfamiliar to me	105	4.1905	.80974
Valid N (listwise)	105		

In relation to knowledge, the respondents scored the highest score of 3.838 out of 5 for the statement "I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I use when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds". Table 4 illustrates that the respondents are aware of what to do in communicating with those of different culture from them. On the other hand, respondents are not confident with their knowledge regarding cultural values, norms and taboos of the place that they are travelling to, which could be due to the respondents themselves not realizing the importance of equipping themselves with this knowledge when they travel as they are not staying there for a long period of time. The respondents are somewhat able to compare the language and culture of their own with the language and culture of the place that they travelled to.

Table 4 *Individual Response Average on Knowledge*

	N	Mean	SD
K1 I know the cultural values, norms and taboos of the place that I am travelling to	105	3.4952	.99154
K2 I am able to contrast aspects of the host country (the place that I am travelling to) language and culture with my own	105	3.7333	1.00256
K3 I am conscious of the cultural knowledge I use when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds	105	3.8381	.86740
Valid N (listwise)	105		

In Table 5, questions addressing students' existing skills show that the respondents demonstrated a degree of confidence, with a score of 3.933 in being able to observe their own behaviour and its effect on themselves as well as on others. Besides, they also feel at ease in communicating with people in different social situations. This could be due to them having prior experiences in interacting with people in a different cultural environment than their own and they have already get used to it. When asked whether they would change their behaviour (verbal and non-verbal) when interacting in an intercultural communication, they are least confident that they would. This signifies that they would still maintain their own verbal and non-verbal behaviour and not change them every time they are in a cross-cultural interaction. One reason for this could be that their knowledge of the new culture is still unfamiliar to them, therefore they are more comfortable sticking with their own culture.

Table 5 *Individual Response Average on Skills*

	N	Mean	SD
S1 I change my verbal (e.g. accent, tone) and non-verbal behaviour when a cross-cultural interaction requires it	105	3.5810	1.06320

S2 I monitor my own behaviour and its impact on my learning, growth and on others	105	3.9333	.82353
S3 I feel comfortable interacting in a variety of different social situations	105	3.6857	1.03138
Valid N (listwise)	105		

4.3 Gender, Travelling and Intercultural Competency

In relation to gender, on average, there is not much difference in the score between male and female respondents. Table 6 illustrates that female respondents scored only slightly higher than male respondents in both the elements of attitude and knowledge. However, when it comes to skills, male respondents show that they are somewhat more skilful compared to female respondents. When it comes to the respondent's attitude, both male and female respondents showed a very positive attitude whereby they scored 4.015 and 4.244 out of 5 respectively. The high score shows that the respondents are open towards interacting in an intercultural environment. Having a positive attitude indicates that the respondents value other cultures and do not hold any judgements towards other cultures (Deardorff, 2006).

In questions addressing the respondent's knowledge regarding intercultural competence both male and female respondents scores an average of 3.594 and 3.716 respectively. The score signifies that the respondents do have prior knowledge about the host culture, but it may not be enough to make them fully understand the world from the perspective of other people. Deardorff (2006) explains that deep understanding and cultural knowledge of other culture is important to enhance one's level of intercultural competence. Based on the questions asked, the respondents show the least knowledge regarding the cultural norms, values and taboos of the place that they are travelling to. Lack of knowledge regarding this might lead to problems such as mistakenly perceived by the host culture as being rude.

For questions on their existing skills, the respondent's give a relatively high score where the male respondents scored 3.826 while the female respondents scored 3.707 out of 5.This shows their level of ability to listen, observe and interpret their surrounding in becoming competence in an intercultural interaction. With regards to the three statements on skills, both male and female respondents stated that they do not switch their behaviour (verbal and non-verbal) to conform to the behaviour of the people from the new culture. However, they are still able to monitor their own behaviour and they are aware of the impact of their behaviour towards others.

Table 6 *Average Score of Intercultural Competence according to Gender*

Elements of Intercultural Competence	Gender	
	Male	**Female**
Attitude	4.015	4.244
Knowledge	3.594	3.716
Skills	3.826	3.707

4.4 Style of Travel and Intercultural Competency

Students who travel alone reported a higher level of intercultural competence with a score of 4.111 in comparison to those who travel in groups with a score of 3.832. When it comes to enhancing one's levels of intercultural competence, students who travel alone will increase their chances to meet other travellers and the locals during the journey. Similarly, Richard and Wilson (2004) emphasised that travelling independently increases interaction with the host country.

Table 7 *Average Score of Intercultural Competence in relation to Style of Travel*

Group Statistics

Travelling Styles		N	Mean	SD	SEM
IC	individually	15	4.1111	.38029	.09819
	groups	90	3.8321	.69743	.07352

4.5 Financial Issues and Intercultural Competency

Students who self-financed their travelling reported a slightly higher level of intercultural competence with a score of 3.991 in comparison to those who received financial assistance with a score of 3.804. The majority of the respondents travel by receiving financial assistance which suggest that they are financially unstable to support themselves to travel, hence, explains why the majority of the respondents rarely travel. However, travelling less does not mean that they are unable to enhance their levels of intercultural competence. According to Patching-Bunch (2016), the quantity of travelling does not affects one levels of intercultural competence but quality matters in which one should interact with the host to increase their levels of intercultural competence.

Table 8 *Average Score of Intercultural Competence in relation to Financial Issues*

Group Statistics

Financial Issues		N	Mean	SD	SEM
IC	self-funded	38	3.9912	.52776	.08561
	financial assistance	67	3.8043	.72991	.08917

5. CONCLUSION

To review, this paper discusses the data collected to explore Malaysian university students' intercultural competency with respect to their travelling behaviour. Through analysis of the data collected, Deardorff's framework of Intercultural Competence (2006) demonstrated to be quite fitting to elicit valuable insight into students' perceptions of their attitude, knowledge and skills. The findings demonstrate that out of the three elements of intercultural competence proposed by Deardorff (2006), the respondents in the study scored the highest

in the element of attitude. Whereas the element that the respondents show least confidence in is their knowledge. An overall average score of the respondent's levels of intercultural competence was analysed and the findings from the study revealed that the respondent's levels of intercultural competence is quite high. Although the majority of the respondents only travel one to two times a year, their levels of intercultural competence are still quite high. This might indicate that the quantity of travel does not really matters in enhancing one's levels of intercultural competence. Hence, it can be suggested that regardless of how many times one travelled, as long as they travel, they are able to increase their levels of intercultural competence. This shows that travelling does enhance one's levels of intercultural competence.

Furthermore, the study found that female students scored higher in the elements of attitude and knowledge. They might be more open towards intercultural interaction, therefore more willing to learn new knowledge about the places that they are travelling to. Although male respondents reported less confidence when it comes to their attitude and knowledge, they gained higher score in the elements of skills. In addition, students who self-financed their traveling reported a higher level of intercultural competence compared to those who received financial assistance. Meanwhile, youth who prefer to travel solo reported a higher level of intercultural competence than those who travelled in groups. To conclude, student travel has the potential to contribute to enhancing levels of intercultural competency as evidenced by the positive propensity of the students to seek experience and appreciation of other cultures.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

This study is small scale in nature and limited to one university in Malaysia. Future research could be done on a larger scale to explore other aspects of student travel, such as; motivation, places of travel and mobility program, that might contribute to intercultural competency. Future research could also consider using other approaches of collecting data such as interviews to get in depth and richer data.

Bibliography:

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