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Research Article

Study Abroad and Student Exchange Experiences of International Students: The Sociocultural and Psychological Racism Perspective

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Abstract

Malaysian students like to study abroad and experience the international exchanging programmes during their university voyage. Due to the technology and entertainment developments, South Korea is one of the popular education destinations for many international students, particularly Malaysian students. Based on the Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism perspective, this study's purpose focused on describing their challenges, academic experiences, and living experiences in South Korea. The results indicated that Chinese-Malaysian students experienced significant negative experiences, including discrimination based on their place of origin, cultural characteristics and social behaviours, and special background and status as non-traditional students. Although Malaysia and South Korea share similar East Asian practice, all participants regretted their study abroad experiences in South Korea. The findings of this study will contribute to the knowledge about the study abroad experiences of Malaysian students, overseas learning experiences, managerial developments of international students' services, and the governmental policies for global views for the South Korean communities.

Keywords: Chinese-Malaysian; exchange; Malaysian student; international student; Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism; South Korea; student experience; study abroad

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

South Korea is a popular educational destination for many students, and particularly for traditional-age and young university students who may spend at least one semester in a foreign country for their personal and academic development. Studying abroad and experiencing international student exchange increases young people's global views, intercultural perspectives, and communication skills, enriching their lives from different directions and perspectives and with classmates from other countries and regions. Because one goal for university education is to increase students' critical thinking skills through international experiences and exposure to the values and concepts from people with different ideas and backgrounds, many universities and departments encourage their students to join study abroad or student exchange programmes for at least one semester at a partner university.

As a result of globalisation and freedom of movement, many university students can now gain the opportunity to study in a foreign country, with reduced tuition fees, through student exchange agreements between their home and hosted universities. According to a recent report (Yoon, 2021), the enrolment of international students in South Korean universities has been rapidly increasing, nearly doubling from 2010 to 2019. In 2010, only 83,842 international students were enrolled at one of the South Korean universities, but that enrolment reached its highest ever, 160,165, in 2019. Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused the number of international students enrolled in South Korea to decline in 2020, to 153,695, it should climb again once the global public health crisis has ended.

Another report, by the ICEF Monitor (*South Korea Reporting Big Gains in Foreign Enrolment*, 2019), concluded from a study of the South Korean Ministry of Education regarding the international population from 430 South Korean colleges and universities in 2019 that during that year, the country's population of international students was 160,165. Chinese students comprised the largest number of South Korea's international student population in 2019, accounting for 44.4% (71,067), followed by Vietnamese students (23.4% or 37,426), Mongolian students (4.6% or 7,381), Japanese students (2.7% or 4,392), and American students (1.8% or 2,915). International students from other countries also were important and significant to the South Korean educational environment, with students from all other countries and regions making up the remaining 23.1%.

For many decades, the Malaysian government has consistently contributed resources to the development of university education. University students are encouraged to enjoy at least one semester of study abroad or take part in an international student exchange during their university voyage. Because of agreements between the home and partner universities, Malaysian university students can freely select any countries and regions as their educational destination. According to a previous study (Doyle, 2016), in 2010, 79,254 Malaysian students joined study abroad and student exchange programmes in foreign countries. More than 25% (20,493) of them decided to go to Australia, followed by 13,796 to the United Kingdom, 8,611 to Egypt, 6,100 to the United States, 5,588 to Indonesia, 5,133 to Taiwan, 2,792 to China, 2,521 to Russia, 2,305 to New Zealand, and 2,175 to India. Most recently, according to a report from The Edge Markets website, more than 70,000 Malaysian university students studied abroad during the 2019/2020 academic year, with most of those Malaysian students deciding to go to the United Kingdom, Ireland, Taiwan, Australia, Egypt, or Indonesia for their foreign experiences (*Fulfilling Your Child's Dreams of Studying Abroad*, 2020). Although South Korea was not among the top five selections for Malaysian students, Malaysian students' enrolment there will continue to grow because South Korea is one of the best selections for many Asian students who share a similar cultural background.

Although South Korea and Malaysia are located in the Far East, where East Asian cultures can greatly influence each other, East Asian students have reported discrimination, bias, and stigma due to their personal and cultural characteristics, during their international studies. Still, a previous study (Lee, 2010) reported that more than 80% of the international students surveyed said that they might refer or recommend their hosted institutions and study abroad experiences to their peers and friends. Even though negative experiences happened during their study abroad experiences, such as over differences between religious and cultural behaviours, many students continued to recommend to others that their international experience increased their global views and cultural understanding. Indeed, international students can face additional difficulties and challenges even greater than those of domestic students from remote regions in their own country. According to a previous study (Mullins et al., 1995), international students usually face financial concerns due to self-funded tuition fees and the costs associated with living alone in a foreign country. Many international students are traditional-age students who do not have enough resources to support their additional living costs, and they often experience hard times trying to save money and contribute to their financial resources. Other common concerns among international students are about homework and school responsibilities, fear of academic failure, motivation to learn, being unsure about their learning skills, and mental issues. Although domestic students face similar questions and issues on-campus during their time at university, loneliness and an unfamiliar social background are not uncommon among

international students.

1.2   Purpose of the Study

Malaysian students like to study abroad and experience international exchange programmes during their university voyage. According to a previous report (Doyle, 2016), South Korea has not been one of the most popular educational destinations, but the country is expected to see increasing populations of Malaysian students for both degree-seeking and non-degree-seeking courses. Unlike the population of Chinese international students in South Korea (the country's largest foreign-student population), the current population of Malaysian students is not high. Therefore, few researchers, university department heads, government agencies, and policymakers contribute significantly to the minority population, including but not limited to Malaysian international students. However, international students' experiences and living standards are among the most important factors for South Korean institutional and governmental entities. Therefore, without a holistic picture and more information about this minority group of international students, Malaysian students may continue to feel confusion about their study-abroad decisions, international academic and living experiences, and post-study-abroad referrals of the South Korean educational environment. Based the current study on the concept of Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007), the current research study was guided by two research questions:

– How do Chinese-Malaysian international students explain and describe their academic challenges during their study abroad and exchange in South Korea?
– How do Chinese-Malaysian international students explain and describe their living and social challenges during their study abroad and exchange in South Korea?

1.3   Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism

This study employed the Sociocultural and Psychological Racism perspective (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007) to understand the challenges, academic experiences, and living experiences of Chinese-Malaysian students in South Korean universities. The current theoretical framework was developed based on the guidelines of Neo-Racism (Lee, 2007). Traditionally, racism focused on discrimination based on individuals' skin colour and race. However, due to globalisation, people from different parts of the global communities. Therefore, people with the same skin colour but different cultural perspective may meet each other in the same region. For example, Malaysian students and professionals may face challenges and difficulties in South Korea in the Far East region.

With the concepts of psychological and social factors, the researcher developed Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007). The current theory advocated that individuals may experience challenges based on the psychological and internal factors, including religious and philosophical behaviours and personal beliefs, and based on social, personal, and external factors, including place of origin, age, social behaviours, cultural characteristics, and spoken language. Although individuals may not experience all these factors for their experience, one or multiple factors and elements may play important roles in their lived stories. Figure 1 outlines the concept of Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism.
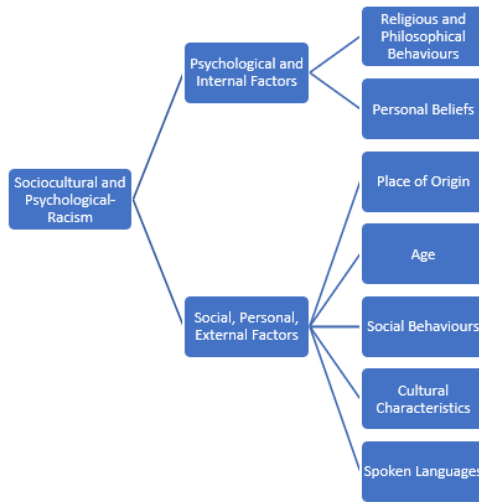
Figure 1: Sociocultural and psychological-racism

2. Methodology

2.1   Research Design: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009) was employed to collect the participants' in-depth and engaging qualitative research data. Unlike the general phenomenology (Giorgi, 1985) with a wider perspective about the general situation and issue in the society, the interpretative phenomenological analysis tends to collect qualitative data from a smaller group of people who may represent the social problems for individuals and groups with a similar background. Also, the research studies with the interpretative phenomenological analysis design tended to understand how the participants describe their experiences and lived stories, inner world, social understanding, and sense-making process of a particular situation. Therefore, the information and lived stories of the participants were rich and meaningful (Tang & Dos Santos, 2017).

2.2   Recruitment and Participants

Due to the rationale of the interpretative phenomenological analysis and the limited number of participants, a total of ten participants were invited. First, the researcher employed the purposive sampling strategy and snowball sampling strategy (Merriam, 2009) to recruit three participants. The researcher invited the participants for this study verbally. Once the participants agreed with the participation, the researcher emailed the interview protocol, rationale, consent form, and related materials. The participant sent the signed consent form and the potential interview time(s) to the researcher. Once the participants completed the interview sessions, they should refer at least one participant to the study for further development. After several rounds of referrals, ten participants were willing to join. As this study focused on the issues of Chinese-Malaysian international students, the participants should meet all of the following criteria,

- Identify as a Chinese-Malaysian person
- Completed at least one semester of study abroad or academic exchange in South Korea
- Non-vulnerable person
- At least 18 years old

2.3   Data Collection

According to Seidman (2013), the interview is one of the useful tools for qualitative research. In this case, as the researcher wanted to understand the in-depth understanding, inner world, and sense-making process, the researcher developed three sets of semi-structured interview questions and sessions based on the guideline. The interview sets focused on the period before they arrived in South Korea, during the first semester in South Korea, and times after their first semester in South Korea. Each interview session lasted from 112 to 132 minutes. After the participants finished three individual interview sessions, all were invited to the focus group activity. Each focus group activity involved five participants. In other words, two focus group activities were hosted. Each focus group activity lasted from 98 to 113 minutes. After all the data collection procedure, the researcher categorised and merged the data based on each participant. Then, the researcher sent the appropriate materials to the participants for the member checking interview session. Each member checking interview lasted from 34 to 54 minutes. All participants confirmed their own data. During the data collection procedure, the researcher employed a digital recorder to record the sessions. All agreed with the arrangement.

2.3.1 Use of language

As the study was reported in English, the researcher tended to use English to conduct the data collection procedure. However, the participants were allowed to use English, Chinese Mandarin, and Chinese Cantonese to express their experiences and lived stories. The researcher translated the Chinese Mandarin and Chinese Cantonese materials to English for this study.

2.4   Data Analysis

The researcher merged more than 500 pages of the qualitative data. First of all, the researcher transcribed the voiced messages to written transcripts. Then, the researcher re-read the materials multiple times for any potential themes and subthemes. The researcher employed the open-coding technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) based on the grounded theory approach to categorise the massive information to meaningful themes as the first-level themes. Afterwards, the researcher further employed the axial-coding technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to narrow down the themes and subthemes again as the second-level themes and subthemes. As a result, four themes and two subthemes were yielded.

2.5   Human Subject Protection

The privacy of the participants is the most important factor in this study. Therefore, the researcher needed to conduct all potential ways and directions to protect the personal information of all parties. The signed consent form, personal contact, email addresses, university information, voiced messages, written transcripts, computer, and related materials were locked in a password-protected cabinet. Only the researcher could read the materials. After the researcher completed the study, the related materials were deleted and destroyed immediately to protect privacy. The study was supported by Woosong University Academic Research Funding (2021/2022).

3.   Results and Discussion

Guided by the Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007) perspective, after several rounds of interview sessions and focus group activities, the researcher identified four themes and two subthemes on the basis of the qualitative data of each participant. Unlike quantitative data with statistical numbers, the participants' qualitative sharing and lived

stories were rich and meaningful regarding their lived stories and social experiences in South Korea. Table 1 outlines the themes and subthemes.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes

Themes and Subthemes		
3.1	Negative Theme: Malaysia as One's Place of Origin	
	3.1.1.	The Sin of Being a Malaysian of Chinese Heritage
3.2.	Negative Theme: Cultural Characteristics and Social Behaviours between Malaysian and Chinese Societies	
	3.2.1.	Participating in Chinese Festivals and Traditions as Chinese-Malaysians
3.3.	Negative Theme: Special Background Status as a Non-traditional Student	
3.4.	Positive Theme: Social Behaviours with East Asian Practices	

3.1   Negative Theme: Malaysia as One's Place of Origin

> *…Malaysia…is it the poor country who is already left behind…Singapore?…is it the country always need to help and financial support from Singapore?…is it the country with many poor people and the people in the east part are poor?…I heard that all the time when Korean people describe my country…I am angry because of the wrong information…(Participant #10, Interview)*

> *…Malaysia is a unique country with different groups of people…Chinese, Indian, Malay, and others are all in our country…it is very beautiful and special…Korea is a land with only Korean people…they don't understand anything outsides of this land…they laughed at our country…and I am sick of these jokes…(Participant #8, Interview)*

All of the study's participants were Malaysia-born Chinese-Malaysian citizens with strong beliefs tied to their homeland (i.e., Malaysia) and cultural heritage (i.e., Chinese). As this is the case with many Korean people who espouse their own cultural heritage and sense of belonging, the study's participants largely agreed on how the South Korean people challenged their place of origin and cultural heritage. All of the Chinese-Malaysian participants strongly advocated that they were proud of their citizenship as Malaysian. Because their South Korean peers and members of the general public criticised their sense-of-belonging and the national sovereignty of Malaysia, they all expressed negative comments, such as the following,

> *…as a Malaysian…I cannot accept…the Korean people laugh…at my country…I don't understand what can you laugh, and why should you laugh…the name of the city, our citizens with different religious perspectives…our train system and the relationship with other southeast Asian country…you can laugh our government…but they cannot laugh our national sovereignty…(Participant #1, Focus Group)*

> *…Malaysia has the west Malaysia and the east Malaysia…the east Malaysia…where I grew up…it is not a rich part because the capital city is located in the west Malaysia…but what is the point…to point…at the west Malaysia and tell people the people in the west are poor and stupid…many many of them, tell me that the Malaysian government stool the lands from Brunei…it is not true…you can laugh at me, but they cannot laugh at my country…(Participant #5, Interview)*

Recently an internet slang expression, "*chung*" (in Korean, 충, and in English, worm), has sprung up to describe negatively viewed individuals, groups, items, and behaviours in Korean communities. In the researcher's conversations with the participants, all ten reported that they were called a Chinese-Malaysian worm in different parts of the Korean society, including classrooms, school departments and services, community centres, on the streets, and in restaurants. According to a previous study (Lee, 2017), South Korean people have the habit of looking down on individuals and groups from third-world countries, such as China. However, it is surprising that the Chinese-Malaysians also experienced that same discrimination, bias, and social stigma from their South

Korean counterparts. The researcher captured the following,

> *...I was called the Chinese worm in the community centre...because the spelling of my English name is in Chinese...the lady in the counter said nothing...but the back-office staff used the word Chinese worm...to describe my identity...they even gamed and made fun of my ID card...(Participant #9, Interview)*

In short, along with the reflections from a previous study (Lee, 2017), many international expatriates who identified their roles and backgrounds as Chinese, regardless of their citizenship, have experienced discrimination and bias in South Korea. Although not all of the study's participants were Chinese citizens or had a Chinese-Malaysian cultural heritage, the stigma they felt from their South Korean counterparts and members of the South Korean public was significant. Using the concept of Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007), the researcher confirmed that the participants' place of origin played an important role in their experiences in South Korea.

3.1.1 The Sin of Being a Malaysian of Chinese Heritage

Citizenship and cultural heritage are factors about an individual that cannot be changed. In many countries, populations of immigrants are among the most important contributors to social and cultural diversity. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020), in 2020, the local Malaysian or Bumiputera population was 69.6%, followed by the Chinese population (22.6%), the Indian population (6.8%), and "others" (1%) (*Current Population Estimates, Malaysia, 2020, 2020*). According to a previous study (Chee-Beng, 1997), approximately a century ago during the late-Ching dynasty more than one million Chinese residents, including but not limited to residents from Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan, decided to move to Southeast Asia (e.g., Malaya) for their career development. Although the local Chinese populations accepted and understood the traditions and customs of the local Malaysian people, many continued to teach the Chinese language, education, religion, philosophy, and practices to their next generations. As a result, many of the study participants identified themselves as being Chinese-Malaysians, in order to specify their cultural heritage. However, in the current case, many participants indicated that their South Korean peers and members of the general public used such self-identities and cultural heritage as the means to challenge their roles in South Korea. Two comments reflecting that situation were captured:

> *...my grandparents and parents are Chinese...but my parents were born in Malaysia...we are all Malaysian with Chinese background...just like a lot of American people with Irish background...nothing wrong...but the South Korean people and my ex-friends...need me to identify...ask me to tell them I am a Chinese...because I speak Chinese, I learnt Chinese in school...and I have Chinese religion...(Participant #3, Interview)*

> *...what is the point...they need me to select...Malaysian or Chinese...I am both...but they need me to pick one...it is wrong and it is incorrect...it is illegal to ask people...to identify their citizenship based on background in Malaysia...I think it is illegal in the United Kingdom too...but in Korea...people encouraged us to select our heritage and citizenship...(Participant #7, Focus Group)*

As one conclusion, using the Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007) as the basis, the researcher found that place of origin and spoken language played important roles in the participants' experiences in South Korea, particularly with regard to their unique background as Chinese-Malaysians (Chee-Beng, 1997). In contrast to Malaysians, with their country's multiple cultural backgrounds and diverse population, South Koreans do not understand other countries' multicultural management and diversity. Therefore, South Koreans' curiosity and lack of understanding caused inconvenience and negative experiences for the Chinese-Malaysian participants in the study.

3.2   *Negative Theme: Cultural Characteristics and Social Behaviours between Malaysian and Chinese Societies*

Malaysia is known as a country with multiple ethnic groups and broad diversity among its residents. Although the country's Chinese-Malaysians and Indian-Malaysians are not its largest populations, the Malaysian government and members of the Malaysian public always show respect for the minorities' cultures and social behaviours. However, all of the study's participants indicated that their South Korean friends and members of the South Korean general public forced them to follow the habits and traditions of other ethnic groups from Malaysia. For example, the religious practices of Chinese-Malaysian women typically do not require them to wear a head scarf (most of the participants were followers of Buddhism and Daoism). However, many reported challenging comments from their South Korean counterparts, who said things such as the following:

…why don't you wear scarf…you shouldn't show us your hair…you are Muslim…you are Malaysian…you look so scary…look at you…you Malaysian…you do not follow the rules in your country…you will be published when you go back to Malaysia…(Participant #2, Interview)

…do you need to worship your Allah six times per day?… can you go to class on time…if you don't have time…you need to tell your professors…do you afraid of the terrorism…please don't bring danger to South Korea…South Korea doesn't want to be destroyed…this is the common conversation…daily conversation from the Korean people in my places, classrooms, and rooms…(Participant #4, Interview)

In fact, the South Koreans' misunderstandings about cultural practices and images of Malaysia and Malaysian people were significant. Although the researcher questioned the participants about the frequency of their challenging conversations and exchanges, all participants indicated that they had experienced these discriminations and biases in their experiences in South Korea.

In addition to the South Koreans' negativity about the Chinese Malaysian students' religious practices, many of the participants experienced difficulties in regard to their eating habits. Malaysia welcomes immigrants and overseas workers from different parts of the world to join the country, and Indian-Malaysians and the population of Indian immigrants in Malaysia comprise one of the top three groups in Malaysia. However, cultural differences, including the eating habits of different groups, can differ significantly––for example, among Chinese-Malaysian people, chopsticks are the common eating utensil. However, many reported the challenges from their South Korean counterparts and friends in response to their use of chopsticks. Some said:

…we use chopsticks for meal…but they asked me to use hand for my lunch…I respected to the eating habits of other Indian-Malaysian residents in my country…but I have my use ways…I don't understand why those Korean people…force me to follow the cultural traditions and behaviours of the Indian-Malaysians…I have my ways…I don't need to follow others… (Participant #6, Focus Group)

…they told me that chopstick is only for Korean people…Malaysian people should only use hand…for food and toilet…I told them this is the Indian-Malaysian's habit…we Chinese-Malaysians have the Chinese ways for eating…but they told me that chopstick is only for Korean people…we should use hand instead…I think it is false…(Participant #10, Focus Group)

In short, some of the differences in cultural and social characteristics and behaviours among Malaysians, Chinese, and South Koreans can create confusion because South Korean people do not understand the differences between their own and the others' customs and traditions (Kim, 1996; Koh, 2017). Based on the work using the concept of Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007), the researcher found that the study participants' cultural characteristics and social behaviours, and the challenges that arose from their social and daily activities, routinely created confusion and negative feelings for them in South Korea. For example, in Malaysia, the diverse population's variety of eating habits are considered unique and

interesting, and it is not appropriate to force or expect people to use specific targeted ways of eating. In the case, the participants felt negative and angry about eating-related comments from their South Korean counterparts.

3.2.1 Participating in Chinese Festivals and Traditions as Chinese-Malaysians

A large number of festivals and traditions in the Far East are influenced by the Chinese culture. Because many Chinese-Malaysian people are the second and third generations of Chinese immigrants, they often follow and practice Chinese traditions and behaviours as Chinese-Malaysians in Southeast Asia. One remarkable festival is the Dragon Boat Festival, which is based on a traditional story from China. Chinese people usually perform the dragon boat competition during early May (of the Lunar Calendar) every year in order to worship the Chinese Poet *Qu Yuan* (340-278 BC). However, all participants reported that the South Korean people claimed that the Dragon Boat Festival was developed in the Korean Peninsula, and asked them, because they were Chinese or Chinese-Malaysians, not to follow the Korean festival. As some participant said:

> ...the Dragon Boat Festival traditions belong to China and Chinese people...nothing associated with the Korean people...we are Chinese-Malaysian...of course we can follow our tradition...as we were Chinese...(Participant #2, Focus Group)

> ...all people on earth can celebrate any festivals...I can join the festival in India...I can go to Saudi Arabia and Mecca for the Muslim practice...all people should have their own rights to join or not join a religious practice or traditions...but I don't understand why Korean people asked us not to join the Chinese or Korean practices as foreigners?...it sounds like we are in a communist country...(Participant #7, Interview)

It is very surprising that many of the participants expressed concerns about the forceful and unfair experiences they endured in South Korea because of their nationality, cultural heritage, and cultural practices. Unfortunately, although South Korea experienced the *June Democratic Struggle* or the *June Democracy Movement* in 1987, most South Korean people still believe that the nationality and cultural heritage of others should prevent them from enjoying democracy in South Korea. Such discrimination and biases are echoed in several recent studies (Dos Santos, 2020a, 2020b; Kim et al., 2016; Suh et al., 2019) about human rights violations and discrimination against foreigners in South Korea. Basing the approach on the Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism perspective (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007), the researchers confirmed that cultural characteristics and social behaviours played important roles in the experiences of the study's Chinese-Malaysian students in South Korea.

3.3 Negative Theme: Special Background Status as a Non-traditional Student

Although international student exchange and study abroad programmes usually do not have any age restrictions, studying abroad usually attracts many traditional-age and full-time students who do not have families and career responsibilities (Presley et al., 2010). However, many non-traditional students, particularly postgraduate research students, also value the opportunity to join study abroad or student exchange programmes in order to upgrade their research skills and global views during their postgraduate voyage (Peppas, 2005).

In this study, four participants were non-traditional-age students and three participants were students in their fifth year due to personal obligations. Surprisingly, these seven participants experienced negative encounters prompted by their status as non-traditional-age students. Four non-traditional-age students reported negative experiences that were in response to their age and family engagements, saying,

...I brought my daughter with me to Korea for the year-long exchange programme...I want to tell my daughter your parents are hard-working student...you should become one of the smart students in your classroom as well...but the point is that my Korean classmates, my daughter's classmates and parents, and the Korean public...do not recognise our status and role in Korea...they laughed at me because I am an old student in the school...(Participant #6, Interview)

...I don't think age is a problem for study abroad...a lot of master and PhD students are in their mid-age or so...but I was challenged in my classroom because of my age...not only my classmates...my professor also asked me why do I study in this school with other young students...it is very impolite...and this is my first time and only time...I was asked about my study intention...I never experienced that in any other countries on earth...(Participant #10, Focus Group)

Moreover, all three of the fifth-year students also experienced negative comments from their classmates, professors, and members of the public because they had deferred their graduation date. In general, most Malaysian and South Korean bachelor's degree programmes last from three years to four years, without any breaks. Although a fifth-year of study is allowed, it is uncommon among students because the curriculum sets the completion date. Disappointingly, the participants experienced challenges and difficulties due to their fifth-year status. They said,

...I switched to part-time during my second-year because of my family issue...but I want to exchange and do an international placement during my final year...so I came to Korea...but my classmates in my school...laughed at me because of my fifth-year standing...what is the point for this?...I have my own plan...you have your own...you cannot gain any grades because you laugh at me...(Participant #3, Interview)

...I did a gap year and first internship...so I have to delay my study...I completed a part of my fifth year in South Korea...but my experiences are very negative...in my classroom and dorm room...my classmates told me that...I am a lazy student...and cannot graduate on-time...it is my own plan and I don't need their judgment...but they always chat and talk my situation...during lunch and dinner...I don't feel good...(Participant #5, Interview)

In conclusion, although age is not a restriction for international exchange programmes, non-traditional-age international exchange students are not the largest population. Unfortunately, the challenges and lack of understanding from the South Korean classmates, professors, and members of the South Korean public increased the anxiety and confusion of the study's non-traditional-age participants (Dos Santos, 2020c). From the perspective of the Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism concept (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007), age was an important factor and played a significant role in their experiences of racism and other forms of bias in South Korea.

3.4 Positive Theme: Social Behaviours with East Asian Practices

Although all of the study's participants expressed a plethora of negative experiences and lived stories from their time in South Korea as international students and foreign exchange students, a few also shared positive comments about their time in South Korea. When the researcher asked each participant about his or her positive stories in South Korea, eight absolutely refused to share because they had no positive stories. Two participants shared about their ideas of the differences in social behaviours between Malaysia and South Korea. Most of the positive reports focused on the social behaviours, such as filial piety to their parents. They said,

...Korean and Chinese people both respect to their parents and grandparents...we all go back to our grandparents' houses for gathering and celebration...we all listen to our parents' comments and suggestions for life...we teach our children and next generation the value of Confucianism...(Participant #1, Interview)

Another positive sharing was about family values. Both South Korean and Chinese people put the family as a whole, and the family members, very high on their list of priorities. Owing to their ideas of collectivism (Han, 2017; Li et al., 2018; Triandis, 1995; Y. Zhang & Yin, 2020), people in the Far East tend to consider the results of groups to be more important than the outcomes of individuals. In this study, a participant echoed that idea and said,

> *…we care about the results of us…not I and me…I think I have to achieve the common interests of our group members…this is why I survive in my country and Korea…the interests of us are always important than the interests from me alone…it is the only thing I like in South Korea…(Participant #8, Focus Group)*

In conclusion, although the researcher asked all of the participants about their positive experiences and stories, almost all refused to share any, and eight strongly asserted that no positive experiences could be shared. Two believed that the East Asian practices of collectivism and filial piety were points for encouragement. According to previous studies (Han, 2017; Li et al., 2018; Sun et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019), most East Asian residents share similar values and backgrounds due to their cultural heritage. In line with the Sociocultural and Psychological-Racism perspective (Dos Santos, 2019, 2020; Lee et al., 2017; Lee, 2007), the anxiety of some of our participants was reduced because of the similar religious and philosophical values and practices they had in common with their East Asian counterparts.

4. Limitations and Future Research Directions

To begin, the current study focused on Chinese-Malaysian students' experiences while studying abroad and participating as exchange students in South Korea. Although South Korea is a popular educational destination for Malaysian students, it is certainly not among the top 10 foreign countries for studying abroad. Future research efforts may wish to investigate other popular countries and regions to gain additional perspectives and a broader understanding, in order to enrich the holistic picture of the current situation.

In addition, the current study focused on specific issues pertaining to the Chinese-Malaysian population in South Korea. However, because Chinese-Malaysian residents are the second-largest population in Malaysia, the voices from the majority group and from other minority groups are unknown. Future research studies may wish to expand the perspective and look at other populations and groups who might want to enjoy the study abroad and international student exchange programmes in South Korea. With a larger picture, Malaysian students can better understand the contemporary situation and the different experiences they should expect between South Korea and Malaysia.

Finally, due to the limited size of the overall population (i.e., Chinese-Malaysian students who are currently studying in South Korea or have completed studies there), the number of participants we invited was necessarily small. However, the rationale of the research design (i.e., the application of an interpretative phenomenological analysis) enabled the researcher to collect rich and engaging stories. That meaningful information increased the density of the sharings in answer to the research questions. Therefore, the researcher suggests that for future research studies with limited populations, the use of interpretative phenomenological analyses should be appropriate.

5. Contribution and Conclusion

This study makes several contributions. First, currently, only a few studies have focused on the study abroad and international student exchange experiences of Chinese-Malaysian students in South Korea. Although South Korea is not a particularly popular destination for Malaysian students, it is still important to understand the experiences, lived stories, and behaviours of international students

in South Korea. The results of this study fill in gaps in the knowledge of this area and reflect the situation for countries and regions with similar backgrounds and situations.

Second, the population of international students in South Korea is increasing rapidly owing to the country's popular cultural influences and attractive scholarship programmes. However, many international students face challenges and difficulties in South Korea as a result of the factors we identified through the theoretical framework. The results of this study fill gaps in international students' understanding about the potential for social difficulties when they study abroad.

Third, university leaders and department heads should take this study as an opportunity to reform and upgrade their international student services and university departments in order to meet the needs and expectations of both domestic and international students and faculty members. The researcher found that many participants faced challenges and problems, and those findings likely reflect the current situations in many colleges and universities in South Korea.

Fourth, government agencies and policymakers will benefit from this study because the voices of international students are valuable towards upgrading the policies and regulations for international students and foreigners in South Korea. Because South Korea plans to attract international expatriates in the region in an effort to develop their industry, without a solid plan for international expats, those expats will leave the region after a few years of giving their services.

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