Intellectual Discourse

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Contents

Zouhir Gabsi (2024). *Muslim Perspectives on Islamophobia: From Misconceptions to Reason.* Palgrave Macmillan.
Reviewer: *Arief Arman*

Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	ʿ
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	ʾ
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a		◌َا، ◌َى	an
◌ُ	u		◌ُّو	un
◌ِ	i		◌ِّي	in
◌َا، ◌َ، ◌َى،	ā		◌َوْ	aw
◌ُو	ū		◌َيْ	ay
◌ِي	ī		◌ُّو	uww, ū (in final position)
			◌ِّي	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: http://rotas.iium.edu.my

International Students' Direct and Parasocial Contact, and Attitude Towards Malaysian Host Nationals: The Mediating Roles of Cultural Identification and Islamic Identity

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Abstract: International students may find it challenging to adjust to a new environment. Based on the principles of intergroup contact, this study explored factors that influenced attitude towards Malaysian host nationals. Communication quality (CQ), parasocial interaction (PSI), cultural identification (CID), and Islamic identity (IID) are predicted to influence attitude towards Malaysian host nationals (ATT). It is also hypothesised that CID and IID will function as mediators. Eight hypotheses were proposed to test these relationships. A questionnaire was distributed online in 2024 among international students in Malaysia *(N = 253)*. The Hayes PROCESS macro was used to test the parallel mediation analyses (model 4). CID and CQI had a significant positive direct effect on ATT. CID also mediated the relationship

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between PSI and ATT, and between CQ and ATT. However, IID is not a significant mediator. The repercussion of these findings on intergroup contact and acculturation of international students were also deliberated.

Keywords: Acculturation, cultural identification, direct and parasocial contact, intergroup contact and attitude, Islamic identity

Abstrak: Pelajar antarabangsa mungkin menghadapi kesukaran untuk menyesuaikan diri dengan persekitaran budaya yang baharu. Berdasarkan prinsip-prinsip hubungan antara kumpulan, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti faktor yang mempengaruhi sikap terhadap warga tuan rumah dari Malaysia. Hubungan langsung melalui kualiti komunikasi (CQ), hubungan parasosial (PSI), identifikasi dengan budaya Malaysia (CID), dan identiti Islam (IID) dijangka mempengaruhi sikap terhadap hubungan dengan warga tuan rumah (ATT). Ia juga dihipotesiskan bahawa CI dan IID akan berfungsi sebagai perantara. Lapan hipotesis dicadangkan untuk menguji hubungan ini. Satu soal selidik telah diedarkan secara dalam talian kepada pelajar antarabangsa yang sedang belajar di Malaysia ($N = 253$). Makro Hayes PROCESS digunakan untuk menguji analisis perantaraan selari (model 4). CID dan CQI mempunyai kesan langsung positif yang signifikan terhadap ATT. CID juga memediasi hubungan antara PSI dan ATT, serta antara CQ dan ATT. Walau bagaimanapun, IID tidak signifikan sebagai pengantara. Impak penemuan ini terhadap hubungan antara kumpulan dan akulturasi pelajar antarabangsa akan dibincangkan.

Kata kunci: Akulturasi, identiti budaya, identiti Islam, hubungan dan sikap antara kumpulan, hubungan langsung dan parasosial

Introduction

Malaysia prides itself on being a popular regional educational hub for international students. International students in Malaysia have become an increasingly important part of the country's higher education landscape. Malaysia is home to a diverse range of world-class universities that attract students from all over the globe, particularly from countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and even Europe. With its affordable tuition fees, high-quality education, and multicultural environment, Malaysia has positioned itself as a popular destination for students seeking to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate studies abroad.

As of June 2023, there are reportedly more than 100,000 international students in Malaysia, with private universities and colleges being the

more popular option (Malay Mail, 2024). Based on data by Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS), popular fields of study in Malaysia for international students include social sciences, business, law, science, mathematics, and computing (Rajaendram, 2024). By the end of 2023, EMGS reported that the number of international students applying to study in Malaysia increased from 10, 453 in 2020 to 65, 207 in 2023. Additionally, EMGS data also indicated that earning undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Malaysia are equally sought after among international students. According to Siddharta (2024), the highest number of international students in Malaysia in 2023 comes from China, followed by Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Most recently, the Higher Education Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Zambry Abdul Kadir cited that the target of enrolling 250,000 international students in Malaysia included both public and private higher educational institutions; thus, immigration procedures should be simplified to facilitate enrolment for international students (Malay Mail, 2024).

There are several factors that influence decision to study abroad in Malaysia (Hassandarvish, 2024; Malay Mail, 2024; Rajaendram, 2024; Rensch, 2024; Safrena & Abdul Latiff, 2023). For instance, the Malaysian government has made significant efforts to promote the country as a regional education hub, offering various incentives such as scholarships, visa programmes, and partnerships with international institutions. International students in Malaysia also benefit from a dynamic academic atmosphere, where they can experience a blend of traditional and modern cultural influences, as well as a safe and welcoming environment. Additionally, Malaysia's strategic location in Southeast Asia makes it an appealing base for students interested in exploring the region, especially for those living in the Asian continent. Others cite the affordable tuition fees and cost of living, high quality education offered, and good reputation as a multicultural and Muslim friendly country as attractive pull factors (Rajaendram, 2024; Rensch, 2024).

To attract international students to come to Malaysia, it is important to pay attention to how they adapt and interact with locals. Consequently, the main aim of this study is to examine whether direct or parasocial contact will influence attitude towards contact with host nationals via cultural and religious identity. Intergroup contact and adaptation are crucial for international students as it directly impacts their overall

experience, academic success and personal well-being while studying in Malaysia. For instance, when international students have positive contact with host nationals, they can learn about different cultures, worldviews, and social norms, and reduce some of their negative preconceived notions about the host culture (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Tropp et al., 2022). Consequently, this will foster mutual understanding, and reduce challenges related to intergroup contact, such as prejudice, racism, stereotyping and ethnocentrism, and will in turn facilitate them in building supportive social networks with host nationals.

Identification with Malaysian culture is also important to facilitate intergroup contact, whether through direct or parasocial contact. While direct contact via face-to-face interactions is well established in increasing positive contact with host nationals (i.e., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), it would be interesting to examine the role of mediated interactions in encouraging intergroup contact and facilitating adaptation. For example, with the proliferation of social media, influencer culture and streaming platforms that promotes local culture, international students can increase identification and cultural learning via mediated interactions with local public figures, celebrities, or media characters that they have come to know and love.

Finally, this study will also extend current understanding on intergroup contact and adaptation by examining how shared religious identity can help influence attitude towards host nationals. Sharing a strong Islamic identity and being able to practice Islamic values in Malaysia can positively influence how Muslim students adjust to Malaysia, and how they interact with host nationals. The next section will provide a detailed review of related literature, specifically in identifying factors that influence attitude towards contact with Malaysians as host nationals, as well as the mediating role of culture and religion in the relationship between direct and parasocial contact, and attitude towards contact with host nationals.

Literature Review

International students' direct contact with Malaysian host nationals

Direct interactions with host nationals can have a positive impact on international students in Malaysia. Previous studies based on intergroup contact and acculturation theories suggest that frequent and positive

interaction with host nationals can help reduce uncertainty and anxiety and may lead to increased cross-cultural adaptation (Imran & Tengku Siti Aisha, 2021; Rui & Wang, 2015; Terigele et al., 2022). For instance, engaging with local host nationals can help international students learn informal language, slang, and cultural nuances that textbooks or other formal lessons may not be able to provide. Direct contact also helps in local culture immersion; immigrants and sojourners can gain information on local norms and expectations, customs, values, traditions, and behaviours. Further, direct engagement with host nationals helps international students feel more integrated and less isolated in their new environment. This will lead to reduced feelings of alienation and culture shock and in turn facilitate smoother adaptation. Thus, in the context of this study, international students who engage frequently with local Malaysians may find their transition into Malaysian culture smoother.

Additionally, the intergroup contact theory suggests that under appropriate conditions, frequent and positive encounters with individuals from different groups can increase one's overall perceptions of that group, reduce prejudiced attitudes, enhance mutual understanding and lead to more positive intergroup attitudes (Allport, 1954). Optimal conditions can include equal status, common goals and cooperation between sojourners and host nationals. Support from authorities will also encourage intergroup interaction. Further, regular and accumulated contact with an outgroup member may reduce intergroup biases (Allport, 1954). This is supported by a meta-analysis of over 500 studies by Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) who found that intergroup contact tends to decrease prejudice towards outgroup members.

Intergroup contact also has advantages in promoting positive interaction between host nationals and sojourners. In a recent study among Chinese university students, researchers found that face-to-face contact with local host nationals have a positive impact on willingness to form intercultural friendships (Tang & Zhang, 2023). Others found that having direct or good quality contact with host nationals can improve intergroup attitudes towards local host nationals (Tang & Zhang, 2023; Terigele et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). For instance, for international students in the United States, communication quality with their most frequent American contact has a significant and direct effect on their behavioural attitude towards Americans (Terigele et al., 2022).

Therefore, international students' contact with host nationals may not only reduce anxiety and uncertainty, but it will also help facilitate cross-cultural adaptation, forming intercultural friendships and aid in enhancing their intergroup attitude towards host nationals. In the context of this study, direct contact via high quality communication with local Malaysians may help international students develop positive attitude towards Malaysians and reduce prejudice or biases towards them as outgroup members. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: International students' communication quality with their most frequently contacted Malaysian acquaintance is positively associated with their attitude towards Malaysians

Further, cultural identification is a key factor that can lead to better cross-cultural adaptation and a more positive attitude towards local host nationals (Terigele et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2008). When sojourners and immigrants identify with local culture through intergroup contact with host nationals, they are attempting to fully integrate in the host culture. Others argue that positive contact with host nationals can lead to stronger identification with outgroup members as these interactions tends to increase their inclusion of the host nationals in the self (Page-Gould et al., 2010; Paolini et al., 2004). Based on their intercultural interactions, stronger identification with host culture will lead to improved attitudes towards host culture in general (Ristić et al., 2019). Thus, when international students directly engage with local Malaysians through positive and friendly interactions, it facilitates them in forming stronger identification with Malaysian culture, and in turn lead them to have a more positive attitude towards outgroup members, such as frequently contacted Malaysian friends and acquaintances. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: International students' identification with Malaysian culture is positively associated with their attitude towards Malaysians.

H3: International students' identification with Malaysian culture will positively mediate the relationship between communication quality and attitude towards Malaysians.

International students' parasocial interaction with Malaysian host nationals

Although the media can be an important source of cultural learning and in facilitating cross-cultural adaptation, there is still a lack of empirical research that focuses on the role of media in facilitating intergroup contact and aiding adaptation from the context of international students (Terigele et al., 2022). In this study, parasocial contact will be used to explore how mediated interactions can influence cross-cultural adaptations by improving attitude towards host nationals and facilitating identification with local culture. Parasocial interaction is a concept developed by Horton and Wohl (1956) and was used initially to describe the pseudo relationship formed by media users with traditional media personalities, such as television newscasters. In today's current media context, it has been expanded to understand the connection formed between media personalities and their fans on platforms such as social media and streaming channels. For instance, engaging with mediated personalities through social media or streaming platforms can lead to positive portrayals of host nationals in the media. Indirectly, it can also challenge stereotypes and present host nationals in a more relatable and multidimensional perspective.

Further, parasocial contact with mediated personalities also create opportunities for viewers to create emotional connections with host nationals portrayed in the media, whether public figures, celebrities, or media characters. When they sympathise or bond with a mediated persona, this may increase liking of the character's culture as well through repeated exposure to the media personae via social media or streaming platforms. Cultural learning can also occur when immigrants engage with media from the host country, as they can gain insights into customs, traditions, social norms and values of the host culture. Exposure to local media can also foster respect for and appreciation of the host culture's uniqueness, leading to better intergroup attitude and identification with local culture. Finally, others argue that it can help facilitate cross-cultural adaptation through enhancing intergroup attitude especially when direct contact maybe limited (Ortiz & Hardwood, 2007). Terigele et al. (2022) found that parasocial contact with favourite American movie/TV drama character indirectly influenced attitudes towards Americans via identification with the American culture. Similarly, Shim et al. (2011) found that for Korean young adults who

consume American dramas, mediated contact led to a positive effect on intergroup attitudes, especially when these adults did not have personal contact with Americans. Thus, for younger immigrants who did not have the opportunity to personally connect with individuals from the host culture, mediated contact can still influence intergroup attitudes towards host nationals.

Thus, in the context of this study, international students' parasocial contact with a Malaysian public figure or celebrity may lead to more positive attitude towards Malaysians. Their identification with Malaysian culture will also mediate the relationship between parasocial contact and attitude towards Malaysians. Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: International students' parasocial interaction with a Malaysian public figure or celebrity is positively associated with their attitude towards Malaysians.

H5: International students' identification with Malaysian culture will positively mediate the relationship between parasocial interaction and attitude towards Malaysians.

International Students' Islamic identity and interaction with Malaysian host nationals

Finally, this study aims to extend understanding on intergroup contact theory by examining the role of religious identity in cross-cultural adaptation. Researchers argued that religion can be an important marker of group identity (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2012). Verkuyten and Yildiz (2007) further highlighted that religion is critical for most people, and religious groups can be a salient bolster of identity, and one of the more significant aspects in the experience of adaptation among ethnic minority groups and immigrants. For Muslims, having a strong Islamic identity means recognising their belongingness to the Islamic faith and the degree to which they espouse Islamic values. Having a strong Islamic identity requires that Islamic values be practised in all facets of life and these values should influence both public and private life (Shahbaz & Nadzrah, 2024).

For Muslims who identify with the Islamic faith, finding commonalities in their religious values practices with the host nationals (such as Muslim dietary restrictions, gender role and Islamic religious

observances), may facilitate positive, respectful and meaningful intergroup contact (whether direct or parasocial contact), and increase identification with Malaysian culture, and this in turn may ultimately lead to increased positive attitude towards the host nationals. Further, practicing Islam in a predominantly Muslim country like Malaysia should provide less struggle in terms of cross-cultural adaptation. Finally, when sojourners share similar moral and ethical principles with host nationals, this can help individuals recognise shared human experiences and lead to a more positive judgment towards the host culture and a more positive attitude towards interacting with the host culture.

Therefore, a similar situation is hypothesised where we predict that both cultural and religious identity may operate similarly in determining international students' attitudes towards local host nationals. Specifically, as international students share the same religious identity with host nationals, it is predicted that international students with stronger adherence to Islamic identity may experience more positive attitude towards Malaysian host nationals. Direct or parasocial intergroup contact with locals may also create positive impressions and attitude towards host nationals, as they experience belongingness to aspects of Malaysian culture, as it helps in reducing stereotypes and prejudices, and reinforce common goals, values and identities. Further, in sharing the same religious identities, they may also share similar values in perceiving relationships with others. For example, the concept of brotherhood in Islam encourages positive attitude towards others and principles of compassion, respect and kindness. These values should facilitate a more positive attitude towards local host nationals, regardless of their cultural, ethnic, or racial differences. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: International students' adherence to the Islamic identity is positively associated with attitude towards Malaysians.

H7: International students' adherence to the Islamic identity will positively mediate the relationship between communication quality and attitude towards Malaysians.

H8: International students' adherence to the Islamic identity will positively mediate the relationship between parasocial interaction and attitude towards Malaysians.

Conceptual Framework

Overall, a conceptual framework based on previous literature and the theories of intergroup contact and acculturation, is displayed in Figure 1. Factors influencing attitude of international students towards Malaysian host nationals, are incorporated into the conceptual framework. In the proposed parallel mediation model, identification with Malaysian culture and adherence to the Islamic identity served as mediators in the study.
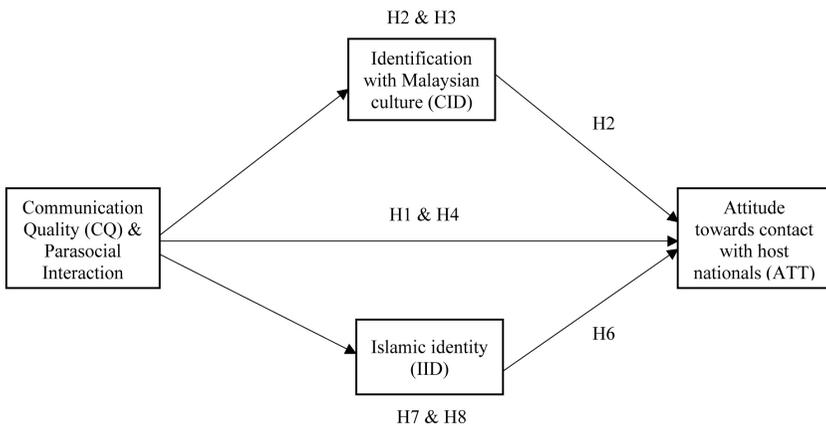
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Methodology

Participants and procedures

This study used a cross-sectional survey design. A Google form was constructed to collect data and the questionnaire was distributed online. Respondents consisted of international students in a public, international university located in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Data collection took place from March to May 2024. Respondents were required to provide informed consent before filling in the survey questionnaire. All respondents were Muslims and selected from a social science faculty, because this faculty was the largest faculty in the university and had the highest number of international students.

Target respondents must be registered in that semester to participate. Throughout the survey, they were asked to think about a Malaysian acquaintance they frequently contacted, and a favourite

Malaysian celebrity or public figure they were familiar with. Using random sampling, based on the list of active undergraduate students in the semester, respondents were selected based on their level of study and major. Initially, the survey received 275 completed responses. After data screening, the final sample size totalled up to 253, after deleting duplicate and straight-lined responses. To ensure that the sample size met the requirements for data analysis, G*power was used to calculate the minimum sample size needed based on the following parameters: medium effect size (.15), alpha value of .05, medium power (0.80), and four predictors. The software determined that the minimum sample size to carry out data analysis was 129 and this was met in this study.

Descriptive analyses were carried out to provide background information on the study respondents. Based on the analyses, they were young (M = 22.98, SD = 4.56) and more than half were females (58%). They were also relatively newcomers to Malaysia, with an average of only three years in terms of length of stay in Malaysia (M = 3.16, SD = 3.58). Almost half were from Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei and Cambodia (49%). Slightly more than half were alone in Malaysia without the presence of any family members (57%). Close to half has never been to Malaysia prior to joining the university (41%). They were also active social media users and reported to spending at least five hours a day using various social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube (M = 5.24, SD = 3.47).

Measures

The following paragraph provides detailed description scales used in the study. Parasocial interaction is a one-sided relationship formed between a media performer and the audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956). To measure parasocial interaction, we used the ten-items Parasocial Interaction Scale from Rubin et al. (1985). The scale was adapted by substituting the word "celebrity" for "Malaysian public figure or celebrity." This scale used a 5-point Likert scale, with response items that ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). A sample item reads: "I would like to meet this Malaysian public figure or celebrity, in person." Direct contact with a Malaysian acquaintance is measured by examining communication quality with their most frequently contacted Malaysian

acquaintance. We adopted the scale developed by Ortiz and Harwood (2007), which has three items and is also measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with response items that ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). A sample item is as follows: "My contact with this person has been friendly."

Next, identification with the Malaysian culture is adapted from the scale by Terigele et al. (2022). It has five items and is measured based on a 5-point Likert scale, with response items that ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). We changed the term "American" to "Malaysian" to suit our study context. An example of an item from this scale is as follows: "I feel like a member of the Malaysian culture." Further, adherence to Islamic identity measures to what degree someone espouses Islamic values, and is adapted from the Islamic identity sub-scale developed by Bagasra and MacKinem (2019). This sub-scale contains five items and is measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with response items that ranged from 1 (*Not at all true)* to 5 (*Extremely True*). A sample item reads: "It is very important for me to raise my (future) children as Muslims."

Finally, attitude towards contact with host nationals is adapted from the scale by Ryder et al. (2000). It contains three items. A sample item is as follows: "I can well imagine having a local Malaysian friend." All items were measured based on a 6-point Likert scale, with response items that ranges from 1 (*Extremely Disagree*) to 6 (*Extremely Agree)*. Again, to suit the study context, the term "local German" was substituted with "local Malaysian." Overall, higher number for all scales indicated better communication quality, higher positive parasocial interaction, stronger adherence to Islamic identity, increased identification with Malaysian culture, and better attitude towards contact with host nationals.

After running a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), some items were dropped due to low loadings, i.e., values below 0.50. Table 1 displays specific information related to the scales used, where total number of items, means and standard deviation reflected values related to items that were retained after the CFA.

Table 1: Scales Used in the Study

No	Scale	Number of items	M	SD	Source
1	Parasocial interaction (PSI)	8	3.09	.68	Rubin, Perse & Powell (1985)
2	Communication quality (CQ)	3	4.00	.72	Ortiz & Harwood (2007)
3	Identification with Malaysian culture (CID)	4	3.65	.67	Terigele, Yan & Jiang (2022)
4	Islamic identity (IID)	5	4.52	.58	Bagasra & McKinem (2019)
5	Attitude towards contact with host nationals (ATT)	2	4.91	.89	Ryder, Alden & Paulhaus (2000)

Findings

Model fit, reliability and validity

All scales used in this study met the cut-off value of .70 based on recommendations by Hair et al. (2013). Values ranged from .71 to .89, which demonstrates good internal consistency for all scales. To establish the measurement model, the JAMOVI software was used to run the CFA. To assess convergent validity, several fit indices were examined. The model fit indices suggested good fit. The chi-square value for the default model was significant, X^2 (199) = 361, $p < .001$. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) was 0.934 and 0.923 respectively, indicating a relatively good model fit. Additionally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was .055, suggesting that the model fits well in terms of error approximations. Overall, these indices indicate that convergent validity is established in terms of explaining the underlying factors that influenced attitude towards contact with Malaysian host nationals.

Further, in evaluating the measurement model, based on recommendation by literature (i.e., Gefen & Straub, 2005; Hair et al., 2013), items with low factor loadings (i.e., below .50) are recommended for removal. All items loaded based on their parent construct; however, items 1 and 3 from PSI, item 4 from CID, as well as item 2 from ATT were below the cut-off value of .50 and were subsequently removed.

Further, the values for composite reliability (CR) were assessed; it should be above .70 (Hair et al., 2011). All CR values were higher than the cut-off value. Finally, the average variance extracted (AVE) should be above the cut-off value of .50 (Hair et al., 2011). This criterion was also met for all constructs in this study, except for the AVE value for IID. However, scholars have reiterated that .40 and above is acceptable, if the CR is higher than 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is still adequate (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Since the CR value for IID is .876, the convergent validity is still acceptable. Table 2 displays the factor loadings, reliability, and validity of each of the construct.

Table 2: Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Validity

Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Communication Quality (CQ)		**.883**	**.935**	**.723**
CQ1	.810			
CQ2	.910			
CQ3	.828			
Parasocial interaction (PSI)		**.893**	**.934**	**.514**
PSI2	.566			
PSI4	.721			
PSI5	.820			
PSI6	.708			
PSI7	.769			
PSI8	.665			
PSI9	.700			
PSI10	.726			
Cultural identification (CID)		**.800**	**.876**	**.522**
CID1	.738			
CID2	.863			
CID3	.705			
CID5	.549			
Islamic identity (IID)				
IID1	.634	**0.769**	**.861**	**.438**
IID2	.532			
IID3	.808			
IID4	.592			
IID5	.710			

Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Attitude towards contact with		**0.716**	**.815**	**.559**
host nationals (ATT)				
ATT1	.712			
ATT3	.782			

Note: CA = Cronbach Alpha, CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

Further, to assess discriminant validity, the value of the Ö of AVE is compared with the correlation coefficient with each construct, in which the Ö of AVE values should be more than the correlation coefficient value between the constructs (Hair et al., 2011). This criterion was met in this study, and thus good discriminant validity was established. Table 3 displays the discriminant validity in this study.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity

Factor	CQ	PSI	CID	MI	ATT
CQ	*.850*				
PSI	.045	*.717*			
CID	.191	.457	*.722*		
IID	.283	.061	.315	*.661*	
ATT	.473	.274	.657	.383	*.747*

Note: CQ = Communication Quality, PSI = Parasocial Interaction, CID = Cultural Identification, IID = Islamic Identity, ATT = Attitude towards contact with host nationals

Hypotheses testing

Having accomplished acceptable reliability and validity, the next step of the analysis is hypotheses testing using the structural model (H1-H8). Prior to conducting the hypotheses testing, zero-order correlations analysis established significant and positive relationships between the independent variables, the mediators, and the dependent variable in the study. The only exception was PSI which was not significantly related to IID. Significant correlational values for other variables ranged from .19 to .52. Multi-collinearity was not present; all variance inflation factor (VIF) scores were below the cut-off value of 5.00 and the conditional index was less than the cut-off value of 30, as suggested in the literature (i.e., Hair et al., 2019).

Multivariate skewness and kurtosis were assessed, as suggested by Hair et al. (2017). The results revealed that the data collected was not multivariate normal, based on the Mardia's multivariate skewness (β = 754.84, $p < .001$) and Mardia's multivariate kurtosis (β = 2906.96, $p < .001$). Therefore, based on recommendations by scholars such as Hair et al. (2019), bootstrapping was invoked. The path coefficients, the standard errors, the *t*-values and the *p*-values in the structural model are reported. A sample resample of 5,000 bootstrapping procedures was used, as recommended by Ramayah et al. (2018).

Further, PROCESS macro by Hayes was used to test the hypotheses of the study (model 4). PROCESS models are suitable to examine mediating relationships (Hayes, 2018). The mediation analysis (model 4) was performed to test main association analyses (H1, H2, H4 and H6) and the parallel mediation analyses (H3, H5, H7 & H8). In the main association analyses model, communication frequency with a Malaysian contact (CF) was entered as a co-variate. Approximately 38% of the variance explained in ATT is attributed to CQ, PSI, CID, IID, and the co-variate (i.e., CF). There was a significant, positive direct effect of CQ on ATT (b = .296, *SE* = .065, t = 4.295, $p < .01$, 95% *CI* = [.160/.431]). Therefore, H1 is supported. Further, H2 is also supported as CID is significantly associated with ATT (b = .546, *SE* = .076, t = 7.176, $p <$ .01, 95% *CI* = [.396/.696]). However, PSI did not significantly predict ATT (b = .043, *SE* = .072, t = .596, $p = .412$, 95% *CI* = [-.098/.183]). Thus, H4 is not supported. Finally, H6 was also not supported as IID did not significantly predict ATT (b = .148, *SE* = .081, t = 1.827, $p = .069$, 95% *CI* = [-.012/.307]). The co-variate, CF also has a direct positive effect on ATT (b = .142, *SE* = .055, t = 2.562, $p < .05$, 95% *CI* = [.033/.251]). Detailed results for the main association analyses are in Table 4.

Table 4: Hypothesis Testing for Main Association Analyses

Hypothesis	Path coefficients	SE	t-value	p-values	BCI LL	BCI UL
H1: CQ -> ATT	.296	.069	4.295	< .001	.160	.431
H2: PSI -> ATT	.043	.072	.596	.552	-.098	.183
H4: CID -> ATT	.546	.076	7.176	< .001	.396	.696
H6: IID -> ATT	.148	.081	1.827	.070	-.012	.307

Note: PSI = Parasocial interaction, CQ = Communication quality, CID = Cultural identification, IID = Islamic identity, ATT = Attitude towards contact with host nationals

Next, to test the parallel mediation analysis, two separate mediation analyses were conducted using model 4. The first mediation analysis treated CQ as the independent variable, to examine if CID and IID mediates the relationship between CQ and ATT. PSI and CF were entered as co-variates. First, the results revealed a significant indirect effect of the impact of CQ on ATT, with CID as the mediator ($b = .083$, $t = 2.371$), supporting H3. Further, the study examined the mediating effect of in the relationship between CQ and ATT, through IID. The results revealed an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of CQ on ATT ($b = .031$, $t = 1.631$). Thus, H7 is not supported. The direct effect of CQ on ATT in the presence of both mediators (i.e., CID and IID) was significant ($b = .296$, $t = 4.295$). In sum, with CQ as the independent variable, for direct contact via communication quality, only CID functioned as a significant mediator. Table 5 displays a summary of the parallel mediation analysis results for CQ as the main IV, with CID and IID as mediators.

Table 5: Mediation Analysis Summary with CQ as the IV

Relationship	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-statistics
				Lower bound	Upper bound	
H3: CQ -> CID -> ATT	.410 (.000)	.296 (.000)	(.083)	.022	.159	2.371
H7: CQ -> IID -> ATT	.410 (.000)	.296 (.000)	(.031)	-.001	.075	1.631

Note: CQ = Communication quality, CID = Cultural identification, Islamic Identity = IID, ATT = Attitude towards host nationals

The second mediation analysis treated PSI as the independent variable, to examine if CID and IID mediates the relationship between PSI and ATT. CF and CQ were entered as co-variates. First, the results revealed a significant indirect effect of the impact of PSI on ATT, with CID as the mediator ($b = .212$, $t = 4.32$), supporting H5. Further, the study examined the mediating effect of in the relationship between PSI and ATT, through IID. The results revealed an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of PSI on ATT, with IID as the mediator ($b = .008$, $t = 0.8$, and thus H8 is not supported. The direct effect of PSI on ATT in the presence of both mediators (i.e., CID and IID) was also not significant ($b = .043$, $t = .596$). In sum, H5 is supported and H8 is not supported. In

other words, only CID functioned as a significant mediator when PSI is treated as the independent variable. Table 6 displays a summary of the parallel mediation analysis results for PSI as the main IV, with CID and IID as mediators.

Table 6: Mediation Analysis Summary with PSI as the IV

Relationship	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-statistics
				Lower bound	Upper bound	
H5: PSI -> CID -> ATT	.263 (.000)	.043 (.552)	(.212)	.124	.317	4.326
H8: PSI -> IID -> ATT	.263 (.000)	.304 (.552)	(.006)	-.011	.031	0.800

Note: PSI = Parasocial Interaction, CID = Cultural Identification, IID = Islamic Identity, ATT = Attitude towards contact with host nationals

Discussion

In the present study, we identified factors that influenced attitude towards contact with Malaysian host nationals among international students studying in a public international university in Malaysia from the perspective of intergroup contact and acculturation. To test the hypotheses, we used JAMOVI and PROCESS macro by Hayes (2018) to analyse the measurement and structural models. First, results indicated that communication quality and identification with Malaysian culture significantly influenced attitude towards Malaysians (H1-H2), but parasocial interaction and adherence to Islamic identity did not emerge as significant predictors towards attitude (H4 & H6).

Next, parallel mediation analyses were conducted. First, cultural identification emerged as a significant mediator in the relationships between communication quality with a Malaysian contact and attitude towards Malaysians (H3) and between parasocial contact with a Malaysian celebrity or public figure and attitude towards Malaysians (H5). However, in the second mediation analysis, adherence to Islamic identity did not emerge as a significant mediator in the relationships between communication quality with a Malaysian contact and attitude towards Malaysians (H7) and between parasocial contact with a Malaysian celebrity or public figure and attitude towards Malaysians

(H8). Thus, although our results contain mixed findings in highlighting factors that lead to positive attitude towards Malaysian host nationals, overall, the results do provide some support for the intergroup contact theory. The following paragraphs will discuss specific details related to the main findings of the study.

First, the significant and positive relationships between communication quality and attitude towards Malaysians (H1) and between cultural identification and attitude towards Malaysians (H2) are consistent with the predictions of intergroup contact theory by Allport (1954) and is in line with findings from current literature (i.e. Paolini et al., 2004; Terigele et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2008). These findings emphasised that besides quantity, high quality communication matters in the direct contact between sojourners and host nationals. Friendly, positive and welcoming intergroup contact helps create a conducive environment for cross-cultural friendships and enhance positive attitude towards Malaysians as host nationals.

Further, those who experienced belongingness with Malaysian culture are more likely to embody good attitude towards Malaysians, as identification may help reduce stereotyping, biases or prejudice towards outgroup members, i.e., Malaysian host nationals. These findings also provide important input for university administrators who are attempting to attract more internationals students to their universities. It underscored the importance of providing a nurturing and conducive learning environment for international students in Malaysia. To facilitate cross-cultural adaptation, institutional support is needed from the university administration in creating initiatives such as cross-cultural student activities, or adopted family programmes, that create opportunities for international and local students to bond emotionally and form close intercultural friendships.

Further, since H4 and H6 were not supported, this appeared to minimise the role played by parasocial contact and religious identity in facilitating cross-cultural adaptation. First, the results highlighting the insignificant relationship between parasocial interaction and attitude towards host nationals contradicts previous literature (i.e., Ortiz & Hardwood, 2007; Shim et al., 2012; Terigele et al., 2022). However, these studies were conducted in the United States. In the present study context, this insignificant finding may not be surprising as it can be

argued that results in Malaysia are different due to under-representation of Malaysian public figures or celebrities in the global media. American movie/TV drama characters maybe well-known across the globe, but the same cannot be said for Malaysian public figures or celebrities. With the exception of a few well-known celebrities who has performed at the global stage (i.e. Siti Nurhaliza, Yuna, and Sheila Amzah), most Malaysian public figures and celebrities are only popular in Malaysia and are arguably not global icons. Thus, parasocial contact may not be as influential as direct contact in impacting attitude towards Malaysians as host nationals, as the interaction between international students and Malaysian public figures and celebrities maybe limited, sparse or infrequent.

Conversely, the result indicating religious identity does not influence attitude towards host nationals (H6) are indeed puzzling as both sojourners and host nationals were Muslims. As Islam is the main religion practised in Malaysia and the university is an Islamic university, international students with strong Islamic identity should respond more positively to the host nationals. However, this insignificant finding could be attributed to the fact that both groups still perceived each other as outgroup members despite being Muslims due to the different ways in which Muslims practise their religious identity. This study included a wide range of Muslim students from different countries that may have diverse ways of adhering to Islamic practices, and this would perhaps explain why adherence to Islamic identity did not significantly influence attitude towards Malaysian host nationals. In sum, this study suggests that perhaps Islamic identity is a multi-faceted construct, not reliant only on just a few common ways of espousing Islamic values. Perception of Islamic identity can also be dependent on what constitutes as Islamic lifestyle, faith or school of thought.

Consequently, it would be interesting if future studies could explore this further and examine how different categories of Muslims (e.g. *Shāfiʿī* versus *Hanafī* schools of thought) react to Muslim host nationals in their process of cross-cultural adaptation. Would international Muslim students belonging to the same school of thought with the host nationals, perceive each other as equals, and be more receptive to intergroup contact, which in turn lead to a more positive outlook towards host nationals as outgroup members? Sulistio et al. (2020) appeared to suggest that diversity in religious fundamentalism may interact with

intergroup contact and attitude. Specifically, they found that those with certain orientation (i.e., fundamentalists) may change their orientation after making contact with more moderate Islamic groups, and have a lower tendency to express prejudice against them.

Additionally, findings for H3 and H5 indicated that cultural identification functioned as significant mediators in the relationship between direct/parasocial contact and attitude towards Malaysians, as consistently predicted in previous literature (Page-Gould et al., 2010; Ristić et al., 2019; Terigele et al., 2022). Although the influence of direct face-to-face contact on attitude towards host nationals via cultural identification is quite well established in literature, but the same cannot be said for parasocial contact. In this study, parasocial contact does not directly influence attitude towards Malaysians. However, it indirectly impacts attitude towards Malaysians via identification to Malaysian culture. Thus, the university management could perhaps introduce relatable figures such as student influencers who can act as role models during orientation week in order to improve cross-cultural adaptation for international students. These student influencers could use their social media platforms to convey positive messages on Malaysian culture that could help international students familiarise themselves with Malaysia.

Additionally, findings also indicated that adherence to Islamic identity does not function as significant mediators in the relationship between direct/parasocial contact and attitude towards Malaysians (H7 and H8). This perhaps underlined the complexity of religious identity in facilitating the cross-cultural adaptation process. As Muslim communities are also very diverse and have different ways of practicing Islamic traditions, future studies could perhaps examine in greater detail how different categories of Muslims adjust to a new cultural environment. This includes how they react to host nationals, and how their religious values and practices may interact with contact with host nationals in influencing their behavioural and attitudinal reaction towards the host nationals, by controlling for other variables as suggested by Allport (1954), e.g., perceived institutional support (i.e. cooperation) or threat from host nationals, and perceptions on status equality between host nationals and international students.

Finally, it is important to note that the study has its limitations. Although a cross-sectional survey does have advantages in terms of

generalising the study findings to the population, it does not go into depth in terms of uncovering why international students react a certain way towards Malaysians as host nationals. Future studies could also extend the findings of this study by triangulating the methods (i.e. survey and focus group interviews) to qualitatively and quantitatively examine motives that may lead to positive attitude towards host nationals among international students studying in Malaysia. Experiments may also provide further clarity in terms of how Muslims from different groups perceive each other, and how this mediates the relationship between intergroup contact and attitude.

Conclusion

Overall, despite its mixed findings, this study has been able to identify significant factors that influenced cross-cultural adaption for international students in Malaysia, such as friendly and warm communication with host cultures and strong identification to Malaysian culture. Based on the study findings, to market Malaysia as a global education hub in the 21st century, it is important that higher educational institutions in Malaysia provide a welcoming environment to international students to facilitate their adjustment process.

In sum, this study also provides support for the intergroup contact theory, where direct interaction between host nationals and sojourners, identification to host national culture, and attitude towards host nationals interact in order to provide good adjustment for international students. Although parasocial contact appears to play a rather inconsequential role in this study, using a more relatable figure compared to public figures or celebrities, such as student influencers to promote the education in Malaysian can still be a pull factor in order to attract more international students to come to Malaysia.

As the world becomes increasingly connected, more international students are venturing outside of their countries to further their education. If Malaysian higher educational institutions do not want to be left behind, efforts must be invested not only to create an attractive curriculum, but also in providing an educational environment that is supportive, friendly, hospitable and inclusive to all.

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