

Through Malaysian Eyes: A Qualitative Study of Local Perspectives on Expatriate Adjustment in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Expatriates experience challenges adjusting to a new host culture. Though host country nationals are critical in an expatriate's success, existing literature focuses on the perspectives of expatriates rather than on host country nationals. This article describes how Malaysian nationals working for multinational corporations perceive the cultural adjustment of their expatriate colleagues. A constructivist philosophical orientation underpinned the basic qualitative design. Using snowball sampling, the lead researcher relied on contacts in Malaysia to refer participants, who then referred other participants. In total, the study included 17 participants who worked for multinational corporations and had weekly in-person contact with expatriate colleagues within the previous five years. Data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and then analyzed using first and second cycle coding. Findings demonstrated two factors that facilitated and complicated the adjustment of expatriates: cultural similarities and navigating cultural adjustment with families. Secondly, findings showed that the international and inclusive nature of an office culture significantly impacted expatriate cross-cultural adjustment. Sub-themes in this section included bosses are busy, forming relational silos, and lunch is more than lunch. One limitation was the potential for participants not to share openly. This issue was avoided by working with known contacts in Malaysia who endorsed the researcher and provided access to participants. Implications include developing an understanding of how expatriates can more successfully adjust to a local culture. Our findings may help multinational companies in Malaysia and those sending employees to Malaysia better training for cross-cultural adjustment, which will positively impact business operations.

Keywords: Cultural adjustment, expatriates, Malaysia, qualitative research

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INTRODUCTION

Asia is home to half the world's population, some of the world's largest economies, and boasts a growing landscape of multinational companies (Berry & Engels, 2018). Globally, multinational companies (MNCs) dedicate significant resources to their expatriate workforce (Sterle, et. al. 2018; Nowak & Linder, 2016). The mobilization and maintenance of an expatriate workforce is increasingly important throughout Asia. Host country nationals (HCNs) greatly impact how expatriates adjust and perform in their work tasks (Kang & Shen, 2018). Poor relationships with HCNs can have detrimental effects on expatriates' adjustment and performance (Bonache et al., 2016; Sokro & Pillay, 2020; Zhang & Peltokorpi, 2016).

Malaysia has seen the number of expatriate visas granted grow significantly in recent years (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Many MNCs in Malaysia depend on expatriates and HCNs working successfully together to achieve their overarching goals. Given HCNs' importance in the success of expatriate integration in the workplace, it seems pertinent for organizations to take into consideration HCNs' perceptions of their expatriate colleagues.

The aim of this study was to explore how Malaysians working in MNCs perceived the cross-cultural adjustment of their expatriate colleagues. The objectives are to:

- (1) Identify the types of adjustments that expatriates faced
- (2) Determine the factors that affect cross-cultural adjustment

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Expatriate Cross-Cultural Adjustment

An expatriate usually refers to an employee who is sent to work abroad, outside of his or her home country, on a long-term job assignment. Usually, they are senior managers who need to manage or set up a new branch. Expatriate employees generally receive additional benefits, such as a cost-of-living allowance and housing allowance (Darwinbox). They hail from all over the world and are typically well-educated (Sterle et al., 2018). Haslberger and Dickmann (2016) assert that expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment (CCA) involves satisfaction with their job and the host location, as well as their ability to perform in both. Higher levels of satisfaction and performance are associated with higher levels of CCA. Successful CCA is important to expatriates' well-being and may lead to longevity with their companies and impact relationships with HCN colleagues (Giorgi et al., 2020).

Cultural distance is "the difference in cultural values between two countries" (Beugelsdijk et al., 2017, p. 90). Countries considered to have more different cultures are understood to have more cultural distance between them than countries having more similar cultures. The impact of cultural distance between expatriates and host cultures has long been studied, yet there is no absolute clarity on whether cultural distance helps or hinders expatriates' CCA (Han et al., 2022), with some even arguing that the measure is altogether unhelpful (Shenkar et al., 2022). A meta-analysis of 62 studies suggested that cultural distance usually made CCA more difficult for expatriates, though this was not necessarily always the case (Han et al., 2022). Relatedly, Ahammad et al. (2016) found that organizational cultural differences negatively impacted the success of cross-border acquisitions, whereas national cultural differences had no direct impact.

Scholars have also attempted to understand how an expatriate's family may have an impact on CCA (Sterle et al., 2018), though findings have varied. Whereas Erogul and Rahman (2017) noted that "in many cases" (p. 7) expatriates' accompanying family members cannot successfully adjust, and therefore the family is forced to return home early, Mercado, et al. (2017) found that having a family along for the assignment positively impacted the expatriate compared to those whose families did not join.

An expatriate's adjustment may also be impacted by relational silos restricted to other expatriates (Lundström, 2021). These silos can emerge due to societal restrictions or simply due to commonalities (Miao et al., 2023), suggesting that differences may also keep expatriates and HCNs apart. Potential differences include food practices, which may result in conflict (Saxena, 2019). Eating familiar food can be a comfort to expatriates (Al-Sayed & Bieling, 2021), though in doing so, they may miss out on eating local food, which is also an important part of Malaysian culture (Jaafar et al., 2022) and a way that different groups in Malaysia "project unity" (Lee, 2017, p. 148) by partaking in meals together.

Understanding Host Country Nationals (HCNs)

For the expatriate, CCA is positively impacted by support from HCN colleagues (van Bakel, 2019). Insider understanding of the location, culture, and the specifics of the local company branch can prove valuable for expatriates trying to adjust to their new host location (Sokro & Pillay, 2020). HCNs also undergo their own adjustment journeys, including making changes to their schedule, language, and communication style in order to work with expatriates, routinely resulting in stress and exhaustion (Fee & Michailova, 2020).

Expatriates may be unfairly stereotyped by their hosts (Bonache et al., 2016), though it can be beneficial if expatriates are perceived to be culturally similar to the HCN. Studies in several countries suggest that HCNs may be more likely to support expatriates whom they view as culturally similar to themselves (Singh et al., 2021; Varma et al., 2020). As may be expected, hosts with positive attitudes towards expatriates may also be more likely to support their expatriate colleagues (Sokro & Pillay, 2020). HCNs who have positive attitudes towards their company may be more likely to support their expatriate colleagues because they view such acts as providing a valuable service to their employer (Shen et al., 2018; Yamao et al., 2020).

METHOD

This study was conducted using qualitative research, which is focused on “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). Given the authors’ desire to understand Malaysians’ perceptions of expatriates, a basic qualitative design was the best choice for this study. Because there was no “additional dimension” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24) to this study other than describing participants’ experiences, the authors chose a basic qualitative design. Constructivism was the most appropriate philosophical orientation for this qualitative study since it “assumes that reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). In this study, the authors hoped “to uncover” (Creswell, 2016, p. 42) participants’ views, which is a main goal of constructivists. Constructivist researchers also openly acknowledge their own “values and biases” (Creswell, 2016, p. 42), which affect their interpretation of participants’ constructions of reality. The study aims to uncover the views of participants while remaining aware of and transparent regarding their views.

The Malaysian population is made up of various ethnicities that include the Malays, Chinese, Indians and other minority races. In this study, the participants were Malaysian nationals who worked for MNCs in Malaysia. The first criterion for selected participants is that they have interacted weekly, in person, and in real time with expatriate colleagues in their physical workplace within the last five years. In other words, participants did not rely solely on electronic communication, they were working with foreign nationals who were employed in the same physical office space after having relocated to Malaysia. This close and enduring contact with expatriate colleagues ensured participants had more than just sporadic interactions with their colleagues, distinguishing these experiences from other random interactions with non-Malaysians who may be short-term business travelers, clients, or foreign colleagues in overseas offices. Since English is the common language used in business throughout Malaysia (Yamaguchi & Deterding, 2016), English fluency of the participants is the second criterion to ensure that participants and their expatriate colleagues can interact without the need for a translator.

Purposeful sampling is a type of nonprobability sampling that “is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96). While there are several kinds of purposeful sampling, snowball sampling was deemed the most appropriate in this study as it involves having other people to help identify potential participants from within the informant’s known contacts (Creswell, 2016; Glesne, 2016). This entails locating and enlisting individuals via recommendations from the initial participants. An advantage of snowball sampling is that it can produce in-depth and detailed information from participants with common characteristics or experiences, and gain deep insights into their attitudes, behaviors, and perspectives. Another reason for using snowball sampling in this study is due to the limited known contacts of potential Malaysian participants to be included in the study, since the researcher is a non-Malaysian. The third rationale for utilizing snowball sampling is, it allows responses to be collected from those who would otherwise have hesitated to take part in the study. Since there is an existing relationship between each participant and his or her referral, the referrals are more likely to be willing to participate in the data collection process.

At the beginning of the study, known contacts were identified and contacted via WhatsApp to be potential participants. The purpose of the study and the two required criteria were explained to them. Once they showed interest and agreed to participate, a Zoom meeting was scheduled. These WhatsApp conversations prior to the Zoom meetings helped develop rapport with the participants (Azhari et al., 2022). At the end of each interview, each participant was requested to propose other potential participants who met the necessary criteria to be included in the study. This way, the mutual contacts would be more confident that this study was authentic and legitimate. Additionally, no Malaysian colleagues were contacted from known expatriates to avoid any perceived relational implications and bias that participants may have had.

A total of seventeen (17) Malaysian participants participated in the one-on-one semi-structured interviews over Zoom, lasting 30-60 minutes for each interview. Prior to the interviews, written and verbal consent was obtained from the participants. The semi-structured approach to the interview allowed the researcher to be flexible and follow interesting turns based on participants’ responses, rather than being forced to stay strictly on one line of inquiry (Chong, 2022). Once the interviews have been conducted, a transcription service was used for the initial transcription, then checked against the audio recording for accuracy. Participants’ information, using pseudonyms, is included in Table 1 below. The participants were aged between 20 to 50 years old. There were ten (10) Chinese, three (3) Indians, three (3) Malays and one (1) Chinese-Malay participants. The three levels in MNC are low, mid and high. Low indicates a participant typically interacted with an expatriate supervisor, mid indicates a participant typically interacted with an expatriate peer, and high indicates a participant typically interacted with an expatriate

subordinate. These designations should not be taken as definitive and exclusive; for example, some of the Mid-designated participants may also have had expatriate subordinates and supervisors.

To protect the participants (Glesne, 2016), pseudonyms were used, personally identifiable information was redacted from all documents and files, all data was password-protected, and no participant's responses were connected to them in the data presentation and write-up. In addition, all the participants were met virtually via Zoom online rather than in person at their workplaces.

Table 1: Participant Information

Name	Gender	Age	Malaysian ethnicity	Level in MNC	Expatriate Nationality
Anaika	F	30s	Indian	Mid	American
Halim	M	30s	Malay	Mid	American, Chinese, Indian
Melvin	M	20s	Chinese-Malay	Low	American, Swiss
Ronny	M	40s	Chinese	High	Pakistani
Penny	F	40s	Chinese	High	Australian, British, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Vietnamese
Shila	F	20s	Malay	Low	Dutch, Italian
Karpal	M	50s	Indian	Mid	Japanese
Vinod	M	50s	Indian	Mid	Australian, British, Indonesian, New Zealander, Singaporean
Fasha	F	30s	Malay	Mid	Bangladeshi, Iranian, Iraqi, Qatari, Zimbabwean
Remy	M	30s	Chinese	Mid	Burmese, Indian
Isaac	M	30s	Chinese	Mid	American, Filipino, Indian, Thai, and Vietnamese
Michelle	F	30s	Chinese	Mid	Australian, British, Indian, Pakistani, South African, New Zealander
Lina	F	30s	Chinese	Mid	Sri Lankan
Freya	F	40s	Chinese	Mid	American, Bangladeshi, Filipino, Russian
Rynn	M	20s	Chinese	Low	Indian, New Zealander, Singaporean
Imee	F	30s	Chinese	Low	British, French, Indian, New Zealander
Victor	M	50s	Chinese	Mid	American, Chinese, Indian, French, Swiss

Note. M = Male; F = Female, MNC = Multinational Corporation.

Qualitative research commonly uses two phases of coding for data (Bingham, 2023; Saldaña, 2013). Because qualitative research follows an inductive analysis method, codes were not predetermined ahead of time (Miles et al., 2020). Following these standards, and using an analytical software, NVivo 14, the data was analyzed using initial coding procedures followed by focused coding procedures. Each transcript was examined line-by-line, and each line was assigned a code that represented the central meaning of the data in each line, which allowed for subtleties in the data to emerge (Charmaz, 2014). The lead researcher used gerunds in the initial coding as they enabled the researcher to “detect process and stick to the data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 120), as well as *in vivo* codes that emerged directly from participants’ own words whenever a phrase or word that a participant said seemed particularly weighty. The next step included reviewing initial codes, comparing them to one another, and then organizing them into focused codes (Charmaz, 2014).

Following Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a constant comparative analysis was used to compare different pieces of data with other pieces of data, both in the same set and in other sets. For example, he compared coded data within the same interview and across different interviews, repeating the same process with different codes that emerged in the two rounds of coding. This process began with the first interview, and each new piece of data or code was compared with prior data and codes as a way of refining the researcher’s understanding of participants’ experiences. The focused codes that emerged are represented either verbatim in the results section below, such as bosses are busy—or their meaning is captured in the labeling of the theme, such as international and inclusive offices.

To establish reliability and validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), there were member checks, which included follow-up interviews with selected participants (Glesne, 2016). These participants represented different Malaysian ethnicities and hierarchical positions in their Malaysian offices. These second interviews were conducted over Zoom for approximately 45 minutes. Participants affirmed the accuracy of the findings, and they were also able to “suggest some fine-tuning to better capture their perspectives” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246).

RESULTS

The findings from this study are based on data shared by the 17 participants concerning their perspectives on how their expatriate colleagues were adjusting to life in Malaysia. Two main themes emerged, with three sub-themes under Theme 1 and 4 sub-themes under Theme 2.

Table 2: Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

Main Theme	Sub-Themes
Theme 1: Navigating Cultural Factors	Sub-Theme 1.1: Facilitating and Complicating Adjustment
	Sub-Theme 1.2: Cultural Similarities Help with Adjustment
	Sub-Theme 1.3: Navigating Adjustment with Families
Theme 2: Navigating Work Practices	Sub-Theme 2.1: International and Inclusive Offices
	Sub-Theme 2.2: Bosses are Busy
	Sub-Theme 2.3: Forming Relational Silos
	Sub-Theme 2.4: Lunch is More than Lunch.

Theme 1: Navigating Cultural Factors

Although humans share a common nature, culture largely shapes our viewpoint and interactions with the outside world. Our culture influences our behavior, communication, and even our mental processes. When working together at the workplace, a lack of cultural intelligence can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication. This is especially when one needs to move to a new country and start anew.

Sub-Theme 1.1: Facilitating and Complicating Adjustment

The participants in this study reflected on the barriers their expatriate colleagues had to overcome in their efforts to adjust to life in Malaysia. They noticed how some of their expatriate colleagues were trying to fit in.

“They are trying to make Malaysia home.” Isaac

“They are desiring to assimilate as quickly as possible, have some friends, and get the network going.” Vinod

Adjusting to Malaysia seemed to be easier for those from similar cultures and more difficult for those with the added complication of navigating cultural adjustment with their families. Participants self-reported their hierarchical level within the MNCs.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Cultural Similarities Help with Adjustment

When participants shared their perspectives on how successful their expatriate colleagues were in adjusting to life in Malaysia, most participants concluded that those expatriates from countries that were culturally similar to Malaysia had an easier time adjusting. Most participants used broad categories like “Asian” and “Western” in comparing the cultural adjustments of their colleagues. Some participants felt that their expatriate colleagues from

Asia adjusted to Malaysian culture more quickly than those from Western nations because of perceived cultural similarities. The following excerpts illustrate this;

“With Southeast Asians, there’s quite a bit of shared context there, so it wouldn’t be too much of a culture shock, right?” Freya

“For the foreigner that comes from India, China, Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, and the Philippines, even though our language is different, our look is slightly different, the taste of food is different, we do have similarities in our Asian culture. Yeah. So, it is easier to adjust to the Malaysian culture as we are much more similar, and they look like me, versus the Westerners. The ability for them to understand me, me to understand them is sooner.” Penny

“I think the good thing about these situations is I think they’re already deep down inside, they’re still Asians, I suppose.” Halim

Sub-Theme 1.3: Navigating Adjustment with Families

Commonly, expatriates who move to a new country to work for an extended period opt to have their families expatriate with them. Family expatriation tends to add extra challenges to living in Malaysia. Vinod shared that,

“The expats with a family usually have more things, it takes a bit longer, a little bit longer, and they require a few more items before they settle in. Whereas, the single ones settle in a lot more readily, easily, and they are more outgoing than the married ones.”

“Expatriates who are married have commitments with their families that prevent them from spending time outside of work with their local colleagues.” Shila

“Expatriates with families may need extra help on arrival. If he is coming with a family, I would advise them to work an agency and find a ‘community that [can] help their family and the children to fit in better.’” Penny

“The singles tend to adjust better as opposed to those who are committed, who have children or who have a spouse at home or parents.” Anaika

On the other hand, Isaac believed that by sending their children to local schools and having them learn local languages, some of his expatriate peers achieved a high level of cultural adjustment.

“I think expats who have adjusted well, and even surprised me, are the ones whose children go to a local school. I was like, ‘Oh, why?’ and they say, ‘Oh, to learn Mandarin.’ That really was a surprise.”

For those expatriates whose families remained in their home country, important personal events were a source of stress:

“Some of them become more homesick during birthdays, festivals and other important events.” Anaika

In summary, the participants in this study believed that their expatriate colleagues’ adjustment to Malaysia was easier for those who were from countries that were deemed culturally similar, whereas expatriates with families had an added layer of complexity in their adjustment process.

Theme 2: Navigating Work Practices

Work ethics and practices differ in every workplace, irrespective of whether one is working in one’s own country or another country. However, the challenges of being in the latter can be much more due to the issues as discussed in the following sub-themes.

Sub-Theme 2.1: International and Inclusive Offices

Some offices in Malaysia were described as being more international, which tended to decrease the need for expatriates to adjust to life in Malaysia. Lina shared the following for expatriates working at a non-Malaysian company with other expatriates,

“I think their culture shock would not be that great, I mean, it would not be that big. But if they’re working for a Malaysian company, it’ll be quite different. The number of expatriate workers in an office may affect how much an expatriate is expected to adjust to Malaysian cultures.”

In the same vein, Imee said,

“There are no fixed rules about how a person should behave in our company because our company is quite international, so the culture is kind of, even though the majority are Malaysians, but then, because it’s quite international, so there is no fixed way how a person should behave.”

Interestingly, Melvin, Karpal, and Michelle all described their office culture as:

“being very influenced by foreign leadership, even feeling more foreign or international than Malaysian in some regards.”

For Rynn and Imee, it was the inclusive nature of the office that led to their expat colleagues not needing to adjust to life in Malaysia. They explained:

“Our companies had explicit values and goals related to making all employees feel welcomed at the office, which led to inclusive practices in the workplace.”

Imee further clarified:

“My company is very diverse. So, there are people from different countries, different backgrounds, and different cultures. So, to be successful, a company has to be inclusive. No discrimination. Yes. Inclusive, regardless of the person’s nationality or ethnic culture.”

It can be inferred that international offices that are inclusive would have less pressure for expatriates to adjust to Malaysian cultures.

Sub-Theme 2.2: Bosses are Busy

Additionally, several participants indicated that they had overall low expectations of their expatriate supervisors trying to adjust to the local culture because those job descriptions either did not require cultural adjustment or simply did not allow them space for adjusting. In explaining why his expatriate supervisors did not seem interested in assimilating, Vinod shared,

“I think it is their responsibility; as I said earlier on, they’re most serious in delivering their key performance indicators (KPIs)], and ensuring that their key responsibility area (KRA)] are met, so forth, so, they are more focused.”

Vinod indicated that eventually his expatriate supervisors adjusted to Malaysia, though it took longer than it did for his expatriate peers.

On the other hand, Lina shared that it is common for expatriate supervisors to be perceived as too busy to eat with local staff, while Michelle said she expects those in leadership to have fewer relationships in general, naturally. Anaika, Remy, and Isaac indicated that it was more difficult to interact with expatriates who were their superiors. Describing the expatriate supervisors in his company and whether or not they would adjust to Malaysian cultures, Isaac said,

“So, for us, it’s like, yeah, there’s not a lot of expectation for that. So, we know that he will leave in five years. He goes to shop in imported grocery shops, his children go to an international school. Some expatriate supervisors were counting down the days until they were moved to a new assignment in another country.”

Anaika, Lina, and Melvin all expressed that their experience with expatriate supervisors mirrored that with Malaysian supervisors. Lina admitted,

“I must say, I don’t know if it has to do with the fact that they are expats versus they are just really driven people,” I feel like those are just very common things that even with a Malaysian, if it’s a Malaysian vice president, it would be similar.”

Participants also shared that certain expatriate benefits sometimes made it less necessary for them to adjust. Freya summarized her thoughts on an American supervisor for whom she once worked at a non-governmental organization. She said,

“Also, there wasn’t that strong need to really adjust to Malaysia, like they could still kind of keep the things how they’ve kind of done it. They’ve got their own house. They can cook food that they prefer to have, and things like that. And they eat out most of the time. The Malaysian community wasn’t important for them, I know that they didn’t really build too deep a relationship with Malaysians except for church, but it’s mostly like a hi-bye type of thing”

Sub-Theme 2.3: Forming Relational Silos

For several participants, cultural adjustment was connected to the work relationships their expatriate colleagues developed. Many participants noted a propensity to form relational silos with other expatriates, which resulted in a tendency to exclude Malaysian colleagues in their relationships. Rynn observed,

“It seems like there is a barrier because they are with their friends. Yeah, they are with their friends. They have their circle of friends. In the company. Outside of the company. The expats usually group together. Yeah. So, for locals, I do have the intent to actually invite them for like, you know, coffee or a meal or whatever. It’s just to understand the culture, you know? Yeah, but it’s not happening.”

Fasha said that while some expatriate colleagues become well-adjusted to Malaysia,

“The rest of them, maybe they don’t travel as much or maybe they just want to stick within their own clique.”

Karpal, on the other hand, felt that silos were helpful for expatriates as it allowed them to join a community that speaks the same language and has a shared cultural heritage while they are living outside their home country. Meanwhile, Anaika desired that her expatriate colleagues would be willing to break down silos, but she also admitted that Malaysians have relational silos. Her perspective was that building silos could be helpful:

“When you start mixing with people or having interactions in different manners ... I would say you should ... even if you’re being judged, just put it out there, you never know what can actually come of it.”

Sub-Theme 2.4: Lunch is More than Lunch

Relatedly, participants also mentioned that some expatriates missed out on connecting with Malaysian colleagues over lunch. The data showed an explicit tie between mealtimes and work relationships. Halim summarized the importance of mealtimes in Malaysian culture, saying simply,

“Malaysians, we bond over food.”

Anaika concurred, saying:

“We Asians love our food, so going out for more lunches or ... dinners, or you know, things like that would really work.”

Yet many participants found that their expatriate colleagues did not make time for lunch with others. Michelle shared some of her colleagues’ views of lunches;

“They often feel that lunch is a waste of time, and I guess it’s culture again for them, it’s like, ‘Oh, why do you need a whole hour for lunch? Just grab a sandwich and let’s have a working lunch.’”

Karpal agreed, though he mentioned there is a tendency to have lunch together for special occasions. Freya also mentioned how lunchtime was beneficial to work relationships. She said she “definitely” preferred the lunch practices of expatriates who ate with her over those who did not. Isaac stated that expatriates should get to know locals by joining them for lunch. Rynn and Freya both shared that for some expatriate colleagues, lunch needed to be something scheduled and planned for, rather than something on a whim, which seemed to be different than what they were used to as Malaysians.

Lina said of an expatriate colleague:

“If you are always eating on your own, so, yeah, maybe we will feel like, ‘Oh, he or she does not want to build a relationship with colleagues, they’re not interested.’”

Michelle felt the same way;

“It may sound like a very trivial thing, but yeah, you can see that when people have lunch together, they are able to talk. There's this sense of like, “Okay, I am human too,” you know? There is this humanity in it, so, yeah, I think the fact that we don't have lunches with our boss, it communicates, “I only want to deal with you in a professional setting.”

In summary, the findings revealed that cultural similarities and family dynamics both facilitated and complicated expatriate adjustment. The international or inclusive nature of the office impacted expatriate cross-cultural adaptation. These factors included busy supervisors, the danger of forming relational silos, and the cultural significance of sharing a meal with others.

DISCUSSION

This study yielded several important findings that expand research concerning expatriates and cultural adjustment in Malaysia. First, what an expatriate brings to the host culture matters. This includes cultural preferences of expatriates and their families. This study also demonstrated that expatriates were not always expected to adjust to Malaysian cultures. Finally, the failure to build relationships with HCN colleagues factored into expatriates' successful cross-cultural adjustment.

Factors of Adjustment

The findings indicated that Malaysian HCNs perceive expatriates from similar cultures as more adjusted to Malaysian society than those who were from culturally distant backgrounds. This confirms Han et al.'s (2022) meta-analysis that cultural distance tended to make CCA more challenging, though participants may also have been influenced by perceptions of certain expatriates being culturally similar to themselves (Singh et al., 2021; Varma et al., 2020).

The data mostly indicated that families were perceived as complicating expatriates' adjustment to Malaysia, in line with Erogul and Rahman (2017). However, there was also a minority perception that having family members present allowed certain expatriates to adjust to Malaysia in unique ways that single expatriates could not, echoing Mercado et al. (2017). The discrepancy between these perceptions ultimately may lie in the uniqueness of the expatriates to whom each participant had access.

The Local Office Culture is Worthy of Attention

Local offices in Malaysia sometimes felt more international than Malaysian. This finding may indicate that expatriates not only need to be aware of the local cultures, but more specifically, they need to understand the local office culture. This echoes findings by Ahammad et al. (2016) regarding the potential impact of organizational cultural differences outweighing that of national cultural differences. In offices that were described as more international, it might seem as if expatriates would be less likely to create silos with others from back home, since they may feel that it is easier to interact with Malaysians who are used to a more international environment. However, since expatriate silos were mentioned by participants working in both offices that were described as more international and those that were described as more Malaysian, it may be that these international-style offices still fostered expatriate silos because there was less pressure on expatriates to mingle with locals. According to participants, in these kinds of international-style offices, expatriates may feel less pressure to adjust to Malaysia's culture since the office culture more closely mirrors their own.

Not Mingling with HCNs is Detrimental

There was a tendency for expatriates to create relational silos with other expatriates, particularly those from the same home country, in line with previous research (Lundström, 2021; Miao et al., 2023). Findings also suggested that HCNs are sympathetic towards their expatriate colleagues who joined these kinds of relational silos since they may also keep to circles made up of others from their own background. However, these silos are perceived to negatively impact expatriates' ability to build relationships with locals and adjust to life in Malaysia. Wasted lunch opportunities in this study are reminiscent of Saxena (2019), who found that food created much strife between local and expatriate employees, with Indian employees feeling controlled by their Malaysian colleagues and Malaysians feeling like their Indian colleagues were avoiding them.

The propensity to build silos and neglect meals with Malaysians may be explained by the likelihood that enjoying food from back home with fellow countrymen nurtures positive feelings and well-being for people living away from home (Al-Sayed & Bieling, 2021). Conversely, Jaafar et al. (2022) said “the love of food and sitting together to *makan* (eat) is something all Malaysians share regardless of ethnicity, religion, or locality” (p. 319). While the ethnicities of Malaysia have unique food cultures, members of different ethnic groups in Malaysia do come

together through shared meals (Lee, 2017), which may be why findings revealed that shared lunches are good ways for expatriates hailing from different cultural backgrounds to build relationships with locals.

LIMITATION OF STUDY

One of the limitations of this study is the use of snowball sampling, which relies on the availability and willingness of the initial or existing participants to introduce or propose others. This type of sampling may introduce bias or limit diversity and generalizability, as they do not ensure representativeness or randomness of the sample. Additionally, participants are likely to refer others with similar characteristics. Snowball sampling can also increase the margin of error in the results, leading to more variation between the study results and the population of interest. However, in this study, the participants' referrals include expatriates who were multi-national, thus, there was a fairly diverse representation obtained. In addition, the two criteria that were set to invite other participants to join the study helped ensure that the specific participants were included.

Another limitation of this study was the potential for participants to be hesitant to share openly with the lead researcher, an American whom they did not know well. The lead researcher avoided this issue by working with known contacts in Malaysia who provided access to participants and could endorse the researcher to them. The lead researcher also clearly communicated that their data would be kept confidential.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed several findings regarding Malaysians' perspectives on their expatriate colleagues' adjustment to their host environment in Malaysia, namely that home culture and family situations impacted expatriate cultural adjustment, expatriates were not always expected to adjust to Malaysian culture, and that expatriates tended to miss out on developing relationships with their Malaysian colleagues. In light of these findings, multinational companies should think through their potential expatriate employees' backgrounds and family situations that may impact their ability to adjust to their host environment prior to sending them on assignment. Potential expatriates would also benefit from evaluating how their background and family status may impact their adjustment and work experience before committing to a new job assignment. Expatriates also should seek to learn as much about their local office's culture and expectations regarding expatriate adjustment, and consider how adjusting—or choosing not to—may impact their relationships and work assignment. Finally, companies can create activities and environments that encourage expatriate and local workers to mingle, rather than encourage either party to cling only to silos with others from their home country; both expatriate and Malaysian colleagues can benefit by being willing to avoid sticking to their silos and instead reach out to one another.

Regarding future research, this study could be replicated in other countries to uncover how HCNs perceive the ability of their expatriate colleagues to adjust effectively in those societies. Similarly, qualitative grounded theory studies could be conducted to generate theories of how HCNs understand and define successful expatriation. This study could also be replicated in Malaysia with attention focused on HCNs working with expatriates from a specific country, which might yield specific insights for that country.

IMPLICATION OF STUDY

Given the increasing importance of Asia in international businesses and the frequency with which host companies employ expatriates, it is vital to continue to develop an understanding of how expatriates can successfully adjust to any local culture. Our findings may help companies in Malaysia and expatriates going to Malaysia better train for cultural adjustment, which will impact business operations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

ZD conducted all the data collection and analysis for this study. He also wrote a draft of this article and worked with JNS on formatting the article for this journal. JNS developed the draft further and formatted the article for this journal. BR was involved in editing for a final publishable draft of this article.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There is no conflict of interest in this article.

DECLARATION OF STATEMENT

The study was approved by Biola University's Institutional Review Board. This study has not been published elsewhere. The study is our work alone and the article is transparent and accurate.

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