COVID-19 and its effects on social connectedness among Malaysian Malay living abroad

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Abstract

Ever since the global pandemic COVID-19 emerged, governments all around the world have attempted to slow the spread of this disease by promoting social isolation and social distancing. Although physical separation does curtail the spread of the virus, the practice of social distancing has limited people's in-person social interactions and has narrowed their sense of social connectedness. To Malaysian Malay expatriates, social connectedness is more than just a means of social relationship or social networking. Social connectedness is a motivating factor for survival and a way to reduce feelings of social anxiety and frustrations when living in a foreign host country. To highlight the significance of social connectedness while working abroad, this study was conducted with 11 single Malaysian Malays residing in the United States of America, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. A qualitative approach was employed in this study by using in-depth interviews to examine the socio-cultural challenges they experienced while working and living in a country different from their own. This paper discusses how COVID-19 affects Malaysian Malay expatriates' social connectedness while living abroad in host countries and the need for more research exploration in the subject area. As a result, although social media can be a platform for everyone to be connected, face-to-face interactions are more desirable. Furthermore, the researchers also found that practising a level of intimacy with close friends can help Malaysian Malay expatriates to gain social connectedness with others which also leads to the feeling of belongingness in their community.

Keywords: COVID-19, intimacy practices, Malaysian Malay expatriates, sense of belonging, social connectedness, social isolation

Introduction

Since the independence of Malaysia in 1957, more than two million Malaysians have emigrated to various host countries and become expatriates. Malaysia has progressively opened its market towards globalization and liberalization of trades and services, resulting in many international organizations expanding their business (Tahir & Ismail, 2007). Some suggest the increase of

expatriation is due to the result of the rapid increase in the number and size of Multinational Corporations (Tungli & Peiperl, 2009; Sambasivan, Sadoughi & Esmaeilzadeh, 2017; Shariff et al., 2018). Hence, this creates various job and career opportunities for Malaysians to work abroad in various host countries instead of working in their home country. Malaysia not only sends employees within the private sector for international business abroad, but also sends expatriates from the government sector as diplomats, academics, and technical specialists (Shephard, 1996; Tahir & Ismail, 2007). Working and living temporarily abroad is one of the significant life events experienced by many individuals as an expatriate. People would consider every aspect of life change that may have significant impacts on them. The status of an expatriate living abroad does not only bring challenges as an emigrant encountering unfamiliar settings but also changes the way they practise intimacy and achieve social connectedness. This research explores the experiences faced by Malaysian Malay expatriates during COVID-19 and the effects on social connectedness. The social connectedness among Malaysian Malay expatriates includes discussing homophily, sense of belonging, and intimacy practices between close friends during the outbreak of COVID-19.

Literature review

Malaysian Malay Expatriates

According to Richardson and McKenna (2002), the definition of expatriate is closely referred to as professionals who are living in overseas countries on a short-term or non-permanent basis that may extend for more than one year. An expatriate is explained as an individual who is not a citizen of the country in which they are assigned to work in the host country (Tahir and Ismail, 2007). Moreover, the term can also be understood as a temporary immigrant crossing the border of their country, to another country, changing their place of residence and work location (Andersen et al., 2014). Furthermore, an expatriate is a person who resides in a country other than their country of origin, whether for work or for other purposes. The individual may also have relinquished the citizenship of their home country to become a citizen in another country (Abu Bakar & Yusuf, 2020).

The migration of educated Malaysians with highly skilled professionals increased significantly since the 1960s (Jauhar et al., 2015). The phenomenon 'brain drain' can be linked to the increased numbers of expatriates and migration of Malaysians, as it is referred to Malaysian with highly competent skills and knowledge relocating to other countries to seek work (Jauhar et al., 2015; Shariff et al., 2018). Malaysian emigration immensely increased over the last three decades when Malaysian students upon graduating abroad are advised to return home to work in their native country (World Bank, 2011; Jauhar et al., 2015; Shariff et al., 2018). A study specifically claims the factors influencing Malaysians deciding to work abroad are due to personal and financial reasons such as to gain higher pay salary, obtain personal growth opportunities, or achieve better career advancement (Shariff et al, 2018).

Furthermore, disparities in quality of life financially and personally are likely to play a significant role in both deciding to emigrate and justifying the decision for Malaysians to become expatriates. For that reason, this research will focus on the experiences of the Malaysian Malay expatriates' social connectedness issue while living abroad in various host countries during the COVID-19 outbreak. The pandemic may have affected the individual's intimacy practices and

personal relationship due to being socially and physically distant from one another during the pandemic.

Living Abroad and Social Connectedness

Organizations are required to send a representative for overseas assignments to maintain the standards of the organization's goal, product, or service (Bartol & Martin, 1998; Lian & Lim, 2020). Malaysian Malay expatriates living abroad can come from various working fields and backgrounds. According to Ko and Yang (2011), among the issues that expatriates face while in foreign countries are their difficulty coping with situations of being in a new environment and their difficulty adjusting themselves in performing their heavy responsibilities overseas. This relates to Malaysian Malay expatriates' difficulty in adjusting and having to endure cross-cultural adaption in the host country. Kennedy (2002) explained, adjusting social and cultural conditions of being expatriates measure the extent to which expatriates are well integrated into their daily life and work in the host country. As a result, an individual who can finally feel at ease and blend in with the surrounding community is only able to live like others (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009).

To transcend cultural boundaries, expatriates should have the ability to address and react to intercultural situations and have cultural intelligence that can help improve the capability for a successful adaptation in the host country (Peterson, 2004; Sambisivan et al., 2017). Nevertheless, expatriates are bound to face various challenges and endure multiple adjustments whether they have fully adapted to the host country. Consequently, various challenges faced among Malaysian Malay expatriates are commonly shared amongst the Malaysian community living abroad. Through gatherings of religious celebrations and sharing of traditional food and heritage, it is by means how Malaysian expatriates stay connected to their identity as Malaysians while bonding with each other (Lee, 2017). This indicates, to stay connected to their heritage roots the Malaysian Malay expatriates create activities and common gatherings of social events. This is to bring the Malaysian community together and to increase their social well-being while residing and working in foreign host country.

This is associated with homophily, whereby sharing similar background and identity of nationality, ethnicity, and religion is a way for Malaysian Malay expatriates to have a sense of connectedness or a connection with people of familiar backgrounds. Furthermore, social connectedness is considered as an individual's sense of having close and positively experienced relationships with others in the social world, linked closely to both emotional and physical well-being (Jacobs & Ellis, 2021). Hence, staying connected to the Malaysian roots is considered crucial among Malaysian Malay expatriates, as the individuals do not want to lose a sense of who they are while working abroad.

Nevertheless, the outbreak of COVID-19 has led to a pause in all common social and religious gatherings, due to social distancing and staying-at-home policies being implemented on everyone. Obtaining social connections is crucial for both psychological and physical health and although some Malay expatriates have successfully adapted well in their host communities, no one is fully prepared to face the loneliness and lack of social connectedness during quarantine lockdown in a foreign host country. With lack of support, being physically and socially isolated from the community, it may put a strain on the Malaysian Malay expatriates who are living abroad.

The Effects of Covid-19 On Social Connectedness

Coronavirus or COVID-19 is a disease discovered in the province of Wuhan, China in 2019 (Elengoe, 2020). By 2020, reports on the spreading of the virus are reported to reach countries like the United States of America, Spain, Italy, Germany, France, Iran, the UK, Turkey, Belgium, and many Asian countries (Liu, Kuo, & Shih, 2020; Shah et al., 2020; Hashim et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic is regarded as the most infectious disease outbreak to have hit the world ever since the Spanish Flu from 1918 to 1919, which resulted in 20 to 50 million deaths including the 34, 644 people, in British Malaya (Liu, Kuo, & Shih, 2020; Hashim, et al., 2021). In 1999, the Nipah virus had infected 265 Malaysians and killed 105 people, and the SARS outbreak in 2003 infected 8,098 people and killed 774 people globally and only two Malaysians were able to survive and live (Hashim, et al., 2021).

The present COVID-19 was brought into Malaysia by Chinese tourists from Wuhan through Singapore and Malaysian citizens that previously travelled to high COVID-19 infected countries, which has profoundly affected human lives in many ways as the virus itself is largely spread through droplets in the air and is a respiratory illness (Hashim et al., 2021). The most impactful effects that have changed people's lives are the importance of taking precautions by practicing social distancing and social isolation from other people. Standard precautions initiated by WHO are used as strict guidelines in curbing the rising number of infections (World Health Organization, 2020). Besides that, preventive measures include regular wash of hands either with soap or sanitizer, wearing masks and gloves, coughing into disposable tissues or flexed elbows, avoiding unnecessary travel, and the avoidance of handshaking with other people (Elengoe, 2020). To further implement this new guideline by WHO, governments all around the world have attempted to slow down the spread of the disease by enforcing lockdowns and promoting social isolation and social distancing (Mohler et al., 2020; Newbold et al., 2020; Pratt & Frost, 2020). According to Connell (2021) research shows the new norm has led to the creation of a social disaster among communities. Findings from Banarjee and Rai (2020), state that social isolation causes people to experience chronic loneliness and that if it prolonged, it may have detrimental effects on physical and mental well-being.

A major concern during the COVID-19 outbreak highlights the discussion of social isolation, lack of social connectedness as having a sense of belonging with other people is an essential part of human development (Jacobs & Ellis, 2021). Having connectedness with people is defined as an individual or a group of people who are socially close, interrelated, or share common resources (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). Studies have shown that self-isolation and having limited social contacts could lead to psychological problems, extreme fear, and confusion (Conway, Woodard, Zubrod, 2020; Ercetin et al., 2020; Mckibbin & Fernando, 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Elengoe, 2020). While separation of families and social contacts due to social isolation leads to a higher risk of depression, anxiety, and even suicidal behaviours due to the lack of intimacy and social connectedness (Fegert et al., 2020).

Method and study area

This qualitative research uses in-depth interviews as a research method to gather important data in contemplation of research objectives. This research regards Malaysian Malay expatriates as a unit of analysis, in which the researcher gets into each of their experiences, views, values, and lifestyles to understand the challenges they face in connecting with others, especially during the COVID-19

pandemic. Furthermore, in this research, an interpretative framework that is concerned with meaning and seeks to understand people's actions was also used.

Participants

To recruit participants for this study, purposive and snowball sampling techniques were use. Purposive sampling is one of the most used sampling techniques because it chooses participants based on criteria such as their specific experiences and roles. In result, it provides researchers with a comprehensive exploration and understanding of their study's subject matter and findings (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Snowball sampling was also used as this method requires the participants to nominate or suggest other potential participants who could fit into the recruitment criteria. This research has involved 11 participants; 5 males and 6 females who are Malaysian Malay expatriates in the United Kingdom, United States of America (USA), Australia, and Canada. The purpose of focusing on one group of participants who share a similar nationality, race, and experiences is to understand what the expected and accepted behaviour is based on similar situations encountered by the participants. Moreover, this research intentionally consists of participants aged below 30 years old as this is the age of fresh graduates and seeking experience in their expertise. The participants involved have also completed their tertiary education as all of them originally studied abroad prior to their employment. In addition, the researchers focused on professional jobs to narrow down the job scope of the participants. The demographic background of participants is illustrated in detail in Table 1. Pseudonyms were used for the names of participants to maintain confidentiality.

Table 1. Demographic background of participants.

Name	Age	Job	Country
Ali	28	Teaching Assistant	United Kingdom
Ara Zain	24	Digital Marketer Pharmacist	United Kingdom United Kingdom
	24		
Daisy	25	Counselor	Australia
Harun Jade Nora Zack Ismael	25	Investment Officer IT Specialist	Australia Canada Canada
Shiloh Sybil	29	Customer Service	Canada
	26	Administrative Specialist Architect	USA
	26	Manufacturing Engineer	USA
	27	Senior Research Tech	USA
	27		
	27		

Data Collection

The data collection techniques in this research study are based on semi-structured in-depth interviews. The data collection was conducted online from November 2021 and was completed in the middle of December 2021. The purpose of using qualitative methods is to gain a more fruitful, deeper, and contextual understanding of the experiences living abroad and intimacy practices of the group studied. The interview questions are developed based on the context of Malaysian Malay expatriates as Holmes (2015) indicates that interviews may offer more insights into emotional reflexivity as a researcher will get a better understanding of emotions. Furthermore, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and geographic distance, it is hard to do a face-to-face interview. Hence, the

interview has been conducted virtually, as Salmons (2012) highlighted how technological advancements have made it easier to collect data through online interviews. As stated previously, a total of 11 participants were chosen for the study. Participants in this study were recruited and contacted through social media platforms such as Instagram and WhatsApp, where they were communicated via direct message. Once they had indicated their willingness to participate, a time was set, and the researchers emailed the Webex meeting link. Before the interview process, the participants will fill in the consent form for ethical purposes. The data collection for each participant took about an hour, with some ethical restrictions that had to be followed to ensure the participants' comfort and confidentiality throughout the interview process. Furthermore, in favour of answering the research objectives, some questions were prepared based on the literature, but there were also a few additional questions asked during the interviews that are relevant to the findings of this research.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis is one of the significant and flexible methods for organizing the data according to their common properties or characteristics as it identifies, analyses, and reports patterns (themes) within the data. This research used the 6-step thematic analysis guide developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) as it offers such a clear and usable framework for doing this kind of analysis. The six steps are as follows: 1) data familiarization, 2) coding and identifying themes, 3) generating themes, 4) reviewing the themes, 5) defining the themes, and 6) writing an article by relating it to the sociological concepts. After the data collection was completed, the researchers manually transcribed all the interviews that had been recorded. The transcriptions were then analysed by the researchers to highlight and identify the initial themes. Then the recurring themes were generated and reviewed once again to prevent the data from being interpreted in different ways or to preclude significant data from being left out. The findings are then presented and described in detail based on the interview quotes as the researchers will relate them to sociological concepts alongside past studies.

Results and discussion

Social Media Being a Platform for Social Connectedness

During the outbreak of COVID-19, most participants expressed the need to be connected to other people vastly through social media due to the restriction of social isolation and staying- at-home policies. Social media was seen as a favourable method of conveying information and sharing news both from their home country and host country. This is referred to as social media networking whereby people socialize themselves online and become connected with them at any time they want (Anderson & Jian, 2018; Adzmi & Bahry, 2020). Furthermore, active social media participation provides viable means to improve and maintain the Malaysian 'silaturrahim' culture, which is to keep and stay connected with the people of their native country (Adzmi & Bahry, 2020). This is said by one of the many participants from the research:

> *I feel as if there is not much difference as my family will, either stay connected whether it is during COVID-19 or not, but the frequency of contact with my family is higher due to the pandemic. Sometimes, once every week we will have a group*

> *call with my siblings who live in KL and Kuantan to update us about each other's life.* **(SYBIL)**

Sybil stated that COVID-19 increases her connection with her family members through the video call especially the group call among her family members including her siblings that do not live in Terengganu. This proves the emergence of social media has made the 'silaturrahim culture' helped to become easier by maintaining a distant relationship (Perry, 2017). Yet, researchers argue interaction through social media does not have the same sense and level of intimacy compared to face-to-face interactions (Hammad & Alqarni, 2021). Level of intimacy is the quality of having a close connection with people and the process of building through emotions and cognitive, such as the feeling of mutual love for one another, like-mindedness, and specialness with each other (Jamieson, 2011). The study of Hammad and Alqarni (2021) also indicated having increased social media interaction resulted in people encountering even higher levels of anxiety and depression, even causing relationships to deteriorate. While social isolation is enforced upon everyone, including individuals who are living temporarily abroad, levels of intimacy due to lack of social connectedness and companionship with other people may be affected because of the infrequent close interaction with people (Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2014). Indicating some close relationships of Malaysian Malay expatriates can progressively become worse or change the quality to become less significant compared to before the pandemic. This is derived from the same previous participant:

> *I feel that the level of connectedness depends on the person. If it's with my boyfriend then I will feel a little distant from him as we can't do the things, we usually do like hanging out etc. Sometimes I ask myself, how am I going to survive this situation, but the COVID-19 situation somehow makes me feel more connected with my family.* **(SYBIL)**

Many of the participants within the research agreed the use of social media allowed them to stay connected with friends and families from their home country. However, the use of social media during COVID-19 did not help to maintain one of the participants' relationships with her close friend. While neither of the individuals is dependent upon the other, both individuals in the relationship expect shared support to be given (Vela-McConnell, 2017). Both parties have faced difficulties in maintaining the level of intimacy and quality of friendship through social media. The participant explained she preferred her relationship with her friend to be face-to-face compared to having interaction through social media. Thus, the sense of reciprocity is out of balance, resulting in the relationship becoming less voluntary and discouraging one of the individuals from investing further in their friendship to maintain being close friends (Rude, 2009). This is further unravelled by another participant, explaining how her relationship with her friend deteriorated during COVID-19:

> *Yes, that's right. Like me and my Egyptian friend, people will say that we are like twins as we literally do everything together, going to the class etc. It is like whenever she is there, I will be there too. But ever since COVID-19, she's been back to her family home. So, most of the time, she is either study, work or helping her sister to study. That's why I miss hanging out with her.* **(NORA)**

Overall, these findings have led researchers to the argument of social media being a platform for social connectedness. In some cases, having social media as a platform may contribute to having an increase of social connectedness around the world temporarily while maintaining distant relationships from both home and host country. However, individuals who expect more in the relationship yet do not feel a sense of reciprocity in the relationship face difficulties in

achieving social connectedness through social media. Social media may not entirely be the solution in overcoming the lack of social connectedness but can be used as a platform to overcome the issue of social connectedness temporarily as a last resort.

Sense of belonging promote social connectedness

It is significant to uncover the reality of the Malaysian Malay expatriate community is highly active with the involvement of Malaysian students studying abroad compared to the involvement of Malaysian Malays that are working in the host country. Nevertheless, there were a few participants, revealed their ignorance of the importance to involve themselves in the Malaysian community before the pandemic. Koh (2017) suggests Malaysians embrace 'silaturrahim' as part of their well-being while living in host countries. Thus, during the outbreak and lockdowns of COVID-19, some of the expatriate participants noticed the importance of having a sense of homophily and belongingness while living abroad to promote their social connectedness with others. This is explained by one of the participants:

> *When I was a student, I was not active in participating in Malaysian gatherings or events. I was more curious about getting to know the local people where I am residing. Wanting to know more about them. So, during my college years, I spent a lot of my time making friends that are non-Malaysians, especially non-Malays. Then everyone slowly kept leaving the States, leaving me one of the few Malaysians deciding to stay here. I honestly regret not engaging more with the Malaysian community. I guess I took it for granted but realized how important and how big of a role they are for me. If it weren't for the Malaysian aunties and uncles still residing here, I would not have a temporary place to stay, have any connection to Malaysian food, connection to Malaysian people to share my troubles with during the pandemic.* **(SHILOH)**

Another participant also explained a comparable situation, whereby previously as a student he took the Malaysian Malay expatriate community for granted as he did not see the significance of forming a relationship or belongingness with them. A sense of belonging, in this sense, is referred to as having a secure relationship with or having connections with a particular group of people (Chase & Allsopp, 2017). The group of people, in this case, is the sense of familiarity and homophily of the Malaysian Malay expatriate community. The uncertainty caused by COVID-19 has made the participant seek help and rely on other Malaysian Malay expatriates to gain a sense of belonging and social connectedness. The need to feel belonged is innate within human nature, thus the participant further describes his experience of connecting with more Malaysian Malay expatriates:

> *If there are problems with current situations, I'll share them with Sara. She has an open mind. For me, it is easier to share deeper feelings with the Malays. If it's in English, it would not feel as satisfied to rant in compared to in our own language. If I shared it with my non-Malaysian friends. It is harder, as their mentality is different.* **(ISMAEL)**

Aside from Ismael, other participants in this research have revealed the importance of developing a relationship with not only the Malaysian Malay expatriate community but the surrounding people residing in the host community as well. The uncertainty of living abroad in host countries during the outbreak has made other participants, such as Ali, share work and family concerns with his previous roommate and lab partners he befriended during his postgraduate studies. Another example is Sybil's concern about her housemate, which has helped her to feel

less socially isolated during the pandemic. Lijadi and Schalkwyk (2014) claim intimacy comes from feelings of trust and acceptance in relationships. The level of intimacy is seen in both individuals' relationships as they were able to share work and personal problems while giving emotional support to one another. This type of intimacy whereby the individuals develop a friend-like or family-like intimacy in close friendship is commonly achieved in specific situations for individuals living temporarily abroad (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Indicating both individuals found a sense of belonging with their close friends, even though they do not share the same homophily. Thus, it is important to highlight the level of intimacy one finds in a relationship with one's close friends to achieve a sense of belonging and social connectedness with one another while working abroad in foreign host countries.

Conclusion

This research particularly has highlighted several insights in the field of social connectedness during the outbreak of COVID-19 by outlining the common problems and difficulties faced and experienced by the Malaysian Malay expatriates in various host countries. The concept of lack of social connectedness is related to consequences of social isolation and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced by everyone. Therefore, the findings provided in the research proved although social media can be a platform for everyone to be connected to the world, both home and host country. However, it may not be a long-term or permanent solution to overcome social connectedness as everyone craves to have face-to-face interaction after the stay-at-home policies are uplifted. Hence, social media works to resolve temporary social connectedness. Moreover, obtaining social connectedness while living abroad can be influenced by having a sense of belonging with the Malaysian community, due to homophily. In addition, obtaining social connectedness with other people can be done by practicing a level of intimacy with close friends. The researchers believe by being open, accepting, and trusting with other people will allow an individual to experience a sense of belonging. Achieving belongingness will assist these individuals to avoid feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, and extreme fear of COVID-19 while living abroad.

Acknowledgement

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