

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access



Life experiences and cultural adaptation among migrant workers in Malaysia

Azlizan Mat Enh¹ , Andika Wahab^{2*} , Arina Anis Azlan³ , Kartini Aboo Talib⁴ ,
Andi Muhammad Tri Sakti³ and Fazal Mohamed Mohamed Sultan⁵

*Correspondence:

andikawahab@ukm.edu.my

¹ Center of History, Politics and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

² Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

³ Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

⁴ Institute of Ethnic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

⁵ Centre for Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Abstract

This study examines the state of migrants' cultural adaptation in Malaysia, and how such an adaptation can help build our understanding of migrants' life and employment experiences in the country. In doing so, this study has adopted a quantitative approach, with a completed survey towards 410 migrant respondents, living and working temporarily in Selangor, Malaysia. A multiple regression analysis finds that the three most significant predictors contributing to the respondents' cultural adaptation are "positive experiences" ($\beta = .677, p = .000$), "closeness" ($\beta = -.107, p = .008$), and "social relationships" ($\beta = .095, p = .032$). While "positive experiences" and "social relationships" influence the migrant workers' adaptation positively, the "closeness" predictor on the contrary (negative). Another predictor, "disconnection", is found to be not statistically significant. The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) reveals significant differences in the respondents' cultural adaptation based on such demographic characteristics as age, gender, level of education, nationality, length of employment, and sector of employment. For instance, female migrants are strongly associated with a higher level of "positive experiences" [$F(1, 408) = 6.321, p = .013$] and "social relationships" [$F(1, 408) = 5.634, p = .018$], while male migrants tend to rely on cultural proximity (i.e., "closeness") [$F(1, 408) = 6.828, p = .009$]. The discussion section highlights attributes such as the gender factor in cultural adaptation, preservation of cultural identities, and creation of migrants' symbolic places to understand how cultural adaptation intersects with the migrant workers' daily lives and experiences. This study concludes that as Malaysia's economy continues to rely on migrant workers, it needs to better understand the workers' cultural adaptation and their far-reaching impact on their life experiences and employment conditions in the country.

Keywords: Social adaptation, Integration, Migrant workers, Life experience, Malaysia

Introduction

The scope and forms of manifestation of international migration have changed significantly (Cormos, 2022), and these changes have brought about social transformation, including cultural adaptation, assimilation, and integration, at the individual and collective levels. Scholarly discourse around international mobility continues to grow. While some studies focus on explaining why migration occurs (Kassim & Mat Zin, 2011) and delve into the integration dilemma facing both migrant communities and host societies

(Dahinden, 2016), there is growing scholarly discourse focusing on the lack of mechanisms to protect migrant workers, which eventually contributes to the exploitation and criminalization of migrant communities (Chan et al., 2022; Rother, 2017). Other studies have focused on the migrants' settlement, displacement, and the lived experiences of migrants in urban settings globally, and the link to super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007; Schiller & Caglar 2009, 2016).

As international migration is dynamic, it must be continuously appraised, both in academic and policy discourse. Malaysia is one of the top destination countries for labour migration in Southeast Asia. In 2019, Malaysia together with Brunei Darussalam, Singapore and Thailand hosted about 9.1 million migrant workers, and about 7.1 million of them originated from countries in the Southeast Asia region. Malaysia was listed as the second highest in the region, after Thailand, with a total migrant worker stock of 3.4 million workers (and 3.6 million workers in Thailand), according to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA, 2019). Significantly, both Thailand and Malaysia were considered to have the 17th and 18th largest stock of international migrants in the world (UNDESA, 2019; International Labour Organization, 2022). In Malaysia specifically, migrant workers are broadly categorized into two groups: regular and irregular migrant workers. Regular migrant workers are referred to as workers who possess valid passports and working passes (locally termed as the visitor pass for temporary employment), employed in six economic sectors permissible by the Government of Malaysia (i.e., manufacturing, construction, plantation, agriculture, services and domestic work). Meanwhile, irregular workers refer to those without such valid documents, and they can be found working within the permissible sectors and beyond (Wahab, 2023).

In tandem with the growing number of international migrant workers in Malaysia, previous studies indicate a growing focus on their life experiences and employment conditions: some highlight the migrants' vulnerability to labour trafficking (Ajis et al., 2015; Juliawan, 2018), while others argue that the existing legislation is inadequate to protect their rights and welfare (Devadason & Meng, 2014; Lim, 2018; International Labour Organization, 2018). Other studies explain why female migrants in Malaysia are more vulnerable to exploitation than male migrants (Lasimbang et al., 2016). When migrant workers face labour abuses or exploitation, they lack the ability to raise their complaints and grievances for remediation (Mak et al., 2021). A recent study commissioned by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2023) found that pockets of regular migrant workers became irregular due to exploitative employment conditions. The study highlights that unpaid wages, excessive work hours, retention of identity documents, and poor living conditions are among the factors contributing to workers running away from the workplace and becoming irregular migrant workers.

While this body of literature provides useful contexts and discourse on the everyday life of migrants in Malaysia, the question regarding why migrant workers continue to be the subject of exploitation is lacking. In doing so, this study focuses on examining factors contributing to cultural adaptation among migrant workers, with the overarching assumption that cultural adaptation shapes and influences migrants' life experiences and employment conditions in Malaysia. For clarity, this study defines culture as the set of shared attitudes, values, social forms, and customary beliefs, in

which a particular group of community learns and transmits to future generations (see Rahman et al., 2019). In many existing pieces of literature, cultural adaptation is referred to as a process of adapting and assimilating into a new culture over time in order to carry out the person’s daily life (Sarker, 2016). The cultural adaptation process of individuals, familial and communities exist in the host society determines the quality of life among the migrant population (Castro & Murray, 2010). Given the complex process of adaptation among the migrant population in Malaysia, this study focuses specifically on four broad aspects of cultural adaptation, namely, migrants’ positive experiences, sense of disconnection and closeness, and social relationships (further see Table 1). These aspects relate to their everyday life experiences and employment conditions, including their ability to speak the local language, their ability to interact with the locals, and their ability to adapt to the host society’s identity and lifestyle.

Why focus on migrant workers’ lives and experiences in Malaysia?

For the past few decades, Malaysia has successfully diversified its economy from one based primarily on agriculture to include the manufacturing and service sectors, transforming Malaysia into a major exporter of electrical appliances and components, chemical, rubber, and palm oil-related products (Wahab & Hamidi, 2022). This economic diversification created jobs (World Bank, 2022; Wahab & Hamidi, 2022), while attracting more foreign investment (Solomon et al., 2015). Despite such economic development however some sectors such as agriculture, plantation and construction are still heavily dependent on manual, unskilled and low-paid workers (Hamzah et al., 2020; Arisman & Jaya, 2020; Shahiri et al., 2021). The local workforce is uninterested and unwilling to work jobs they consider “dirty, demeaning and dangerous” (Katmon et al., 2020; Mohd Fateh et al., 2022). Existing studies also point out that most Malaysian employers prefer to hire a migrant workforce for such reasons as the migrant workers’ willingness to work long hours. (Ismail, 2015; Wahab & Hamidi, 2022).

Table 1 Summary of section two of the survey questionnaire

Code	Label/predictor	Key aspects
B1–B8	Positive experiences	This label features positive experiences the participants encounter throughout their life and employment experiences in Malaysia, including their interactions with the host society and neighbourhood, at the workplace, and accessing public services
C1–C6	Disconnection	This label features aspects related to the respondents’ feelings of disconnection from the host society, contributed directly or indirectly by language differences, cultural identity, religious differences, and negative perceptions and sentiments among members of the host society
D1–D5	Social relationships	This label features aspects related to respondents’ ability to establish and/or maintain their relationship with the host society (e.g., learning the local language and participating in cultural and local events and celebrations)
E1–E3	Closeness	This label features aspects related to respondents’ likelihood to rely on the proximity they have developed and their likelihood to interact only with people with similar backgrounds (e.g., same hometown, same nationality, same language, same identity, or same religion)
F1–F6	Cultural adaptation	This label features aspects related to respondents’ ability to adapt to the local cultures (e.g., their ability to speak the local language, ability to interact with the local community, and ability to adapt to the host society’s identity and lifestyle)

Given its high level of dependency on a migrant workforce, Malaysia has become a major destination country for migrant workers from Asia. It has been estimated that between 2 million and 5.5 million documented and undocumented migrant workers live in Malaysia, working primarily in six economic sectors—manufacturing, construction, agriculture, plantation, services and domestic work (Lee & Khor Yu, 2018; Wahab & Hamidi, 2022). The majority of these migrant workers originate from such countries as Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, India, and Myanmar (Ministry of Human Resources, 2019). Further complicating the migrant population demography in Malaysia are the nearly 200,000 refugees and asylum seekers from more than 50 countries, seeking temporary shelter and protection (Wahab & Hamidi, 2022). The case of migrants' life in Malaysia provides a unique lens to understand and reflect on the dynamics of cultural adaptation and integration, and their connection with the growing literature concerning employment precariousness in the country.

Existing literature intersecting migrants' life, integration and adaptation

Following the current literature on the international mobility of migrant workers, with the central debates on employment precariousness, nation-building, and integration and adaptation, this section outlines relevant themes worth further discussion. We begin by reviewing literature which focuses on the employment precariousness of migrant workers. Existing studies such as Kaur (2010), Mei Wei and Yazdanifard (2015), and Wahab (2019, 2023) have documented the range of labour rights exploitations faced by migrant workers in the country. These exploitations are further compounded by the lack of state protection and remedies (Wahab, 2020; Wahab & Hamidi, 2022). A study conducted by Sunam (2022) claimed that current Malaysia's regulatory framework, poor commercial workplace and socio-economic infrastructures (see also Lindquist, 2017) have collectively caused precarious employment conditions facing many migrant workers, in particular the Nepali workers in the country. Other scholars have documented the persistent stereotypes among the host society against the migrant population, perceiving them as disposable workers (Ormond & Nah, 2020), disease vectors and financial burdens (Juliawan, 2018; Ormond & Nah, 2020; Sok, 2019; Wahab & Hamidi, 2022).

It is important to stress that the migrant workers' life experiences and employment conditions discussed in the existing literature are not unique only to Malaysia. They are also found in other countries, including those located in the global north. For instance, a study released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2013) found that some European countries tend to be more xenophobic against migrant worker communities during times of economic decline and high levels of unemployment. Similarly, O'Connell and McGinnity (2008) found that in Ireland, migrant workers are three times more likely to experience discrimination during employment recruitment and at the workplace than the local populace. In countries such as the United Kingdom and France, the lack of social interaction and bridging between the migrant worker population and the host society contribute to isolation and lack of access to mediation and remediations, when labour exploitation and abuses occur at the workplace (Ager & Strang, 2004).

Another significant body of literature pertains to the role of transnational and social networks of migrant populations in destination countries. The existing literature points

out that migrants typically engage in various forms of non-conventional transnational political participation connecting them to their country of origin through such venues as membership in a charity organisation, boycott or strikes, artistic performances, and remittance of funds (Sabucedo & Arce, 1991; Pérez-Armendáriz & Crow, 2010; Bermudez, 2016; Lara-Guerrero & Rojon, 2022). These networks connect the migrants to each other, enabling them to relive their memories of home and support their family members back home. In destination countries, migrants often attend weekend gatherings, seasonal celebrations, gastronomy fiestas and art festivals. These activities further strengthen the migrant workers' transnational networks, solidarity, and social identity in foreign lands.

International mobility among migrants is also about attachment, belonging and settling. Existing studies suggest that social and cultural adaptation among migrant populations in destination countries interfaces with the complexities of the migration process, beginning with securing a decent job, and a place to live, getting to know the neighbourhood, adhering to new rules and regulations, and surviving in a new terrain. Questions about the sense of belonging, social connections, and attachment among migrant workers in foreign lands continue to be raised and debated (Sadiq, 2009; Talib et al., 2012; Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2013; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015; Grzymala-Kazłowska & Ryan, 2022). In many destination countries, migrants continue to negotiate the temporal, spatial, structural, and relational processes to create a sense of belonging and new attachment (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Ryan, 2022).

The integration and adaptation process in destination countries is complex as they also interplay with other aspects such as the places and environments where migrant workers live. Another important stream of literature explains how "places" influence migrant workers' settlement and their connection to work demands, access to public services and transportation, particularly in cities (see Schiller & Çağlar, 2009). As influxes of migrants concentrate in cities, they have become the subject of police harassment, prejudice and negative sentiments (Nazri et al., 2022). Despite such challenges, existing literature points out that migrants continue to contribute and redefine cities with new services created to cater for their needs such as schools for their children, health screening initiatives, and income-generating opportunities for the host society through a range of domestic economic activities (Schiller & Çağlar, 2009).

Another significant body of literature concerns the concept of super-diversity, i.e., explaining the different social and legal status of migrant populations and their concomitant conditions, divergent labour market, discrete configurations of gender and age, and patterns of spatial distribution in cities (Vertovec, 2007, 2019). Debates concerning super-diversity are increasingly popular in such urban contexts as Amsterdam, Brussels, and London where ethnic minority groups, primarily migrant populations, are arguably replacing or have already replaced the host society and ethnic majority groups (Crul et al., 2013; Foner et al., 2019; Geldof, 2015; Crul, 2016; Geerts et al., 2018). Geerts et al. (2018) further relate the concept of super-diversity with the debates around intersectionality, stemming from Anglo-American Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Further, Foner et al., (2019) observe that super-diversity has such unfulfilled promises as integrating the dimension of power into analyses and exploring the intersections of various forms of diversity.

The past few decades also saw a growing literature highlighting challenges and barriers facing female migrants, particularly among Asian women migrating to European countries. For instance, Asian female workers are seen to be culturally unfit to work in the United Kingdom, especially in institutions dominated by white males (see Davidson & Davidson, 1997; Rana et al., 1998; Kamenou, 2013; Tariq & Syed, 2018). Female workers in the UK are often excluded from informal workplace networks and access to training programmes, which are also instruments to their career development (Tomlinson et al., 2013). In Malaysia, existing literature only explains how and why female migrant workers are more vulnerable to exploitation compared to male migrants (see Lasimbang et al., 2016), but there is no significant research unpacking comprehensive employment conditions and cultural adaptation among female migrants.

To conclude, while there have been growing pieces of literature discussing various manifestations of employment precariousness, migration infrastructures (e.g., regulatory framework, recruitment facilities and commercial workplaces), gender aspect, and migrants' status and life experiences in Malaysia (and elsewhere), very little efforts have been made to relate it with cultural adaptation. This is despite the fact that the process of cultural adaptation can serve as both cause and consequence of better (or worse) employment conditions and life experiences of migrant workers. Worth reiterating, however, this study only focuses on examining factors contributing to cultural adaptation from four broad aspects namely, positive experiences, disconnection, closeness and social relationships.

Method and materials

This study has adopted a quantitative approach by distributing survey questionnaires to examine factors associated with migrant workers' cultural adaptation in Malaysia. Before conducting the survey, we underwent a research ethics review process under the auspices of the Research Ethics Committee of the National University of Malaysia (UKM) between March and August 2022. A written approval was sought from the Committee on 15 August 2022 with a Reference Number: UKM PPI/111/8/JEP-2022/497. Written informed consent was obtained from all respondents before the survey was conducted.

The survey was conducted covering migrant respondents working and living in Bandar Baru Bangi, i.e., a township situated in one of the districts in the state of Selangor known as Hulu Langat. Bandar Baru Bangi is also known to be the epicentre of migrant communities, especially migrant workers who are working and living in the area. For the record, Selangor is the most populated geographical state by migrant population in Malaysia, i.e., 30% of the total migrant population in the country (Low, 2020). The sample size was determined in accordance with Dillman's (2000) formula, which suggested approximately 384 respondents for populations larger than 1,000,000 with a 5% sampling error and a confidence interval of 95%. An additional 15% of questionnaires were distributed to cover the incomplete responses. To this end, the survey administered a total of 429 questionnaires, but there were only 410 participants who completed the survey. Below is Dillman's (2000) formula for sample calculation.

$$N_s = \frac{(N_p)(p)(1-p)}{(N_p - 1)\left(\frac{B}{C}\right)^2 + (p)(1-p)}$$

where N_s = completed sample size needed, N_p = size of population, p = proportion expected to answer a certain way (50% or 0.5 is the most conservative), B = acceptable level of sampling error (0.05 = 5%), C = Z statistic associated with confidence interval (1.960 = 95% confidence level).

The survey questionnaire was adapted from the United Kingdom (UK) feasibility study on migrants (UK Home Office, 2021), focusing on various aspects of integration. These aspects of integration were then reviewed and validated by two appointed experts in the field. The questionnaire was divided into two main sections. The first section includes questions about the respondents' demographic characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, length of employment, sector of employment, level of education, and status of employment. The second section consists of 28 questions, encompassing attributes pertaining to cultural adaptation and associated factors (6 items), positive experiences (8 items), disconnection (6 items), social relationships (5 items) and closeness (3 items). All responses were measured by the 5-point Likert scale i.e., 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly agree, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree). Table 1 below summarizes key aspects of the questionnaire.

A pilot study was conducted from 20 August 2022 to 30 August 2022, utilising a convenience sample among 30 migrant workers to check the reliability of the questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's alpha. All constructs obtained satisfactory levels of reliability, allowing the actual data collection to proceed. Field data collection was then commenced from 1 September 2022 to 30 November 2022, using a combination of convenience and snowball sampling techniques. A non-probability recruitment strategy was employed in two prongs. The first prong involved establishing contacts and getting permission from supervisors and employers' representatives at the workplace (e.g., construction sites and manufacturing factories). The second prong involved making contacts with migrant community leaders in selected areas, who then recommended other migrants to be surveyed on a voluntary basis. This sampling strategy was deemed the most appropriate, safe (i.e., given the power dynamics) and transparent to ensure voluntary participation and authenticity of responses. The selection of the sample was done based on a number of inclusion criteria. These include their (1) status as a migrant worker (not refugee or asylum seeker); (2) age, that is 18 years and above; and (3) status of nationality i.e., Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar and Indonesia only. The questionnaires were administered by ten enumerators who were previously trained by the research team prior to being involved in actual data collection.

The data were processed and analysed using the Statistical Packages of Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. No significant outliers were found. Two types of analysis were conducted: descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. A descriptive statistics analysis was conducted to describe the respondents' demographic characteristics. The inferential statistics analysis includes (1) multiple regression analysis to determine the factors contributing to the migrant workers' cultural adaptation in Malaysia, and (2) an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to identify the relationships between the respondents' demographic characteristics and the factors contributing to their cultural adaptation.

Results

Respondents' demographic characteristics

Of the total 410 respondents who completed the survey, the majority of them were male ($n=336$) (82%), while only 18% were female participants ($n=74$). In terms of education, nearly half the respondents reported that their highest level of education is secondary school (48.3%), followed by primary school (40.0%), and diploma (8.5%). Despite working as low-wage and temporary contract workers, some respondents (3.2%) reported having a bachelor's degree, indicating a mismatch between their level of education and the type of employment they were performing in Malaysia. Nearly half the respondents (49.8%) were aged between 18 and 30 years old, 45.9% were aged between 31 and 50 and a small proportion (3.7%) were aged 51 years and above. The survey also found that three respondents (0.7%) were below 18 years old, which contravenes existing Malaysian government regulations governing the hiring of migrant workers (see Ministry of Home Affairs, n.d.). The distribution of the respondents' nationalities was relatively equal, that is, the respondents are from four countries, Myanmar ($n=108$, 26.3%), Bangladesh ($n=107$, 26.1%), Nepal ($n=101$, 24.6%), and Indonesia ($n=94$, 24.9%). The overall respondent demographic characteristics are presented in Table 2 below.

Factors contributing to migrant worker's cultural adaptation

A multiple regression analysis was run to identify the factors, negative or positive, contributing to the respondents' cultural adaptation in Malaysia. The multiple regression analysis, with four predictors (positive experiences, disconnection, social relationships, and closeness) and cultural adaptation as the dependent variable, suggests a significant result with $R^2=0.480$, $F(4, 405)=93.32$ $p<0.001$. The analysis revealed positive experiences ($\beta=0.677$, $p=0.000$) as the most significant predictor for cultural adaptation, followed by closeness ($\beta=-0.107$, $p=0.008$), and social relationships ($\beta=0.095$, $p=0.032$). This means that the respondents' positive experiences, closeness and social relationships in Malaysia influence their state of cultural adaptation. It is important to note that while the respondents' positive experiences and social relationships influence their cultural adaptation positively, closeness indicates the contrary, that is, negatively influencing cultural adaptation). As explained in Table 1 above, closeness as a predictor refers to the respondents' proximity to a certain group that shares aspects of commonality such as nationality, ethnicity, language, identity, and religion. Another predictor, namely, the respondents' disconnection from the host society ($\beta=-0.047$, $p=0.258$) toward their cultural adaptation was not statistically significant. Table 3 below presents the overall results of the regression analysis.

Respondent's demographic characteristics and factors (variables) contributing to their cultural adaptation

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to identify the relationships between the respondents' demographic characteristics and the factors (variables) contributing to their cultural adaptation in Malaysia. First, we examined the relationship between the respondents' demographic characteristics and their positive experiences in Malaysia (see Table 4). The analysis suggests that differences in the migrant worker's

Table 2 Respondent demographic characteristics

Variable	Categories	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	336/410 (82.0)
	Female	74/410 (18.0)
Highest level of education	Primary School	164/410 (40.0)
	Secondary school	198/410 (48.3)
	Diploma	35/410 (8.5)
	Bachelor's degree	13/410 (3.2)
Age	18 years old	3/410 (0.7)
	19–30 years old	204/410 (49.8)
	31–40 years old	139/410 (33.9)
	41–50 years old	49/410 (12.0)
	51 years old and above	15/410 (3.7)
Nationality	Indonesia	94/410 (22.9)
	Bangladesh	107/410 (26.1)
	Nepal	101/410 (24.6)
	Myanmar	108/410 (26.3)
Length of employment	< 1 year	9/410 (2.2)
	2–3 years	93/410 (22.7)
	4–5 years	113/410 (27.6)
	6–10 years	124/410 (30.2)
	> 10 years	71/410 (17.3)
Occupation Sector	Service	211/410 (51.5)
	Agriculture	7/410 (1.7)
	Construction	60/410 (14.6)
	Manufacturing	119/410 (29.0)
	Other	13/410 (3.2)
Immigration and occupation status	Documented worker	364/410 (88.8)
	In regulation process	3/410 (0.7)
	Without a valid passport and/or working permit	28/410 (6.8)
	Other	15/410 (3.7)
Marital status	Single	174/410 (42.4)
	Married	236/410 (57.6)

Table 3 Results of multiple regression analysis

Variables	Unstandardized	Standardized	t	Sig	95% CI	
	B	coefficients beta			Lower	Upper
Positive experience	.210	.677	14.623	.000	.011	.090
Disconnection	-.023	-.047	-1.134	.258	-.056	.044
Social relationships	.034	.095	2.148	.032	.088	.221
Closeness	-.065	-.107	-2.673	.008	-.116	-.065

positive experiences were statistically significant by gender [$F(1, 408) = 6.321, p = 0.013$], age [$F(4, 405) = 5.066, p = 0.001$], nationality [$F(3, 406) = 9.090, p = 0.000$] and the length of employment [$F(4, 405) = 4.513, p = 0.001$]. From the gender lens, female respondents reportedly have higher positive experiences ($M = 32.35, SD = 3.92$) as compared to

Table 4 Relationship between respondents’ demographic characteristics and their positive experiences (factor)

Variable	N (%)	df	F	p value
<i>Gender</i>		(1, 408)	6.321	.013
Male	336/410 (82.0)			
Female	74/410 (18.0)			
<i>Highest level of education</i>		(3, 406)	.741	.528
Primary school	164/410 (40.0)			
Secondary school	198/410 (48.3)			
Diploma	35/410 (8.5)			
Bachelor’s degree	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Age</i>		(4, 405)	5.066	.001
18 years old	3/410 (0.7)			
19–30 years old	204/410 (49.8)			
31–40 years old	139/410 (33.9)			
41–50 years old	49/410 (12.0)			
> 50 years old	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Nationality</i>		(3, 406)	9.090	.000
Indonesia	94/410 (22.9)			
Bangladesh	107/410 (26.1)			
Nepal	101/410 (24.6)			
Myanmar	108/410 (26.3)			
<i>Length of employment</i>		(4, 405)	4.513	.001
< 1 year	9/410 (2.2)			
2–3 years	93/410 (22.7)			
4–5 years	113/410 (27.6)			
6–10 years	124/410 (30.2)			
> 10 years	71/410 (17.3)			
<i>Occupation</i>		(4, 405)	1.782	.132
Service	211/410 (51.5)			
Agriculture	7/410 (1.7)			
Construction	60/410 (14.6)			
Manufacturing	119/410 (29.0)			
Other	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Immigration and occupation status</i>		(3, 406)	1.072	.361
Documented worker	364/410 (88.8)			
In regulation process	3/410 (0.7)			
Without a valid passport and/or working permit	28/410 (6.8)			
	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Marital status</i>		(1, 408)	3.088	.080
Single	174/410 (42.4)			
Married	236/410 (57.6)			

Bolded values: $p < .05$

male respondents ($M = 33.58$, $SD = 3.40$). When comparing the age range, respondents aged > 50 years old and above indicated the highest level of positive experience compared to the other age groups. A significant difference in respondent’s positive experiences was found between respondents aged > 50 years old and 18–30 years old ($p = 0.015$, 95% C.I. $- 5.95$, $- 0.41$), > 50 years old and 31–40 years old ($p = 0.029$, 95% C.I. 0.19, 5.83), and 41–50 years old and 19–30 years old ($p = 0.025$, 95% C.I. 0.14, 3.44).

In terms of nationality, respondents from Indonesia have the highest mean score for positive experiences ($M=34.21$, $SD=3.34$), followed by Bangladesh ($M=32.64$, $SD=4.09$), Myanmar ($M=31.95$, $SD=3.96$), and Nepal ($M=31.63$, $SD=3.48$). A significant difference in positive experiences was found between respondents from Indonesia and Bangladesh ($p=0.017$, 95% C.I. 0.97, 2.93), Indonesia and Nepal ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I. 1.19, 2.93), Indonesia and Myanmar ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I. 0.83, 3.62). The differences in the respondents' positive experiences by length of employment were also statistically significant and were found between those who have worked for more than 10 years and those who have worked between 2 and 3 years ($p=0.001$, 95% C.I. 0.71, 3.99). Respondents who have worked in Malaysia for >10 years have the highest mean score for positive experiences ($M=34.05$, $SD=3.52$), followed by 6–10 years ($M=32.55$, $SD=3.94$), 4–5 years ($M=32.53$, $SD=3.60$), 2–3 years ($M=31.69$, $SD=4.11$), and less than one year ($M=30.66$, $SD=2.34$). The data indicates that the longer the migrant workers are employed in Malaysia, there is higher the likelihood they would have a more positive experience in the country.

Second, we examined the relationships between the respondents' demographic characteristics and disconnection (factor or label). The analysis found that the difference in respondents' feeling of being disconnected from the local community (labelled as disconnection) was statistically significant within their age group [$F(4, 405)=2.977$, $p=0.001$], nationality [$F(3, 406)=10.868$, $p=0.000$], and occupation [$F(4, 405)=4.504$, $p=0.001$], see Table 5. A significant difference was found between those who were aged >50 years old and <18 years old ($p=0.048$, 95% C.I. 0.02, 8.50). Respondents aged 18 years old showed the highest mean score for disconnection ($M=11.00$, $SD=1.00$), followed by 19–30 years old ($M=7.90$, $SD=2.34$), 31–40 years old ($M=7.84$, $SD=2.65$), 41–50 years old ($M=7.14$, $SD=2.17$), and >50 years old ($M=6.73$, $SD=2.76$), indicating that the older the respondents, the less likely they would feel disconnected from the host society. Additionally, there was a significant difference in disconnection between respondents from Indonesia and Bangladesh ($p=0.017$, 95% C.I. 0.19, 2.93), Indonesia and Nepal ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I. 1.19, 3.96), and Indonesia and Myanmar ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I. 0.89, 3.62). The analysis also found that Indonesian respondents experienced a significantly lower disconnection with the host society, as compared to respondents from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar. As for occupation, disconnection was significantly different between respondents who worked in the construction and manufacturing sectors ($p=0.011$, 95% C.I. -2.29, -1.91), and between manufacturing and other occupations ($p=0.012$, 95% C.I. 0.34, 4.22). This also suggests that those who worked in the manufacturing sectors ($M=8.3$, $SD=2.37$) were found to feel more disconnected from the host society, as compared to migrant workers in other occupations or economic sectors.

Third, we examined the relationships between the respondents' demographic characteristics and their social relationships (see Table 6). The analysis found a significant difference in the respondents' social relationships based on gender [$F(1, 408)=5.634$, $p=0.018$], age [$F(4, 405)=4.823$, $p=0.001$], nationality [$F(3, 406)=7.488$, $p=0.000$], and length of employment [$F(4, 405)=7.796$, $p=0.000$]. The difference in female and male respondents' social relationships was statistically significant, where females indicated a higher level of social relationship ($M=19.70$, $SD=3.26$) than males ($M=18.67$,

Table 5 Relationship between respondents' demographic characteristics and disconnection (factor)

Variable	N (%)	df	F	p value
<i>Gender</i>		(1, 408)	.073	.787
Male	336/410 (82.0)			
Female	74/410 (18.0)			
<i>Highest level of education</i>		(3, 406)	.453	.715
Primary school	164/410 (40.0)			
Secondary school	198/410 (48.3)			
Diploma	35/410 (8.5)			
Bachelor's degree	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Age</i>		(4, 405)	2.977	.001
18 years old	3/410 (0.7)			
19–30 years old	204/410 (49.8)			
31–40 years old	139/410 (33.9)			
41–50 years old	49/410 (12.0)			
> 50 years old	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Nationality</i>		(3, 406)	10.868	.000
Indonesia	94/410 (22.9)			
Bangladesh	107/410 (26.1)			
Nepal	101/410 (24.6)			
Myanmar	108/410 (26.3)			
<i>Length of employment</i>		(4, 405)	1.022	.396
< 1 year	9/410 (2.2)			
2–3 years	93/410 (22.7)			
4–5 years	113/410 (27.6)			
6–10 years	124/410 (30.2)			
> 10 years	71/410 (17.3)			
<i>Occupation</i>		(4, 405)	4.504	.001
Service	211/410 (51.5)			
Agriculture	7/410 (1.7)			
Construction	60/410 (14.6)			
Manufacturing	119/410 (29.0)			
Other	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Immigration and occupation status</i>		(3, 406)	.406	.749
Documented worker	364/410 (88.8)			
In regulation process	3/410 (0.7)			
Without a valid passport and/or working permit	28/410 (6.8)			
	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Marital status</i>		(1, 408)	1.522	.218
Single	174/410 (42.4)			
Married	236/410 (57.6)			

Bolded values: $p < .05$

$SD = 3.39$). A significant difference in social relationships was also found between respondents aged > 50 years old and 19–30 years old ($p = 0.008$, 95% C.I. 0.53, 5.41), > 50 years old and 31–40 years old ($p = 0.023$, 95% C.I. 0.24, 5.19), and between 41 and 50 years old and 19–30 years old ($p = 0.030$, 95% C.I. 0.09, 2.99), where the mean score for each age group was; > 50 years old ($M = 21.46$, $SD = 2.44$), 41–50 years old ($M = 20.04$, $SD = 3.32$), 31–40 years old ($M = 18.74$, $SD = 3.69$), 19–30 years old ($M = 18.49$, $SD = 3.08$), and 18 years old ($M = 16.66$, $SD = 4.93$). This suggests that older

Table 6 Relationship between respondents' demographic characteristics and social relationships (factor)

Variable	N (%)	df	F	p value
<i>Gender</i>		(1, 408)	5.634	.018
Male	336/410 (82.0)			
Female	74/410 (18.0)			
<i>Highest level of education</i>		(3, 406)	.562	.640
Primary school	164/410 (40.0)			
Secondary school	198/410 (48.3)			
Diploma	35/410 (8.5)			
Bachelor's degree	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Age</i>		(4, 405)	4.823	.001
18 years old	3/410 (0.7)			
19–30 years old	204/410 (49.8)			
31–40 years old	139/410 (33.9)			
41–50 years old	49/410 (12.0)			
> 50 years old	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Nationality</i>		(3, 406)	7.448	.000
Indonesia	94/410 (22.9)			
Bangladesh	107/410 (26.1)			
Nepal	101/410 (24.6)			
Myanmar	108/410 (26.3)			
<i>Length of employment</i>		(4, 405)	7.796	.000
< 1 year	9/410 (2.2)			
2–3 years	93/410 (22.7)			
4–5 years	113/410 (27.6)			
6–10 years	124/410 (30.2)			
> 10 years	71/410 (17.3)			
<i>Occupation</i>		(4, 405)	1.937	.103
Service	211/410 (51.5)			
Agriculture	7/410 (1.7)			
Construction	60/410 (14.6)			
Manufacturing	119/410 (29.0)			
Other	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Immigration and occupation status</i>		(3, 406)	2.105	.099
Documented worker	364/410 (88.8)			
In regulation process	3/410 (0.7)			
Without a valid passport and/or working permit	28/410 (6.8)			
	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Marital status</i>		(1, 408)	3.450	.064
Single	174/410 (42.4)			
Married	236/410 (57.6)			

Bolded values: $p < .05$

respondents are more likely to be able to establish social relationships with the host society.

When it comes to nationality, a significant mean difference was found between respondents from Indonesia and Nepal ($p = 0.000$, 95% C.I. 0.09, 3.36), Indonesia and Myanmar ($p = 0.016$, 95% C.I. 0.18, 2.59), and between Bangladesh and Nepal ($p = 0.015$, 95% C.I. 0.15, 2.56). It was suggested that Indonesian respondents tend to have

better social relationships with the host society ($M=19.95$, $SD=3.04$), as compared to respondents from Bangladesh ($M=19.18$, $SD=3.30$), Nepal ($M=18.81$, $SD=3.39$), and Myanmar ($M=18.56$, $SD=3.46$). Respondents' social relationship is also significantly different by the length of employment. A significant mean difference was found between respondents who have worked in Malaysia for >10 years, and 4–5 years ($p=0.006$, 95% C.I. 0.34, 3.06), >10 years and 2–3 years ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I.=0.90, 3.74), >10 years and <1 year ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I. 1.58, 7.95), and between 6 and 10 years and <1 year ($p=0.015$, 95% C.I. 0.46, 6.67). The mean score for each length of employment category was; >10 years old ($M=20.32$, $SD=3.23$), 6–10 years ($M=19.12$, $SD=3.36$), 4–5 years ($M=18.61$, $SD=2.85$), 2–3 years ($M=18.00$, $SD=3.41$), and <1 year ($M=15.55$, $SD=5.63$), indicating that a respondent's ability to build social relationships with the host society increases the longer they work in Malaysia.

Next, we examined the relationship between the respondents' demographic characteristics and closeness—i.e., the likelihood of respondents interacting only with people from similar cultures or countries. The analysis found that closeness is significantly different within age group [$F(1, 408)=1.828$, $p=0.009$], level of education [$F(3, 406)$, 3.165, $p=0.024$], nationality [$F(3, 406)=10.636$, $p=0.000$], and occupation [$F(4, 405)=3.287$, $p=0.011$] (see Table 7). The level of closeness among male respondents was higher compared to female respondents, indicating that male respondents were more likely to depend on cultural proximity. The mean difference in closeness was statistically significant between respondents from Indonesia and Bangladesh ($p=0.028$, 95% C.I. -1.44 , -0.05), Indonesia and Nepal ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I. -2.13 , -0.73), Indonesia and Myanmar ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I. -1.85 , -0.47), and between Nepal and Bangladesh ($p=0.046$, 95% C.I. 0.00, 1.36). The highest mean score for the closeness variable was found among respondents from Nepal ($M=5.42$, $SD=1.92$), followed by Myanmar ($M=5.15$, $SD=2.31$), Bangladesh ($M=4.73$, $SD=1.85$), and Indonesia ($M=3.98$, $SD=1.24$).

Finally, we examined the relationship between respondents' demographic characteristics and overall cultural adaptation (see Table 8). The analysis found that cultural adaptations among migrant respondents differ by gender [$F(1, 408)=4.527$, $p=0.034$] and nationality [$F(3, 406)=10.785$, $p=0.000$]. Specifically, female respondents have a higher level of cultural adaptation ($M=8.42$, $SD=1.14$), compared to male respondents ($M=8.10$, $SD=1.19$). The mean difference in respondents' nationality was also statistically significant, where a significant difference was noted between respondents from Indonesia and Bangladesh ($p=0.003$, 95% C.I. 1.43, 0.98), Indonesia and Nepal ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I. 0.45, 1.30), and between Indonesia and Myanmar ($p=0.000$, 95% C.I. 0.32, 1.15). The highest mean score for the cultural adaptation variable was found among Indonesian respondents ($M=8.72$, $SD=1.08$), followed by Bangladesh ($M=8.15$, $SD=1.21$), Myanmar ($M=7.99$, $SD=1.19$), and Nepal ($M=7.84$, $SD=1.11$). The results suggest that Indonesian respondents are more likely to have a higher cultural adaptation than respondents from other countries.

Discussion

The regression analysis in the previous section indicates how such factors as positive experiences and social relationships contribute positively to the respondents' cultural adaptation to Malaysia. Sharing certain things in common such as language, cultural

Table 7 Relationship between respondents' demographic characteristics and closeness (factor)

Variable	N (%)	df	F	p value
<i>Gender</i>		(1, 408)	6.828	.009
Male	336/410 (82.0)			
Female	74/410 (18.0)			
<i>Highest level of education</i>		(3, 406)	3.165	.024
Primary school	164/410 (40.0)			
Secondary school	198/410 (48.3)			
Diploma degree	35/410 (8.5)			
Bachelor's degree	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Age</i>		(4, 405)	1.664	.158
18 years old	3/410 (0.7)			
19–30 years old	204/410 (49.8)			
31–40 years old	139/410 (33.9)			
41–50 years old	49/410 (12.0)			
> 50 years old	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Nationality</i>		(3, 406)	10.636	.000
Indonesia	94/410 (22.9)			
Bangladesh	107/410 (26.1)			
Nepal	101/410 (24.6)			
Myanmar	108/410 (26.3)			
<i>Length of employment</i>		(4, 405)	.918	.453
< 1 year	9/410 (2.2)			
2–3 years	93/410 (22.7)			
4–5 years	113/410 (27.6)			
6–10 years	124/410 (30.2)			
> 10 years	71/410 (17.3)			
<i>Occupation</i>		(4, 405)	3.287	.011
Service	211/410 (51.5)			
Agriculture	7/410 (1.7)			
Construction	60/410 (14.6)			
Manufacturing	119/410 (29.0)			
Other	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Immigration and occupation status</i>		(3, 406)	.543	.653
Documented worker	364/410 (88.8)			
In regulation process	3/410 (0.7)			
Without a valid passport and/or working permit	28/410 (6.8)			
	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Marital status</i>		(1, 408)	1.227	.269
Single	174/410 (42.4)			
Married	236/410 (57.6)			

Bolded values: $p < .05$

identity and religion plays a role in shaping positive experiences and social relationships between respondents (especially among Indonesian and Bangladeshi migrant respondents) and the host society (see Dannecker, 2013). It is important to note that not all respondents benefit from these aspects of commonality, for instance, Nepali and Myanmar respondents. This was already highlighted in a study conducted by Adhikary et al. (2018) which revealed that Nepali migrant workers are unlikely to have a positive experience working in such Muslim countries as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Qatar (i.e., due

Table 8 Relationship between respondents’ demographic characteristics and cultural adaptation (overall)

Variable	N (%)	df	F	p value
<i>Gender</i>		(1, 408)	4.527	.034
Male	336/410 (82.0)			
Female	74/410 (18.0)			
<i>Highest level of education</i>		(3, 406)	.104	.958
Primary school	164/410 (40.0)			
Secondary school	198/410 (48.3)			
Diploma	35/410 (8.5)			
Bachelor’s degree	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Age</i>		(4, 405)	.698	.593
18 years old	3/410 (0.7)			
19–30 years old	204/410 (49.8)			
31–40 years old	139/410 (33.9)			
41–50 years old	49/410 (12.0)			
> 50 years old	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Nationality</i>		(3, 406)	10.785	.000
Indonesia	94/410 (22.9)			
Bangladesh	107/410 (26.1)			
Nepal	101/410 (24.6)			
Myanmar	108/410 (26.3)			
<i>Length of employment</i>		(4, 405)	2.072	.084
< 1 year	9/410 (2.2)			
2–3 years	93/410 (22.7)			
4–5 years	113/410 (27.6)			
6–10 years	124/410 (30.2)			
> 10 years	71/410 (17.3)			
<i>Occupation</i>		(4, 405)	.890	.470
Service	211/410 (51.5)			
Agriculture	7/410 (1.7)			
Construction	60/410 (14.6)			
Manufacturing	119/410 (29.0)			
Other	13/410 (3.2)			
<i>Immigration and occupation status</i>		(3, 406)	.146	.932
Documented worker	364/410 (88.8)			
In regulation process	3/410 (0.7)			
Without a valid passport and/or working permit	28/410 (6.8)			
	15/410 (3.7)			
<i>Marital status</i>		(1, 408)	.024	.877
Single	174/410 (42.4)			
Married	236/410 (57.6)			

Bolded values: $p < .05$

to such differences). Additionally, the regression analysis also found that the aspect of closeness (as a factor) contributes negatively to their cultural adaptation. This suggests that maintaining closeness only within their own communities hinders migrants from adapting and integrating with the host society (Segal, 2019).

Besides, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) found that factors influencing cultural adaptation differ significantly according to the respondents’ demographic characteristics.

This suggests a complex relationship between a migrant worker's ability to adapt and his/her gender, nationality, and length of employment in Malaysia. This complex interplay is shaped by such factors as gender, place attachment, cultural norms and identity, social networks, and employment policy in Malaysia (Sadiq, 2009; Talib et al. 2012; Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2013; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015; Grzymala-Kazłowska & Ryan, 2022; Wahab & Hamidi, 2022). This discussion section aims to further discuss this complex interplay.

Gender and cultural adaptation

One of the key highlights from the statistical analysis indicates that female respondents (as compared to male respondents) are more likely to have positive experiences with the host society. Presumably, this also leads to stronger levels of cultural adaptation. The female respondents not only expressed positive experiences in Malaysia but were also more likely to establish social relationships with the host society. Importantly, the survey also found that the social relationships built or maintained by these female respondents are not necessarily limited to their relationships with the host society, but also occur within the migrant communities (e.g., with other migrant nationalities), migrants from the same countries and relationships with male respondents. This finding contradicts the existing literature, especially involving Asian female migrants in European countries who are allegedly unable to establish or engage in social relationships with the host society (see Sadian, 2021).

Migrants create their own symbolic physical space, causing separation and isolation

Unlike female respondents, the statistical analysis found that male respondents tend to only get along, interact, and socialize with people from migrant communities, particularly migrants from the same countries. This finding is not new, and it indirectly implies separation and rejection of the host society's culture and identity (see Kassim & Mat Zin, 2011). It is commonly known in Malaysia that migrant communities create their own physical spaces and environments in which they interact socially with workers, especially those from the same country and province (Wahab, 2020). These physical spaces, such as *Central Market* and *Mydin Kota Raya* (i.e., marketplace) in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, are symbolic of migrant communities. Migrant workers are very much accustomed to gathering, socializing, meeting old and new friends among migrant communities, eating and buying basic needs in places such as *Mydin Kota Raya*, especially during public holidays. Thus, creating symbolic physical spaces among migrants in Malaysia serves as an act of collectivism but it may also cause further separation and isolation from the host society.

Cultural adaptation and preservation of migrants' identity

The survey found that migrant respondents who have stayed and worked in Malaysia for more than 10 years are more likely to have positive experiences and are also more likely to establish social relationships with the host society. This implies that migrant respondents would have to go through a relatively long period working in Malaysia before they are able to establish positive interactions, relationships, and experiences in the country. Throughout this period, they would learn the local language, norms, cuisines, social etiquette, and new skills, while building trust, new networks, and friends among the host

society (Wahab & Hamidi, 2022). Existing literature points out that any migrant individual who has undergone a long period of adaptation and assimilation process will also undergo identity changes (Cormos, 2022). These identity changes are noticeable, for instance, the ability to speak local languages or changes in lifestyle.

In Malaysia, it can be generally observed that while migrants have successfully undergone a long process of adaptation and assimilation, they strive to preserve their unique identities and cultural practices, including Indonesian migrants who have worked and stayed in the country for longer than 10 years. Such preservations are manifested in almost all domains of their everyday life in Malaysia—from food, attire, lifestyle, and money management (Muniandy, 2017). The presence of support facilities such as Nepali, Bangladeshi and Indonesian grocery shops and restaurants in such locations as Pudu Raya and Klang, that offer native cuisines and meet the daily needs of the migrant community, and remittance facilities offering money transfers—all indicate the preservation of the unique cultural identity and lifestyles of the migrant population.

Different cultural identities and practices delay the cultural adaptation process

Unsurprisingly, given the close similarity of cultural identities (e.g., language and religion) with the dominant ethnic group among the host society (i.e., the Malay community), Indonesian respondents tend to have more positive experiences and establish social relationships with the host society, as compared to other migrant nationalities, especially migrants from Nepal and Myanmar. On the contrary, migrant respondents from Nepal and Myanmar tend to maintain cultural proximity with their fellow citizens, and eventually become disconnected: socially and culturally, from the host society. Cultural practices such as chewing betel nuts and spitting randomly in public spaces, commonly associated with Myanmar and to a certain extent Nepali respondents, are considered incompatible with the local norms. Such cultural practices not only slow down cultural adaptation among certain groups of the migrant population but also create prejudice and negative perceptions among the host society (towards Nepali and Myanmar citizens). This also reinforces the notion that cultural adaptation is not only about the ability of the migrant population to overcome and adapt to the new environment but also requires the understanding of and acceptance by the host society. In other words, cultural adaptation is a two-way interaction and acceptance process.

The nature of employment influences the process of cultural adaptation

The statistical analysis found that migrant respondents who worked in the manufacturing sector were more likely to be disconnected from the host society. Specifically, some migrant respondents expressed difficulties interacting with other employees at the workplace and neighbourhood and eventually felt isolated from the host society. These respondents admitted that they also find it difficult to adapt to the local cultures. Other than manufacturing, migrant workers in Malaysia are commonly present in such sectors as construction, plantation, agriculture, services, and domestic work. This study covered migrant respondents from all these sectors except domestic work.

It is important to highlight that workers in the manufacturing sector tend to work long hours, work overtime during public holidays, and mingle with almost the same groups of workers at workplaces (Wahab, 2020; Wahab & Hamidi, 2022). It is also a common

practice where employers to require migrant workers to live in employer-sponsored hostels, where they are separated according to their respective nationalities by design (Wahab, 2023). Existing studies also indicate that most employers impose strict outing procedures, discouraging workers from leaving their hostels even after working hours (Wahab, 2019). When they have to leave their hostels, the migrant workers are required to get permission from their supervisors. This suggests that the nature of employment in the manufacturing sector, coupled with strict accommodation procedures imposed by employers, has negatively impacted the workers' attitudes and lifestyles, including limiting their ability to interact, socialize and get to know the local cultures. This contributes immensely to the lower level of cultural adaptation among migrant workers.

Conclusion

This study attempted to assess the relationship between the international mobility of migrant workers and their cultural adaptation in Malaysia. Specifically, this study aimed to identify the factors that influence the migrant workers' cultural adaptation in the country. Using a multiple regression analysis, the study found that the three most significant predictors contributing to cultural adaptation among migrant workers in Malaysia are positive experiences, closeness, and social relationships. In other words, this finding suggests that the respondents' positive experiences, closeness and social relationships in Malaysia influence their cultural adaptation, but such influence may be positive or negative. For instance, while the findings indicate that the respondents' positive experiences and social relationships positively influence the respondents' cultural adaptation, closeness indicates a negative influence on cultural adaptation. Another factor (or predictor), namely disconnection, was found not statistically significant. The analysis of variance (ANOVA), however, revealed significant differences in the respondents' cultural adaptation based on such demographic characteristics as age, gender, level of education, nationality, length of employment, and sector of employment. For example, female migrants have a higher level of positive experiences, social relationships, and cultural adaptation, while male migrants have a higher level of closeness (i.e., high reliance on cultural proximity). Other demographic characteristics such as age and level of education influence respondents' positive experiences, disconnection, social relationships, and cultural adaptation in Malaysia. With respect to respondents' nationality, Indonesian respondents (compared to Bangladesh, Nepal, and Myanmar) are strongly associated with a higher level of positive experiences, social relationships, and eventually having a stronger cultural adaptation.

The analysis of migrants' cultural adaptation also aims to relate and better understand the growing literature concerning employment precariousness among the migrant population in the country. To help elucidate this connection, several attributes which explain how certain age groups, gender, or nationality integrate were discussed. These attributes include gender, preservation of cultural identities, creating symbolic physical places, and the nature of employment. Notwithstanding, this study is not without its limitations. The area of focus in the current study was limited to Bandar Baru Bangi, a township located in one of the districts of Selangor, Malaysia. Respondents were recruited utilising a non-probability sampling technique, thus caution must be exercised in generalising these findings to a larger population. Future studies should utilise a systematic and

probability sampling strategy to recruit respondents for more generalizable inferences. Triangulation of the findings is also recommended through in-depth interviews or focus group discussions on the personal experiences of migrant workers in Malaysia.

To conclude, the continuous economic growth and development in Malaysia necessitate a stable supply of labour. Where the local workforce is reluctant to meet the existing labour gaps in certain economic sectors (e.g., manufacturing and plantation), a migrant workforce is the only viable option, which drives international mobility among migrant communities from developing and under-developed countries to migrate and work temporarily in Malaysia. When migrants do so, they interact and live with the host society, in a direct or indirect manner. These interactions demand continuous scholarly and policy discourse, probing and reimagining the current state of integration and their far-reaching impact on the livelihood of millions of migrants without jeopardizing the security and prosperity of the host society.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewer(s) for their constructive feedback.

Author contributions

AME, AAA, AM and FM contributed to the overall design, data collection and analysis of the survey, while AW and KAT contributed in synthesizing the existing body of literature and writing the discussion and conclusion sections. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) [Ref: FRGS/1/2021/SSIO/UKM/02/1].

Availability of data and materials

The study is based on quantitative interview materials which were collected on the basis that they remain anonymous and confidential.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Research Ethics Committee of the National University of Malaysia (UKM), (Ref. No.: UKM PPI/111/8/JEP-2022/497).

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Received: 9 April 2023 Accepted: 19 December 2023

Published online: 05 January 2024

References

- Adhikary, P., Sheppard, Z. A., Keen, S., & Teijlingen, E. (2018). Health and well-being of Nepalese migrant workers abroad. *International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care*, 1, 96–105.
- Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2004). *Indicators of integration: Final report*. Retrieved May 7, 2022, from <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20110218135832/http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/dpr28.pdf>
- Ajis, M. N., Askandar, K., & Awang, S. (2015). International migration and human trafficking in Malaysia: A study on illegal immigrants. *Asian Social Science*, 11(25), 124–134.
- Arisman, A., & Jaya, R. K. (2020). Labour migration in ASEAN: Indonesian migrant workers in Johor Bahru, Malaysia. *Asian Education and Development Studies*, 10(1), 27–39.
- Bermudez, A. (2016). Transnational migration, politics and conflict. In O. Jubany & S. Sassen (Eds.), *International migration, transnational politics and conflict, migration, diasporas and citizenship* (pp. 17–45). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Castro, F. G., & Murray, K. E. (2010). Cultural adaptation and resilience: Controversies, issues and emerging models. In J. W. Reich, A. J. Zautra, & J. S. Hall (Eds.), *Handbook of adult resilience*. Guilford Press.
- Chan, A. K., Cheung, L. T., Chong, E.K.-M., Lee, M. K., & Wong, M. Y. (2022). Hong Kong's new wave of migration: Socio-political factors of individuals' intention to emigrate. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(49), 1–21.
- Collins, P. (1990). Black feminist thought in the matrix of domination. In P. Collins (Ed.), *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of Empowerment* (pp. 221–238). Unwin Hyman.
- Cormos, V. C. (2022). The processes of adaptation, assimilation and integration in the country of migration: A psychosocial perspective on place identity changes. *Sustainability*, 14(16), 10296.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *The University Chicago Legal Forum*, 1, 139–167.

- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 1241–1299.
- Crul, M. (2016). Super-diversity vs. assimilation: How complex diversity in majority–minority cities challenges the assumptions of assimilation. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 42(1), 54–68.
- Crul, M., Schneider, J., & Lelie, F. (2013). *Super-diversity. A new perspective on integration*. VU University Press.
- Dahinden, J. (2016). A plea for the “de-migrantization” of research on migration and integration. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(13), 2207–2225.
- Dannecker, P. (2013). Rationalities and images underlying labour migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia. *International Migration*, 51(1), 40–60.
- Davidson, M., & Davidson, M. J. (1997). *The black and ethnic minority woman manager: Cracking the concrete ceiling*. Paul Chapman.
- Devadason, E. S., & Meng, C. W. (2014). Policies and laws regulating migrant workers in Malaysia: A critical appraisal. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 44(1), 19–35.
- Dilman, D. A. (2000). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method*. Wiley.
- Foner, N., Duyvendak, J. W., & Kasinitz, P. (2019). Introduction: Super-diversity in everyday life. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(1), 1–16.
- Geerts, E., Withaecx, S., & Brandt, N. (2018). Superdiversity: A critical intersectional investigation. *Tijdschrift Voor Genderstudies*, 2(1), 1–5.
- Geldof, D. (2015). De transitie naar superdiversiteit. Van grootstedelijke naar Vlaamse realiteit. *Christen-Democratische Reflecties*, 3, 65–75.
- Grzymala-Kazłowska, A. (2013). Zarys koncepcji społecznego zakotwiczenia. Inne spojrzenie na tożsamość, adaptację i integrację imigrantów. *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 57(3), 45–60.
- Grzymala-Kazłowska, A., & Ryan, L. (2022). Bringing anchoring and embedding together: Theorising migrants’ lives over time. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(46), 1–19.
- Hamzah, I. S., Sarifin, M. R., Aziz, M. A., & Abdullah, M. F. (2020). Malaysia as attraction of international foreign workers. *Journal of Critical Reviews*, 7(8), 797–804.
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2018). Situation and gap analysis on Malaysian legislation, policies and programmes, and the ILO Forced Labour Convention and Protocol. Retrieved October 29, 2023, from https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/genericdocument/wcms_650658.pdf
- International Labour Organization (ILO). (2022). *Measuring labour migration in ASEAN: Analysis from the ILO’s International Labour Migration Statistics (ILMS) database*. Retrieved October 30, 2023, from https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_839321.pdf
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2023). Assessment of causes and contributing factors to migrant workers in Malaysia. Retrieved November 1, 2023, from https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd486/files/documents/2023-08/english_undocumented-migrant-workers-report.pdf
- Ismail, R. (2015). Impact of foreign workers on labour productivity: Analysis of firm level data. *International Journal of Productivity and Quality Management*, 16(1), 36–53.
- Juliawan, B. H. (2018). Seeing migration like a state: The case of irregular Indonesian migrant workers deported from Malaysia. *Anti-Trafficking Review*, 11, 36–51.
- Kamenou, N. (2008). Reconsidering work–life balance debates: Challenging limited understandings of the ‘life’ component in the context of ethnic minority women’s experiences. *British Journal of Management*, 19(S1), 99–109.
- Kassim, A., & Mat Zin, R. (2011). *Policy on irregular migrants in Malaysia: An analysis of its implementation and effectiveness*. Philippines Institute for Development Studies, Discussion Paper no. 34.
- Katmon, N., Rapani, N. A., Ismail, R., Jaafar, H., Jusoh, M. A., Farooque, O. A., Ismail, M. A., Zuriyati, M. Z., & Naw, N. S. M. (2020). Factors that influence youth’s decision to work in the palm oil field: The case of FELDA. *Solid State Technology*, 63(2), 1426–1441.
- Kaur, A. (2010). Labour migration in Southeast Asia: Migration policies, labour exploitation and regulation. *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, 15(1), 6–19.
- Lara-Guerrero, L., & Rojon, S. (2022). “My guitar is my rifle”: Mexican migrants mobilising unconventionally through arts. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(1), 1–20.
- Lee, H. A., & Khor Yu, L. (2018). *Counting migrant workers in Malaysia: A needlessly persisting*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Issue Brief no. 25. Retrieved January 1, 2023, from https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2018_25@50.pdf
- Lasimbang, H. B., Tong, W. T., & Low, W. Y. (2016). Migrant workers in Sabah, East Malaysia: The importance of legislation and policy to uphold equity on sexual and reproductive health and rights. *Best Practice and Research in Clinical Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 32, 113–123.
- Lim, R. J.-X. (2018). *Strong state and free market: Systematic abuse on Malaysia’s foreign workers*. Conflict, Justice, and Decolonization: Critical Studies of Inter-Asian Societies, 1–9.
- Lindquist, J. (2017). Brokers, channels, infrastructure: Moving migrant labor in the Indonesian-Malaysian oil palm complex. *Mobilities*, 12(2), 213–226.
- Low, C. C. (2020). De-commercialization of the labor migration industry in Malaysia. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 9(1), 27–65.
- Mak, J., Zimmerman, C., & Roberts, B. (2021). “I had tears in my eyes but I just left without looking back”: A qualitative study of migration-related stressors amongst Nepali male labour migrants. *Journal of Migration and Health*, 4, 1–9.
- Mei Wei, R., & Yazdanifard, R. (2015). The review of challenges foreign workers face in construction industry of Malaysia. *Global Journal of Management and Business Research*, 15(4), 13–16.
- Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR). (2019). *Work and labour statistics*. Series 19. no. 1/2019 March. Retrieved December 28, 2022, from http://myhos.mohr.gov.my/ebook/istatistik1_2019/bil1_2019.pdf
- Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA). (n.d.). *Dasar pengajian pekerja asing di Malaysia*. Retrieved January 7, 2023, from <https://www.moha.gov.my/index.php/ms/bahagian-pa-dasar-dasar-semasa/dasar-semasa-pengajian-pekerja-asing-2>

- Mohd Fateh, M. A., Mohamed, M. R., & Omar, S. A. (2022). The involvement of local skilled labour in Malaysia's construction industry. *Frontiers in Built Environment*, 8(861018), 1–13.
- Muniandy, P. (2017). *Politics of the temporary: An ethnography of migrant life in urban Malaysia*. Gerak Budaya.
- Nazri, A. S., Talib, K. A., Sulaiman, N., & Gidah, M. E. (2022). Untangling the needs of refugees in Malaysia: The way forward. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 7(1), 196–220.
- O'Connell, P. J., & McGinnity, F. (2008). *Immigrants at work: Ethnicity and nationality in the Irish labour market*. Retrieved March 13, 2022, from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/5019263>
- Ormond, M., & Nah, A. M. (2020). Risk entrepreneurship and the construction of healthcare deservingness for 'desirable', 'acceptable' and 'disposable' migrants in Malaysia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(20), 4282–4302.
- Pérez-Armendáriz, C., & Crow, D. (2010). Do migrants remit democracy? International migration, political beliefs, and behavior in Mexico. *Comparative Political Studies*, 43(1), 119–148.
- Rahman, M. M., Arif, M. T., Safii, R., Tambi, Z., Akoi, C., Jantan, Z., Abdul Halim, S., & Hafiz, A. (2019). Cultural adaptation by Bangladeshi migrant workers in Sarawak, Malaysia: An empirical study. *Indonesian Journal of Cultural and Community Development*, 4(September), 1–7.
- Rana, B. K., Kagan, C., & Lewis, S. (1998). British South Asian women managers and professionals: Experiences of work and family. *Women in Management Review*, 13(6), 221–232.
- Rother, S. (2017). Indonesian migrant domestic workers in transnational political spaces: Agency, gender roles and social class formation. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(6), 956–973.
- Ryan, L., & Mulholland, J. (2015). Embedding in motion: Analysing relational, spatial, and temporal dynamics among highly skilled migrants in the context of Brexit. In L. Ryan, E. Umut, & D. Alessio (Eds.), *Migrant Capital* (pp. 135–153). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sabucedo, J. M., & Arce, C. (1991). Types of political participation: A multidimensional analysis. *European Journal of Political Research*, 20(1), 93–102.
- Sadian, M. H. (2021). *The experiences of Filipino immigrant women: Adjusting to life in Sweden*. Retrieved January 4, 2023, from <http://www.diva-portal.se/smash/get/diva2:1523987/FULLTEXT01.pdf>
- Sadiq, K. (2009). *Paper citizens: How illegal immigrants acquire citizenship in developing countries*. Oxford University Press.
- Sarker, R. (2016). Migration and employment: A study of Bangladeshi male migrant workers in Malaysia. In K. Lian, M. Rahman, & Y. Alas (Eds.), *International migration in Southeast Asia. Asia in Transition*. (Vol. 2). Springer.
- Schiller, N., & Çağlar, A. (2009). Towards a comparative theory of locality in migration studies: Migrant incorporation and city scale. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35(2), 177–202.
- Schiller, N., & Çağlar, A. (2016). Displacement, emplacement and migrant newcomers: Rethinking urban sociabilities within multiscale power. *Identities*, 23(1), 17–34.
- Segal, U. A. (2019). Globalization, migration, and ethnicity. *Public Health*, 172, 13–142.
- Shahiri, H., Cheng, Z., & Al-Hadi, A. A. (2021). Why do low-skilled foreign workers have a wage advantage? Evidence from the palm oil plantation sector in Malaysia. *Population, Space and Place*, 27(4), e2404.
- Sok, S. (2019). Challenges and constraints in achieving appropriate working and living conditions for Cambodian temporary migrant workers in Malaysia. *South East Asia Research*, 27(4), 361–377.
- Solomon, C., Bakar, R., & Islam, M. A. (2015). Attracting foreign direct investment: The case of Malaysia. *International Business Management*, 9(4), 349–357.
- Sunam, R. (2022). Infrastructures of migrant precarity: Unpacking precarity through the lived experiences of migrant workers in Malaysia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(3), 636–654.
- Talib, K. A., Hassan, K. H., Isa, S. M., Yusoff, S. S., & Mustafa, C. (2012). Labor law and immigrants: Legal impacts on minority. *Journal of Asian Social Science*, 8(6), 56–62.
- Tariq, M., & Syed, J. (2018). An intersectional perspective on Muslim women's issues and experiences in employment. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 25(5), 495–513.
- Tomlinson, J., Muzio, D., & Sommerlad, H. (2013). Structure, agency and career strategies of white women and black and minority ethnic individuals in the legal profession. *Human Relations*, 66(2), 245–269.
- UK Home Office. (2021). A feasibility study for a survey of migrants: Questionnaire. Retrieved May 20, 2022, from https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/115910/occ92-questionnaire.pdf
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). (2019). *International migration stock in 2019*. Retrieved October 29, 2023, from https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/files/documents/2020/Feb/un_2019_internationalmigration_wallchart.pdf
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2013). A new beginning: Refugee integration in Europe. Retrieved May 21, 2022, from <https://www.unhcr.org/my/media/new-beginning-refugee-integration-europe>
- Vertovec, S. (2007). Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6), 1024–1054.
- Vertovec, S. (2019). Talking around super-diversity. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(1), 125–139.
- Wahab, A. (2019). Human rights anchored in business: Practice and challenges in the palm oil sector in Malaysia. *Asian International Studies Review*, 20(1), 1–20.
- Wahab, A. (2020). The outbreak of Covid-19 in Malaysia: Pushing migrant workers at the margin. *Social Sciences and Humanities Open*, 2(1), 1–20.
- Wahab, A. (2023). COVID-19 and the precarity of Indonesian workers in the oil palm production in Sabah, East Malaysia. *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01171968231206382>
- Wahab, A., & Hamidi, M. (2022). COVID-19 pandemic and the changing views of mobility: The case of Nepal-Malaysia migration corridor. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(44), 1–19.
- World Bank. (2022). *The World Bank in Malaysia: An overview*. Retrieved January 11, 2023, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/malaysia/overview>

Publisher's Note

Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.