

UNOFFICIAL CULTURAL AMBASSADORS: EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF MALAYSIAN STUDENT SCHOLARS IN AMERICA

*Sofiya binti Wan Mohd Nor**

Department of Foundations of Education,
Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
Jalan Universiti 1, Serdang, 43400 Seri Kembangan, Selangor, Malaysia
E-mail: sofiyawmn@gmail.com

*Murni binti Wan Mohd Nor***

Institute for Social Science Studies (IPSAS), Universiti Putra Malaysia
and Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
Jalan Universiti 1, Serdang, 43400 Seri Kembangan, Selangor, Malaysia
E-mail: murni@upm.edu.my

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ABSTRACT

International educational exchange programmes promote a person's intellectual development and cultural understanding, which could also foster mutual cooperation and stronger diplomatic ties between countries. Through these programmes, students can socially interact and learn about others from diverse backgrounds. However, the rise of Islamophobia after the September 11 attacks has inculcated the fear of "the Other" and limited the number of Muslim students allowed to study in America, as Muslim culture and religious values are popularly perceived as incompatible with American values and thus viewed as a threat. This study contributes to the literature of diplomacy by highlighting the experiences of sixteen Malaysian scholars sponsored by the Malaysian government and the challenges they experienced during their educational exchange in America. The aim of this qualitative study is to understand the experiences of Malaysian student scholars by identifying: (1) how they initially perceived America; (2) their motivations for wanting to study in America; (3) the

challenges they faced; and (4) how their experiences transformed them. The study found that many students faced initial struggles with racism, cultural challenges, and difficulty in achieving cultural assimilation. However, they were able to overcome misperceptions and negative stereotypes. The findings highlight the positive impact of their academic and cultural exchange, its success in reducing divisiveness, and the influence of soft power in strengthening relations between America and Malaysia.

Keywords: Educational exchange, diplomacy, Malaysian student scholars, America-Malaysia relations, soft power

INTRODUCTION

International educational exchange programmes are sought after because these programmes are believed to promote a student's academic development and cultural understanding. Educational exchange programmes foster mutual friendship and diplomatic ties between two nations, as students of these programmes also act as “unofficial cultural ambassadors”. This term is used to reflect some of the Malaysian student scholars' belief that they have to conduct themselves responsibly on American soil as their actions would reflect on Malaysia as a nation (Ibnu 2022). Therefore, as a tool of public diplomacy, international educational exchange programmes can increase dialogue, enhance cooperation, and create global alliances by strengthening intercultural ties with students from other diverse backgrounds. According to Krause and Van Evera (2009), international exchange programmes are especially powerful for America. The Fulbright Program, which Krause and Van Evera (2009) acknowledge as a “promising outreach dialogue programme aimed at the Muslim world” is very effective in establishing mutual understanding among people from different nations as Fulbright scholars are sent to 150 countries across the globe (111).

The Fulbright scholarship was created to establish mutual understanding between people of different cultures and ethnic groups, as well as facilitate international peace. After the Second World War, Senator J. Williams Fulbright was determined to prevent wars and conflicts in the future. His experience as an international student at Oxford University, England, changed how he understood the world, and it was then that he believed that educational exchanges could indeed change a person's worldview by immersing oneself in a different culture (MACEE Fulbright Malaysia n.d.).

Based on how Senator Fulbright's educational exchange impacted him, it can be suggested that the university does not just function as a place

to learn, but also as a “culture carrier” whereby students who return home from studying abroad will have a changed perspective of the host country and its people (Marshall 1970). The university is a public space where students’ minds are being challenged intellectually and culturally. In this case, the university can act as a space to foster mutual understanding by addressing misconceptions and promoting intercultural dialogue. This becomes even more important today as nations grapple internally and internationally with problems of divisiveness, racism, and xenophobia.

The September 11 attacks in America, for example, have changed the definition of national security and has led America to have stricter laws and regulations post-September 11, especially in terms of accepting Muslim students into the country by implementing tougher visa regulations (Alberts 2007). Based on a survey conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE), 59% of respondents indicated that the new visa and security process was the main reason for the decline in international student enrolment, especially from Muslim-majority countries. The enrolment of Indonesian students, for instance, decreased by 10% to 10,432 (IIE 2015). The perception of an unwelcoming atmosphere by potential students could have also deterred them from enrolling in tertiary education in America. This demonstrates the radical change in how Muslims are viewed globally.

Even though the events of September 11 occurred two decades ago, Islamophobic rhetoric is still prevalent among Americans towards Muslims. Jasmine Zine (2003) defines Islamophobia as “a fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individual, ideological and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination” (as cited in Zine 2006: 239). This has caused blowback against Muslims in general, which extends to American Muslims, Muslim immigrants, and international Muslim students in America.¹ The Trump administration’s rhetoric against Muslims such as the call for the Muslim travel ban to prohibit citizens of Yemen, Syria, Iran, Libya, and Somalia from entering America has increased fear, marginalisation, and prejudice towards minorities (Khan et al. 2021). The implementation of unfriendly policies has contributed to the heightened security measures of student visa processing and the sharp decline in student visa issuance by the US State Department (Hartocollis 2019). As a result, the issuance of visas for citizens from banned countries plummeted by as much as 80% since President Trump took office (Torbaty 2019).

Research indicates that the travel ban was not just an administrative policy to protect national security, but it also had adverse effects on intercultural relations in America. In 2018, the Council on American-Islamic

Relations (CAIR) reported that there was a 74% increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes and discrimination since Trump became the 45th President of America (CAIR New York 2018). This has also affected certain groups of Muslim international students as some of them were unable to return home, worried that they would not be allowed to re-enter America (Anderson 2020). Stricter immigration policies coupled with Trump's Islamophobic rhetoric displayed on social media created a divide between Muslims and Americans, which Khan et al. (2021) believe to be a tool of persuasion that "Americans should detest Muslims" (10). As a result of the hateful rhetoric, it perpetuated certain misconceptions among the American community about Muslims in general, thereby exacerbating the challenges already faced by international students who tried to adapt to student life in America, particularly if they were visibly Muslim or perceived to be Muslims. This is supported by Abukhattala's study (2004) which found that Arab-Muslim students in Canada had trouble in interacting with their non-Muslim peers due to their unwelcoming attitudes based on negative perceptions of Muslims.

International educational exchange programmes that are often held in universities can, therefore, help to address the misconceptions that may be embedded in American society. Scholars have suggested that having more exchange programmes between Americans and Muslims² in high school and the university will help in countering cultural and religious misunderstanding, anxiety, and fear within society (Nakhleh 2009). The role of "the scholar as a diplomat" allows for more informal interaction between scholars in the host country by influencing behaviours without indoctrination or propaganda (Bettie 2015). In addition, educational exchange programmes could also be beneficial in narrowing the cultural gap between Americans, Muslims, and minorities.

Similarly, through educational exchange, international students and young leaders are sent to America to gain knowledge while being immersed in American culture. Cull (2008) identifies that there is an overlap between cultural diplomacy and educational exchange, defining the latter as "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by sending its citizens overseas, reciprocally accepting citizens from overseas for a period of study or acculturation" (33). The purpose of Malaysian students being sent to America is not just to gain a prestigious degree, but to also expose them to cultural and intellectual diversity with the hopes they would experience positive changes and implement beneficial initiatives upon their return. At present, there is a lack of studies that highlight the experiences of Malaysian student scholars in adapting to life as international students, and how the educational exchange programmes shape their identity.

The current study investigates the perceptions and experiences of Malaysian student scholars in America. It is guided by Nye's (2008) soft power theory which argues that soft power is the ability to get what you want through the power of attraction, rather than coercion. Nye (2008) categorises a country's soft power sources into three: (1) culture (when other countries are attracted by universal values); (2) political values (such as democracy and freedom of speech); and (3) the just implementation of foreign policies. Nye further articulates that a state's soft power is effective in influencing public opinion without using coercion but leading by example.

Non-state actors, such as universities and companies, also have their own form of soft power that can attract people (Nye 2022). Therefore, higher education institutions are effective agents of soft power because universities are "increasingly operating beyond sovereignty, based on their own strategies and motivations" (Peterson 2014: 3). Non-state actors also include the public such as teachers and students to be agents of soft power (Kurlantzick 2006). They can be influential in displaying a favourable image to people, locally and abroad, because it is believed that they are untainted by government politics (Hocking 2005) or that they do not necessarily act according to the state (Kurlantzick 2006).

The rise of interest in extending a nation's soft power through international educational exchange has been observed in scholarly discourse, particularly in how universities from emerging powers have positioned themselves strategically to spread their international influence. China, a growing global power, is a case in point. As of 2018, there were 6,400 Nepali students who studied in Chinese universities with financial support provided by the Chinese government (Gauttam et al. 2021). Moreover, Confucius Institutes (CIs) have also been established to teach and promote the Chinese language and culture abroad (Pan 2013) in an "effort to accomplish its foreign policy goals through the use of soft power" (Gil 2008: 116). In addition, China promotes its soft power through CIs by establishing an international network in academia to strengthen its global influence. By 2018, there were 548 CIs across the world (USC US-China Institute 2021). The strategy of tapping into their pool of expertise in CIs that are attached to many universities in different countries across the globe has been described by Yang (2010) as "arguably China's most systematic planned soft power policy" (235).

Gil (2008) links the rising interest in studying the Chinese language globally to China's soft power which was successful in creating a positive national image. However, Gil (2008) does not discount that the positive

perception could be undermined due to any circumstances related to China's political and economic power. In addition, the influence of soft power may decline if CIs are perceived as having lower academic freedom due to possible interference from the Chinese government (Pan 2013). Indeed, the role of soft power, especially in international education, has limitations. As Schneider (2006) argues, public diplomacy cannot be used as a response to merely sweep problematic policies or unfavourable public reactions under the rug. Nevertheless, there are many examples that highlight the attractive power of higher education in effectively promoting positive cultural values through international educational programmes.

We used Nye's soft power theory to understand the impact of educational exchange among Malaysian student scholars who studied in America. Specifically, the study aims to ascertain if America's soft power is able to motivate these students to further their studies in American universities and how it plays a role in shaping their perceptions and experiences as students. In doing so, the following questions guided the study: (1) How do Malaysian student scholars initially perceive America?; (2) What are their motivations for wanting to study in the United States?; (3) What are the challenges they face?; and (4) How do their experiences shape them? The findings of this study contribute to the literature on diplomacy, specifically people-to-people relations by highlighting the role of soft power and the positive impact of educational exchange programmes through the detailed experiences of Malaysian student scholars.

MALAYSIAN STUDENTS IN AMERICA

Malaysia and America have always had a strong bilateral relationship, particularly through trade, investment, and educational relations. Malaysia is one of the top countries that sends its students to further their studies in America. According to the Open Doors Report in 2020, Malaysians were the 24th largest group of international students in 2017. The number of Malaysian students studying in America rose steadily between 2013 and 2017. In 2014, 7,231 Malaysian students enrolled in American universities which was a 6% increase from 2013. In the following year, 7,834 Malaysian students enrolled, with an increase of 8% compared to the year before. This increase indicates that Malaysia and America considered it essential to continue supporting policies and programmes for Malaysian students to study abroad post-

September 11. Unfortunately, the number of Malaysian student enrolment slowly declined starting from 2017. In 2019, there was a 10.4% decrease in Malaysian student enrolment as compared to the year before (IIE 2020).

The drop in enrolment could be attributed to the declining value of the ringgit, the increasing cost of international higher institutions, and Malaysia's focus on developing the country into an international education hub. Sirat (2008) points out that the increase of reputable international higher education branches across Malaysia has widened people's access to higher education. As a result, the Public Service Department (*Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam*) Scholarship, which is awarded by the Malaysian government, had to be limited, thus, lowering the opportunities for students to further their studies abroad (ICEF Monitor 2017). In a media conference, a spokesperson from the Public Service Department explained that sending top students to local universities is part of the long-term plan to include the civil service with exceptional graduates who will contribute effectively to Malaysia's civil service (Ng and Choong 2016). Regardless of the declining number of Malaysian students sent to American universities by the Malaysian government and government-linked companies such as Petronas, Khazanah Nasional, and Bank Negara, Malaysia continues to send high-achieving students to America (ICEF Monitor 2017). This reflects the value and importance of educational exchange programmes in America.

The decision of Malaysia's corporate companies to sponsor Malaysian scholars to pursue their degrees in America suggests that these top companies are more pragmatic in terms of attaining a prestigious degree abroad despite initial post-September 11 concerns. In contrast, a study that was conducted in 2005 indicated that some Malaysians have an adverse view of the American government due to its post-September 11 foreign policies. The findings showed that respondents with lower levels of educational qualifications were less likely to view American foreign policy favourably compared to respondents with higher levels of educational qualifications (Mustafa et al. 2008). The latter group may be more open to pursuing their studies in America because its reputation for quality higher education takes precedence over their disdain for American foreign policy.

Previous studies suggest several challenges and obstacles that influence the educational experience of international students and this may be exacerbated by American foreign policy affecting Muslims and minorities. As such, this study specifically aims to understand Malaysian scholars' experiences and perceptions of America, the challenges they face and how their experiences as international students impact them.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This research uses a qualitative design, whereby the focus of the inquiry is Malaysian students with the aim to obtain a deeper understanding of their experiences as international student scholars (Maykut and Morehouse 2002). The researchers employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews focusing on issues of students' perceptions and concerns of studying in America, their subsequent challenges, and the impact of their student experiences.

At the time of the study, the participants were 16 Malaysian student scholars who successfully graduated from their respective universities to gain an understanding of their experiences while they studied in America under the Malaysian government scholarship programme. Our sampling choices were informed by the following criteria: (1) Malaysian students who studied in America; (2) sponsored by either the Public Service Department or the Council of Trust for the People; (3) successfully graduated from their programmes; and (4) experienced challenges adapting in America. The leading researcher selected the participants purposively, as she was a Malaysian student scholar who studied with them. This allowed the researchers to have better access to participants and more importantly, establish rapport which allowed the participants to share their experiences freely and without judgement.

To manage bias and ensure that the study established trustworthiness, the researchers also had to suspend their judgement to allow the participants' experiences to emerge. This process is called "epoche" where the researchers suspended their views, biases, and preconceived ideas about the phenomenon (Moustakas 1994). Although this process is known to be used by phenomenologists, the researchers adopted this approach to put aside their pre-existing views and biases so as not to impose their position on the participants. This allowed the experiences of respondents to emerge naturally. The researchers also obtained thick and rich descriptions, which are detailed accounts of the participants' experiences that give the readers "...the feeling they have experienced or could experience, the events being described in a study" (Creswell and Miller 2000: 129).

The researchers selected participants that were sponsored by the Public Service Department and the Council of Trust for the People. The participants that were recruited studied in different universities throughout America. These participants attended universities in the Midwestern and North-eastern states, namely the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Purdue University, SUNY Buffalo-New York, Rutgers University, and the University of Pittsburgh. In terms of gender, both male and female participants were selected. The participants were all Muslim student scholars

to see whether they had specific worries such as Islamophobia and experienced challenges related to their Muslim identity while living in America post-September 11. Many of the Muslim female participants that were selected wore the headscarf and this is to identify whether they faced any hostility while they were studying.

The qualities of the chosen participants facilitated the researchers to meet their research objectives (Creswell 2008) to provide rich data and insight by describing their experience as educational exchange students in detail. The participants that were selected were also ones who would cooperate willingly. The questions focused on their reasons for studying in America, their student experiences, and how those experiences shape them.

In line with ethical considerations, the researchers ensured that the participants understood the purpose of the study, the nature of the interviews, and how the interview data would be used for research publication purposes. The participants gave their full consent to participate in the interviews. The researchers used pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities in the report by removing personal information. However, contextual identifiers in the participants' descriptions were retained to avoid altering the original meaning of the data (Kaiser 2009).

DATA ANALYSIS

The participants were interviewed in Malaysia throughout 2017. All interviews were recorded electronically and later transcribed verbatim. Once the responses were collected, the researchers then analysed the statements that were important in describing their experiences studying abroad. The researchers read the transcripts several times to avoid the error of quoting statements out of context. The thematic analysis method (Creswell 2008) was employed to interpret the data. The data were analysed by identifying recurring patterns, making subsequent inductions, condensing the information into relevant topics, and categorising them into key themes (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four major themes emerged from the interview data, which are: (1) motivation; (2) overcoming misperceptions; (3) communication and cultural barriers; and (4) appreciation of different ideas and beliefs. Overall, we found that despite

having fears and misperceptions of American culture before furthering their studies in America, these Malaysian students overcame those fears and eventually had a positive perception of Americans based on their beneficial experience studying in America. The researchers used Nye's soft power theory as the main theoretical framework to analyse the data, which explained most of the themes.

Motivation: Prestigious American Education

Based on the interviews with the participants, many of them were excited to study in America for its reputation in higher education. Research also suggests that many international students want to earn an American degree due to the perceived prestigious education. The participants were motivated to obtain a world-class degree as they believed it could lead to better career prospects. This finding is consistent with that of Ritter's (2016) research on the perception of East Asian students studying in universities in America whereby they found that educational prestige was one of the reasons many Korean students wanted an American education. From the interviews, it was highlighted that America's status for its higher education was a strong factor that pulled some students to further their studies there. Suraya, a student from the University of Pittsburgh explained:

I've heard a great deal about the American education system and how it is one of the best in the world for producing great scholars and individuals. The liberal education system was attractive. The independence of planning your own academic life and the idea of growing into your own self is an opportunity not to be missed.

The findings of the interviews are in tandem with a survey that was conducted by IIE in 2011, which found that 60% of Malaysian students chose America as the first destination to study as compared to the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Japan, and Germany (IIE 2015). According to the report, when asked what the top reason was for studying abroad, 48% of the respondents believed that doing so would enhance their career, while 42% of the respondents were interested in cultural reasons. The survey, therefore, highlights that American higher education is indeed appealing to Malaysian students due to perceived prestige and associated benefits. This is in line with Nye's (2022) and Peterson's (2014) argument that a country's soft-power resources such as the reputation of America's higher education and prestigious universities can positively attract the global community to America and strengthen its image as a global leader in democracy.

Motivation: Hollywood Nostalgia and America’s Advanced Technological Culture

Apart from the quality of American higher education, some of the participants of this study shared that they were enthusiastic to study in America as they were enamoured with Hollywood glamour and the nation’s advanced technological culture. Many of the participants seemed to associate America with Hollywood, reflecting that it was the first image that came to their minds when thinking about the US. One participant described why he wanted to study at Rutgers University New York. Zainal explained how he had always fantasised about living in New York. He said, “...it’s also because of television—I watched *Gossip Girls* a lot. I really wanted to go to New York because it seemed very fancy”. This indicates that the representation of American popular culture can be very influential in shaping the perception of Malaysians and influencing their decision to pursue their studies in America. This is in line with Nye’s idea (2022) that popular culture is a strong source of soft power which other people would like to experience and emulate. In this way, the attraction of America’s popular and academic culture can act as a diplomacy tool to help foster people-to-people relations as indicated by the participants.

Similarly, Aziz said that he always wanted to study engineering in America. “I’ve always had this nostalgia for the US, maybe it was from Hollywood movies”, he explained. In addition to the glamorous image of Hollywood, he also highlighted that America’s advanced research in science and technology attracted him to further his studies there. Aziz shared his perspective that “the US is one of the most technologically advanced countries on earth”.

The participants’ attachment to America’s global image and reputation in science and technology reflects the importance of soft power in nurturing diplomatic relations between the two countries by using persuasive national branding. The finding corroborates Nye’s (2022) argument that when a culture upholds shared universal values and policies, it strengthens the desire of others to emulate those values based on the relationship of attraction and duty that its culture creates. The culture of progress and advancement, especially in science and technology, is a strong pulling factor among people to the American culture, as many want to live up to that definition of development.

In addition, the image of Hollywood and the idea of America as being an advanced technological hub, as explained by the participants in this study, are influential enough to pull international students to further their studies in America without much persuasion by the American government or institutions of higher learning. Interestingly, the findings of this research are inconsistent

with Mustafa et al.'s (2008) study which highlights Malaysian Muslims' unfavourable perceptions of America and its foreign policy in the Middle East. The conflicting findings here suggest unfavourable foreign policies that are unjust can be more influential than soft power (Schneider 2006). Indeed, the current study does not aim to ascertain Malaysian students' perception of American foreign policy per se. However, the participants initially had fears and concerns about how Americans viewed Muslims due to Islamophobia post-September 11. This study, therefore, reinforces the notion that regardless of America's foreign policies, many people would still be willing to pursue their education in America because the benefits of obtaining an American education precede its unfavourable foreign policy.

Communication and Cultural Barriers

Despite the participants' enthusiasm and motivation for wanting to study in America, many of them experienced communication and cultural barriers that hindered them from fully assimilating into American culture. Several of the students that participated in this study emphasised that one of the main challenges they faced was language and cultural barriers. This is not to imply that their command of English was weak, but American students had difficulty understanding their "Malaysian accent". Aziz explained how he experienced cultural and communication difficulties:

A lot of challenges, most of them were cultural and communications related. The American accent is different from what we're accustomed to. And Americans are much friendlier and more direct than Malaysians.

Some participants tried to overcome these challenges by learning the American accent and the cultural context of the language. Farhana shared how she tried to improve her American English as she believed that assimilating into the American culture depends on one's ability to speak and be understood by Americans. Farhana said:

During my time in college, I even made an effort to teach myself how to speak using an American accent using an audiobook, "Mastering the American Accent" by Lisa Mojsin. My speaking clarity improved tremendously, and the clarity helped me a lot in interacting efficiently and making many more new friends with the locals. I believe the ability of a foreign student to make friends with the locals correlates strongly with his or her speaking abilities and clarity.

In addition to communication barriers, most of the participants described their interactions with their American peers were strictly limited to the classroom or professional settings. As such, they could not develop meaningful relationships that go beyond surface-level pleasantries exchanged among classmates and colleagues. Their challenges in socialising outside of the academic environment can be attributed to certain differences in lifestyle and values. One participant explained, the interaction usually “means drinking at bars or having wine at home or even partying”. Aziz shared that the alcohol-drinking culture prevented him from fully fraternising with his colleagues off campus, as consuming alcohol and being involved in related behaviour was against his religious values. Therefore, this limited the extent to which he could assimilate into American culture.

The experience of cultural dissonance is a common shared occurrence, particularly among Muslim international students in American colleges and universities. On the opposite end, some students may compromise their values to gain acceptance. Mir and Sarroub (2019) highlight that some Muslim international students may downplay their religiosity in public and mingle in bars and clubs just to be socially accepted. Due to the strong urge of wanting to fit in, Mir and Sarroub (2019) argue that the relationship between Muslim international students with local students may be superficial.

Although research has reported that cultural barriers can prevent international students from assimilating into American society due to the difference in how certain international students may look and dress (Campbell 2015), most of the participants in this study stressed that they generally did not feel discriminated against due to their social identity marker as a Muslim. This also applies to participants who wore the headscarf.

However, another study identified that some Malay students felt the need to portray themselves as a good example to assimilate into the culture and distance themselves from negative and false misconceptions. In a study conducted by Ibnu (2022), a group of sponsored, Malay female students in the UK shared that when they first came to study, they had to cope with the stigma of being migrant Muslims due to several terrorist attacks that took place. As a result, the students were motivated to behave like “mini diplomats” as they felt like they were representing not just Malaysia, but Islam as well (Ibnu 2022). This indicates that Muslim international students’ exclusion may not have been based on the differences in physical attributes, but more on the religious and cultural values that differentiate them from their local counterparts.

From the overall experiences of the participants, we can infer that many of them managed to overcome difficulties in communication and reduce cultural barriers by improving their interpersonal skills and appreciating the diversity between Malaysians and Americans, including their differences.

Overcoming Misperceptions

The interviews revealed that the participants were highly motivated to study in America. However, they still had fears that lingered in their minds before they embarked on the educational exchange programmes, such as the perception of Americans being “snobbish, arrogant, and ignorant” as well as concerns about how Muslims and minorities would be treated. Suraya reflected on her worries about how they would treat “outsiders” but much to her relief, she was “...surprised to find out that they were more curious than afraid. They do appreciate outsiders and diversity. I had many positive experiences where I felt welcomed”.

Other graduates such as Muhammad, initially perceived Americans to be “racist”. One participant, Ahmad, revealed that he was once harassed by a police officer. When the researcher asked about his experience studying in America, he shared that he once felt disrespected when he took a trip to New Orleans and was pulled over by some police officers for no identifiable reason, and subsequently interrogated. But apart from that, Ahmad said, “I had the pleasure of meeting really nice people and made really good friends”.

Despite the participants’ worries and certain negative experiences, most of them noted that they did not experience overt hostility in America. Suraya’s and Ahmad’s positive experience studying in America underscores how having more opportunities to interact with people of different ethnic backgrounds can reduce racial stereotypes (Ritter 2016). These beneficial educational and cultural exchanges suggest that many of these participants had a strong motivation to study in America for academic and social reasons, despite the fact they had worries about Islamophobia and experienced some form of racism.

Some of the participants’ uncomfortable experiences did not cause them to perceive Americans negatively. The increased social interactions that the Malaysian student scholars had with American students on campus support the idea that educational exchange may have indeed helped in fostering mutual understanding and tolerance by addressing misperceptions. The findings of this study are supported by Kim’s (2016) research that highlights how Fellows of the Hubert Humphrey Fellowship Programme changed their misconceptions towards Americans as they gained more knowledge about the

culture after having face-to-face communication rather than reading about the American culture on the Internet. The participant's positive experience could lead to a long-lasting change such as the appreciation of different ideas and beliefs.

Appreciation of Different Ideas and Beliefs

The American education system is known for its multi-discipline approach and its emphasis on liberal arts and social sciences. According to some of the participants, this gives it a “more holistic approach” because it forces students to “think outside the box” and therefore, encourages students to be more analytical. When the researchers asked the participants about the most impactful experience they had, many of them shared that they felt “enlightened” by their intellectual journey, especially enrolling in elective courses that they would not have been able to take in Malaysia. Izzy explained:

I liked how people respected everyone regardless of their race, religion and orientation. I also took a class once a week—a dialogue class on ethics, to see how Americans interact. I was able to learn about sensitive issues in this open dialogue...There is a safe space to discuss these things. It's more about discussion than bashing people.

All participants confided that they were greatly enlightened by their student experience in America, despite their initial worries about Islamophobia and racism. Educational exchange is not just about the physical exchange of students between two countries but more importantly, it is about the movement of ideas and knowledge, which transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. This is supported by Nye's (2022) soft power theory whereby academic freedom in universities can develop their own soft power to attract the global community.

In addition, many participants revealed they felt a sense of freedom in expressing their ideas and identity, compared to how they perceived the limitation of such expression in Malaysia. This was a very positive aspect of their educational experience in America. This finding reflects Nye's (2005) explanation that concepts such as freedom, liberty, and human rights have become so popularly synonymous with the image of America that it has become its national brand and is constantly reinforced in the minds of the people through education, economic activities, politics, as well as popular culture and entertainment. Studies by Tagg (2014) and Abukhattala (2004) support this notion whereby many of the participants in their research who were non-native students studying in their host countries enjoyed more freedom in academia compared to their home of origin.

Similarly, most of the participants of this study enjoyed taking elective classes, as the lessons piqued their curiosity and intellectually challenged their own beliefs. By the end of their educational exchange, some of the participants of this study adopted more liberal ways of thinking. Ayra explained her experience taking a class on literature and how the discussion on “privilege” had broadened her horizons. She shared that she was forced to think about her privileges back in Malaysia and how being a third-party observer in America gave her “the opportunity to be more objective”. She realised it changed her perspective on how much she should be thankful for. These participants’ experiences of studying in America contributed to the increase in their intercultural and global competencies by being more appreciative of different ideas and beliefs, which coincides with findings by Stebleton et al. (2013).

Rehan also shared a similar experience when she had to take an elective course that was unrelated to any of her Actuarial Science courses:

I still remember taking an elective class like World Hunger that made me realise my purpose in this life. Learning how poor people fight for food and sustenance made me realise how fortunate I am to be given the opportunity to live life without having to worry about going by the day hungry. Going to this kind of class made me a better person because I was exposed to the harsh reality of the basic human inequality that people face in many parts of the world.

The accounts provided by Izzy, Ayra, and Rehan highlight that what they experienced was not just an intellectual exchange but also a change in their perspectives. These changes that the participants experienced could also be described as their way of adjusting to life as international students studying in a Western country by realising their changed identities, as well as enabling them to communicate with people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs effectively (Newsome and Cooper 2016).

Although the participants’ interactions with American students outside of academic settings may have been limited, the educational, and cultural exchange within those settings was enough to transform their outlook in life. From the interviews, it could be suggested that their views and understanding of the world slowly changed, influenced by the different discussions they had in the classes they took. These positive experiences are often shared amongst their peers once they return home, which contributes to strengthening the image of the host country (Cull 2008).

Foreign students who are sponsored by their respective governments to further their studies in America not only benefit their home countries but can also benefit American society by making them more exposed to people of

different cultures and appreciating ethnic diversity and differences in thinking. Some of the participants of this study also shared how their classmates and colleagues were more inquisitive of the Malaysian culture “without being prejudiced about my identity” as they did not know much about Malaysia. Many of them highlighted they felt they were “unofficial cultural ambassadors of Malaysia” which motivated them to thrive academically and socially.

To highlight their uniqueness as Malaysians, those who felt like they were “unofficial cultural ambassadors” also contributed to cultural diplomacy by engaging in intercultural activities that would help to promote their home country to other students, Americans, and international students alike. In another study, the Swedish Women’s Educational Organisation conducted cultural events to increase engagement with American society, as they too felt that they were unofficial ambassadors of their country (Biltekin 2020). In other words, diplomatic relations between two countries can be fostered when students participate in academic discourse and cultural activities.

As a result, the influence of fostering diplomatic relations through mutual understanding and cooperation is stronger when people from two different countries and cultures have an interchange of ideas and are, later on, enlightened by their experiences of studying abroad. The impact of educational exchange, as demonstrated above, has many positive outcomes. However, students need to be properly trained to promote goodwill and mutual understanding through intercultural discourse for them to be effective cultural ambassadors. If not, unofficial cultural ambassadors would only remain an elusive concept that may not be practised by students (Akli 2012).

The long-term impact of international educational programmes can be seen when the participants of this study gained a meaningful experience which have positively changed their perception of America. Apart from that, they break down barriers between cultures when they share stories of their journey in America with their peers in Malaysia. It is also interesting to note that the obstacles they faced may have made their educational experience more meaningful, as their experiences while they were student scholars helped shape their identities and gave them a broader perspective on life.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to explore Malaysian scholars’ experiences and perceptions of America while they were enrolled in an educational exchange programme. We have done so by discussing the challenges they faced and

how their experiences as international students impacted them. This study highlights that educational and cultural exchanges can be positive and life changing. Regardless of their initial concerns about how they would be treated as “outsiders” and adjustment challenges in an unfamiliar environment, many of the participants enjoyed their educational exchange and benefitted from it.

In a world where people are fragmented, it is more important to have educational exchanges to address existing misconceptions. This can help to foster people-to-people relationships and strengthen diplomatic efforts between countries more effectively. American universities and Hollywood movies, for example, are more persuasive as diplomatic efforts compared to official government initiatives (Nye 2021). This explains the reason most of the participants were enamoured with America’s global image which made them excited to continue their studies in American universities despite their initial worries about how international students would be treated.

It cannot be denied that the participants in this study experienced several challenges such as communication and cultural barriers. However, they managed to overcome them. The experience of studying and living in America have formed a lasting impression on these student scholars and provided them with increased meaning, such as the appreciation of different ideas and beliefs, indicating the importance of these programmes, and how they can strengthen diplomatic efforts.

The overall benefits and impact of educational exchange and how it contributes to cultivating diplomatic relations can also be seen by their experience of having social interactions with people of different backgrounds, thereby breaking down cultural and religious barriers. As indicated by the participants, after they completed their studies, they began to have a higher appreciation for the differences of opinion and thinking. This was a result of their experiences in and outside of classes. These experiences may also shape their identities and widen their understanding, especially when they see and go through life with people from other parts of the world.

It is hoped that bringing to light the hurdles these participants endured, and what they did to navigate these challenges would help potential Malaysian and international students to know what to expect when they study abroad and adjust to American culture. Additionally, their insights could also assist universities in better supporting international students to adapt to a new environment, especially one that is culturally different.

Based on the study, it is evident that America has well-documented literature on their initiatives to send their students abroad in educational exchange programmes, as they believe that their students will benefit

greatly from the exchange. America as a nation, reinforces its soft power when they send its students abroad. Similarly, Malaysian soft power is also strengthened through the role of student scholars who act as “unofficial cultural ambassadors” when sent to study abroad. As revealed by the participants of this study, educational exchange programmes can be successful in addressing misperceptions and narrowing the gap between cultures. Therefore, the enthusiasm for these programmes should not decrease and Malaysia should continue to send students overseas due to the many short- and long-term benefits for the student and the nation.

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The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Interview data were collected through informed consent of respondents and approval of supervisor in accordance with procedures standard at the University of Malaya.

NOTES

* Sofiya Wan Mohd Nor has a Bachelor’s degree in International Studies and Global Security with a Focus in the Middle East from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She also obtained a Master of Arts in Strategic and Defense Studies from the University of Malaya. Currently, she is a PhD student majoring in Educational Psychology at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Her research interests include resilience among youth and how they cope with adversity.

** Murni Wan Mohd Nor is a senior lecturer in the Department of Government and Civilizational Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, and research associate at the Institute for Social Science Studies (IPSAS), Universiti Putra Malaysia. She specialises in human rights, constitutional law and hate speech. Currently, her research focus is Islamophobia, media representation of racial and religious issues, and its effect on public perception.

- ¹ Muslims here are referred to American Muslims as well as immigrant Muslims.
- ² Here, Muslims refer to international Muslim students as part of a specific initiative (exchange programme).

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