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Effects of Intercultural Friendships on the Life Style of University Students in Rawalpindi and Islamabad

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Abstract

Intercultural friendships have become increasingly significant in university settings due to the nature of higher education which makes it possible for students to meet people different in their ethnicity, language, regionality, sociability, and culture. This research focuses on the association between intercultural friendship and chosen aspects of students' lives at the universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad, especially lifestyle change, friendship behavior, communication behavior, and academic behavior. The current study is based on Kim's theory of cross-cultural adaptation as well as Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory. Quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted using sample of 120 students from the International Islamic University, Islamabad and Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi. There were sixty students from each university involved in the survey. Data were collected by means of structured questionnaire with demographic information and 25 five-point Likert-scale statements divided into five dimensions. The questionnaire had high levels of internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .90$), as evident from its pilot testing among 30 students. The use of descriptive statistics and independent-samples t-tests was made during analysis. According to the results obtained, intercultural friendship is quite common among the respondents and it is linked more to the development of social and communicative characteristics rather than to the considerable shifts in deeply embedded lifestyle habits. Respondents mentioned that they became more tolerant, respectful towards cultural differences, confident in intercultural interaction, effective in their communication and exposed to new languages or expressions. At the same time, food preferences and clothes styles did not undergo any considerable transformations. Moreover, educational outcomes were considered by most of the participants to be minimal, which implies that the establishment of friendship does not necessarily result in academic advantages without any collaboration. No statistically significant differences were found in composite comparisons between males and females as well as between the students from Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

Keywords: Intercultural friendship, Lifestyle change, University students, Cross-cultural adaptation Identity negotiation, Communication behaviour, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Campuses play a vital role as important social sites where young people come in contact with people whose background, language, regional affiliations, familial affiliations, and cultural traditions differ from those of the students themselves. Increasing trends of higher education and mobility among the students have led to increased diversity of culture on campuses, leading to contacts that go far beyond the family and neighborhood contexts. In the context of a socially diverse country like Pakistan, such contacts become especially important since students may hail from different provinces and linguistic groups but share the same national and educational environment. Rawalpindi and Islamabad make up a good setting for the analysis since students belonging to various backgrounds are attracted by the universities in these cities. Friendship, therefore, becomes a way of more than ordinary contact among peers; rather, it becomes an opportunity for intercultural communication, cooperation, negotiation, and responses to new cultural traditions (Gudykunst, 2004)

Friendship is one of the most enduring forms of interpersonal interaction open to university students. In contrast to the fleeting interactions of classrooms, friendships include repetition, self-disclosure, support, and the creation of trust. Should such relationships transcend cultural boundaries, students will have the opportunity to experience differences in language use, food, festivities, clothing, role perception, and interpretation of interpersonal conduct. The nature and extent of this kind of interaction may affect the way that students perceive individuals from other cultures. Intergroup contact theory suggests that meaningful contact can reduce prejudice and enhance intergroup attitudes, especially in a favourable social context (Allport, 1954; Dovidio et al., 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

The importance of intercultural friendship even applies to communication. Those students who have regular dealings with individuals from various cultural backgrounds may need to adapt to differences in language, accents, conversation, humor, politeness, and body language. The significance of communication in dealing with cultural differences is discussed by Gudykunst (2004), while the importance of intercultural sensitivity and competence as capabilities acquired through awareness, knowledge and interaction is noted by Chen & Starosta (1997; 2000), and Deardorff (2006). In friendships, students acquire these capabilities in a learning environment that is not formally educational.

Interactions in intercultural friendships may also affect personal identity. According to the Identity Negotiation Theory by Ting-Toomey (2005), identity is a construct that is negotiated through communication and interaction. Students do not bring along an established sense of identity when they enroll in universities. It may be negotiated and renegotiated during interactions with other people. Interaction with people from various cultures may cause students to think about their own values and assumptions and develop a more complex perception of differences. In the same way, Kim's (2001) Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation considers adaptation as an ongoing process of stress, adjustment, learning and development. While this theory has been elaborated within the framework of cross-cultural adaptation, it can be applied to domestic intercultural interaction in which students deal with cultural differences in the national environment.

In the current study, emphasis is placed on a significant contrast between social and communicative change and more profound lifestyle change. There are some elements of life that are not as easy to change as others. For instance, food, clothing, religion, family norms, and other daily habits might be deeply rooted in identity and socialization.

According to Berry (1997, 2005), there is cultural adaptation in various fields, but it does not necessarily mean that changes happen equally in all fields of life. In other words, students might become more open and communicative, but still preserve their tastes in food and clothing.

A unique context in which to explore these concerns is that of Pakistani higher education. Students can be involved in interactions across ethnicity, language, and region, yet remain deeply rooted within their familial and social networks. The literature on multicultural education, linguistic diversity, interethnic friendships, and student integration indicates the potential role of universities in fostering dialogue and cohesion (Ahmad & Malik, 2019; Khan & Iqbal, 2018; Nisar & Chaudhry, 2021; Rehman & Sattar, 2023). There is, however, a requirement for research that considers several aspects of student life in tandem and in relation to two related urban locations.

This research project will thus explore the existence of intercultural friendships among the university students of Rawalpindi and Islamabad and will find out if these intercultural friendships result in any change in behavior in terms of lifestyle, friendship, communication, and academic behavior. Gender differences, along with city of study, will be taken into consideration in this study as well.

Study Objectives

1. For investigation into the magnitude of intercultural friendships among university students at Rawalpindi and Islamabad.
2. For finding out the relationship between intercultural friendships and the lifestyles, friendship behavior, communication behavior, and academic behavior of students.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation

Integration theory of cross-cultural adaptation developed by Kim (2001) is quite appropriate in analysing the effects of repeated interaction in cultural differences in regard to behavioural and psychological development. This theory treats adaptation as a process rather than an event, whereby individuals will come across new expectations and challenges; learn through interaction; and develop greater capacity to cope with diverse environments. In the case of university environment, intercultural friendship will expose the students to repeated interaction, which will make them learn and adapt.

The theory is especially relevant to this research since it implies that adaptation does not have to bring about drastic results. A student who will learn to start a conversation with other people from different cultures without having any problems will be considered adapted despite the fact that he or she did not change any aspect of their lifestyle, such as dressing code and food preference. This means that it is appropriate to examine different aspects.

2.2 Identity Negotiation Theory

Identity Negotiation Theory by Ting-Toomey (2005) expands on Kim's theory by offering an explanation as to how cultural interactions impact perceptions of self and others. Identity is negotiated in the course of interaction, which means that constantly receiving feedback about how one is perceived and how one perceives others. Intercultural friendship could create a conducive interpersonal space for such negotiations as friendship involves openness, personal communication and learning from each other. Students would learn to differentiate their own cultural biases from those of other cultures and develop flexible perceptions of identity.

The theory also sheds light on why intercultural friendship impacts attitudes of respect, confidence, tolerance, and personal values of students without changing all of the behavioural practices at once. Students can accept differences of the other culture without giving up their own cultural practices, which were taught at home. This is to say that identity negotiation does not mean changing identity and replacing it with another one.

2.3 Intergroup Contact and Intercultural Competence

Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis established a foundation for understanding how interaction between social groups can reduce prejudice under favourable conditions. Later research strengthened the evidence that intergroup contact can improve attitudes and relationships across group boundaries (Dovidio et al., 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Friendship is particularly important because close relationships provide deeper and more sustained contact than casual encounters. Paolini et al. (2004) further demonstrated the relevance of direct and indirect cross-group friendships in reducing negative judgements. Intercultural competence provides another perspective. Chen and Starosta (1997, 2000) emphasise sensitivity to cultural difference, while Deardorff (2006) conceptualises intercultural competence as an outcome involving attitudes, knowledge, skills, and appropriate behaviour. Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) similarly describe intercultural competence as a multidimensional concept involving effective and appropriate interaction. University friendships may contribute to these outcomes by providing repeated opportunities to interpret unfamiliar behaviours and adjust communication accordingly.

2.4 Friendship, Student Integration, and Social Capital

Friendships are also tied into processes of student integration in broader terms. According to Tinto (1993), social and academic integration could affect students' experiences in higher education institutions. Though the current study is not testing student retention, the concept of integration is useful in that friendships could create a feeling of belongingness and could help with participation in university activities. Moreover, Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) have interesting approaches to understanding the importance of social ties and social capital.

On the other hand, friendship diversity does not necessarily guarantee any academic gains. The students could maintain good intercultural friendships without participating in any academic work together. This nuance is important for interpretation of the results obtained in the current study. In case the benefits in terms of academic activity are low while communication and social benefits are high, the implication is that informal friendships and formal cooperation are based on different principles. Thus, universities should provide certain structures for connecting social and academic processes.

2.5 Cultural Practices and Domain-Specific Change

Berry (1997, 2005) theory of acculturation explains why certain dimensions of behavior may be more resistant to change than others. Culture is deeply ingrained within the framework of family, values, religion, regional affiliation, and socialization. The student may become acquainted with the new cuisine, but remain loyal to the habitual food preferences; he/she may become aware of the other fashion trends and enjoy increased understanding of cultural diversity, but choose to keep wearing old clothes. These examples do not indicate the lack of intercultural experience.

Research on international and intercultural friendships between university students proves the importance of friendships for the adaptation and experience of the foreign culture (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Montgomery, 2010; Ward et al., 2001). The current research differs from those studies which focus solely on the issue of

international students as it deals with the topic of domestic intercultural relationships in Pakistan.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative and cross-sectional survey design was adopted. This design was suited to the description of the prevalence of intercultural friendship and patterns among certain student behaviors within a specified period of time. This design being cross-sectional means that the results will be taken as correlations and perceptions of friendship on behaviors.

3.2 Population, Sampling, and Participants

The subjects belonged to BS, MS, MPhil, and PhD categories studying in the International Islamic University Islamabad and Pir Mehr Ali Shah Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi. Stratified random sampling was employed in the selection process. Consideration was given to gender, ethnicity, and institutions. There were 120 students sampled in total, with 60 students being taken from each institute. In total, there were 52 males (43.3%) and 68 females (56.7%). 21-23 years was the biggest age group, accounting for 36.7% of the total, whereas 18-20 years accounted for 26.7%, 24-26 years for 24.2%, and over 27 years for 12.5%. 80.0% of the respondents were BS students and 20.0% studied MS, MPhil, and PhD programs.

3.3 Instrument, Pilot Testing, and Reliability

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that had demographic information and 25 items in a five-point Likert scale format. The 25 items were grouped into five categories: intercultural friendship, lifestyle modification, friendship behavior, communication behavior, and academic behavior. Response categories ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The questionnaire underwent pilot testing among 30 students prior to the study. Some minor modifications were done to the wording based on the pilot test. Cronbach's Alpha was .90.

3.4 Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

The questionnaires were completed through on-campus and online means. Voluntary participation was used, and the participants were made aware of the nature of the research. The ethics involved include informed consent, autonomy, dignity, confidentiality, anonymity, and non-maleficence. Personal identifiers were not needed to conduct the analysis in this paper.

3.5 Data Analysis

Coding and analysis of data was done using SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were computed for demographic information and answers to individual items. Independent samples t-test was employed to compare male and female respondents as well as students from Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The composite scores were also calculated for the five dimensions. In the present study, the level of statistical significance was fixed at the common $p < .05$ level. The emphasis is on both the statistical findings as well as the substantive direction of the response pattern.

Statistical tests performed: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for coding and analysis of data. For descriptive analysis, frequencies and percentages were computed; Cronbach's alpha was used to compute reliability; composite scores were calculated for the five dimensions under study; and independent samples t-test was used to compare male and female respondents as well as students from Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The level of significance was $p < .05$. No ANOVA test was used in the current study.

4. Results

4.1 Intercultural Friendship

The data clearly show that intercultural friendships were prevalent among the respondents. 83.4% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the fact that they had friends who came from a culture different from theirs. In the same way, 78.3% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they frequently engaged in interactions with friends who came from different cultural backgrounds. It is evident that the majority (86.7%) of the respondents felt that their university had opportunities for interacting with individuals from different cultures and that 76.6% of them felt comfortable in making friends with individuals from different cultures.

However, the comparatively smaller number of people reporting the majority of their close friends as belonging to different cultures (44.2%) indicates the importance of the distinction between intercultural contacts and intercultural friendships. This outcome shows that although cultural diversity is visible in the social context of students, there can be a disparity in terms of the extent of intercultural friendships. While students may come across individuals of different cultures on a frequent basis, they do not incorporate such individuals within their intimate circle of friends.

4.2 Lifestyle Change

However, the impact on lifestyle was relatively low in comparison with social and communicative aspects. Only 27.5% were in agreement with the fact that intercultural friendships have impacted their lifestyles, while 35.9% did not agree at all and 36.7% kept neutral position. Food preferences reflected this trend more distinctly as only 17.5% of people reported positive impact, while 46.7% of respondents answered negatively. Concerning dress style, only 20.0% of students were positively influenced by their intercultural friends while 52.5% reacted negatively. Formation of new social practices brought a mixed picture, but leisure activities reflected a considerable number of neutral answers and a relatively strong positive trend.

Thus, the presented information proves that the lifestyle is multidimensional concept, and social and communicative attitudes can be relatively flexible due to direct interaction while food and dress are connected with such aspects as socialization within a family, religion, region, economical issues, and identity of a person.

4.3 Friendship Behaviour

The best positive responses in the friendships-behaviour scale related to being open-minded, respect for cultural diversity, and increased confidence in intercultural interaction. Around 63.4% of the participants indicated that they became more open-minded because of intercultural friendships. Sixty percent showed more respect for cultural diversity, while 67.5% said they were more confident in intercultural communication. The responses about tolerance and personal values were more moderate with significant neutrals.

This implies that the most noticeable impact of intercultural friendship lies in attitudes towards interpersonal interaction. Friendship provides an opportunity for people to substitute stereotypical information about other cultures with personal experience of knowing particular individuals. Regular intercultural interactions allow people to become accustomed to cultural diversity and less afraid of it, which correlates with the intergroup contact theories (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

4.4 Communication Behaviour

Communication outcomes were also generally positive. The total percentage of people who agree or strongly agree with the statement that intercultural friendship improved their communication skills was 68.3%, while 70.0% of people have learned a new language or phrase from their friends. 55.9% also agreed that they can understand other communication styles better because of the experience of intercultural friendship. This implies that intercultural friendship is an informal learning process for communication.

There were two questions that revealed a totally different picture. Most people disagreed that intercultural friendships help to avoid misunderstandings and that they are more socially adaptable as a result of intercultural friendship, creating polarized opinions. This implies that being exposed to cultural differences does not necessarily mean the avoidance of communication problems. People could get more conscious about differences but still face misunderstandings..

4.5 Academic Behaviour

Most academic-behaviour statements were rather negative. The respondents tended to disagree that intercultural friendships helped make one's life at university positive and facilitated better cooperation in groups, provided new academic viewpoints, encouraged global thinking, or facilitated academic personal growth. Disagreeing respondents' share was from 67.5% to 82.5%. Still, there is a minority of strongly agreeing respondents, which means that intercultural friendships may bring significant academic advantages to certain students despite the fact that it was not the case for the sample under consideration.

It should be noted that the difference between the communication-related results and the academic ones plays a significant role. Students might acquire new phrases, gain confidence and improve their social competence as a result of intercultural friendships but not use them for academic purposes. The academic effects might involve special institutional practices, like collaborative projects or mentorship programs. Therefore, the research findings do not question the significance of intercultural friendship.

4.6 Gender Comparisons

Independent-samples t-tests found several differences to be statistically significant for individual items, although the total composite dimensions were not significantly different across genders. In the composite results, there was no gender difference in intercultural friendship, lifestyle, friendship behavior, communication behavior, or academic behavior. This means that differences between individuals should be handled carefully since the overall dimension did not reveal any consistent gender difference.

For instance, female participants had a higher mean score than male participants in terms of diversification of leisure activities while male participants scored higher in certain items dealing with respect for cultural differences and communication-style understanding. The inconsistent directions in these differences show that even if gender influenced the experiences or perceptions of these individual items, it did not make an overall gender difference in the dimension.

4.7 Comparison by City of Study

No significant difference was found between the means of the participants from the two cities in terms of all the five composite dimensions of the scale. The mean score for participants from both cities was different in all five composite dimensions; however, no difference reached statistical significance. It implies that, in the current context, city of study does not have a strong impact on intercultural friendship, lifestyle changes, friendship behavior, communication behavior, and academic behavior.

The similarity might be caused by the geographical closeness and connectedness of the two cities. More significantly, this result highlights the fact that university-level contexts

and interpersonal networks matter much more than city-based differences. Future research should pay attention to comparing the specific university contexts and environments rather than just cities.

4.8 Qualitative Responses

Open-ended questions provided context for the results obtained quantitatively. The students highlighted widened perspectives, open-mindedness, increased knowledge about food and culture, and enhanced social skills as some of the positive outcomes. Language differences and difference in social practices were the major problems that were cited. The respondents also cited the way they gained knowledge of festivals, traditions, food, and languages from their intercultural friends. Many of the respondents linked intercultural friendship with increased tolerance, respect, empathy, cooperation, and fairness. Universities should organize cultural festivals, exchange programs, multi-cultural research and curricula, mentoring programs, and an inclusive university environment.

5. Discussion

The results in general are consistent with the idea that intercultural friendships lead more consistently to social and communicative change rather than to a broader change in lifestyle. This finding is consistent with the theories of Kim (2001), in which it is possible to adapt incrementally by interacting. It is also consistent with the theory of identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 2005), since the students seem to gain more confidence and openness in their communicative interactions with people from other cultures. Therefore, the theory of identity negotiation can be seen in communication even before it appears in actual changes in lifestyle.

The very strong results concerning open-mindedness, respect, and intercultural confidence are consistent with the intergroup contact literature (Allport, 1954; Dovidio et al., 2003; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Through direct friendship, there is consistent opportunity to get to know each other as individuals and to overcome stereotypical attitudes based on hearsay and secondhand information. The fact that social attitudes changed more readily than food and dress could be explained by that.

In the case of the communication variables, the importance of everyday interaction is underlined again as learning new expressions and understanding various forms of communication involves paying attention to how meaning is made across cultural boundaries. This type of learning is comparable to the process of acquiring intercultural competence which is defined by Chen & Starosta (1997, 2000); Deardorff (2006); Spitzberg & Changnon (2009). Yet, the lack of significant results in terms of decreasing the amount of misunderstandings and social adaptability indicates that intercultural communication is still challenging. Friendship increases contact with otherness but does not prevent from conflicts or misunderstandings.

The limited influence of friendship on lifestyle is theoretically justified. According to Berry (1997, 2005), cultural adaptation is domain specific. Food habits and dress may be culturally and familially constructed and thus not change simply due to intercultural relationships. One can respect the customs of another culture and at the same time retain the habits and preferences he/she has already developed. Thus, being open to other cultures does not mean losing own identity.

These results call for special consideration. The existing theories of social integration posit that relationships could serve to facilitate participation. However, from the data presented above, one can conclude that although friendship was an important relationship, it did not result in perceived benefits of academic character for most of the respondents. One possible reason is that socializing and studying are different spheres and students might socialize

in general but do their homework in already existing peer groups. It is also possible that universities did not create appropriate programs of academic activities for the multicultural environment.

Lack of statistically significant differences between male and female respondents or between the people from different cities suggests that the pattern of intercultural friendship is very much alike among all groups examined in this paper. That does not mean that gender and place of residence are not important factors in intercultural communication. Item differences reveal that experience can be quite different depending on particular item. However, these results suggest that conclusions should not be drawn based only on some items.

Moreover, the present study adds value to existing research in that it investigates the intercultural friendship among individuals within their own country and not just the experience of adaptation of international students. Cultural diversity of Pakistan exists in many forms even within its boundaries. The students may have to deal with many differences in terms of language, ethnicity, province, region, and culture while maintaining a common nationality.

6. Conclusion

The current research considered the phenomenon of intercultural friendship and its potential relation to lifestyle and behavior of university students living in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. According to the results, intercultural friendship is a very popular phenomenon among the participants and it is possible to identify the following contributions of this phenomenon: social and communicative ones. In particular, students mentioned the following changes in their lifestyle as a result of intercultural friendship: increased open-mindedness, respect to other cultures, confidence in cross-cultural communication, developed communication skills, and learning new languages and new expressions. Thus, cross-cultural adaptation and identity negotiation theories can be applied to the Pakistani university students' experience.

However, it should be said that intercultural friendship is not an instrument for changing different aspects of lifestyle in equal measures. For example, food preferences and clothing styles were relatively resistant to change, and academic benefits were also not significant for most of the participants of the research. Thus, it can be argued that intercultural friendship does not presuppose the replacement of cultural identities but only their expansion.

In addition to the lack of any statistically significant differences between gender groups and cities in composite dimensions, it can be concluded that the whole pattern is fairly consistent among all involved samples. However, due to the item-level and qualitative differences, one may assume that intercultural friendship is experienced differently by students. Universities may contribute significantly to the development of a positive outcome through organizing such interaction in an institutionalized form, rather than just through the mere presence of diverse students.

7. Recommendations

1. Universities should hold intercultural festivals, cultural exchanges and diversity-related events that afford genuine opportunities for students to engage with each other.
2. Student societies and unions should hold intercultural discussions, seminars, dialogue events, and joint social activities.
3. Orientation programs should include intercultural awareness and friendship-building activities during the first months of university attendance.

4. Faculty should create mixed-cultural study groups, joint assignments, peer mentoring and joint projects in order for social diversity to add to academic knowledge.
5. Universities should afford students opportunities to exchange languages, traditions, cuisine and cultures on a voluntary and respectful basis.
6. Student services should assist with language barriers, communication problems, stereotyping and misunderstanding that might hinder the formation of intercultural relations.
7. Future research should employ different universities in other provinces and also public and private sector institutions in order to enhance generalisability of findings.
8. Future research should have large sample sizes, longitudinal research design and mixed-methodology in order to understand the process through which intercultural friendships form.

8. Limitations

There are several limitations associated with the study.

1. The cross-sectional nature of the study means that causality cannot be established. This is because the study results only provide information about the observed associations and influence but not about whether intercultural friendships caused these changes in lifestyles.
2. The study is based on self-report responses, which could be impacted by recollections, perceptions or even socially desirable answers.
3. The sample for the study was limited to just two universities in Rawalpindi and Islamabad.
4. The current analysis is focused on the description of results, t-tests, and composite analyses, while the correlation analysis between intercultural friendships and lifestyle outcomes was missing in the data set presented here.

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