

## **THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ADAPTATION PROCESS: A CASE STUDY ON INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA**

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**Abstract.** The migration of Indonesian Migrant Workers (TKI) to Malaysia resulted the adaptation experience with the host culture during their repeated social interaction with locals. Communication has bridged the interaction which lead to the process of adjusting cultures among the individuals. Communication has not only occurred in the interaction with people who are staying in the host country, but also with those in their home country. Aside of telephone or text messaging, social media plays a role in the process of adaptation among the immigrants. This study has traced the migration and adaptation experience of 33 TKIs. With the objective of tracing the communication experience in their adaptation process by focusing on the role of social media in their social communication process. Focus group discussions were conducted for data gathering. The findings show that aside of direct interpersonal communication with the locals and fellow immigrants, TKIs keep their communication with the family in Indonesia on daily basis through phone call and social media interaction. Interaction with the host has exposed and helped them to adapt with the local culture. However, the interaction with fellow immigrants and text messaging through social media account with family and friends in home country has kept them updated with what is happening in their home country. The use of vernacular language during the interaction with the fellow immigrants as well as people in the home country kept them linger with their original culture. Thus, social media has kept them in their own enclave culture virtually.

*Keywords: Indonesian Migrant Workers, Adaptation, Communication, Social Media, Interaction*

## INTRODUCTION

The migration of migrant workers to Malaysia has taken place for decades. Kaur (2008) and Azizah Kasim (2012) clearly explained the continuous influx of foreigners, especially migrant workers, to Malaysia from year to year. There has been number of waves of the migrant workers influx to Malaysia since 1900s, including those who are coming from Indonesia. Malaysia has always been seen as destination for migrant workers (Kaur 2008). For Indonesian job seekers, Malaysia is one of the promising countries where job opportunities are available. Thus, the migration of Indonesians to Malaysia for seeking a better job purpose has occurred even before the Second World War (Hugo 2004). Some of the workers are working in the manufacturing, services or domestic sectors who are addressed as Indonesian Migrant Workers (TKI).

Migration has involved culturally diverse individuals in the host society. The migration of Indonesian Migrant Workers (TKI) to Malaysia resulted the adaptation experience with the host culture during their repeated social interaction not only among themselves, but also with locals. Communication is becoming a tool that has bridged the interaction which lead to the process of adjusting cultures among the individuals; both migrants and locals. Communication has not only occurred in the interaction among people who are staying in the host country, but also the interaction with relatives in their home country. It means that whenever you are going, your home has always been there for you to engage with. Aside of direct interaction with people in the host country, the usage of telephone, text messaging as well as social media play a role in communication activity in the migration as a prominent part of adaptation process among the immigrants.

This paper is part of a study on intercultural adaptation through the migration of Indonesian Migrant Workers (TKI) to Malaysia from the perspectives of the workers and hosts. The study aimed to analyze the cross-cultural adaptation process from the perspective of communication which was conducted based on few research objectives. However, this paper only highlight a little part of the TKI's communication experience during their migration by focusing on the role of social media as part of their social communication process.

## INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION IN MIGRATION

The diverse cultural background among the immigrants and locals has resulted a multicultural society in the social interaction. Culture is learned through the interactions that exist in everyday life and even through mass media as platform for learning. Thus, culture is naturally created by humans and develop through symbolic sources that contain meaning and shared among people (Gudykunst 2005). During migration, interaction between immigrants and locals are unavoidably happening. The use of media has always been part of the communication process itself. Through the communication, culture are shared and learned. Individuals may face uncertainty towards new culture that they found in the new cultural milieu.

Kim (1988, 2001) has proposed an integrative theory of Communication and Cross-cultural Adaptation that comprehensively looking into communication process. The gap between the familiar culture and comfortable surroundings of home and the unfamiliarity of the host environment limits individual ability to function effectively during migration (Kim 2001). Kim (1977) explored the communication activity in the host society and distinguished it into two different categories; intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic groups.

High number of immigrant population has resulted the unavoidable complexity of interaction between immigrant and host society groups. Ketab et al (2015) has argued that inter-ethnic relationships in culturally diverse societies may affect the sense of togetherness,

better social self-concept and enhancing cultural understanding. Kim (1988, 2001) has created the structure of cross-cultural adaptation which are personal communication, social communication, environment, and predisposition. With the limitation of presentation, this paper will only focus on personal communication and social communication as the theoretical guidelines in the discussion.

### **Personal Communication**

Interaction between immigrants and the local society occur in the communication platform. The membership of individual in certain situation of society directly depends upon their ability to communicate with other people (Lewis as cited in Kim 2001). Personal communication and social communication of the immigrants towards their home and host society become factors that support their adaptation process in the host country to mingle with the society and be part of them as well as the applied the local culture.

In the host country, there are some moments when the immigrants have to receive every new things through their observation and interaction with locals; such as language, food, norms, daily practice and so forth, without equipped themselves with adequate preparation prior to migration. This condition affect the possible stress and uncertainty conditions towards local culture. In order to overcome such situation where immigrants experience culture shocks, uncertainty and uncomfortable feeling, their ability to communicate will play its part. In order to be able to adapt with local culture, immigrants will interact with local society through communication. In this case, personal communication plays a role on how they interact by implementing the local norms in daily activity as well as react to every situation occurs. Strangers realize successful adaption only when their internal communication system sufficiently overlap with those of the natives. This type of communication is related to the social communication when two or more individuals interact with one another, knowingly or not (Kim 2001).

Adaptation with local culture, immigrants have to reduce the self-center practice and control our ego during interaction with the host society. Therefore, interpersonal communication becomes the “remedy” of ego-reduction and self-decentering practice since we deal with the societies who hold different cultural practices (Miike 2009). The competence of immigrants in the social interaction may be affected by some factors such as the motivation, pre-sojourn preparation, and the community acceptance on their existence, the satisfaction in term of job, salary and so forth. Besides, the communication that involving the native of the host environment plays a vital role in the process of adaptation (Kim 2001).

When interacting with local society, immigrants will experience either good or bad treatment from the environment. The social status inherent with the immigrants who work as lower middle income workers has given certain impression in the society that constructed as stereotype. The existence of stereotype may be perceived as something bothers the social interaction. The way local society construct and how the immigrants perceive the construction of migrant worker existence can create such a bridge in the daily communication and interactions. Therefore, the communication of every personal immigrant has to be completed by the ability of their social communication.

### **Social Communication**

When personal communication deals with any other people in the support system, here social communication has another role incorporate with the personal communication that occur during the migration. Social communication occur both in macro and micro levels. At macro level it deals with mass communication tools as newspaper, television, movies, social media and so forth. Whilst in micro level it occurs in such place as homes, neighborhood, workplace,

even if it occurs with stranger in a serious dialogue (Kim 2001). Thus, communication process occur holistically during their interaction within the local community.

When individual moves to another culture, he or she has to prepare themselves with a new set of relationship. Exposure to both home and host media may help them to create an idea in regards to what the home country or culture is all about. Media exposure can, at least, accommodate immigrant to gain some knowledge pertaining to the host country, then only they will be able to overcome the culture shock phase during migrating. This media exposure can crucially help them to interact with local people, as well as understand what circumstances they are dealing with. Furthermore, social media can be a platform for them to also communicate with their own community; in both host and home country.

Gordon (1964) as cited in Kim (2001) stated that media give socialization influence on the image and stereotypes, the long-term value system, and as the view as priority concern. Media as the catalyst of interaction among people may tell something that become the construction of the society. In the case of international migrant workers, there might be some sort of stereotypes that constructed in the society due to several events such as illegal migrants, robbery, underpaid, persecution and so forth. The stereotypes put migrant workers in certain position as lower middle class society. This condition may be perceived as something challenging for the migrant workers to interact with local persons. Due to that reasons, the adaptation may be influenced by such a condition.

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND ADAPTATION**

Sawyer and Chen (2012) in their study has explored the role of social media on the individual adaptation process. The study found that individuals tend to utilize social media to be more integrated with the host culture during the adaptation process. In addition, individuals are trying to maintain contact with the people in their hometown by using the same platform. Through the use of social media, adapted individuals can recognize stereotypes and bias that may be formed in their perceptions through various sources. Kim (1977) states that intercultural communication exists on the basis of language skills, acculturation motivation and emigration interaction in the destination country in the context of interpersonal communication and the use of mass media.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study has traced the migration and adaptation experience of 33 TKIs in Malaysia. Informants were divided in total of six (6) groups of TKI based on their working sectors and gender. The informants are Indonesian Migrant Workers (TKI) in three (3) different working sectors; i.e. construction, cleaning services, and manufacturing who are working in the area of Klang Valley in Peninsular Malaysia. The informants who are participated in this study come from various area in Indonesia. They definitely have different cultural background with local society in the host country. Focus group discussions were conducted for data gathering towards the groups of informants which focused on their communication experience during migration and how the social media played a role in their communication process as during migration. Nicknames will be used to address the informants for presentation purpose.

**Table 1: Focus Group Composition**

Group 1	5	Male	Construction
Group 2	5	Male	Construction
Group 3	6	Female	Cleaning Services
Group 4	6	Female	Cleaning Services

Group 5	5	Male & Female	Manufacturing
Group 6	6	Male & Female	Manufacturing

## COMMUNICATION DURING MIGRATION: THE EXPERIENCE

This part will be deliberating on the communication experience among the informants. In the migration experience of TKI to Malaysia, there are two groups of people involved in daily communication namely migrant and host communities. As stated by Kim (1977, 1988, 2001, 2007) that in the migration, intercultural communication embodies intra-ethnic, inter-ethnic and inter-group communication. Social interactions in society can indicate the relationship between individuals and groups in society based on proximity, separation, isolation, cooperation, partnerships, friendships, conflicts, etc. (Gsir 2014). Therefore, the discussion will be based on their interaction among themselves as TKI, interaction with their relatives in home country, their interaction with locals in the host country and as the ultimate focus of this paper which highlight the social media usage during migration.

### Communication among immigrants

Some of TKIs came to Malaysia with their relatives who have migrated in the earlier time. Therefore, interactions among TKIs in the host country show the close relationship among them in term of ethnic and cultural proximity as well as the strong will towards migration. This study found that migrant workers have conserved their home culture through communication with their fellow immigrants or with relatives in their home country. Communication between migrants with their neighbors in the host country is inherent in the preservation of their home culture. Intra-ethnic communication activities occurred in order to share their individual experiences in regards to their adaptation process. The interaction and communication process allowed them to share their intercultural adaptation experience and share the value of local cultures among them. By doing so, the learning process towards ultimate adaptation will be bearable.

### Communication with relatives in home country

In addition to the conservation of their home culture through their interaction and communication among them as migrant workers, TKIs also keep their communication activity occur with their respective family in Indonesia. The distance between host and home countries has never hindered their communication with the relatives in the home country. TKIs keep their communication occur with the family in Indonesia on daily basis through texting, phone calling as well as social media interaction.

The communication through international call services cost them sum amount of money that they are willing to spend. Some of them spend RM10 – RM30 per days for calling back home to engage with family. This spending has shown the importance of communication with the family members in the home country.

*“...kalau isi telepon itu hari-hari habis lah. 30 (Ringgit Malaysia) habis lah...” (Yani)*

*“...I usually top up the cell phone credit in amount of RM 30 every day for phone calling, it will cost me that amount...” (Yani)*

*"...satu bulan kalau saya habis 300 (Ringgit)" (Sri)*  
*"...I spend RM300 per month for cell phone credit top up" (Sri)*

*"...satu hari habis 10 Ringgit." (Lela)*  
*"...one day I spend RM10 (for calling)" (Lela)*

Due to the active usage of cell phone, most of TKIs in this study provided their family with a cell phone to facilitate their communication. Thus, they can interact with the family back in their hometown easily and without any time restriction. Informants who bring their spouse with them usually will call their children once a week, the least, and some of them will make a daily phone call. Daily interaction with the respective family in the hometown bound them with some of the cultural values applied in the family. They will also keep on updated with the current issues related to their family or home country.

*"...telepon pun hari-hari." (Heni)*  
*"...I call every day." (Heni)*

*"...hampir tiap hari itu (telepon)" (Dudi)*  
*"...almost every day (I call my family)" (Dudi)*

In this communication activity, they usually will use their vernacular languages in the conversation. Meetings with migrant workers from other areas are also becoming a routine agenda for them. During that activity, they usually will exchange experience and sharing their knowledge in order to reduce uncertainty during migration. Through this communication activities, cultural backgrounds and cultural proximity has overcome the hardship along their adaptation process. Through communication activity during their migration experience, stereotypes and prejudices towards host communities have also constructed. Sharing experiences and information about host communities and cultures is part of their learning process on local culture.

### **Communication with locals in the host country**

Through every day experiences in the host country, TKIs have constructed their views on local communities. As strangers, some of them experienced good and bad events in their interaction with locals. The past experiences were shared among them with the hope that other fellow TKI will learn for it. Communication can occur directly through interaction or indirectly through unintentional and intentional observation on daily basis. The direct interaction between TKI with the locals through communication where the exchange of verbal and verbal messages is deliberately intended for one another. Meanwhile, indirect communication exists through observation in the environment to the local community or to get information or stories from the mass media or other colleagues.

*"Orang-orang sini kan sama, kayak orang Indonesia." (Sri)*  
*"(the culture of) Local people are similar with us" (Sri)*

*"Baik, mereka baik, kadang jumpa orang Indonesia, mereka tanya-tanya..." (Dini)*

*“They are nice, when they meet us, they will ask questions (friendly)...” (Dini)*

*“Mereka (masyarakat tempatan) baik. Mereka menghormati kita. Baik-baik saja.” (Dewi)*

*“They (the locals) are kind people, they put respect on us” (Dewi)*

During the discussion, informants shared their perception towards locals. Exposure towards mass media strengthen the perceptions, stereotypes and prejudices over each other which causes cultural and social distances between immigrants and locals. This affect the interaction between the two groups only occur on the surface.

### **Social Media usage during the migration**

In addition to utilization of cell phone, informants also consume local as well as home country mass media to get information on various issues. According to some of the informants, *Metro daily!* is the newspaper they usually read during the day. Interestingly that manufacturing and construction workers will read the newspaper on the daily basis. Among the construction workers, one of them usually will buy newspaper in the morning side and share with other fellows. Meanwhile, manufacturing workers will share the newspaper with those who are close related with them; family or close friends.

Informants in the rage of aged about 20 - 30 years are mostly use social media to interact with their friends and family. Most of them have a Facebook account and use it as a medium to interact with one another. Facebook has facilitated them to communicate with the Indonesian Migrant Workers group across Malaysia. Through the site, informants can get connected with another Indonesian Migrant Workers who are currently working in other countries such as HongKong and Brunei Darussalam. The Indonesian Migrant Workers Facebook Group page that provide information as well as sharing platform regarding the working experiences, acknowledge some complaints and issues related to migrant workers.

*“...saya pakai (internet), pakai Facebook, Kalau yang lain tak (pakai internet).” (Sri)*

*“...I use (internet), use Facebook, some of my friends do not use internet.” (Sri)*

*“...sekarang Kan ada dunia internet.” (Samsul)*

*“Ada apa (di luar), trennya Facebook, jaman sekarang.” (Dayu)*

The informants stated the interactions through the social media can help reduce the uncertainty during migration. In the Facebook group page, informants can share their daily experiences throughout the region; with TKI who are working in Malaysia as well as those who are working in some other countries. The informant informed that they are actively interacting with his fellows TKI through this Facebook. In addition, their existence in the virtual world seems to provide an opportunity for them to be an integral part of their social environment. They are interacting with people within their cultural enclave, virtually.

### **THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ADAPTATION PROCESS**

Nowadays, the existence of social media has brought changes to how individuals interact with one another which has brought people who live in different countries to stay connected and interact. The interaction with fellow immigrants and text messaging through social media account with family and friends in home country has kept them in the loop and updated with what is happening in their home environment.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, the cost of making a telephone call to a foreign country was really expensive and communication between countries was sent via traditional postal mail. However, today, the existence of Facebook and some other social media have made communication with people across countries a lot easier (Abdul Latiff et al 2014). This experience has also shown by most of the informants in this study who are utilize social media, as well as other online media, for communication purpose and information gathering.

Social media, especially Facebook, have reduced the distance barrier among the individuals as well as keep updated with the current issues in the home country. Facebook, as the social media choice of the informants, could provide not only channel to communicate but also information sharing in the form of link, photos, video and so forth. Informants found that this platform is sufficient for them, yet interactive, as the communication tool.

The use of vernacular language during the interaction with the fellow immigrants as well as people in the home country kept them linger with their home culture. The usage of home culture on the daily basis has helped the informants to overcome the challenges they faced during migration. Besides, they perceived the home culture and conserve it while ongoing the adaptation process. Therefore, even though they are exposed towards local culture, however the home culture bound still with them. Social media, especially Facebook, as the platform for them to continuously share the home culture with relatives, fellow migrants and friends.

Interaction with the host has exposed and helped them to adapt with the local culture. Media, as in mass media and social media, has given a room for them to earn and share knowledge, and keep updated with the current issues in the local context.

## **LIMITATIONS OF STUDY AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATION**

The study on immigrants and locals adaptation towards migration has always been interesting to be explored more. In this study, the exploration towards social media role in the adaptation process has limited portion of the whole. However, this is a good start to conduct further study regarding this subject matter in the future with the consideration that social media has widely utilized and given positive implications on the adaptation process.



## **CONCLUSION REMARKS**

The findings show that aside of direct interpersonal communication with the locals and fellow immigrants, TKIs keep their communication occur with the family in Indonesia on daily basis through social media interaction. Interaction with the host has exposed and helped them to adapt with the local culture. However, the interaction with fellow immigrants and text messaging through social media account with family and friends in home country has kept them in the loop and updated with what is happening in their home environment. The use of vernacular language during the interaction with the fellow immigrants as well as people in the home country kept them linger with their original culture. Thus, social media has kept them in their own enclave culture virtually.

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