

**A STUDY ON IRANIAN STUDENTS'  
NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY AND  
INTERCULTURAL CHALLENGES IN  
MALAYSIA**

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MALAYSIA**

by

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To  
My Wife and My Son

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKKNOWLEDGEMENT.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES.....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES.....</b>	<b>x</b>
<b>ABSTRAK.....</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>xii</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Background.....	2
1.3 Statement of the Problem.....	9
1.4 Research Questions .....	14
1.5 Objectives.....	15
1.6 Significance of the Study .....	15
1.7 Limitations of the Study.....	18
1.8 Definitions of Keywords.....	19
1.9 Chapter Summery.....	22
<b>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>23</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	23
2.2 Overview of identity.....	23

2.2.1	Social-self .....	27
2.2.2	Transforming Identity .....	30
2.2.3	Identity Development in Adulthood.....	31
2.2.4	Globalization and Identity .....	33
2.3	National Identity .....	37
2.4	Religious Identity .....	44
2.5	Ethnic Identity.....	45
2.6	Acculturation.....	48
2.6.1	Process of acculturation.....	53
2.6.2	Cultural adaptation.....	54
2.7	Iran and Malaysian Higher Education.....	55
2.7.1	Iranian higher education.....	57
2.7.2	Malaysian Higher Education .....	61
2.7.3	Pull and Push Factors.....	65
2.8	Theoretical Framework: Identity Negotiation Theory (INT) .....	69
2.9	Chapter Summery.....	75
	<b>CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>76</b>
3.1	Introduction.....	76
3.2	Methods.....	76
3.3	Research Design .....	77
3.4	Informants .....	80
3.5	Instrumentation .....	82

3.6	Data Collection Procedures.....	84
3.7	Interview Design.....	85
3.8	Data Analysis .....	86
3.9	Interpretive coding and thematic analysis.....	88
3.10	Chapter Summary.....	89
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS .....</b>		<b>90</b>
4.1	Introduction.....	90
4.2	Data Analysis .....	91
4.3	Interpretive coding and thematic analysis.....	95
4.4	National identity .....	98
4.4.1	Sense of belonging to the Persian Language .....	99
4.4.2	Sense of belonging to a place .....	100
4.4.3	Sense of belonging to history .....	101
4.5	Culture and identity .....	104
4.5.1	Patterns of sexual behavior.....	106
4.5.2	Cultural Heritage.....	108
4.6	Intercultural relations .....	112
4.6.1	Educational satisfaction.....	113
4.6.2	Attitudes of the host society .....	115
4.6.3	Friendly relations and social interactions .....	122
4.6.4	Changes in relationships.....	124
4.6.5	Identity Shock and dialectics of mutual relations .....	126

4.7	High-tension areas in social interaction .....	129
4.7.1	Religious tensions.....	129
4.7.2	Cultural tension.....	132
4.7.3	Economic tensions .....	134
4.8	The consequences of challenges .....	134
4.8.1	Housing patterns .....	135
4.8.2	Leisure time patterns.....	136
4.8.3	Patterns of cultural consumption .....	136
4.8.4	Shopping patterns.....	137
4.8.5	Nutrition patterns .....	137
4.9	Challenging factors in the country of origin and host community.....	138
4.10	Coping strategies .....	140
4.11	Chapter Summary.....	142
	<b>CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSIO .....</b>	<b>144</b>
5.1	Introduction.....	144
5.2	Negotiation of identity: Theoretical contribution and critique .....	145
5.3	A pattern of negotiation: Contribution to theoretical framework.....	154
5.4	Patterns of acculturation: Theoretical contribution and critique .....	157
5.5	Typologies of identity: Contribution to theoretical debate and knowledge....	160
5.6	Overview of the Central Themes.....	167
5.6.1	Constructing sense of identity.....	168
5.6.2	The advent of allegiance to nationality .....	170



5.6.3	Varied perceptions of host society .....	172
5.6.4	Intercultural differences .....	175
5.6.5	Multiple coping strategies .....	177
5.7	Iranian students' Identity Changes and challenges .....	178
5.8	Multiple identity belongings in Iranian students .....	184
5.9	Intercultural communication .....	188
5.10	Areas of tension .....	201
5.11	Chapter summary.....	208
<b>CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>		<b>210</b>
6.1	Introduction.....	210
6.2	Conclusion .....	232
6.3	Implications and Recommendations for future research.....	234
6.4	Limitation of the study .....	238
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>		<b>240</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>		

## LIST OF TABLES

	<b>Page</b>
Table 2.1 Enrollment of International Students (MoHE, 2010) .....	65
Table 3.1 Informants ‘Codification.....	87
Table 4.1 Demographic Characteristics of USM informants.....	93
Table 4.2 Demographic Characteristics of UPM Informants .....	94
Table 4.3 Demographic Characteristics of UTM Informants.....	95
Table 4.4 Themes and Meanings of national identity .....	96
Table 4.5 Themes and Meanings of Cultural Orientation.....	97
Table 4.6 Themes and Meanings of communication shifts.....	97
Table 4.7 Themes and Meanings of Areas of tension .....	97
Table 4.8 Central Themes and Meanings.....	98
Table 5.1 The Perspective of Identity Changes.....	181

## LIST OF FIGURES

	<b>Page</b>
Figure 2.1 Two Ways of Observing National Identity.....	40
Figure 5.1 Iranian students' negotiation pattern .....	155
Figure 5.2 Constructing meaningful sense of identity .....	168
Figure 5.3 Shared value for nationality and ethnic heritage.....	170
Figure 5.4 Iranian students' view on the host society .....	172
Figure 5.5 Intercultural differences in experiencing challenges .....	175
Figure 5.6 Multiple coping strategies with challenges .....	177
Figure 5.7 A Thematic Illustration of Identity Challenges.....	180
Figure 5.8 Stability of Identity and identity Changing .....	183
Figure 5.9 Satisfaction of study in the host society.....	192

# **NEGOSIASI PELAJAR IRAN TERHADAP CABARAN IDENTITI DAN ANTARA BUDAYA DI MALAYSIA**

## **ABSTRAK**

Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk menyelidiki pengalaman harian, cabaran identiti dan perundiagan serta penyesuaian antara budaya pelajar-pelajar Iran di Malaysia. Objektif kajiannya adalah seperti berikut: mengkaji cara pelajar Iran di Malaysia mendefiniskan diri mereka serta orang lain, mengkaji cabaran agama dan identiti budaya di Malaysia, menganalisis perubahan identiti pelajar Iran di Malaysia, mengkaji jenis cabaran identiti pelajar Iran di Malaysia dan merumuskan tipologi identiti pelajar Iran. Penyelidik menggunakan teknik persampelan bertujuan. Tiga puluh enam (36) pelajar dipilih sebagai responden untuk kajian ini. Kajian ini dipilih untuk mengkaji fenomena ini melalui penelitian makna dan interaksi harian. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan fleksibiliti identiti keseluruhan dalam kalangan responden yang membantu mereka untuk berunding, membentuk dan membentuk semula makna diri melalui interaksi sosial dan budaya mereka. Dari kacamata responden, tema-tema yang muncul berteraskan identiti yang bermakna, nilai kewarganegaraan dan warisan etnik, dan perbezaan antara budaya. Sumbangan utama kepada wacana identiti ialah empat tipologi pelajar Iran iaitu: identiti Parsi, identiti Islamik, identiti reformist and identiti etnik minoriti. Cabaran utama pelajar Iran sebahagian besarnya ialah cabaran budaya, agama dan ekonomi. Strategi negosiasi yang digunakan oleh pelajar untuk menghadapi cabaran juga berbeza dan sangat dipengaruhi oleh tipologi identiti, universiti, pendidikan, keperibadian, umur, dan jantina.

# **A STUDY ON IRANIAN STUDENTS' NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITY AND INTERCULTURAL CHALLENGES IN MALAYSIA**

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research is to examine the identity challenges as well as intercultural adaptation of Iranian students in Malaysia. The objectives are as follows: to examine the ways in which Iranian students define themselves as well as others, to investigate the challenges of religious and cultural identity in Malaysia, to analyze the changing identity of Iranian students in Malaysia, to investigate the types of Iranian students' identity challenges in Malaysia and to formulate typologies of the Iranian students' identity. This research utilizes a purposive sampling technique. Thirty-six (36) students were chosen as informants for the study. The findings portray overall identity flexibility with some exceptions, among the informants that have helped them to negotiate, construct, and reconstruct meaningful sense of self through their social and cultural interactions. From the informants, these emerging themes centered on meaningful sense of identity, the value of nationality and ethnic heritage, and intercultural differences. A key contribution to the identity discourse is the discovery of four typologies of Iranian students' identity: Persian-centric identity, Islamic-centric identity, Reformist identity and minority-ethnic identity. The consequences of the influences of the two societies have placed the students in such a condition that they experience a sense of identity security, respect and support. As a result, these students adapt themselves to the host society by changing new identity to adjustment and achieving a kind of identity stability. The main challenges that emerged from the analysis are mainly cultural, religious and economic. The registration strategies

students use to deal with the challenges are also different and largely influenced by their identity typology, university, education, personal characteristics, age, and gender.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

The goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by Iranians living abroad. These challenges usually pertain to their international identity, ethnic choices, cultural orientations, social identity, and the way these variables affect them. Iranian revolution marked the end of the Pahlavi era (1925-1979) and the beginning of an Islamic theocratic state that has institutionalized Islamic traditions and political structure (Lewis, 1998). The significant point to be considered is the way different political regimes have dealt with the question of identity in Iran. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Iranian identity was being portrayed as in opposition to Islamic identity. The focus was on the Persian identity and the determination to remove Islamic symbols from Iranian society and culture were constructed.

After the 1979 revolution, an exact opposite trend commenced. As a result, the emphasis was shifted to an Islamic identity of Iran. The anti-Western nature of Iranian revolution and the hostile events surrounding this uprising fueled the fire of anti-Iranian sentiments in many parts of the world. Iran is a society transiting from traditional structures and systems and taking in a new trend of development. As a result there were new growth in urbanization as well as interaction and contact with other cultures, communities and people. Contradictions between local and global transformations have caused the youth in Iran to sway between traditional and modern influences in the formation of their identities. This situation in Iran is referred to as the “identity crisis”.

## 1.2 Background

A few studies proposed that, regardless of the presence of subgroups among the Iranian students in Malaysia caused by different ethno-religious gatherings, their nationality as Iranians has been a key element and an identifiable source of a community over time and settings (Bozorgmehr, Sabagh, & DerMartirosian, 1993). Questions may be raised as to how this pattern could be sustained across generations in Iranian community, and to what extent certain can the personal and social traits of Iranian generations be altered and modified from the existing patterns.

Some studies have shed light on these issues by referring to the predictability of some modes of adaptation. For example, Rumbaut and Portes (2001) who examined such issues and stated: “The adaptation process registers individual variants and exceptions, but, by and large, it follows a predictable sequence where outcomes construct on each other, with earlier successes and failures decisively affecting future outlooks, identities, and achievements” (p. 307)

Mahdi (1997) also pointed out that the distinct commitment of many Iranians to their professional efforts, and their tendency to identify themselves in relation to their achieved status. The author asserted that through professional achievements, these individuals assume collective responsibility and identify themselves as citizens of the world with no boundaries or attachments

Many Iranians remain detached or feel ambivalent about their identity because of various factors, such as continuous social/political tension, lack of cohesiveness as well as group fragmentation due to the heterogeneity of this population (Bozorgmehr, 2001; Mahdi, 1997; Habibi, 2003; Karim & Khorrami, 1999; Khalili, 1998). However, this pattern of disengaged or undetermined behaviour has recently started to change in various Iranian groups (Khalili, 1998). It is now evident that different members of



Iranian community are showing more interests in socializing with other Iranians. These interactions are also taking place in various educational, political, social, professional, and religious settings in different universities in Malaysia.

Indeed, the enchanting images and emotional intensity of such an important event carried significantly powerful messages that promoted social transformation and hope for new possibilities. In addition to the everyday success of many Iranians living in different parts of the world, the active presence of prominent Figures and luminaries in various fields continues to foster a deeper understanding of Iranian population, thus cultivating a mutual respect for the competing ideologies of Eastern and Western cultures.

Similar to many other contemporary immigrants, Iranians who migrated to a foreign country are diverse in terms of their age, education, religious associations, political affiliations, socioeconomic backgrounds, occupational levels, language proficiency, and lifestyle, (Bozorgmehr et al., 1993; Jalali, 1996). Due to the *mélange* of Iranian cultural background and complexity of their adaptation patterns, attention was given to various mediating factors such as demographic characteristics, socialization patterns, intergenerational relations, language skills, socioeconomic status, situational stressors, and coping strategies.

Scholars continue to explore various aspects of the anthropological outcomes of migration, either to live permanently or study, with increased recognition of contextual (social patterns), and relational influences (ethnic patterns). Such studies continue to link ethnic socialization and acculturation experiences, with various outcomes such as identity formation/achievement, acculturative stress, self-esteem, self-acceptance, sense of directness, and others (Berry, 2000; Eliasoph & Litcherman, 2003; Suárez-Orozco, 2001a; Watters, 2001; Yip & Fuligini, 2002; Zhou, 2001).

The issue of ancestry categorization is also reflected in Bozorgmehr's (2001) study, noting that Iranians are officially recognized as "white" ethnic population (similar classification is used for European, Middle Eastern, and individuals from North Africa. Previous studies have suggested that culture and value priority change from one generation to another (Creese, Dyke, & McLaren, 1999; Inglehart, 2000; Kertzer, 1983). In a study of postmodern values, Inglehart (2000) focused on the impact of changing values on various aspects of peoples' social lives. In this study, Inglehart referred to the influence of economic developments on the lifestyle and well-being of people around the globe. As the author suggested, such development has had a major impact in creating a reasonably comfortable life for people in various parts of the world. However, this study stressed that going beyond certain threshold will "lead to a gradual intergenerational shift in basic values in the societies" (Inglehart, 2000, p. 219).

Scholars seek to develop a better understanding of generational continuity by studying the complexities associated with acculturation s experienced by various ethnic groups. For example, Phinney, Chavira, and Williamson (1992) considered generational relation as a factor in acculturation attitude and provided a mixed picture of generational continuity. The authors noted that while the passing of time may lead to a decrease in cultural activities in some ethnic groups, nevertheless, some ethnic groups may exhibit strength and retention in their cultural practices.

Iranian students, those who travelled abroad to pursue their education; came from rich cultural heritage, with a sense of pride about their backgrounds that promote collectivist values. Iranian culture is deeply rooted in ethical, intellectual, and spiritual ideals (Safa, 1989). Concepts such as Pand (maxim), Andarz (council), Danesh (learning), Kherad (wisdom), and Taghdir (fate) are reflected in the vast field of

Persian literature, particularly, in the outstanding work of classical Persian poets such as Sa`di, Hafez, Molavi, Rumi, Ferdowsi, and many others. This rich literary tradition represents various aspects of Iranian culture through which one seeks to establish modes of social behavior and encourage conformity to codes of conduct such as truthfulness, honesty, virtue, knowledge, and skills (Safa, 1989). Since the pre-Islamic era (i.e., prior to the seventh century), and throughout the ensuing eras following the conquest of Iran by Muslim Arabs, Iranian culture and civilization had survived many traumatic historical events.

There is a great ethnic diversity within an Iranian population, and historically they have demonstrated their tendency to accept other cultures and races (Jalali, 1996). Iranian receptivity of other cultures is clearly evident in the writings of Nasrin Rahimieh (2001). In her book, entitled “Missing Persians”, Rahimieh provided a pluralistic approach in defining personality and the Persian identity. The writer offered insights regarding Iranians’ transcultural experiences, pointing to shifts in boundaries, changes in women’s role, changes in patterns of identity, linguistic, as well as cultural restlessness. In her introduction, Rahimieh provided perceptive inquiry regarding the impression of self and cultural transformation. As many historians and critics of Persian literature had pointed out, writing about the self is always irrevocably bound to the commune and politics. But this notion of the self has not remained static throughout Persian history. If the changes have, in fact, resulted from encounters with other languages, cultures, and histories, can these transmutations not tell us anything about the conscious and unconscious adaptations that make up the history of Persian culture? (Rahimieh, 2001, P. 17)

Naficy (1991) shed light on the manifestations of nostalgia in the lives of Iranian students studying abroad by examining the meanings behind elements of their

popular cultures and literary works. As Naficy noted, through various exile-produced means of communications such as the use of books, newspapers, imageries, artifacts, narratives, rituals, symbols, music, and other creative activities, Iranians are trying to recapture and preserve their past memories. As the author elaborated, facets of mystic poetry, and elements of nature, lyrics, and icons are used as symbolic substitutes to help maintain the yearning for a return to the homeland. The longing and dream of going back will continue as long as they remain unrealized. Naficy wrote perceptively about the significance of such notions:

“This nostalgic longing and its cultural artifacts and processes in exile entail regressive practices. It is true that nostalgia can also be motivated by a realistic perception of decline of the present time, of shock in the future to come, of reterritorialization and displacement, or by crisis of identity; it is also true that nostalgia serves to soften the blows from these various traumas. Nonetheless, in the final analysis, it is regressive, because it seeks not so much to preserve the past as to restore it through fetishization of an idealized construction. Politically, nostalgic longing can produce not unity, but discord, not peace, but war.” (P. 299)

During their migratory transition in the foreign countries, Iranians have struggled to preserve their traditions and at the same time, they have shown flexibility in adapting to various aspects of their host countries. In general, various research had provide insights on the attitudes of Iranian families as being compatible with contemporary social trends, i.e. they keep pace with the general orientation of the larger society. The author explained that while she understood how some Iranian international students residing in the host country could not fully embrace the culture of the host society, it would not be reasonable to expect their children to follow the same path. “To expect them to embrace Iran and Iranian cultures as their parents do is

not only unrealistic but unfair. In contrast, “allowing them to abandon completely their heritage would be a huge loss” (Vaziri, 1999, p. 7). According to Mahdi (1999, p. 2) “While Iranian immigrants often express a strong desire for the preservation of their cultural heritage, they show no significant resistance to the forces of assimilation to the host society”. However, adaptation to the host society may prove to be a bumpy road for many Iranian students in Malaysia.

According to Dasgupta (1998), higher levels of anxiety to when espouse the values of the host culture may lead to the disregard of the native culture. Furthermore, this study showed that the reverse is also true when ethnic minorities oppose the dominant culture's way of life. It would generate internal conflicts or acculturative stress to the immigrants. Dasgupta further pointed to biculturalism as another mode of cultural adaptation and defined it as a process that integrates both elements of ethnic and dominant cultures in one's way of life. Dasgupta suggested that immigrants are not passive informants in their adaptation process. The continuity of traditional culture by a minority group and adoption of ethnic identity is integrally connected. However, the strength of the commitment to this identity differs from a person to another, depending on dedication to the original culture and the degree to which one relates to the host culture.

Contemporary ethnic scholars have been fascinated by the study of human capital, demographic characteristics, and the attributes that lead the minority groups to excel or to fall short in reaching their goals (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Why do some individuals in subsequent generations maintain the cultural orientation and skills of their native culture and others lose them? Different views provide explanations in answering this question. Chiro and Smolicz (2002) stated, "The extent to which a minority ethnic identity is being maintained in culturally plural societies is clearly

linked to the social context in which the group finds itself." (p. 48). Ying (1999) explained that disparity becomes a significant source of conflict between these groups of people.

Researchers in the field of social science continue to construct knowledge about the challenges that confront minority population in a larger/host society. Safdar, Lay, & Struthers (2003) investigated the acculturation process of Iranian immigrants in Canada by examining their essential goals and the ways they are achieved. As the authors elaborated, these goals which are the "maintenance of heritage, culture, participation in the host society, and maintenance of psychological and physical health" are achieved by being involved with the members of both heritage, culture, and the host culture, as well as considering the immigrants' psychological and physical health (Safdar et al., 2003, p. 557).

Globalization which cannot be separated from the issues faced by immigrants is a debatable and an equivocal subject (Karimi Maleh, 2000 a, b). Notwithstanding the issues and challenges governments have with their own societies, the extension of globalization and the rise of new players, such as multi-national associations, global associations and media, such as the Internet and satellite are new threats to the current political system. Such threat is to the extent that a few critics assumed that during the process of globalization, a portion of the mostly developed countries, using up to date innovations can extend a global culture for themselves and cause transmutation and the disposal of regional attributes of various social orders.

It is conceivable to have diverse methodologies in examine the outcomes of the neighborhood and ethnic identities resulted from globalization. In a way, one methodology may look for improvement in the surrounding characters in the globalization approach; while on the other hand, some others may report the decay of

ethnic and local identities. Subsequently, the aim of this research is to study the relationship between the local and international identities of the respondents.

A few key perspectives on globalization have been examined, for example, the economic and cultural perspectives (Friedman, 2000; Giddens, 1991). Some scholars, for example, McGrew (1992), Baylis, Smith, & Owens (2005) and Legrain (2002) regarded globalization as an affiliation procedure and the ever-expanding cooperation (Nonejad, 2005). Consequently, by utilizing these definitions, it could be argued that in the light of the globalization of communication, the theme of identity have also been extended in a similar fashion. The causes and effects of these identity themes are stated in general, and they extend to the structure of the international identity (Ghoreishi, 2002).

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

Shafieyan (1983) investigated the psychosocial, instructive and monetary issues of Iranian students in the United States during the Iran-America emergency and the impact of the emergency on these Iranian students. During the Carter government, a choice was made to expel students who were breaching their visas in the United States. Iranian students were also liable to the treat of segregation in the U.S. During that period, the perception of prejudice against Iranians was very high. Hence, they were often thought to be hostile to outsiders particularrly Iranians.

In addition, a few Iranians encountered adjustment issues which were intently connected to psychopathological measures, for example, forlornness, nervousness, despondency, yearning to go home, and low confidence (Hojati, 2006). The repercussions of these unfortunate incidents resulted in Iranian students shifting their attention to countries which can provide affordable quality education in English. From

1992 to 2003, the number of degree courses allowed to be taken by Iranian students in Canada expanded from 40 to 140, while in the U.S. it declined from 203 degree courses to 68. However, the claims of discrimination in Canada in the form of the refusal to allow visa to parents, friends, and family, despite their legal and moral eligibility were on the rise in spite of their lawful and good qualification (Mahalat, 2008). This pattern of self-assertive visa refusals to Iranian residents and future students, in particular on the subjective ground of "restricted connections to Iran", has essentially expanded since 2004.

Malaysia, a standout amongst developing nations in South East Asia, is influenced by the difficulties caused by globalization and internationalization, particularly in terms of education. A fundamental reaction by the Malaysian government to these difficulties was to provide wider and affordable access to higher education higher education establishments (Acuma Incorporated, 2009). Moreover, there is a serious effort to promote education as a viable source of the national economy, by creating legislature to transform Malaysia into a worldwide center of education as well as an eminent education hub in the region. Furthermore, Malaysia is quite optimistic in developing an education model that is capable of achieving global recognition and accreditation for excellence at par with its competitors throughout the world.

The attractiveness of the educational projects offered by most of the Malaysian universities is additionally improved by the accreditation from other countries. The number of international students in Malaysia is significant for the national economy, especially if it is considered as a supplier of higher quality education in the worldwide market. In other words, higher education in Malaysia can possibly be a noteworthy income generator through its offering of world-class scholarly projects (Jimenez,



2007). The objectives distinguished it from China, Iran, Indonesia, Vietnam and the Middle East. Similarly, the Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia aims to draw in 95,000 foreign students to study in Malaysia by 2010 (Sirat, 2009).

The early arrival of foreign graduate students in Malaysian was from neighboring nations which are less developed than Malaysia. In recent times, there have been students who come from other parts of the world including the Indian subcontinent, the Middle-east, and even some African nations (Ayob, 2000). Be that as it may, the convergence of students from Iran has been staggering. Iranian students, who used to make America and Europe their best choice for obtaining education, turn to Malaysia in huge numbers. What motivated them was Malaysia's moderate education cost and standard of living, the courses offered and expectations about life in the country. As a result, Iranians particularly those from the working class, to play Judas on the West, made a beeline for the East. There has been a huge increase in the number of Iranians pursuing their post-graduate education in Malaysian colleges particularly the most recent decade. In 2011, Iranians filled up around 15,000 places in Malaysian colleges when in 2006, there were only the Figure was just 900 (Krich, 2011). The flood of international students is because of the accomplishment of the Malaysia Education Promotion Center in the Middle East and North African nations by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education.

With the rising number of Iranian students in Malaysia, the social, cultural, and religious factors affect their interactions with the host society. The similarities and differences between the host and the origin country have led to the establishment of some boundaries. These differences alongside experiencing a new lifestyle in a new environment had caused some changes to Iranian identity and behavior. There had been some specific challenges which occurred between individuals from the host

society and the Iranian students that caused some intra group challenges. The investigation into these challenges is of prime importance because neglecting them might result in serious gap between the host and the origin societies. A scientific study of these challenges will lead to a better and mutual understanding of either society from one another.

As indicated by Ting-Toomey (1999), numerous temporary residents experience different levels of risk and rejection of their sociocultural national identity, international student identity, and newcomer identity, as parts of their underlying culture shock experience. In the current study, we particularly focus on the Iranian students' experiences and stories concerning their "feelings of being an outsider" to encountering an "at home" or "welcoming guest" identity in Malaysian Culture.

The researcher encourages tested the role of host national or co-national/multi-national interaction design in either helping or obstructing their developmental adaptive journey. Without the security of having prepared access to their family and friends back in their countries, numerous Temporary residents tend to encounter a feeling of identity alienation and dislocation (Gareis, Merkin, & Goldman, 2011).

The identity negotiation theory (INT) (Ting-Toomey, 1999, 2005) framework is utilized to direct the improvement of this study since it clarifies in details the positive and negative identity shifts that international students experience as they adjust to living in another society and communicate with culturally different others. Ting-Toomey (2005) characterizes cultural identity as "the emotional significance we attach to our sense of belonging or affiliation with the larger culture" (p. 214). Beyond socio-cultural identity issues, INT additionally underscores the multifaceted way of notable social part identity, newcomer identity, and situational boundary-crossing identity from the identity arguments' idea. The term rationalizations refer to a pressure between

restricting or contending strengths inside a discourse communication framework (Littlejohn and Foss, 2005). It likewise implies “invoking, often indirectly and by implication-multiple systems of meaning. These discourses often compete, oppose, and struggle with one another” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p.349).

The focus of this study is on Iranian students, their challenges, and the Typologies of their identity. Currently, the literature on Iranian is mainly focused on the adaptation experiences of Iranian living abroad. Like many immigrant groups, Iranians as a cultural group continue to experience transitions in different facets of life. However, there seemed to be a lack of research and limited understanding of how the experiences of Iranian students may differ not only from other groups but also among themselves. Furthermore, there has been relatively limited research on academic, employment, marital, financial, health, religious, and adaptation experiences of this population. Many studies carried out in Iran have so far employed some approaches which consider the adoption of the new global patterns or the substitution of the previous patterns with some new ones as identity crisis (Davran, 2002; Rezaian, 2013). Whereas Iranian cultural identity contains different and diverse sources and elements as well as a historical dynamic so that after the arrival of Islam in Iran, the Islamic and Iranian identities have been combined and they have coexisted peacefully ever since (Ahmadi, 2005).

The identity challenges in other societies can be considered as the result of an encounter between modernity and postmodernity. However, the traditional features of Iranian society could be added to this conflict as well. The younger generation of Iranians are currently being challenged with two levels of identity challenges due to the increasing number of students who go abroad to pursue their academic studies. Hence, the domain of their identity challenges has also expanded. In other words, the

questions of identity, identity formation and identity challenges among Iranian students, specifically those studying abroad, have gained more significance. Extensive attention to this phenomenon is probably due to the direct encounter of this group of Iranians with such modern concepts. Since “identity” is genuinely a modern concept, it is one of the most critical issues in the era of modernity (Giddens, 1991).

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

The present study is based on the identity of a population on which very limited research has been conducted up to date. In addition, many researchers have studied the role of factors such as religiosity, acculturation, cultural identity, and individual difference variables. The current study takes these variables into consideration to identify which one is the best predictor of an individual’s identity challenge. More specifically, the study focuses on the types of identity challenges that Iranian students residing and studying in Malaysia are currently facing. Therefore, based on the background and the problem statements discussed earlier, the following questions emerge:

RQ1) How does Iranian students’ identity negotiation relate to INT & Berry s’ model of acculturation?

RQ2) Based on the concept of identity negotiations, what are the Typologies of Iranian students’ identities?

RQ3) What meanings do Iranian students attach to themselves when defining who they are?

RQ 4) What are the ways in which Iranian students deal with the cultural, religious and other types of challenges in Malaysia?

RQ 5) What are the ways in which Iranian students' identities are affected by the changes they undergo in the host society?

### **1.5 Objectives**

The objectives of the current study are as follows:

- 1) To investigate the Iranian students' identity negotiation, relate to INT and Berry's model of acculturation
- 2) To obtain a typology of the Iranian students' identity in the host society
- 3) To examine the ways in which Iranian students in Malaysia define themselves as well as the others
- 4) To discover the Iranian students' religious, cultural and other identity challenges in Malaysia
- 5) To analyze the identity changing of Iranian students residing in Malaysia

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

As the whole world continues on the path of becoming more diverse, the acculturation process continues to affect both minority and majority groups (Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992). There has been a developing enthusiasm for the investigation of those living abroad either as immigrants or non-immigrants; international students, their socialization patterns, and the ways this population see themselves and seeks to fit in their social setting. Many young people from various ethnic or racial backgrounds have a positive self-image; however, racial or group categorizations remain an important factor in the lives of these groups. The way that the people from minority backgrounds see themselves affects their interactions which will ultimately lead to the shaping of the society's collective future (Cornbleth, 2003).

Iranian students are influenced by both their original culture as well as the culture of the host society. As Mahdi (1999) pointed out, Iranians find themselves in a new and different culture that has led them to create and construct meanings of their new identity. At this point in history, Iranian students are caught in a social and political momentum that has placed them under so much speculation regarding the significance of the events surrounding them as well as their consequences. Most of these Iranians are aware of their migratory challenges and acknowledge their unique circumstances which is partly attributed to the ongoing political uncertainties. Due to the inhospitable reception of numerous host societies toward these minority groups, and particularly the existing anti-Iranian attitudes, the question arises as to what do various ethnic messages mean to Iranians, and to what extent do they internalize the negative and positive messages about their ethnic groups? It is also prudent to examine the social impact of such ambivalent social or political circumstances on Iranians, and the extent of their flexibility or adaptability (i.e., cultural adjustment by choosing various coping strategies) in managing difficult situations.

Enabling international students to pursue higher education in Malaysia could enhance cultural understanding among different groups of peoples. In an era of globalization, and global terrorism, encouraging educational exchange might be justified on the premise that it is important to understand other cultures. However, there is insignificant number of solid, research-based data on changes in cultural identification among students. To claim international educational exchange opens minds and fosters respect for other cultures may be substantially reasonable, but the supporting data are also currently absent. Unresolved is whether that desired diffusion is being achieved. Vinken, Soeters & Ester (2004, p. 24) suggested that in the end, it

is unclear how cultural change constructs and is constructed by Iranians or by other socially defined ‘categories’ of individuals for that matter.

The question of how groups of individuals make sense of culture, the extent to which they bear with and follow the worlds of ‘tradition’ or of ‘modernity’, to define it in popular binary terms, and how they engage in the process framed as ‘cultural change’, the process in which both the worlds of tradition and modernity meet, are yet to be answered. It could be argued the university classroom is one of the places where “the worlds of tradition and modernity meet,” for it is there that students from many cultures meet, both those from “modern” societies and those from more traditional backgrounds. This study is an initial step towards considering the issue of national cultural identity change as a consequence of exposure to higher education in Malaysia.

Considering the normative and behavioral differences within Iranian community, the significance of this study is it allows insights on the social and cultural identities, as well as the meanings that they bear for the Iranian students to be explored. In light of the continuing political struggles, the result of this study offers a better understanding of the types of stressors, ways of coping, and their effectiveness. The outcome of the current study will also help to enhance understanding of the social well-being of the Iranian students. Furthermore, emerging discussions on the central themes of this study contributed in identifying research, practice, and policy implications for improving the quality of social experience of Iranians residing in Malaysia.

This research is intended to clarify the nature and the degree of cultural and social changes occurring among selected Iranian students during their stay in Malaysian public universities. This study is a primary step to consider the issue of changes in the national cultural identity as a result of exposure to higher education in Malaysia. The focus is on whether students of various national groups converge in

their cultural identity and adopt some of the values of the host culture. Alternatively, whether they might diverge, either by developing new identities by combining native cultural dimensions or by retaining and possibly strengthening their own cultural roots. It is anticipated that the data will help answer those questions and contribute to the discourse on the international educational exchange.

### **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

As with most studies, there were limitations on time and other pertinent resources. Given the Iranian students takes approximately three years to complete a graduate Master program and four years or more to complete an PhD program of studies, it would take a similar period to collect data for a longitudinal study with data obtained from a sample of students as they enrolled in their graduate programs, and again as they. To obviate the time handicap, a cross-sectional study, using matched samples from groups of entering and graduating students, was conducted.

A student's field of study was seen as a potential influence on his or her reaction to a stay at a given institution. Business students, for example, might have different interests from engineering students or students in other disciplines, and they may have different attitudes about cultural issues. Furthermore, the academic experience itself might be markedly differently by business and science students, or for those in other disciplines; again, possibly influencing how students adjust their cultural identity. For example, it is likely that some business courses would focus on differences in business philosophies or business practices between various nations and it involves in-class discussions encouraging students to think about cultural issues. Science curricula are less likely to include similar examinations of comparative national differences.



## 1.8 Definitions of Keywords

**Identity:** Deaux (1993) suggested that, “Identity refers to social categories in which an individual claims membership as well as the personal meaning associated with those categories” (1993, p. 4). Deaux went on to cite Tajfel’s (1978) theory of social identity, “Identity emerges from the context of intergroup relations. Thus, one defines oneself as a member of a particular in-group vis-à-vis an out-group” (Deaux, 1993, p. 4).

By this definition, we are able to define ourselves with terms such as “our group” or “our organization.” Subconsciously though it may be, we are clearly defining what it means to be “us” and, consequently, what it means to be “them.” Forming identity based on what we are not has the capacity to portend “Otherness.” “Othering, or the process of identifying an individual or group of people as the Other, marks them as strange, foreign, exotic, or heathen... Othering is rooted in the concepts of in-group favoritism and out-group bias” as well as Critchfield ‘s (2010, p. 2) explanation. (See Section 2.2)

**Culture:** The definition used by Schein (1992, p.12) was adopted. “A pattern of shared basic assumptions (value systems) that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”

Schein’s (1992) definition had several attractive elements, including his opening description of culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions.” International variance in shared assumptions was referred to frequently in this study, involving university students from different national groups. Moreover, Schein’s explicit reference to the teaching and learning of culture as “the correct way to perceive, think and feel” is a common theme in this study. (See Section 2.7)

In this definition, culture is seen as a complicated construct, in part, because it involves three interrelated, but still widely different components, all of which can be identified in the preceding definitions: human thinking, human behavior, and human artifacts (Bodley, 1994). Some definitions emphasize one component over another, but anthropologists have generally accepted all three under the umbrella of culture.

**Acculturation:** Acculturation is a process that involves contact between two cultural groups, leading to numerous changes in both groups. Usually the dominant group changes less than the other group. The behavioral shift of the non-dominant group may include (1) culture shedding, (2) culture learning, and (3) culture conflict (Berry, 1998).

Most research in this area have been linked to the migration of people to new and culturally different regions, or ethnic minorities seeking to adjust to the majority's host culture. Nevertheless, an acculturation process takes place for international students as they, by necessity, adapt in some manner, to their new environment. Existing research on acculturation proved useful for this study. (See Section 2.8).

**National Identity:** According to Smith, national identity, identical identity, is multi-dimensional and can carry the following concepts: historic territory, ethnicity, common myths and historical memories, a common mass public culture, common legal rights and duties for members and a common economy with territorial mobility for the members (Smith 2001, pp. 21-38).

This definition is used for recent studies because, in this definition, Smith divided national identity into two functions, namely the external and internal functions. An external function includes territorial, economic, and political acknowledgements. On the other hand, an internal function included a socialization process through education. (Smith 1991, pp. 15-16). (See Section 2.6.1)

**Religious Identity:** Religious identity as described by Dollinger (2001) through analyses of auto photographic essays includes both internal (personal) and external (social) factors that are significant to the individual.

This suggests that those individuals who rate higher on conventional religiousness and those individuals for whom religion have a fundamental principle experience. They have more gratitude in their lives and are more satisfied with their circumstances than less religious/spiritual individuals. (See Section 2.6.2)

**Ethnic Identity:** Smith (1991) claimed that this common heritage, social relatedness, and social ties define the ethnic identity of the individuals in a particular culture. She defined ethnic identity as the “sum total of group members’ feelings about those values, feelings, and common histories that identify them as a distinct group” (pp. 181-182).

By this definition, ethnic identity can be divided into two major subcategories that together they characterize the interaction of the psychological and social factors: internal (invisible) ethnic identity and external (visible) ethnic identity (Isajiw, 1990; Sadowsky, Kwan, & Pannu, 1995). They propose that the external component of ethnic identity consists of observable behaviors pertaining to the socio-cultural context and includes language, friendships, activities, media, and traditions. The internal component of ethnic identity consists of cognitive (perception of ethnic group and of self within ethnic group, knowledge about cultural heritage, and cultural values), moral (obligations, commitment, and group solidarity), and affective factors (preference for association to culture of origin rather than the dominant culture, and higher comfort with norms of culture of origin in comparison to a dominant culture). This distinction reflects the independent variance of the internal component of ethnic identity and the

external component of ethnic identity in cross generational studies (Isajiw, 1990; Sadowsky, et al, 1995). (See Section2.6.3)

## **1.9 Chapter Summery**

The first chapter introduces the purpose and significance of this study and includes the defining framework for studying the identity challenges of Iranian students and their compatibility with the host community. This chapter attempts to explain the research problem with specific goals and research questions in the host society by presenting the cultural background of Iranian students. In this regard, while identifying five objectives for the research, efforts have been made to introduce the limitations of the research. Also, in this section, by providing a definition of key words, efforts have been made to provide a clearer path for research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

The second chapter introduces identity definitions and theories from several different perspectives. The researcher will discuss theories regarding the identity from different scholars (e. g., Goffman, 1963; Erikson, 1968) in the fields of anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, and sociolinguistics. These theories have all added to the better comprehension of the concept of identity. Afterwards, different types of identity around which the current study evolves will be discussed, namely, ethnic identity, cultural identity, religious identity, social identity, and international identity. Toward the end, an elaboration on the concept of self, which is a key component in individual identity, is exhibited. Following this, the chapter will focus on the discussions about acculturation and individual difference variables affecting identity.

### **2.2 Overview of identity**

The word “identity” became a “term for something as unfathomable as it is all-pervasive” (Erikson, 1968, p. 9). The American Psychological Association itself described the dilemma surrounding the concept as “Although virtually all writers use the term to refer to ways in which people define themselves, different theories and intellectual traditions have produced a myriad of conceptions and connotations” (as cited in Kazdin, 2000, p. 271). Identity formation begins at an early age. As we grow, our identities are formed by internal and external factors. “People are able to express identity based on two primary sources of information: information from within and

information from beyond” (Rivera & Hohman, 2010, p. 1). For purposes of this thesis, researcher will be focusing on the external factors that add to identity formation.

Not only can identity be viewed in interaction terms, it is also classified by numerous scholars as a major human need. Identity formation turns out to be more perplexing and essential when perceived with regards to human needs satisfaction. Burton calls attention to, “... Needs such as personal recognition and identity... are the basis of individual development and security in a society” (1998, p. 1). These human needs, “...are part of the very nature of human beings” and as Burton argued, “Human individuals *must* pursue their needs, either independently or in association with others, regardless of the consequences” (as cited in Burrows, 1996, p. 57).

When taking a look at the way of life as a human need, acknowledgement of the need for satisfaction is basic. In a multicultural society where individuals of disparate cultures are attempting to peacefully co-exist and establish identity, the ensuing quest to fulfill these needs can follow a positive or negative direction depending on how the situation is approached.

It would be helpful for both host and immigrants to recognize that regardless of culture, identity is an international human need shared by all and must be fulfilled by all. This creates a common denominator from which collaboration is able to exist. “The most fundamental evolutionary force experienced by individuals is the drive to attempt to control their environment in order to satisfy their needs” (Burrows, 1996, p. 58). In this manner, if the immigrant and host from an initial period in the relationship endeavor to “control their environment in order to satisfy their needs” in a cooperative way, the probability of contention could be limited. “Once it is discovered that goals are held in common, the stage is set for a search for means that satisfy all parties to a dispute” (Burton, 1998, p. 42). Then again, in the supremacy view that human needs