

Study of Sociocultural Acculturation Impact on Students' Mental Health from Chinese Mainland in Hong Kong SAR

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of sociocultural acculturation on the mental health of postgraduate students from Chinese mainland in Hong Kong SAR. Utilizing the GHQ-28 and the Acculturative Hassles Scale for Chinese Students (AHSCS), this research identifies the correlation between psychological well-being and sociocultural adaptation. Based on 245 valid responses from a questionnaire survey conducted in October 2024, the findings reveal a significant positive correlation between sociocultural adaptation and mental health. Recommendations are provided for Hong Kong SAR universities to enhance support systems aiding students' acculturative challenges from Chinese mainland.

Keywords

Sociocultural Adaptation, Mental Health, Studying Abroad, Chinese Mainland Students, Hong Kong

1. Introduction

The prolonged period of British colonial rule has profoundly "Britishised" Hong Kong's local culture, creating a unique blend that often feels distinctly separate from Chinese mainland culture. This cultural divergence can be particularly stark from the perspective of Chinese mainland students, who frequently encounter a variety of challenges as they attempt to integrate into Hong Kong SAR society.

These students often grapple with regional discrimination, which manifests in subtle prejudices and an outsider status that can be isolating. Language barriers further complicate their experience, as many may struggle with Cantonese, the dominant local dialect, while also facing difficulties in academic situations where English is the medium of instruction. Cultural differences—ranging from social

norms and lifestyle choices to educational expectations—add additional layers of complexity.

Consequently, these challenges can lead to an increased risk of psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and feelings of alienation, particularly due to the limited support networks available for non-local students (Bhowmik et al., 2018; Razgulin et al., 2023). If the government in Hong Kong region fails to implement effective strategies to assist these students in acclimating to their new environment, it could significantly impact their mental health and academic performance. Over time, this may jeopardize Hong Kong SAR's reputation as a prestigious regional education center, which has been built on its ability to attract diverse students from around the world (Lian & Tsang, 2010).

2. Literature Review

Actually, many international scholars have begun to pay attention to the group of international students and research the topics of their sociocultural acculturation and mental health in many countries. For instance, Voevodin et al. (2020) claim that the acculturation of students studying abroad in a new environment is facilitated by effective intercultural communication, development, and implementation of social adaptation and psychological prevention programs. The prevalence of depressiveness and anxiety among students studying abroad is quite high and serious, and it plays a critical role in measuring students' mental health (Razgulin et al., 2023).

However, the students from Chinese mainland are different from the traditional international students because, in contrast to those who have chosen to study in foreign countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, or Germany, the group from Chinese mainland is studying and living in a society that is both familiar and strange to them due to unique political and sociocultural relationships between Hong Kong SAR and the Chinese Mainland (Yu & Zhang, 2016). Luckily, more and more scholars are concentrating on students from Chinese mainland in Hong Kong SAR, this special international student group, and researching sociocultural acculturation and mental health, especially Chinese scholars. For instance, a 17-item Acculturative Hassle scale for Chinese Students was used to test the adaptability of Chinese students, and its reliability and validity were effectively demonstrated (Pan, Yue, & Chan, 2010). Pan et al. (2017) used the GHQ-12 scale to test the mental health level of students from Chinese mainland studying at the University of Hong Kong SAR in research.

In addition, other scholars have also conducted some research on sociocultural and psychological adaptation. Regarding the relationship between cultural adaptation and social support, Lian & Tsang (2010) supposed that cross-cultural adaptation is positively associated with social support and integration; however, it may also demonstrate a negative correlation with marginalization and separation. More about the sociocultural adaptation issue, local language proficiency, and lower level of perceived discrimination fostered all may help to enhance studying abroad students' adaption to local culture (Yu & Zhang, 2016). Moreover, academic self-

efficacy is predicted to improve the performance of both psychological and academic adaptation issues (Yu et al., 2021). Social support from local students can increase the positive effects of integration and decrease the negative effects of marginalization on the sociocultural and psychological adaptation of students studying abroad (Ng et al., 2017).

3. Research Design

3.1. Research Objective and Research Question

This research objective is to investigate whether we can enhance acculturation adaptation capacity in students from Chinese mainland to improve their mental health when they are studying in Hong Kong SAR. Hence, based on the research objective, we come up with the research comes up with the following question: What is the relationship between the acculturation of students from Chinese mainland in Hong Kong SAR and their general health level? To answer this question, this research references the above two scales (17-item Acculturative Hassle scale & GHQ-12) to test the general health level and adaptability of students from Chinese mainland in Hong Kong SAR. Moreover, this research also adopts Berry and Sam's (2010) acculturation theory as an analysis framework (see Figure 1).

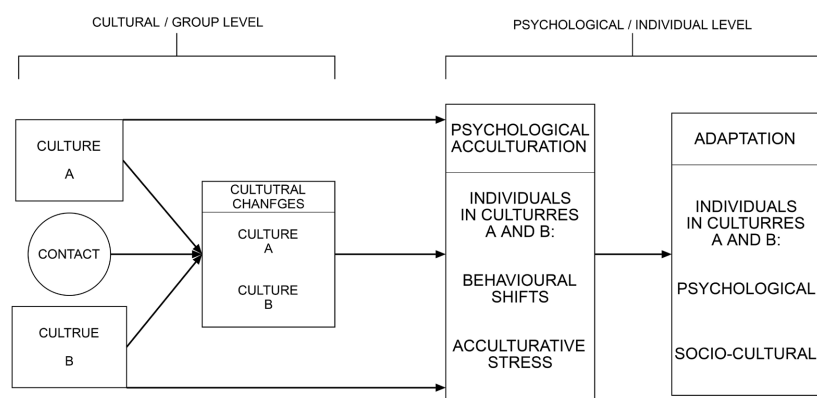


Figure 1. Acculturation theory of Berry & Sam.

3.2. Research Methodology and Design

We aim to measure the correlation between the sociocultural adaptation and mental health of students from Chinese mainland studying in Hong Kong SAR. Hence, we choose to adopt a quantitative method to try to do this research.

To investigate whether sociocultural adaptation and mental health correlate, we adopt two scales, the sociocultural adaptation scale created by Ward and Kennedy (1999) and the general health questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28) created by Goldberg and Hillier (1979), to collect and measure data, and we also collected the demographic information of the participants (Figure 2). Against the two scales, we set sub-variables on the independent variables (sociocultural adaptation) and dependent variables (GHQ-28) to investigate specifically whether there is a correlation between different sociocultural adaptation problems and different mental health problems.

In order to make the scales more relevant to students from Chinese mainland, we also take reference from Pan, Yue, and Chan's (2010) research about the cross-cultural adaptation of students from Chinese mainland studying in Hong Kong SAR. Regarding the questions, each question is a multiple-choice question, and we have designed four options, which are don't agree, agree a little, basically agree, and totally agree. Each option is scored from 0 to 3. Higher scores indicate more serious problems with social and cultural adjustment or mental health. Finally, total scores were calculated for the socio-cultural adaptation scale and the mental health scale.

Characteristics	Number (%)
Gender	
Male	110 (45)
Female	135 (55)
Age	
20~23	75(30.6)
24~27	116 (47.4)
28~31	26 (10.6)
32~35	16 (6.5)
Above 35	12 (4.9)
Cantonese Household	
Yes	93 (38)
No	152 (62)
Marital Status	
Yes	44 (18)
No	201 (82)
Language	
Both good at English & Cantonese	79 (32.2)
Only good at Cantonese	40 (16.3)
Only good at English	84 (34.3)
Both bad at English & Cantonese	42 (17.2)
Year of Enrolling	
1995	1 (0.4)
1998	1 (0.4)
2000	2 (0.8)
2001	2 (0.8)
2003	2 (0.8)
2004	1 (0.4)
2005	2 (0.8)
2006	3 (1.2)
2008	4 (1.6)
2009	1 (0.4)
2010	3 (1.2)
2012	5 (2.0)
2013	2 (0.8)
2014	7 (2.8)
2015	16 (6.4)
2016	8 (3.2)
2017	8 (3.2)
2018	19 (7.6)
2019	7 (2.8)
2020	13 (5.2)
2021	22 (8.8)
2022	41 (16.4)
2023	55 (22)
2024	20 (8.0)

Figure 2. Demographic information.

After the scale was designed, we used WeChat groups as the main source of questionnaire collection. The target research group in this study is the students from Chinese mainland who are studying or have studied in Hong Kong SAR;

hence, we distributed the questionnaire to various WeChat alumni groups and student groups of students from Chinese mainland and invited group members to fill in the questionnaire as much as possible. All WeChat groups are officially set up (including universities, Hong Kong SAR and students' alumni organizations from Chinese mainland, etc.).

Regarding the timing of data collection, we started the data drop on 16 October 2024 and almost completed the data collection on 20 October 2024 (the number of responses in the questionnaire reached the number needed for our study). A total of 318 questionnaires were collected. Based on the total time taken by the respondents to answer the questionnaires and other indicators, invalid questionnaires were excluded, leaving 245 valid questionnaires. Then, after collecting data, we adopted SPSS as our data-analyzing tool.

Regarding the demographic information and data, the gender ratio of the participants in this questionnaire (male to female) was 4.5 to 5.5. About the age, around 47.4% of the participants' age is around 24 to 37, and 30.6% of them are between 20 and 23 years old. Regarding information on household registration and marriage, 62% of the participants were non-Guangdong residents and 82% were unmarried. In terms of language proficiency, 32.2% of the participants were proficient in both Cantonese and English, 16.3% were only proficient in Cantonese, 34.3% were only proficient in English, and the last 17.2% were not proficient in either Cantonese or English. In terms of the year of enrollment in Hong Kong's higher education institutions, more than half of the participants enrolled between 2020 and 2024 (**Figure 2**).

4. Findings and Discussion

As **Figure 3** shows, against the GHQ-28 scale, based on the reliability, we get the result that the value of Cronbach's Alpha is 0.933, meaning that the reliability of this scale is high enough to support the following research. **Figure 4** presents the reality of the sociocultural adaption scale. Based on the reliability, we get the result that the value of Cronbach's Alpha is 0.841, meaning that the reliability of this scale is high enough to support the following research.

The correlations between sociocultural adaption and the general health (GHQ-28) of students are shown in **Figure 5**. The Pearson Correlation value is 0.632, and the significance is smaller than 0.05, which means that sociocultural adaption and the general health of students have a strong correlation from a statistical perspective. Regarding the correlation between somatic symptoms (sub-dependent variable 1) and independent variables, **Figure 6** shows that all of them are significant enough (P value is smaller than 0.05). About the correlation between anxiety and insomnia (sub-dependent variable 2) and independent variables, **Figure 7** shows that all of them are significant enough (P value is smaller than 0.05). Against the correlation between social impairments (sub-dependent variable 3) and independent variables, **Figure 8** shows that all of them are significant enough (P value is smaller than 0.05). Regarding the correlation between depression (sub-dependent variable 4) and independent variables, **Figure 9** shows that all of them are significant enough (P value is smaller than 0.05).

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.933	0.933	28

Figure 3. Reliability: sociocultural adaption.

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
0.841	0.841	13

Figure 4. Reliability: GHQ-28.

		Sociocultural Adaptation Scale	GHQ-28 Score
Sociocultural Adaptation Scale	Person Correlation	1	.632**
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000
	N	245	245
GHQ-28 Score	Person Correlation	.632**	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	
	N	245	245

Figure 5. Correlation: sociocultural adaption & GHQ-28.

		Dependent Variable 1: Somatic symptoms
Independent Variable 1: Social Interaction	Person Correlation	.271**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 2: Social Cultural Difference & Local Eating Habit	Person Correlation	.378**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 3: Adapting Local Accommodation & Independently from Parents	Person Correlation	.393**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 4: Academic Performance	Person Correlation	.437**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 5: Language Deficiency	Person Correlation	.406**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Dependent Variable 1: Somatic symptoms	Person Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	245

Figure 6. Correlation: sub-dependent variable 1: somatic symptoms.

		Dependent Variable 2: Anxiety and insomnia
Independent Variable 1: Social Interaction	Person Correlation	.328**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 2: Social Cultural Difference & Local Eating Habit	Person Correlation	.374**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 3: Adapting Local Accommodation & Independently from Parents	Person Correlation	.529**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 4: Academic Performance	Person Correlation	.524**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 5: Language Deficiency	Person Correlation	.498**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Dependent Variable 2: Anxiety and insomnia	Person Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	245

Figure 7. Correlation: sub-dependent variable 2: anxiety and insomnia.

		Dependent Variable 3: Social impairments
Independent Variable 1: Social Interaction	Person Correlation	.292**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 2: Social Cultural Difference & Local Eating Habit	Person Correlation	.419**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 3: Adapting Local Accommodation & Independently from Parents	Person Correlation	.490**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 4: Academic Performance	Person Correlation	.532**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 5: Language Deficiency	Person Correlation	.477**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Dependent Variable 3: Social impairments	Person Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	245

Figure 8. Correlation: sub-dependent variable 3: social impairment.

		Dependent Variable 4: depression
Independent Variable 1: Social Interaction	Person Correlation	.240**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 2: Social Cultural Difference & Local Eating Habit	Person Correlation	.369**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 3: Adapting Local Accommodation & Independently from Parents	Person Correlation	.314**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 4: Academic Performance	Person Correlation	.254**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Independent Variable 5: Language Deficiency	Person Correlation	.283**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	245
Dependent Variable 4: depression	Person Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	N	245

Figure 9. Correlation: sub-dependent variable 4: depression.

Same as the findings from [Yu and Zhang \(2016\)](#), students from Chinese mainland have to face the language barriers, social interactions, political identification, and discrimination when studying in Hong Kong SAR; and findings from [Lian and Tsang \(2010\)](#), students from Chinese mainland may have difficulties in sociocultural adaptation when they were learning and living in Hong Kong SAR, this research finds that the sociocultural adaptation and mental health of students from Chinese mainland have a significant general correlation, and they present a positive correlation. Moreover, each sub-dependent variable below GHQ-28 has a significant and positive correlation with each sub-independent variable below sociocultural adaption. Against the GHQ-28, four sub-indicators can help us to understand the specific mental health issues that students from Chinese mainland have, which are somatic symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, social impairments, and depression. Based on the sociocultural adaptation scale, five sub-indicators have significant relationships with the above mental health issues, which are social interaction, social-cultural difference, local eating habit, adapting local accommo-

dation, and independently from parents, academic performance, and language deficiency.

Improving the mental health of students from Chinese mainland studying in Hong Kong SAR is achievable by enhancing their capacity for acculturation and adaptation. This insight can offer practical suggestions and strategies for higher educational institutions in Hong Kong SAR to effectively address the mental health challenges faced by these students. Based on the General Health Questionnaire-28 (GHQ-28) scale used in this research, mental health issues can be categorized into four distinct symptom clusters: somatic symptoms (which may include physical manifestations such as fatigue and pain), anxiety and insomnia (characterized by persistent worry and difficulties in maintaining sleep), social impairment (indicating struggles in interpersonal relationships and participation in social activities), and depression (encompassing feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and lack of motivation).

The specific categorizations of mental health challenges faced by students from Chinese mainland in Hong Kong SAR provide a framework for a thorough investigation into their unique experiences during their academic pursuits. These challenges may include issues such as anxiety related to academic pressure, cultural adjustment difficulties, language barriers, and feelings of isolation in a foreign environment. By identifying and addressing these distinct areas of concern, educational institutions can develop targeted support services—such as counseling programs, peer support networks, and language assistance resources. This tailored approach not only helps in addressing immediate mental health needs but also promotes a more inclusive and nurturing academic atmosphere, ultimately fostering resilience and well-being among these students as they adapt to their new surroundings.

5. Limitations

This research primarily investigates the correlation between sociocultural adaptation and mental health among students from Chinese mainland studying in Hong Kong SAR. To achieve this, we employed a quantitative methodology, relying on statistical analysis to conclude. However, this approach limited our understanding by excluding the participants' subjective experiences and nuanced descriptions of the mental health challenges they encountered while adapting to life in Hong Kong SAR. In particular, we did not incorporate qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, which could have provided richer insights into their struggles and coping mechanisms.

Additionally, our participant sample was not segmented according to their specific academic majors or programs. This lack of differentiation may have obscured important variations in experiences and adaptation strategies that could be relevant in understanding how mental health varies across different disciplines. Furthermore, while the research explores the correlation between multiple variables, it does not delve into the regression model analysis. Such an analysis could have

offered a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships between the identified variables, shedding light on potential causal links.

Another significant limitation is that we did not consider the participants' socioeconomic backgrounds or their prior mental health issues as control variables. These factors are critical, as they may significantly influence both sociocultural adaptation and mental health outcomes. The absence of this contextual information could introduce inaccuracies and gaps in the final results of our investigation.

In conclusion, we acknowledge these limitations and emphasize that future research should strive to address these gaps. Incorporating qualitative methods, exploring diverse academic perspectives, and considering socioeconomic and psychological histories will enhance the depth and accuracy of findings in this important area of study.

6. Conclusion

This research endeavors to explore the impact of sociocultural adaptation on the mental health of students from Chinese mainland pursuing their studies in the dynamic and multifaceted cultural landscape of Hong Kong SAR. Utilizing a comprehensive questionnaire designed through a dual-scale methodology, the study collects quantitative and qualitative data on both sociocultural adaptation—encompassing factors such as language proficiency, social integration, and cultural immersion—and mental health indicators such as anxiety, depression, and overall psychological well-being. This approach allows for a nuanced analysis of the complex interplay between these variables.

The findings from the data analysis reveal a clear and significant relationship between sociocultural adaptation and mental health. Specifically, each sub-variable of sociocultural adaptation, such as the ability to form local friendships and navigate cultural differences, demonstrates notable correlations with corresponding aspects of mental well-being. These insights suggest that higher educational institutions in Hong Kong SAR ought to implement targeted supportive policies aimed at assisting students from Chinese mainland in effectively navigating the challenges of adjusting to the local culture.

To enhance their educational experience and improve their prospects for employment in Hong Kong SAR, it is particularly beneficial for these students—especially those hailing from regions outside of Cantonese cultural influences—to engage actively with the rich tapestry of Cantonese culture and language. This proactive engagement can take various forms, such as participating in local cultural events, enrolling in language courses, and joining student organizations that foster cultural exchange. Such activities will not only facilitate a smoother integration into the vibrant social milieu of Hong Kong SAR but also support a more fulfilling and enriching academic journey for these international students, ultimately leading to a more successful transition into their future careers.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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