

A Cross-Cultural Study of International Students at Higher Level Education

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Abstract

It is said that culture and personality are correlative terms; that to know the culture of a people is to know the types of personalities to be found within it and that to know the personalities is to understand the culture. International students from different countries interact differently in class and communicate and respond accordingly to their culture. Henceforth, with the help of Hofstede's five cultural dimensions: Power distance, collectivism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance and long term orientation, this study provides an understanding of how students from Thailand and Yemen studying at higher level education interact in class.

Keywords: Culture, International students, higher level education, Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

Introduction

Culture is an accumulation of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, morals, laws, and customs that distinguishes members of one group from another group. Different scholars have defined culture differently. According to Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov (2010), "Culture is the collective programming of mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another." It consists of shared values, beliefs, practices, habits and laws. It is not something that can be inherited it rather describes a group of people who were raised up in the same social environment and shared the same life experiences and education. People learn culture from childhood as they live in a society and a kid learn the basic values, perceptions, wants and behaviors as s/he lives with family, go to school, mix with other kids in the area (Hofstede, et al., 2010; Kotler, et al., 1999). People from different cultural background communicate in different ways. For example, in Thai society pointing with a single finger is considered to be rude and accusatory while in Yemeni society male cannot have direct eye contact with the female as it is considered as a taboo. Similarly, students from different countries carry out different cultural mindsets and they differ in attitude, habits, and beliefs. International students are not students of

their home country, henceforth their expectations and interactions in education are different. In order to understand those differences, Hofstede's cultural dimensions were employed in this paper. Hofstede defines "dimension as an aspect of culture that can be measured relative to other culture." This study sought to compare the five cultural dimensions of Hofstede between Thai and Yemeni students in Higher Education (HE).

Literature Review

Numerous typologies and frameworks have been developed to identify and measure culture but during the last decades, Hofstede's cultural dimensions have been widely used in cross-cultural communication (Saleem, 2012). His cultural dimensions have also been linked to educational culture (Hofstede 2010). He first proposed four cultural dimensions such as power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Later, he introduced a fifth dimension which is long term orientation.

Cooney, Erstad, Keller, & Wang (2015) conducted a survey between aviation students from China and USA. Four cultural dimensions of Hofstede were employed in the study. An independent t test was employed to test the mean scores of the two groups. The t test revealed a significant difference between power distance, masculinity vs. femininity and individualism vs. collectivism but did not indicate a significant difference between uncertainty avoidance.

Dennehy (2015) conducted another survey of 327 students from 37 nationalities studying at a third level institute in Ireland. He employed Hofstede's five cultural dimensions and each item was measured on a five point likert-scale. Another researchers, Rieck, Gerhardt, Eringa, Caudron, & Xie (2017) studied a survey of 1033 international students from Netherlands, Germany, China, South Africa and Qatar to validate Hofstede's result on a new sample. The findings of the research contest many of Hofstede's original findings. The dimension of power distance and long term orientation show significant differences with Hofstede's original country values. The dimensions individualism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance show significant differences from half of the countries.

Rienties & Tempelaar (2013) use a sample of 1257 students in Netherlands between Dutch and International students. The international students were clustered into nine geographical clusters Using Hofstede's cultural dimension scores to relate personal emotional and social adjustment issues.

Mohr, (2010) investigated the relationship between cultural values and the learning styles preferences of students from business administration. The data was collected from 939 students studying at different countries and the VSM94 instrument suggested by Hofstede was employed in the study to measure the cultural values. Payan, Reardon, & McCorkle (2010) focused on the

dimension of individualism/ collectivism when they asked marketing and business students from nine countries about their perceptions of academic honesty and then compared the results obtained against Hofstede's original country scores.

Jayatileke & Gunawardena (2016) conducted a research based on small sample participants from Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Mauritius who were engaged in online learning courses. The research employed Hofstede's and Hall's framework. The result showed that Sri Lankan and Pakistanis showed similar patterns in their recognition that their cultures exhibit characteristics of high power distance, collectivism and feminine values while there were no definite dimensional perspectives from the Mauritians.

Boland (2011) employed Kolb's learning style inventory and Hofstede's value survey module among 244 undergraduate students studying accounting in Japanese, Australian and Belgian universities. The research revealed that the student group from Australia and Belgium tended to be more individualistic in their learning.

Purpose of the study and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to apply Hofstede's five cultural dimensions among the Thai and Yemeni students and to provide a clearer understanding of differences and similarities between eastern and Middle East culture. The following research questions are:

1. How far are Hofstede's cultural dimensions relevant when they come to education?
2. What are the similarities and differences that are prevailed among the Thai and Yemeni students?
3. Does culture have a significant impact on learning?

Method and Data

Twenty five Likert scale items based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions model; Power distance, Collectivism/ Individualism, Masculinity/ Femininity, Uncertainty avoidance and Long term orientation was employed in this research. Each dimension had four items except one dimension which had three items. All the items were measured on a five point likert scale. Respondents were given the option to rate items: 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree. All the research items were derived from a cultural dimensions study conducted by Dennehy (2014) (see table 2).

Since majority of the foreign students studying at Aligarh Muslim University are from Thailand and Yemen, a survey was conducted among these two nationalities. Eighty questionnaires were distributed among the Thai and Yemeni students studying at different departments and seventy-four participants completed the survey of which thirty-seven were from

Thailand and thirty seven from Yemen. Additionally, the questionnaire asked participants for demographic information: gender and educational level.

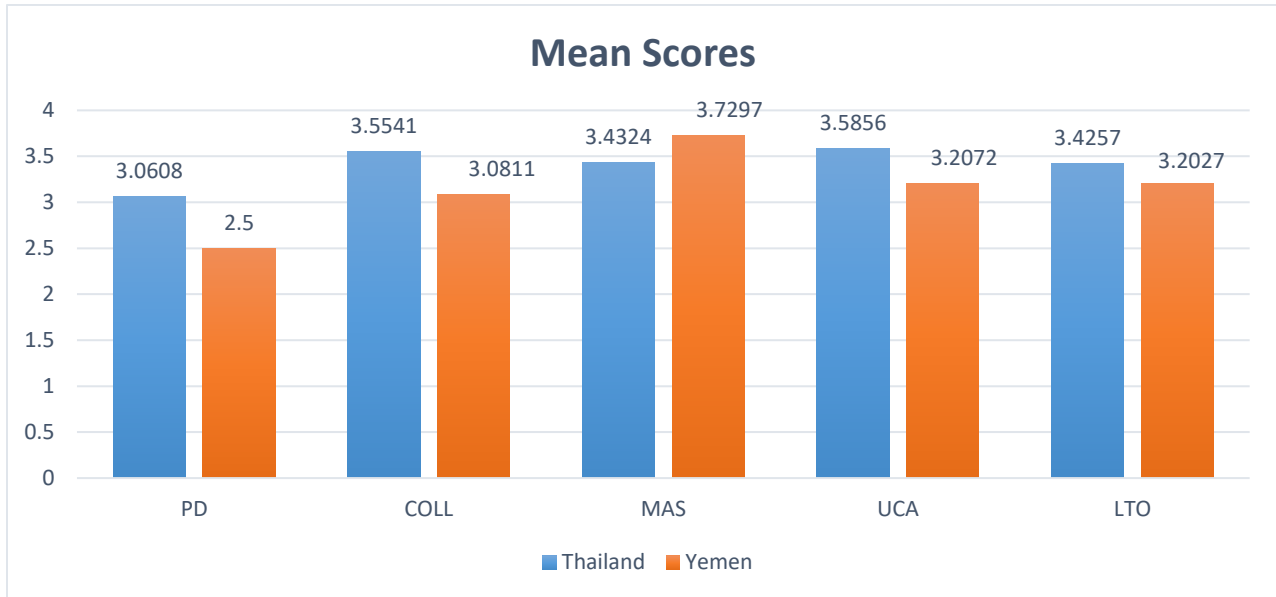
Results

All results were transferred into the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) and an independent t test was conducted to determine if a significant difference exists between the mean scores of the two groups. The data for this study was based on 74 participants. 53 (71.6%) were male and 21 (28.4%) were female. While collecting the data it was found that majority of the students were pursuing BA and Ph.D. 47.3% were in bachelor’s degree, 21.6% were in master’s degree and 31.1 % were in Ph.D. The table below will explain more.

Table 1: Distribution of participants according to their gender, country, and educational level.

Items	Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	53	71.6%
	Female	21	28.4%
Country	Thailand	37	50%
	Yemen	37	50%
Educational level	B.A	35	47.3%
	M.A	16	21.6%
	Ph.D.	23	31.1%

Figure 1: Comparison of cultural dimensions means from Thai and Yemeni students.



Note: PD=power distance, COLL=collectivism vs. individualism, MAS=masculinity vs. femininity, UCA= uncertainty avoidance, LTO= long term orientation.

Discussion

Power Distance

The result of this study indicated that Thailand has a higher power distance than Yemen. Thailand scores 3.0 and Yemen 2.5. Thailand is a hierarchical country in which relationships between teachers and students are based on superiority and they are totally dependent on their teachers when it comes for learning and they believe that teachers should not be contradicted as teachers are perceived as ‘guru’ with ‘personal wisdom’. On the other hands the Yemenis’ students believe that they should not be fully dependent on their teachers and teachers should not always initiate communication first. They are rather expected to find their own intellectual path.

Collectivism v/s Individualism

The Thai students’ responses indicate a more collective traits than the Yemeni students. Loyalty to the group in a collectivist culture is paramount. The society fosters strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their groups. In this study Thailand scores 3.5 while Yemen scores 3.0. Thai students prefer to study in group while the Yemenis students are more self-direct. Moreover, the Thai students speak up only in class when they are invited by the teachers and they always maintain formal harmony in class. On the contrary, the Yemeni students are more opened to confrontation and challenges in class.

Masculinity v/s Femininity

A masculine society is driven by power, competition, achievement, and success. Students in masculine society is more likely to be goal driven. The result of this study showed that Yemen has a more masculinity trait than Thailand. Yemen scores 3.72 while Thailand scores 3.43 on this dimension. The Yemenis students believe that it is good to have competition between students and teacher should rather be brilliant and strict than being friendly in class while the Thai students believe that the teacher should be friendly.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The results of this study indicated that Thailand has a higher uncertainty avoidance than Yemen. Thailand scores 3.5 while Yemen scores 3.2. Thai students’ tend to avoid uncertainties when compared to Yemen. Thai students seem to be less comfortable in handling uncertainties while Yemeni students are more relaxed in dealing with ambiguity.

Long Term Orientation

The score shows that Thailand is 3.4 and Yemen is 3.2. The Thai students denote systematic planning process, careful on risk taking when it comes to learning. In long term orientation students focus on asking how, while in short term orientation culture, students focus on asking why.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to find out the cultural differences and similarities among the Thai and Yemeni students by employing the cultural dimensions of Hofstede. The study revealed a significant difference between the Thai and Yemeni students. Thailand is having a high power distance, collectivistic, high uncertainty avoidance, and long term orientation than Yemen. Yemen on the other side is showing a masculine culture. However, when it comes to education, Hofstede's cultural dimensions seem to be useful. Country from high power distance shows great respect to their teachers and will not dare to contradict their teachers in class. When it comes to collectivism, students show loyalty to their groups. In high uncertainty avoidance, students are strictly adherent to their works and stick to the structured timetable. It is evident that culture has an impact on education. Both Thailand and Yemen are having different cultural background. It is evident from the study that eastern culture is different from Middle East culture.

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Table 2 Items

Power Distance

1. I am totally dependent on my teachers for my Learning.
2. A teacher should not be contradicted by a student.
3. It should always be the teacher to initiate Communication.
4. Students should not ask the teacher questions in class

Collectivism vs. Individualism

1. I prefer to study in group.
2. My family strongly influenced my choice of study.
3. Students should speak up in class only when invited by teachers.
4. Formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained all times.

Masculinity vs. Femininity

1. It is good to have competition between students
2. It is very important that the teacher is friendly.
3. Failing in college is a disaster.
4. Students should choose academic subjects in view of career.

Uncertainty Avoidance

1. It is acceptable for a teacher to say 'I don't know' to a student's question.
2. A good teacher uses plain language not academic language.
3. I feel comfortable in strict timetables and detailed assignment.

Long Term Orientation

1. It is important to make sacrifices in the short term for the long term benefit.
 2. Student failure is due to lack of effort.
 3. I do not really believe in planning things in life.
 4. I plan my time so I can finish my assignments on time.
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