

THE INTEGRATING EFFECT OF HOMESICKNESS, ATTACHMENT AND
SPIRITUAL WELLBEING ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' MENTAL
HEALTH IN MALAYSIA

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To my beloved parents and my dear siblings

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ABSTRACT

One of the numerous exciting experiences encountered by many young people nowadays is related to the transition linked to studying abroad. Many international students face various psychological and mental health problems. The objectives of this study were to identify the differences in mental health across demographic factors and to determine the relationships between homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing with mental health. Besides, the mediating effects of attachment and spiritual wellbeing on the relationship between homesickness and mental health were examined. Moreover, hierarchical guidelines and a structural model of mental health were developed based on the homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs among international postgraduate students in Malaysia. The survey research was used as research design for this study. Through purposive and quota sampling, 442 international postgraduate students were selected from five public research universities in Malaysia. They were asked to complete a set of validated instrument which included four questionnaires of homesickness, adult attachment, spiritual wellbeing, and general health. The findings confirmed that there were significant differences in mental health according to gender, marital status, level of study and nationality. The results also showed that mental health correlated with homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing. Moreover, it was found that the influence of homesickness on mental health was mediated by attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs. Mental health guidelines were developed hierarchically based on homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing in three levels to explore the importance of different factors in each construct. Finally, homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs were able to predict mental health by approximately 67 percent. Mental health could also be significantly predicted by the homesickness construct ($\beta = .683$, $t = 42.538$, $p < .001$), attachment construct ($\beta = .125$, $t = 5.973$, $p < .001$) and spiritual wellbeing construct ($\beta = .139$, $t = 8.698$, $p < .001$). Results of this study would be able to help counsellors raise awareness among international students who are studying in foreign countries. In addition, focusing on the guidelines can help administrators and lecturers in promoting good mental health among international students. This research would also contribute to enhancing mental health level among international students by introducing the positive roles of attachment and spiritual wellbeing to help reduce the negative effects of homesickness on mental health that may occur during their stay abroad.

ABSTRAK

Antara pengalaman yang mengujakan dialami oleh ramai golongan muda dewasa ini adalah berkaitan dengan peralihan yang dikaitkan dengan pengajian di luar negara. Ramai di kalangan pelajar antarabangsa mengalami pelbagai masalah kesihatan psikologi dan mental. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti perbezaan kesihatan mental merentasi faktor demografi yang berbeza, dan mengenalpasti hubungan antara perasaan rindu, keterikatan dan kesejahteraan rohaniah dengan kesihatan mental. Di samping itu, kesan pengantara bagi keterikatan dan kesejahteraan rohaniah terhadap hubungan antara perasaan rindu dan kesihatan mental turut diteliti dalam kajian ini. Selain itu, garis panduan hierarki dan model struktur kesihatan mental dibangunkan berdasarkan konstruk perasaan rindu, keterikatan dan kesejahteraan rohaniah di kalangan pelajar pasca siswazah antarabangsa di Malaysia. Kajian tinjauan telah digunakan sebagai reka bentuk kajian bagi kajian ini. Dengan menggunakan persampelan bertujuan dan kuota, seramai 442 pelajar pasca siswazah antarabangsa telah dipilih daripada lima universiti penyelidikan awam di Malaysia. Mereka diminta untuk melengkapkan satu set instrumen yang telah disahkan yang mengandungi empat soal selidik untuk mengukur tahap kerinduan, hubungan dewasa, kesejahteraan rohani dan kesihatan umum. Hasil kajian mengesahkan bahawa terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan dalam kesihatan mental mengikut jantina, status perkahwinan, tahap pengajian dan kewarganegaraan. Dapatan turut menunjukkan bahawa kesihatan mental adalah saling berkaitan dengan rindu, keterikatan dan kesejahteraan rohani. Selain itu, didapati bahawa pengaruh rindu ke atas kesihatan mental adalah dipengaruhi oleh kesan pengantara bagi konstruk keterikatan dan kesejahteraan rohani. Garis panduan mental telah dibangunkan secara hierarki berdasarkan rindu, keterikatan dan kesejahteraan rohani dalam tiga tahap untuk meneroka kepentingan faktor yang berbeza dalam setiap konstruk. Akhir sekali, rindu, keterikatan dan kesejahteraan rohani dapat meramalkan kesihatan mental sebanyak kira-kira 67 peratus. Kesihatan mental juga boleh diramalkan secara signifikan oleh konstruk rindu ($\beta = .683$, $t = 42.538$, $p < .001$), konstruk keterikatan ($\beta = .125$, $t = 5.973$, $p < .001$), dan konstruk kesejahteraan rohani ($\beta = .139$, $t = 8.698$, $p < .001$). Hasil kajian ini akan dapat membantu para kaunselor untuk meningkatkan kesedaran di kalangan para pelajar pasca siswazah antarabangsa yang sedang menuntut di negara-negara asing. Di samping itu, tumpuan kepada garis panduan tersebut dapat membantu pentadbir dan pensyarah dalam usaha mempromosi kesihatan mental yang baik dalam kalangan pelajar antarabangsa. Kajian ini juga akan menyumbang kepada peningkatan tahap kesihatan mental di kalangan pelajar antarabangsa dengan memperkenalkan peranan positif keterikatan dan kesejahteraan rohani untuk membantu mengurangkan kesan negatif daripada rindu ke atas kesihatan mental yang mungkin berlaku semasa mereka menginap di luar negara.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Ha	-	Alternative Hypotheses
ANOVA	-	Analysis of Variance
CDC	-	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
DSM	-	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
DPM	-	Dual Process Model
GHQ	-	General Health Questionnaire
HQ	-	Homesickness Questionnaire
ISC	-	International Students' Centers
ISPWS	-	International Student' Psychological Wellbeing Scale
K-economy	-	Knowledge Based Economy
MGA	-	Multi Group Analysis
MIDUS	-	Midlife in the United States
MOHE	-	Ministry of Higher Education
NAMI	-	National Alliance on Mental Illness
NHESP	-	National Higher Education Strategic Plan
NICA	-	National Interfaith Coalition on Aging
NIMH	-	National Institute of Mental Health
OECD	-	Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development
RQ	-	Research Questions

RU	-	Research University
SAD	-	Separation Anxiety Disorder
SD	-	Standard Deviation
SEM	-	Structural Equation Modelling
SMC	-	Squared Multiple Correlation
SPSS	-	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SWBQ	-	Spiritual Wellbeing Questionnaire
UKM	-	Universiti Kerabasa Malaysia
UM	-	Universiti Malay
UNESCO	-	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UPM	-	Universiti Putra Malaysia
USM	-	Universiti Sains Malasis
UTM	-	Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
WHO	-	World Health Organisation

LIST OF SYMBOLS

β	-	Path Coefficient
k	-	Kappa Value
p	-	Significance level
r	-	Correlation Coefficient Value
R^2	-	Determination Coefficient
t		t-statistic Value
σ^2	-	Variance

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Today, the scenario in which people spend their whole lives in one place is no longer true for many. Thus, individuals around the world experience major changes in their lives when relocating and these variations require them to adapt to new situations. One of the important reasons for moving is relocating to pursue higher education. Moving meant that individuals would now have to make contact with people from different backgrounds (cultural, religions, social economic statuses, beliefs and so on). In other words, people today spend less time in environments familiar to them compared to people in the past because of issues such as migration, international tourism, dispatchments and international exchange programs (Vingerhoets, 2005; Stroebe et al., 2015).

In general, relocating to a new place induces strain. Moving from one familiar environment to a new and strange environment for whatever reason is usually considered as a stressful process. Problems contributing to the process can be categorised into two categories. The first is associated with factors relating to missing out on familiar environment such as one's mother tongue, pre-existing social networks, accustomed geographic and architectural environments, local food and arts. The second category is linked with the concerns arising from the need to adapt to the new host country such as difficulties in learning the new, local language, understanding new, acceptable behavioral patterns, fostering new social networks

and facing the new local population with negative attitude (Tartakovsky, 2007; Mirsky, 2009; Jibeen, 2011).

Nowadays, one of the numerous exciting experiences encountered by many young people is related to the transition linked to studying abroad. Many international students face various psychological problems which can be classified into two categories (Sandhu, 1994; Furnham, 2010). The first is intrapersonal factors, which have roots in personal sense such as a profound sense of loss, sense of inferiority and sense of uncertainty about the future. The second is interpersonal concerns, which is related to environment, cultural background and surroundings. These factors may lead to homesickness, communication problems, cultural shock and the loss of social support systems (Sandhu, 1994; Furnham, 2010). This study focused on one of the aforementioned factors, homesickness, as it is one of the most common consequences of migrating for educational purposes.

Homesickness is a depression-like reaction. It is also a normative pathology and can be defined as distress caused by separation from home and close relationships that can lead to intense preoccupation and ruminations about the previous environment as well as having a strong longing to return to the old environment (Eurelings-Bontekoe *et al.*, 1994; Soltani *et al.*, 2011). Homesickness can occur in mild or severe forms. Severe homesickness can result in unsustainable movement and create demanding situations for individuals (Thurber and Walton, 2012). Along with other daily problems related to the migration, these individuals also face negative impacts on their mental health.

Good and sound mental health may contribute to an increase of productivity and efficiency, especially in the lives of young adults and students. However, Negative and unavoidable events in life such as homesickness can affect university students' mental health (AhmadiGatab, 2011). Nonetheless, although the transition from living at home to living away from home represents a significant stress, the modern day men have long been enforced to break the bonds with their home environment and attempt to adjust to new stressful situations (Vingerhoets, 2005). To support students who suffer from the effects of profound health consequences, part of

this study focused on the mental health issues resulting from pathological impacts of homesickness.

Moreover, it is likely that other factors apart from homesickness have influence on students' mental health. Therefore, this study sought to identify the effectiveness of other theoretical factors (attachment and spiritual wellbeing) towards mental health as well. In general, there were two parts in this study. Firstly, the study investigated the relationships between mental health (dependent variable) and homesickness (independent variable) among international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia. Secondly, the study explored the role of attachment and spiritual wellbeing as two mediator variables in the relationship between mental health and homesickness among the targeted population.

1.2 Research Background

As noted earlier, it was hypothesised that international students' mental health can be affected by homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing. Therefore, this brief literature review focused on the key terms of this study such as mental health, homesickness, attachment, spiritual wellbeing and international students by establishing the context, background and importance of the topic.

Increased number of mental disorders and psychological problems - Mental health is a global agenda that receives the attention of many. Previous studies found that mental disorders have an effect on all age group, and is associated with considerable economic and social costs (Campos, 2007; Sarmiento, 2015). In addition, the number of mental disorders occurrences among the population of education students had been growing increasingly (Castillo and Schwartz, 2013; Eisenberg, Gollust, Golberstein and Hefner, 2007). The number of higher education students who sought counselling help attested the severity of the psychological problems faced by the said group of individuals (Hunt and Eisenberg, 2010; Zivin, Eisenberg, Gollust and Golberstein, 2009). According to Gallagher (2013), from the National Survey of College Counselling Centres, there was a considerable increase

of students suffering from severe psychological problems (82%), students who require immediate intervention in crisis situations (80%), issues of medication (73%), learning disabilities (61%), consumption and abuse of illegal drug (52%), self-inflicted injury problems (48%), sexual abuse on campus (40%), eating disorders (34%), alcohol abuse problems (34%) and concerns about career planning (30%) (Gallagher, 2013). Based on the mentioned factors and percentages, this study chose to focus on psychological problems as it was the most glaring issue. Additionally, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) 2008, 16.8% of the global psychological disorders are related to cases reported in Malaysia.

The severity of psychological problems among international students -

According to previous studies among international students, several factors contributed to poor mental health including limited English proficiency (Kim *et al.*, 2011; Kono *et al.*, 2014;), sleep disturbance (Sentell *et al.*, 2007; Kaneita *et al.*, 2009; Kono *et al.*, 2014) and financial struggles (Cuthbertson, 2004; Eisenberg, 2007; Ross, 2006; Soh, 2012). In addition, many international students are confronted with different problems. The typical problems include issues in relation to health, human relationship, study and finance (Kim *et al.*, 2010). According to a recent study (Masoume, 2011), there are two main disturbing categories of problems among international students in Malaysia. They consist of social and recreational problems, which subsequently lead to mental health problems in Malaysian international students. These results are consistent with the findings of Allahdad (2010) and Lin & Yi (1997). To conclude, Many cases of mental pressure is associated with migrating to a foreign country and adapting to a different lifestyle. The pressure resulting from the above factors may put immigrants at the risk of contracting both physical and mental health issues (Ha, 2008; Kim and Yoo, 2016). Lindner (1940) reported that about 60 to 70% of students who settle at a university develop feelings of distress and homesickness (Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets and Van Heck, 1999; Soltani *et al.*, 2011). Of these, seven to ten percent suffered from a severe form of homesickness (Eurelings-Bontekoe, Brouwers, Verschuur and Duijsens, 1998; Soltani *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, homesickness is a common experience among students and this study chose to focus on homesickness as an independent variable and mental health as a dependent variable.

The significant role of host country according to international students -

The host country also has a significant role to play to ensure that international students' wellbeing is taken care of. As an example, Van Tilburg *et al.* (1997) indicated that individuals with more social support were less likely to suffer from psychological issues compared to individuals who received less social support or perceived so. Urani *et al.* (2003) also found that social support was negatively related to homesickness. Furthermore, students in a foreign country often reported having problems interacting with members of the host country and adjusting to daily life. These additional stressors may lead to depressive symptoms (Spencer-Oatety and Xiong, 2006). Therefore, Malaysia was chosen as a host country in the present study regarding to focus on the international students' who were studying in Malaysia. Moreover, the prevalence of diseases and poor health behaviours among international students may be caused by different socio-cultural backgrounds and lifestyles (Chen, 2007; Kim and Yoo, 2016). Given that, the results of many previous studies in the area of students' mental health were inconsistent between countries (Araya, 2003; Sarmiento, 2015). In addition, limited researches on the mentioned issue had been conducted in Asia (Randall *et al.*, 1998; Sarmiento, 2015). Therefore, it was found that there was a knowledge gap to be filled. Thus, this study focused on the wellbeing and mental health of international students in Malaysia.

Estimating the growing number of international students - Based on the report of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2009), 3.7 million tertiary students were enrolled in an institution outside of their home country. The percentage represented an increase of 77% since the year 2000. The estimate projects that world demand for international higher education will increase to some 7.2 million or more in 2025 (Bohm *et al.*, 2002; OECD, 2011; Zhao and Douglass, 2012). Therefore, it is very likely that the number of international students will continue to increase around the world, therefore more related study are needed to investigate their psychological problems and issues. Moreover, according to Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia was ranked 11th in a list of the world's most desirable destination for international students (MOHE, 2011). In the fast growing education sector, Malaysia has contributed to two percent of the global marketing for overseas students' sharing. Malaysia is also one of the biggest hubs of overseas students. It was estimated that there were more than 90,000 international students currently

pursuing their studies in Malaysia (Yusoff and Chelliah, 2010; Njie, Asimiran and Baki, 2012; Ministry of Higher Education, 2012; Grapragasem et al. 2014; Kumar and Yang, 2014; Mosbah and Saleh, 2014). In accordance to this, the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE; 2012) has set a target of attracting 200,000 foreign students to Malaysia by the year 2020. Therefore, it is important that studies about international students' experiences, wellbeing and other related factors are conducted. The results from this study will be able to help MOHE achieves its target.

1.3 Problem Statements

Major changes toward international student's lifestyle - According to previously conducted studies, transitioning to college or university among international students was associated with problematic phenomenon of homesickness (Arthur and Popadiuk, 2004). It was found that homesickness was prevalent and associated with poorer mental health, which made the move more difficult or at times, unsustainable (Stroebe, Schut and Nauta, 2015). Individuals who suffer from homesickness typically reported exacerbated pre-existing mood, depression and anxiety disorders, withdrawn behaviours and difficulty to focus on topics unrelated to home (Arthur and Popadiuk, 2004). Thus, as confirmed by many past researches, it can be concluded that mental health problems and homesickness are interrelated. In addition to the difficulties of leaving their homes and families, international students also experience stress and anxiety related to their studies. In other words, the students were found to be preoccupied with their academic tasks as well as environment difficulty (McKinlay *et al.*, 1996). Moreover, it was ascertained that homesickness precipitate new physical and mental health problems, which may cause withdrawal from school (Arthur and Popadiuk, 2004). Since one of the objectives of students going abroad to study is to be successful, they need to be in good physical and mental health. Therefore, one of the goals of this study was to help foreign students gain gratifying, productive and healthy educational experience.

Limited numbers of studies related to supportive variables - Previously conducted studies only yielded information on a limited number of psychological variables and did not focus on how students can apply the knowledge found to change their lifestyles and gain better mental health. There are many studies which covers the mental health issue among the academic population. However, only a few studies focused on a particular program or real action that can meet the students' needs (Eisenberg, 2007; Sarmiento, 2015; Soh, 2012). Considering the substantial gap in the understanding of homesickness and its effects on students' mental health, this study aimed to ascertain efficient and helpful ways to assist students achieve satisfying achievements and better mental health. In addition, this study investigated strategies to improve the conditions of homesick students with poor mental health by ascertaining the indirect roles played by "attachment" and "spiritual wellbeing".

Unique situation of Malaysia as a destination for international students - By setting a target of 200,000 foreign students pursuing their studies in Malaysia by the year 2020, student mobility is bound to increase. Hence, for countries such as Malaysia, in which the phenomenon is relatively new, more studies involving international student samples in the country is needed (Murthy, 2008). It was predicted that if university counsellors do not consider the importance of international students' mental health problems, the number of international students enrolling in Malaysian universities will drop in the future. Being supported by several reports, universities in Malaysia have a strong foundation and unique competitive to be the leaders in Southeast Asian higher education. In line with that, Malaysia still has the potential of providing opportunity for foreign students (Muda, 2008). In spite of this, a majority of studies among international students were conducted in America, the United Kingdom and Australia as they are the traditional destinations for foreign students (Cetinkaya-Yildiz, Cakir, and Kondakci, 2011). Since Malaysia is still growing to become the main educational centre in the Southeast Asia region, there is a need for studies in this area as results may shed light on the intensity and priority of international students' decision in pursuing their studies in Malaysia.

Ultimately, literature shows that there is a lack of empirical studies and critical analyses of several components towards mental health issues among international students, especially in Malaysia. Therefore, this research sought to discover the relationships between those components to enhance students' awareness about the aspects of homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing, which can then help them to improve or sustain better mental health. In accordance to the above goal, the present research sought to investigate the influence of "attachment" and "spiritual wellbeing" as mediator variables on the relationship between "homesickness" and "mental health" among international students in Malaysia.

1.4 Research Objectives

This study aimed to overcome the aforementioned problems through six main research objectives:

1. To identify the differences in mental health across demographic factors (gender, marital status, level of study, nationality and location of study) among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.
2. To identify the relationships between mental health construct with homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.
3. To examine the mediating effects of attachment on the relationship between mental health and homesickness among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.
4. To examine the mediating effects of spiritual wellbeing on the relationship between mental health and homesickness among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

5. To develop a hierarchical guideline of mental health based on homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.
6. To develop a structural model of mental health based on homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

1.5 Research Questions

Six research questions established for the investigation of this study are as below:

1. Are there any differences in the mean scores of mental health across demographic factors (gender, marital status, level of study, nationality and location of study) among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia?
2. Are there any relationships between mental health construct with homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia?
3. Does attachment mediate the relationship between mental health and homesickness construct among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia?
4. Does spiritual wellbeing mediate the relationship between mental health and homesickness construct among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia?

5. What hierarchical mental health guideline could be developed based on the homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs among the international postgraduate students from the five public research universities in Malaysia?
6. What structural model could be developed to predict mental health based on homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs among the international postgraduate students from the five public research universities in Malaysia?

1.6 Research Hypotheses

Four main alternative hypotheses were identified in this study. In alternative hypothesis one, there were five sub-hypotheses. In alternative hypothesis two, there were three sub-hypotheses. To summarise, eight sub-hypotheses were investigated. Additionally, both the third and fourth research questions had only one hypothesis each. Finally, the fifth and sixth research questions did not have any hypothesis.

Ha 1: There will be significant differences in the mean scores of mental health across demographic factors (gender, marital status, level of study, nationality and location of study) among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 1a: There will be a significant mean difference in mental health across genders among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 1b: There will be a significant mean difference in mental health across marital statuses among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 1c: There will be a significant mean difference in mental health across the levels of study among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 1d: There will be a significant mean difference in mental health across nationalities among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 1e: There will be a significant mean difference in mental health across the locations of study among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 2: There will be significant relationships between homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs with mental health construct among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 2a: There will be a significant relationship between mental health and homesickness construct among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 2b: There will be a significant relationship between mental health and attachment construct among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 2c: There will be a significant relationship between mental health and spiritual wellbeing construct among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 3: Attachment will significantly mediate the relationship between homesickness and mental health construct among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

Ha 4: Spiritual wellbeing will significantly mediate the relationship between homesickness and mental health construct among the international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia.

1.7 Significance of the Study

Today's youth are the leaders and future of tomorrow and students are a part of that group. However, there are plenty of empirical evidence showing that the increased of stress levels can have a detrimental impact on the academic performance and other life aspects of university students. These effects may be harmful and adverse to their development and growth (Chow, 2007; Deroma *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, students are exposed to several risks such as homesickness during this stage as they deal with the fulfilment of specific duties, which includes living in a new environment with new requirements (AhmadiGatab, 2011). Therefore, close attention should be paid towards the mental health of students who migrate abroad to pursue their studies. In this regard, this study focused on the relationship between mental health and homesickness among international students in Malaysia. The significance of this study is discussed further in the following sections: practical and academic significance. Practical significance is related to the practical application of the result of the study to improve the level of the psychological wellbeing among international students. Academic significance refers to the combination of the four variables under study (homesickness, attachment, spiritual wellbeing, and mental health) that provide important information that were not found or investigated from previous studies.

1.7.1 Practical Significance

Students have to be responsible of their own psychological wellbeing. One of the way to help students cope with psychological issues is by raising awareness in regards to their customs and beliefs. By doing so, parties involved would be able to understand the various definitions of being psychologically well better as different societies may interpret the term differently. This would then be a helpful solution to the difficulties faced by international students in their new environments. While students try to understand and change their wrong beliefs and attitudes, stress levels will decrease. Thus, it allowing them to have better functioning in their lives, especially in their academic performance and achievement. The results of this study

will therefore be valuable for students or any other individuals who experience poor mental health upon migrating.

In addition, students are an integral part of the younger population in any society and they are the destiny makers of their country's tomorrow (El-Gendawy *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, all related organisations have to be responsible and include students as a source of production and transmission of knowledge. They have the duty of recognising mental health issues and solving psychological problems such as homesickness, depression and anxiety in students. In addition, college and university counsellors need to make deliberate efforts to help students (McKinlay *et al.*, 1996) and they must also play an important role to assist international students with their adjustment issues (Vajirakachorn, 2004). Therefore, this study hoped to provide one of the steps towards identifying the factors contributing to the increase of mental health issues among international students. With that knowledge, parties involved will be able to assist students who experience homesickness and decrease the number of mental disorder cases.

Moreover, although the infrastructure in Malaysia is well developed, more research can be helpful for more improvements in the said area and other areas as well. This is to enable the country to be a more attractive and strong education destination. Researching more about Malaysian education system especially issues involving international students will provide valuable information and paint a positive impression about studying in Malaysia. Additionally, counselling services with the aim of promoting higher education should be introduced by the government to help students cope better with their psychological and mental health problems. It would also be able to assist students to significantly adjust to their new environment and lifestyle without risking their health. Advances in research on the discussed topic may aid in both the development and improvement of counselling services, which in turn will help students be more academically and socially successful. On a long term basis, this could result in a higher degree of good mental health and lower degree of homesickness.

Finally, Malaysian government and relevant stakeholders such as Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) can attempt to develop programs and action plans suited to the real needs of the international student population by findings of the present study. The results would provide a more adequate and embracing program which would aid in the general improvement of mental health among international students in Malaysia. Moreover, it could be useful for university counselling centres to create awareness and inform students about the risks of homesickness and help them to identify their attachment patterns and spiritual beliefs. Therefore, related organisations can help international students to maintain a good level of mental health and to prevent mental disorders.

To summarise, this study will be able to contribute new findings which will be fruitful for migrating students and counsellors, especially mental health professionals and those working closely with students. This study will also provide important information to relevant stakeholders, such as the Malaysian Ministry of Education, foreign embassies and both public and private universities in Malaysia. With the results acquired from this study, they will be able to consider implementing the effective ways to improve access for students with disabilities and mental health issues. The results would also contribute towards improving the welfare of international students in this country. This research will also present important data for researchers who could then add important information to the body of knowledge about international students' issues.

1.7.2 Academic Significance

The significance of this study in the academic setting was to provide additional literature on the said research area to the body of knowledge in regards to the relationship between “homesickness”, “attachment”, “spiritual wellbeing” and “mental health”. In addition, this study will provide the mediating role of “attachment” and “spiritual wellbeing” on the relationship between “mental health” and “homesickness” in different ways to the body of knowledge. Moreover, this study aimed to provide a theoretical framework that supports the influence of

“homesickness”, “attachment” and “spiritual wellbeing” on “mental health”. The theoretical framework can be a starting point for studies in the context of mental health especially among international students.

As the number of international students in Malaysian universities increase, the need to understand and address their psychological and cross cultural adjustment to this country also becomes more important (Yusoff and Chelliah, 2010). Therefore, by identifying the current issues and concerns relating to international students’ mental health in Malaysia, this study will provide informative insight for researchers and relevant experts to continue related studies and fulfil the academic gap in the purpose of developing a brighter future for the Malaysian education system. Similarly, since the number of international students continues to increase around the world, this study will be useful for other researchers from other countries to consider more about the factors studied in this research in their future research.

1.8 Research Scope

In this section, the research scope is examined. They include discussion about the participants of the study and instruments used.

1.8.1 Participants

To investigate students’ psychological wellbeing, this study focused on international postgraduate students. The study was carried out in five public research universities in Malaysia namely: UTM (Universiti Teknologi Malaysia), UM (University of Malaya), UPM (Universiti Putra Malaysia), UKM (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) and USM (Universiti Sains Malaysia) in the academic year 2014-2015. The population of the study was 12,732 international postgraduate students (based on the report from International Students’ Centres, 2014). In this study, the final sample size was 442 students, which fulfilled beyond the requirement of minimum sample size needed.

1.8.2 Instruments

To obtain the necessary information needed by this study, a set of questionnaire was used. The questionnaire consisted of five parts. Part A measured the homesickness construct and was developed by Archer *et al.* (1998). Part B investigated the attachment construct and was developed by Collins and Read (1990). Next, Part C looked into the spiritual wellbeing construct and was developed by Gomez and Fisher (2002). Part D measured individual's general health with 28 items and was developed by Goldberg (1978). Lastly, Part E consisted of demographic questions such as gender, marital status, level of study, nationality and location of study.

1.9 Research Theoretical Framework

Three theories were integrated in this study namely: (1) The Dual Process Model (DPM; Stroebe and Schut, 1999), (2) the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; Collins and Read, 1990) and (3) Fisher's Model of Spiritual Wellbeing (Fisher, 1998). A brief outline of these theories is presented in the next sections. They are discussed in detailed in Chapter 2.

1.9.1 The Dual Process Model (DPM)

The development of the Dual Process Model or DPM was originally intended as a way to conceptualise the way people dealt with the loss of loved ones (Stroebe and Schut, 1999). By integrating some essential aspects of two different approaches including the attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980) and cognitive stress theories (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), the end result was named the Dual Process Model. DPM attempts to explain the grieving process based on combining the main concepts of attachment and cognitive stress theories. This model was established from loss-orientation and restoration-orientation, which are two aspects of the grieving process.

Loss-orientation refers to the loss experience itself and is also related to concentrating and coping with loss. On the other hand, restoration-orientation refers to efforts to adjust and adapt with the new and demanding situation after loss (Stroebe and Schut, 1999).

With the application of this model, homesickness can be described as a “mini-grief” experience and also a form of bereavement (Stroebe *et. al.*, 2002). The new explanation of homesickness is useful for literature as many different populations experience the said phenomenon (Willis *et. al.*, 2003). Since homesickness is considered as the emotional reaction to loss of significant persons, some emotional reactions similar to grief reactions following death can be estimated. In relation to international students, the ability of these individuals to overcome the grieving process related to the absence of their families and friends or loss of home along with trying to adjust and adapt in new situations are the key elements of this theory (Stroebe *et. al.*, 2002).

Moreover, the loss-model of Fisher (1989), which is based on the comparison between homesickness and grief, reported that losing is a similar cause that leads to distress. In regards to DPM predictions, for a successful adaptation, the fluctuation between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented is necessary. It is also predicted that students’ wellbeing is affected by confronting with the fact of leaving home and adapting to the new environment successfully. Thus, the theoretical foundation of DPM can be classified into two elements. The first is related to missing attachments in one’s home environment, families and friends while the second is associated with difficulties in the new environment such as adaptation (Stroebe and Schut, 1999).

Therefore, it would be logical to assume that there is a relationship between homesickness and mental health, since the restoration-oriented stage is related to adapting with new situation to achieve the optimal level of mental health. Accordingly, based on the Dual Process Model (DPM) by Stroebe and Schut (2002), the homesickness level among students in this study was assessed by two similar categories, namely “attachment to home” and “dislike the university” (Archer *et al.*, 1998).

1.9.2 Attachment Theory

The attachment theory is a concept resulting from the cooperation of John Bowlby (1969) and Mary Ainsworth (1985). Following some extensive research by Bowlby, it was formulated that the attachment theory originated from several factors; cognitive and developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, cybernetics, ethnology and socio-biology as well as information processing (Bretherton, 1992). According to Bowlby's theory (1973), the most important aspect of attachment is that the nature and quality of relationships are largely determined by the caregiver's emotional availability and responsiveness to the child's needs.

The attachment theory makes connections between early experience and later functioning in the case of interpersonal and emotional relationships. "Working models" mediate this connection as internal representations. The repeated interactions between infant and caregiver resulted in the appearance of working models (Bowlby, 1973; Bretherton, 1990). In addition, Bowlby (1973) labeled "working models" as mental representations, which is referred to the expectation of infants in the case of accessibility and responsiveness of parents or other attachment figures. The "working models" are complementary and mutually confirms the view of people as worthy or unworthy of care (Bowlby, 1973).

According to the applied model of attachment in this study, individuals can be classified into three categories of attachment: Close, Depend and Anxiety (Collins and Read, 1990). The dimension labelled as Close is a good illustration of how important attachment organisation is and the term also refers to the desire of wanting to form close contacts with attachment figures. Therefore, based on the attachment model by Collins and Read (1990), it could be assumed that there was a relationship between the three attachment patterns and mental health level. Accordingly, in this study, the attachment level among students was assessed by three similar categories, namely "Close", "Depend" and "Anxiety" (Collins and Read, 1990).

1.9.3 Fisher's Model of Spiritual Wellbeing

By using the definition of spiritual wellbeing from the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (NICA; 1975), Fisher (1998) proposed the term of spiritual wellbeing as a hierarchical multi-dimensional model. The model includes four secondary dimensions which are related to the spiritual wellbeing aspect. They are personal, communal, environmental and transcendental (Fisher, 1998; Fisher, Francis and Johnson, 2000; Gomez and Fisher, 2003). Later on, Fisher (1999) expanded NICA's statement in light of extensive literature search and his own research to broaden the description of spiritual wellbeing as a fundamental dimension of people's overall health and well-being and to integrate other dimensions of health.

The proposed model of spiritual wellbeing by Fisher (1998) falls under four headings: **(1) Personal domain** is about intra-relates with oneself. This domain consisted of having meaning, purpose and values in life. Also included self-awareness, self-worth, self-esteem and identity; **(2) Communal domain** is associated with the quality and depth of inter-personal relationships between self and others which originates from morality, culture and religion. This includes love, forgiveness, trust, hope and faith in humanity; **(3) Environmental domain** is related to caring and nurturing for the physical and biological, to a sense of awe and wonder. For some people, it is the notion of unity and connectedness with the environment; and **(4) Transcendental domain** is expressed by the relationship of self with something or someone beyond the human level, a transcendent such as ultimate concern, cosmic force or God. This involves faith toward, adoration and worship of, and the source of mystery of the universe. In this model, spiritual wellbeing is reflected in the quality of relationships that people have with the four domains of spiritual health.

Therefore, it would be logical to assume that there is a relationship between spiritual wellbeing and mental health, since spiritual health is related to achieve the optimal level of mental health. Accordingly, based on the spiritual wellbeing model by Fisher (1998), in this study, the level of spiritual wellbeing among students was assessed by four similar categories, namely "personal", "communal", "environment" and "transcendental" (Fisher, 2012).

1.10 Research Conceptual Framework

This research can be divided into two parts. The first was to investigate the direct relationships between homesickness, attachment, and spiritual wellbeing with mental health. In this case, homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing were the independent variables while mental health served as the dependent variable. This study also explored the indirect relationship between homesickness and mental health with the mediating roles of attachment and spiritual wellbeing separately. In this case, homesickness was the independent variable, mental health was the dependent variable and both attachment and spiritual wellbeing were the mediator variables. The sub-constructs of all four variables included in this study are as reported in the research's conceptual framework. Figure 1.1 shows the model clearly illustrates the two parts of the study as well the sub-constructs involved.

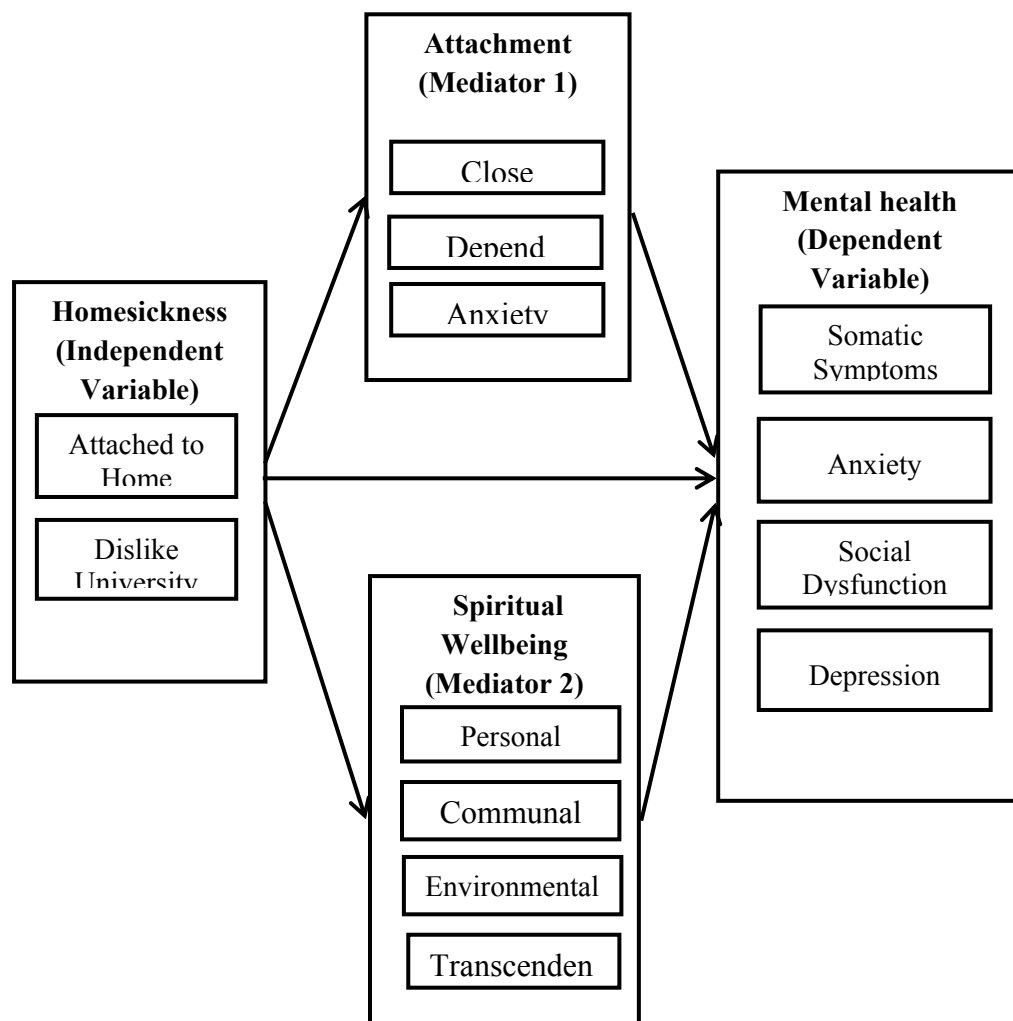


Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework of the Study

1.11 Conceptual and Operational Definitions

Conceptual definitions refer to the elements of the research process, which makes clear what the specific concept means as a measurable occurrence. Conceptual understanding of the terms is an important foundation of any research. This comprehension is labelled as operational definitions (Fraenkel *et al.*, 1993). These terms in this study are mental health, homesickness, attachment, spiritual wellbeing and international postgraduate students. The following section provides the widely used concepts in this study based on conceptual and operational definitions respectively.

1.11.1 Homesickness

Conceptual - Fisher and Hood (1987) described homesickness as a complex cognitive–motivational–emotional state, which involves grieving and obsession about one’s home. Homesickness is also defined as a negative emotional state characterised by recurrent thoughts of home, missing friends, the desire to go back to the familiar environment and often co-occurring physical complaints (Nijhof and Engels, 2007).

Operational - In this study, homesickness is referred to an individual’s emotional state in two categories (attachment to home and disliking university). It was measured using Archer *et al.* (1998)’s homesickness questionnaire. High scores on each sub-construct showed that a person is in a severe state of homesickness with negative ruminations about home and current environment.

1.11.2 Attachment

Conceptual - Attachment described as a nature and quality of early relationships are largely determined by a caregiver's emotional availability and responsiveness to the child's needs and attachment quality has been shown to predict future behaviours (Bowlby, 1973). Attachment is also defined as specific emotional and behavioural responses towards the separation from and the reunion with attachment figures, as well as the reaction to the presence of strangers (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978).

Operational - In this study, attachment is referred to three types of individual's emotional response (close, anxiety and depend). It was measured using the adult attachment scale developed by Collins and Read (1996). High scores on each sub-constructs demonstrated that a person is comfortable with intimacy and closeness and is able to depend on others without the fear or worry about being rejected by others.

1.11.3 Spiritual Wellbeing

Conceptual - The term "spiritual health" refers to an essential aspect of individuals into two broad types of health and well-being. This definition intends to integrate all the other dimensions of people's health such as the mental, physical, social, emotional and vocational (Fisher, 2011). Spiritual wellbeing also can be defined as a feeling of communicating with others, having meaning and goal in life and having belief and relationship with an exalted power (Hawks *et al.*, 1995).

Operational - In this study, spiritual wellbeing is defined as a reflection to the quality of relationships that people develop in four areas (with themselves, others, the environment and transcendent). It was measured using the spiritual wellbeing questionnaire developed by Gomez and Fisher (2002). High scores on each sub-construct illustrated that a person feels harmony in his or her relationship with each mentioned area.

1.11.4 Mental Health

Conceptual - Mental health is the state of an individual's emotional and psychological well-being. Individuals with sound mental health can use their cognitive and emotional capabilities to play their functions in society. They are also able to meet the basic needs of daily life (Farlex Partner Medical Dictionary, 2012). Based on the definition by World Health Organisation (WHO; 2001), mental health is an essential and fundamental need for individuals at any time. WHO (2007) also defined mental health as a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully and is able to make an individual contribution to his or her community.

Operational - In this study, mental health refers to an individual's emotional wellbeing which helps inhibit he or she from experiencing disorders in four categories (somatic symptoms, anxiety, social dysfunction and depression). It was assessed using the general health questionnaire developed by Goldberg (1978). Given the positive term, low scores on each sub-construct demonstrated that a person was in a good state of mental health.

1.11.5 International Students

Conceptual - According to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2010), international students are those who travel to a country different from their own for the purpose of tertiary study. Workneth, Klein and Miller (1976) described foreign students (international students) as a population that "feels vulnerable and is at risk during much of their time in a foreign country".

Operational - In this study, the term international postgraduate students can be referred to the participants of this study, which were international students. They were registered in a master or doctorate academic level in one of the five chosen public research universities in Malaysia (UTM, UM, UPM, UKM and USM) for the academic year of 2014-2015.

1.12 Conclusion

This chapter presented a brief explanation of this study. To recap, the objectives of this study were to identify the differences towards mental health across demographic factors, to identify the relationship between homesickness, attachment, spiritual wellbeing constructs and mental health, to examine the mediating effects of attachment and spiritual wellbeing on the relationship between mental health and homesickness. And to develop a hierarchical guideline as well as a mental health structural model based on homesickness, attachment and spiritual wellbeing constructs using the data collected from a sample of international postgraduate students from five public research universities in Malaysia. Results from this study would benefit several parties including individuals who are planning to migrate abroad or has done so, counsellors, educators, university counselling centres and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) in Malaysia. It would also benefit the existing body of knowledge in relation to the subject. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this study also were discussed. In addition, this chapter included a brief discussion on the theories used in this study. They include the attachment theory, Dual Process Model (DPM) and Fisher's Model of Spiritual Wellbeing. Finally, an analysis of conceptual and operational definitions of this study was presented.

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