



# Factors Affecting Students' Subjective Well-being: The Relationship between Religion, Cultural Intelligence, Personality Traits and Subjective Well-being (SWB)

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective** – More and more international students choose to study in international programs in Thai universities. While considering the development of international programs, some schools tend to ignore the psychological pressure and happiness of foreign students during their time in the program. I noticed that some students have mental problems which are unable to be resolved.

**Methodology/Technique** – This paper will analyze the factors of subjective well-being in International Chinese college students, including the relationship between cultural intelligence, personality traits, and subjective well-being (SWB).

**Findings** – This paper concludes that neuroticism has a significant negative impact on International Students' SWB, while openness to experience has a positive impact. Behavioral cultural intelligence has a positive effect on SWB, whilst motivational cultural intelligence has no significant effect.

**Type of Paper:** Empirical

**Keywords:** Religion; Cultural Intelligence; Subjective Well-being (SWB); International Chinese College Students; Personality Traits

**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Wen, C. I. (2019). Factors Affecting Students' Subjective Well-being: The Relationship between Religion, Cultural Intelligence, Personality Traits and Subjective Well-being (SWB), *J. Mgt. Mkt. Review*, 4(4) 234 – 241. [https://doi.org/10.35609/jmmr.2019.4.4\(2\)](https://doi.org/10.35609/jmmr.2019.4.4(2))

**JEL Classification:** A29, A30, I19.

## 1. Introduction

Following the trends of globalization, China currently operates some of the largest markets across various different industries; as a consequence of this, China has many cultural exchanges with other countries, including Thailand. This has increased economic growth in Thailand and has promoted higher overseas study demands as compared to other countries. There are currently 30,000 international students including short-term exchange students in Thailand.

\* Paper Info: Revised: September 10, 2019

Accepted: December 30, 2019

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For foreign students, Thailand is the third-most popular destination in Southeast Asia after Malaysia and Singapore. The Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Studying Abroad (Huiyao, 2017) indicates that the total number of Chinese students studying abroad was 544,500, 31,000 of which are studying in Thailand. The number of international students reached a peak in 2017, which created more opportunities for both China and Thailand for academic cooperation.

Data on the following website (<http://www.dpubkk.com/view.php?id=539>), shows that the largest number of foreign Chinese students studying in Thailand are located in Dhurakij Pundit University (DPU). I had visited International programs of this University in 2019 and interviewed the director of the Department of International Business, Ms. Guo Jing. According to Ms Jing, there are approximately 1,000 Chinese students in the Department of International Business program, which is the highest number of Chinese student. In addition, only Dhurakij Pundit University has a formal Chinese-speaking counselling center, which was established in August 2017. I interviewed Mr. Yin in 2019, the director of the CONSELING CENTER of the CAIC program in DPU. He indicated that students' anxiety and loneliness caused by overseas study, and their psychological pressures, are unable to be resolved. These emotions were captured in survey results obtained by the counselling center, where students were asked how strongly they identify with particular statements. Approximately half of the students said "I have a bad mood for a while, and I am easy to get angry and nervous.", and more than 30% of the students said "I feel that suicide can solve all problems". This shows the importance of paying attention to psychological issues and student happiness. It will be important to investigate how to improve student happiness, which makes the experience of studying abroad much smoother.

This study explores the life adaptation and well-being of foreign students. I hope this research will increase the emphasis by schools on students' physical and mental health and provide insight into the factors that affect student well-being.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Personality Traits and Subjective Well-being**

The "Big Five" mode was developed by McCrae and Costa (1992), who posit that most of the variability in personality can be captured by five dimensions: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Significant correlations between the Big Five personality traits and SWB have been confirmed by many scholars. One of the most cited studies points out that Extraversion has a positive impact on SWB, while Neuroticism has negative effect on SWB (Pishvama et. al., 2011). The most cited paper indicates that Extraversion influences SWB positively and Neuroticism influences it negatively (Costa & McCrae, 1980). Furnham et. al. (2003) found that Neuroticism has a negative impact on happiness, whereas Extraversion and Openness to Experience have a positive impact. Previous papers have shown that Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Openness to Experience can be measured as simply happiness. These personality traits are strongly correlated with stable SWB. Thus, this study tests the following 3 hypotheses (H1-H3):

H1: Neuroticism has a negative impact on SWB.

H2: Extraversion has a positive impact on SWB.

H3: Openness to Experience has a positive impact on SWB.

### **2.2 Cultural Intelligence and Subjective Well-being**

Since the word "cultural intelligence" was published in Earley and Ang's (2003) paper, the term has been gradually used in cross-cultural fields. Cultural intelligence includes four dimensions: Metacognitive CQ, Motivational CQ, Cognitive CQ, and Behavioral CQ. Based on a previous definition of CQ (Behzad &

Somayye, 2013), I defined Behavioral CQ as the ability of an individual to use appropriate behaviors verbally and non-verbally. Motivational CQ means that an individual is able to direct attention and energy to function appropriately in different situations and the interest of individuals to interact with people from other cultures.

There are many articles that identify that emotional intelligence is a more powerful predictor of subjective well-being (SWB). There is no one finding on the relationship between cultural intelligence and SWB, which will be valued when I point out their correlations. Cultural intelligence (CQ) is the ability to adapt across cultures, and it reflects an individual's ability to gather, interpret, and act upon radically different cues to function effectively across cultural settings or in a multicultural situation (Earley & Ang, 2003). Cultural adaption is a process of adapting to the cultural shocks generated in different environments. Ang et. al. (2007) states that Motivational CQ and Behavioral CQ respectively have a positive effect on cross-cultural adaptation. Moreover, Shen and Chen (2017) point out that cross-cultural adaptation is a strong predictor of psychological well-being among Chinese Students in Thailand. Based on the above, H3 and H4 below are developed:

H4: Behavioral Cultural Intelligence has a positive effect on SWB.

H5: Motivational Cultural Intelligence has a positive effect on SWB.

### **2.3 Subjective Well-being**

Since 1967, the literature on SWB has covered happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect. Shin and Johnson (1978) define happiness as "a global assessment of individual quality of life based on their own chosen criteria." Previous studies reveal that an individual lives a good life, which is defined as high subjective well-being, also known as "happiness" (Diener, 2000). Subjective well-being was coined by Diene (2000). That study focuses on how people evaluate their lives. SWB includes three dimensions: life satisfaction, positive, and negative. "Life satisfaction" refers to cognitive judgments that individuals make to evaluate their life or any field. Another is emotional reactions, including frequent positive affect and infrequent negative affect.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Data and Sample Selection**

During the period from 1 Feb to 30 April 2019, I conducted interviews consisting of open-end questions with 50 international business students who were selected using simple random sampling. After the interviews, I based on the previous interview and the scales developed by journals to conduct a questionnaire consisting of multiple-choice online questions (<https://www.dosurvey.com.tw/>), which was divided into four parts (Big Five Scale, The Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS), The Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWBS), and Personal Background questions). All of the questionnaires were translated into Chinese.

### **3.2. Big Five Questionnaire**

I adopted and revised the three dimensions of the 5 Mini-Marker scale developed by Saucier (Saucier, 1994), which was a total of 15 items of 3 dimensions which includes (1) Neuroticism: the items asked included "Unenvious", and "Moody." (2) Extraversion: items included "Shy", and "Talkative." (3) Openness to Experience: items included "Creative", "Imaginative" and the reverse coded items "Unintellectual," etc., which was rated on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

### **3.3 The Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS)**

I revised the cultural intelligence 20-question scale published by Ang et. al. (2014), ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). I adopted two dimensions of this scale with 11 questions: (1) motivational CQ: 5 items included “I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures;” and (2) behavioral CQ: 6 items included “I change my non-verbal behavior when a cross-cultural situation requires it.”

### 3.4 The Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWBS)

I revised items from the Subjective Well-Being Scale (SWBS) (Diener, 2000), Questions asked included: “In most ways, my life is easy and comfortable,” “My life is Exciting,” “and My life is satisfied” etc., rating from 1 (Very rarely or never) to 5 (Very often or always).

### 3.5 Reliability and Validity

A total of 27 items of the Big Five scale, CQS, and SWBS questionnaire, with reliability of 0.816. Each Cronbach's Alpha exceeds 0.617. As Fornell and Larcker (1981) indicate, a Cronbach's Alpha value above 0.6 is acceptable. In the validity analysis, the KMO value is 0.843 ( $p=0.000$ , approx. Chi-Square =2117.8,  $df = 300$ ). As Kaiser (1974) reports, a KMO value between 0.8 and 1 is satisfactory.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Demographic Information

A total of 210 questionnaires were distributed, 180 were collected, and there were 14 invalid questionnaires (with incomplete data) which were excluded. This means that 166 questionnaires were effective, with a response rate of 92.22%. Quantitative data analysis was performed with SPSS19.0. Most participants are male (59.6%), and 39.2% are female. [ $N=166$  (Male=99, Female=67)]. The majority (70%) are 21-25.9 years old, and 26.5% of participants are under 20.9 years old, and 3% are aged between 26 to 30.9 [ $N=166$  (21-25.9=117, under 20.9=44, 26-30.9=3, 31-35.9=1)]. As for religion, 131 (78.9%) Chinese students do not have religion, 22 students (13%) practice Buddhism, 4 (2.4%) practice Christianity, 5 (3%) practice Islam, and several practice Hinduism, Taoism.

### 4.2 Test of the Hypotheses

Table 1. Regression analysis of the prediction of subjective well-being for each variable

Dependents Independents	Subjective Well-Being					
	M	SD	B (Unstandardized)	$\beta$ (Standardized)	T	Sig
(Constant)	2.98	0.54	1.494		3.992	0.00
Openness to experience	3.37	0.56	0.329	0.342	4.662	0.000
Extraversion	3.22	0.83	0.025	0.038	0.493	0.622
Motivational CQ	3.37	0.71	0.083	0.108	1.291	0.199
Behavioral CQ	3.5	0.64	0.148	0.174	2.224	0.028
Neuroticism	2.87	0.64	-0.174	-0.206	-2.741	0.007
R <sup>2</sup>	0.283					
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	0.26					
F	12.474					

Table 1 summarizes the results of the regression analysis for SWB and the variables. Openness to Experience ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $p = .00$ ), and Neuroticism ( $\beta = -.21$ ,  $p < .05$ ), respectively, have the strongest positive and negative correlation with SWB. Hence, H1 and H3 are confirmed. However, Extraversion has no significant impact on SWB. Therefore, H4 is confirmed ( $\beta = .174$ ,  $p = .028$ ). Students may increase their happiness when they know how to use culturally appropriate words, tones, gestures, and facial expressions during their overseas studies. Many factors may be involved in predicting student happiness.

In testing the relationship on the population variables (religion), CQ and SWB, I found that Motivational CQ ( $p < .05$ ,  $\beta = .296$ ) is positively correlated with happiness. However, behavioral CQ ( $p = .093$ ,  $\beta = .161$ ) is not. This shows that people practicing no religion, if they have more motivation and interest to accept different cultures, are generally more happy (Shi & Wand, 2018). Culture shock is experienced in communication, language, tradition and religion, which is reflected in religious belief which affects cultural adaptation. Xue and Lei (2005) state that cultural adaptation (cultural integration) can have a direct effect on the happiness of Chinese students. This assumed that all of the previous findings are the same as this study predicted.

## 5. Conclusion

Thai Universities have established more and more programs for International students. Nowadays, this will bring more income and academic exchange opportunities to all countries, as well as international talent cultivation opportunities. In the host culture, International students should always be ready to face the challenges of communication gaps, different traditions and religious practices. My findings in this paper are similar to those obtained by Diner et. al. (2015), who states that having an extroverted, or non-neurotic personality trait is a good start to achieving happiness, and other factors, such as living conditions and even cultural background, are also important. This research is intended to be provided to universities, which have established international programs, especially those programs with numerous Chinese students. This study aims to identify the major influential causes of personalities and cultural intelligence by International students and identify their difficulties in achieving SWB.

The study emphasizes the importance of understanding Cultural Intelligence adaptability and the necessity to improve SWB. I found that the Behavioral CQ has an effect on SWB. Students will increase their happiness when they know how to use culturally appropriate words, tones, gestures, and facial expressions. Hence, universities should enhance international students' behavioral cultural intelligence and openness to experiences.

Thus, the study and examination of cultural intelligence is essential. The findings of this research can be used by universities to develop ways to improve international students' SWB. For example, international programs should set up psychological counselling, cultural exchange courses, religion courses and psychological tests to make international students happier during their studies. By understanding college students' concept of a good life and their level of cultural intelligence, we can improve the students' mental health. The analysis of this study is based on Chinese students; future research may examine a different culture to broaden the results.

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