
Understanding the impact of cross-cultural friendships and residency status on multicultural attitudes: A UAE perspective

Abstract: With 80% of the population comprising of expatriates, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) presents itself as a unique place to explore multicultural attitudes. This study examines how cross-cultural friendships and exposure to different cultures impacts young adults' sociocultural development and social cynicism levels in the UAE. Two distinct surveys measuring sociocultural development and social cynicism were administered to dual samples consisting of 155 and 166 young adults. Participants provided information about their number of cross-cultural friendships and residency status. It was found that a) both number of cross-cultural friends and residency status did not impact participants' sociocultural development and b) that only residency status, not cross-cultural friendships, had a significant effect on social cynicism. Short-term expatriates showed the least social cynicism levels compared to long-term expatriates and locals. This research study provides a unique perspective on the effects of cross-cultural interactions on both positive and negative aspects of multicultural attitudes. In contrast to previous literature, the findings challenge emphasis on diversity for development, and shows that short-term expatriates feel welcomed and do not feel threatened by the host culture in the UAE. On a global scale, the study contributes to a better comprehension of negative multicultural attitudes and encourages the growth of sustainable cities.

Keywords: Cross-cultural friendships; Sociocultural development; Social cynicism; Multicultural attitudes; UAE

1 Introduction

With increasing globalisation, interacting with people from different cultures on a daily basis has become an essential part of our lives (Chen, 2006). 'World cities' are built on such multicultural exchange. The United Arab Emirates, a country where 80% of its population are expatriates, has the largest proportion of immigrants in the world (Pison, 2019) and opens doors to different cultures, perspectives, and attitudes. It presents itself to be a unique place to conduct cross-cultural research. With 2019 being the Year of Tolerance and 2021 being the Year of promoting cohesive communities in the UAE, the Government is prioritising diversity, inclusivity, and is establishing its status as a global capital for peace and tolerance. The current study explores effects of cross-cultural exposure on multicultural attitudes in the UAE.

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Modern societies are becoming increasingly multicultural; however, research in this field remains largely understudied (Lee, 2006; Veillard, 2017), especially in the Middle East (Yaaqeib, 2021). Very few studies have explored multicultural attitudes in the United Arab Emirates (Al-Esia and Skok, 2014). While previous research primarily focused on factors associated with the success of cross-cultural friendships (Hendrickson et al., 2011), the current study aims to examine both potentially positive (sociocultural development) and negative (social cynicism) effects of intercultural interaction through cross-cultural friendships and residency status. It is important to note that this is one of the first few studies to assess the impact of duration of exposure through residency status.

This study has two distinct objectives from two surveys administered at different time points. Survey 1 aims to examine the impact of cross-cultural friendships (few, some, many) and residency status (short-term expatriates [<3 years in UAE], long-term expatriates [>3 years in UAE], locals) on the sociocultural development of young adults in the UAE. Meanwhile, Survey 2 aims to explore how cross-cultural friendships and residency status may impact the levels of social cynicism in young adults in the UAE.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a review of relevant literature on Cross-cultural friendships and Multicultural attitudes is presented. Then the research methodology undertaken to test the hypotheses of this study is explained. Third, findings of the study are reported, followed by discussion of the findings and conclusion.

2 Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1 Cross-cultural friendships

According to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, friendships fulfil the need for belonging and love. Cross-cultural friendships, in particular, refer to the bonds formed between people from different cultures (Berner and Korff, 1995). Both practitioners and scholars initially focused on the problems, imagined and real, caused by cross-cultural interactions and friendships. Criticizing this emphasis on diversity-caused problems, in the 1980s, Adler (1980, 1981) introduced the concept of cultural synergy. Adler hypothesized that cultural diversity in friendships offered such potential advantages as increased creativity (derived from wider range of perspectives, enhanced capacity for generating more and better ideas, and disinclination to groupthink), enhanced attention and concentration (fostered by the need to understand the ideas and perspectives of members from different cultures), and consequently increased effectiveness (stemming from better problem solving).

Past studies administered on international students showed that forming friendships with individuals from the same country or similar nationalities and sense of belongingness was more prominent due to shared cultural experiences (McFaul, 2016). Research has shown that interaction with people from different cultures comes with its own set of benefits such as increase in cultural knowledge, expansion of awareness, breaking of stereotypes, and personal growth. Forming connections with different cultures may also increase intercultural competence which is defined as the attitudes and understanding about different cultures (Schwarzenthal et al., 2019). Besides these benefits, social support gained through cross-cultural interactions not only acts as a buffer against the stress that immigrants experience due to acculturation (Smith and Khawaja, 2010), but also increases the likelihood of retaining cross-cultural contact more than a year later (Rasmi et al., 2009). In fact, research has shown that being exposed to different cultures is associated with an individual's holistic development (Ng et al., 2009). In addition to

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maintenance of one's own cultural practices, acceptance of the host country's cultural heritage is considered beneficial for both psychological and socio-cultural adaptation (Hui et al., 2015). Beyond this acceptance, prior cross-cultural interactions, fluency in the local language and the desire to gain new cross-cultural contacts via new job opportunities are also strongly linked to sociocultural adaptation (Masgoret, 2006).

Several authors claim that international students, who have been previously raised and educated in cultural and social environments different from those of the host country, constitute an important source of diversity; they are a rich resource for international education on college campuses, enriching not only student population but also campus culture and intellectual life (Choudaha and Chang, 2012; Mamiseishvili, 2012). The presence of international students exposes domestic students to different cultures, and the interaction between domestic and international students would not only lead to a deeper understanding of each other's culture but also develop networks that would be mutually beneficial in terms of exchanges of information, ideas, and support in the future (Andrade, 2009; Grayson, 2008).

University settings promote the formation of friendships through such cross-cultural interactions among international-domestic students and within domestic students of different ethnic-cultural backgrounds (Sinanan and Gomes, 2020). These cross-cultural interactions among university students have several benefits and challenges for sociocultural development (Gareis et al., 2019). On the one hand, having friends from different cultures increases open-mindedness and decreases intercultural communication apprehension (Williams and Johnson, 2011), lowers acculturative stress (Kim et al., 2021) and positively promotes intrapersonal skills necessary for sociocultural development (Gareis et al., 2019). Hu and Kuh (2003) found that interactional diversity experiences had substantial, uniformly positive effects on all college outcome variables (i.e., general education, personal development, science and technology, vocational preparation, intellectual development, total gains, and the diversity competence measures).

Moreover, interactions between international and domestic students encourage a more inclusive community within the university setting, lowering the rates of negative cultural stereotypes (Shu et al., 2020). Cross cultural friendships have been cited as an important factor in mitigating various negative attitudes towards immigrants (Swart et al., 2022). These findings suggest that cross-group friendships and empathy might mitigate the negative impact of diversity and threat on attitudes towards immigrants, even in this demanding context.

On the other hand, looking at the possibility of both positive and negative outcomes, Adler also hypothesized that intercultural interactions might increase potential disadvantages such as decreased cohesion (due to mistrust, miscommunication, tension, and stress) and decreased ability to validate ideas, arrive at consensus, and take action (Adler, 1981; Adler and Gundersen, 2008). Research has also shown that cross-cultural interactions involve challenges like fear of the 'other' and language barriers, which may result in miscommunication, misunderstanding, and even conflict (Sias et al., 2008). It can aggravate in-group/out-group ideology and cultural differences instead of similarities (Hahn et al., 2015).

Additionally, research on university friendships formation suggested that the in-group/out-group ideology of those staying within the 'local bubble friendship' exhibited higher levels of passive xenophobia, hindering the development of sociocultural skills of

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cultural humility (McKenzie and Baldassar, 2017; Tavares, 2021). However, despite such complexities, people do form nurturing long-term intercultural friendships (Sias et al., 2008). Thus, studying the effects of exposure to different cultures and cross-cultural friendships is an important aspect of our human development.

Taking this into consideration, the following hypothesis is proposed for the first survey of this study:

H1. Individuals with ‘many’ cross-cultural friendships will be associated with higher sociocultural development when compared to participants with ‘some’ or ‘few’ cross-cultural friendships.

2.2 Multicultural attitudes

Past research has highlighted the importance of studying attitudes of diverse ethnic groups (Williams and Johnson, 2011). According to Van de Vijver et al., (2008), multiculturalism is a psychological concept and a political ideology which refers to acceptance of and support for culturally diverse groups of society. Multicultural attitudes are linked to the idea of recognising uniqueness of various ethnocultural groups (Bagci and Çelebi, 2017). It is further believed that cultural diversity improves quality of life, enhances cultural openness, and increases acceptance towards others (Black, 2018). In terms of coexistence, van Geel and Vedder (2011) pointed out that immigrants are expected to actively integrate and participate with the host culture in new societies. It helps to guarantee a cordial relationship between the locals and immigrants.

2.2.1 Positive multicultural attitudes

Intermingling with people from diverse cultural backgrounds is found to be concurrent with one's holistic development (Ng et al., 2009; Keller et al., 2003). For example, Wechtler et al., (2015) found that long-term expatriation experience was positively associated with various aspects of sociocultural development, indicating that living outside of one's home country and being exposed to various cultures can positively affect one's sociocultural development. It was further found that sociocultural development levels were relatively higher among international students who studied abroad and held personal and constant interactions with people from the host culture, compared to those who had fewer interactions (Gu et al., 2010). A study administered in Spain, consisting of five different immigrant groups found that longer periods of residence, possession of residence permits, intermingling with the local population, and less contact with fellow-countrymen were strong predictors of socio-cultural adjustment among first-generation immigrants (Zlobina et al., 2006).

A study conducted in South Africa with White, Black, and mixed-race participants reported that employees working in a multicultural environment demonstrated higher socio-cultural adjustment and positive employee attitudes (Jackson and Van de Vijver, 2018). White employees scored higher on multicultural scales than black and mixed-race employees, which can be attributed to the fact that the dominant ranks at work in South Africa are majorly occupied by the Whites (Jackson and Van de Vijver, 2018). However, the findings suggest that interactions in multicultural settings can increase tolerance and acceptance towards various ethnic groups, positively impacting one's socio-cultural development.

Literature from democratic Western nations showed that minority groups displayed a more positive attitude toward multiculturalism than local majorities (Dandy and Pe-Pua,

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2010; Van de Vijver et al., 2008; Ward and Masgoret, 2008). Ward and colleagues (2018) argued that feeling accommodated in the society as minorities and a sense of belongingness were significant factors resulting in these findings. It can be implied that the need to feel integrated into society can influence the level of one's socio-cultural adaptation.

In addition, one's sociocultural adaptation can also depend on their residing country's stance on multiculturalism. For instance, a comparative study by Berry and Sabatier (2010) indicated that second-generation immigrant youth in Canada had higher levels of sociocultural adaptation than those living in France. This finding was attributed to the fact that Canadian policies are more supportive of multiculturalism and diversity compared to France. However, it is interesting to note that locals also demonstrate significant sociocultural adjustment in the form of multicultural adaptation (Lefringhausen and Marshall, 2016).

Furthermore, Engle and Engle (2004) assessed the intercultural sensitivity of international students who took part in a short-term or long-term abroad program in France. The longer-term sojourners developed a higher level of intercultural communicative competence, with the most progress occurring in the second half of their stay. As a group, the participants became more willing to accept cultural differences. The results suggested that cross-cultural friendships have the potential to foster the overall development of cross-cultural sensitivity in student sojourners in the long-term. Employing both qualitative and quantitative measures, Medina-López-Portillo (2004) did a similar study and investigated the intercultural sensitivity development of international university students who participated in a short-term or a long-term program in Mexico. The longer-term sojourners developed a more sophisticated understanding of the host culture and a higher level of intercultural sensitivity. These findings suggest that one's sociocultural development is not determined merely by friendships, but also by the amount of time spent in a different culture.

Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H2. Long-term expatriates will depict higher sociocultural development than short-term expatriates and locals.

2.2.2 Negative multicultural attitudes

Hahn et al., (2015) and Verkuyten (2005) discussed the potential negative effects of multiculturalism. They suggested that inter-cultural interaction may increase development of negative perceptions of individuals from different cultures by drawing more emphasis on differences between the cultures as opposed to similarities, leading to cultural isolation and resulting in more segregation than integration. As a result, many incoming international students fall victim to expressions of negative attitudes and behaviours, such as social cynicism. It may also prevent them from developing long-lasting multicultural friendships. Social cynicism refers to negative preconceived biases that other individuals are fundamentally self-interested, lack moral judgement, and have malicious intentions - even when none may exist (Stavrova et al., 2020). Social cynicism has been suggested to be developed over time in the human species as an adaptive response to a society filled with oppression and deception (Bernardo et al., 2021). This generalised notion creates a lack of trust that one has for human nature and social institutions, leading to self-alienation (Li et al., 2011).

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Socially cynical individuals may receive lesser social support, and experience increased conflict in their interpersonal relationships (Baron et al., 2007; Kaplan et al., 2004). Studies have further shown that higher social cynicism is related to lower interpersonal trust and lower conscientiousness (Singelis et al., 2003; McCrae, 2002). In fact, undesirable previous experiences and limited exposure to various cultures predict the development of negative multicultural attitudes in the future (Ward and Masgoret, 2006). Therefore, it can be assumed that cross-cultural interactions and knowledge may affect public's display of social cynicism towards each other. It plays an integral role in the development and materialisation of intergroup conflicts and relationships.

Furthermore, social cynicism may be a contributing factor in disabling individuals from being able to form friendships due to its moderating factor between social exclusion and empathy. Choy et al. (2021) found that social cynicism tends to be a key moderating factor when observing the mediating role of empathy between social exclusion and pro-social behaviours. They hypothesized that due to the distrust an individual exhibiting high cynicism levels has of other people, they believe that once excluded, it is unlikely that other people will be willing to form relationships with them. This mentality leads to a drop in empathy levels which, in turn, affects their pro-social behaviours. Thus, individuals that have been socially excluded and have higher cynicism levels tend to have less empathy (Dincă and Iliescu, 2009). Moreover, social exclusion threatens an individual's primary need for belonging. Williams (2007) states that along with formulating feelings of loneliness and distress due to the phenomena of ostracism, an individual's self-regulation methods, coping mechanisms and cognitive functioning may likewise be negatively affected.

Hence, due to the detrimental effects on their psychological state of well-being that cynical individuals face from social exclusion, it throws them into a vicious cycle of repetitive cynical behaviours. Stavrova and Ehlebracht (2019) have likewise identified an association between cynicism and lower levels of self-esteem and psychological well-being. We believe that individuals might have higher cynicism levels when interacting with people from different cultures due to various reasons (lack of exposure, negative experiences etc.). According to Bentsen (2022), negative attitudes such as cynicism are more likely to be present if the majority population in a multicultural society are insecure about their economic or cultural position. Thus, even if an individual has been socially excluded in the past, if given the opportunity to form relationships with people from different cultures, their social cynicism might restrict their prosocial behaviour.

Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed for the second survey:

H3. Individuals with 'many' cross-cultural friendships will have lower levels of social cynicism when compared to individuals with 'some' or 'few' cross-cultural friendships.

Individuals residing in places with a dense culturally diverse population are frequently exposed to different forms of lifestyles and traditions; hence they are more accommodating towards people of other ethnic backgrounds (Williams and Johnson, 2011). In terms of coexistence, findings from a cross-cultural study administered in Canada, a country with a large population of immigrants, showed that Iranian immigrants in Canada had higher levels of social cynicism than locals (Safdar et al., 2006). This indicates that for immigrants, the amount of time spent in a country is of significance, with recent immigrants potentially feeling threatened by 'others' in a new environment.

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The Intergroup Contact Theory proposed by Allport (1954) explores the same concept of intergroup interactions and declares a reduction in preconceived biases for individuals experiencing favourable conditions upon more frequent contact with those from different cultures. Findings from Pettigrew and Tropp's (2008) study further supported the above theory that frequency of contact with people from different cultures decreased prejudices and identified factors such as reduced intergroup interaction anxiety, increased empathy, and great cultural knowledge to play a fundamental role. Hence, greater exposure to people from different cultures may decrease social cynicism.

Therefore, taking into consideration an individual's residency status, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Short-term expatriates would exhibit higher social cynicism levels as compared to long-term expatriates and locals.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Design

A quantitative cross-sectional design was utilised for both surveys. Participants were grouped based on cross-cultural friendships and residency status. Data was collected using surveys with demographic questions and standardised questionnaires with Likert scale responses. The first IV was Cross-cultural friendships, which consisted of three levels: 'Few', 'Some' and 'Many' cross-cultural friends. These friendships were primarily defined as the bonds between people which may differ in their nationality, religion and/or mother tongue. The second IV was Residency Status, which consisted of three levels: 'Short-term' Expatriates (<3 years in UAE), 'Long-term' expatriates (>3 years in UAE) and 'Locals'. The dependent variables for the first and second surveys were Sociocultural Development and Social Cynicism, respectively.

3.2 Materials

In addition to demographic questions of age, gender, level of cross-cultural friendship, and residency status, participants responded to a questionnaire in each survey study.

Survey 1: Global Perspective Inventory (GPI; Braskamp et al., 2008): The GPI measures sociocultural development based on interpersonal, intrapersonal and cognitive development. It contained items such as '*I understand how various cultures of this world interact socially*' and '*I enjoy when my friends from other cultures teach me about our cultural differences*'. The participants responded to 35 items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). Higher total score represented greater levels of sociocultural development. The original Cronbach's alpha for the GPI was .76, while the Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .66, indicating moderate level of reliability.

Survey 2: Social Axiom Survey (SAS; Leung et al., 2002): A sub-scale of this questionnaire, Social Cynicism, was utilised in the present study. The SAS contained items such as '*People create hurdles to prevent others from succeeding*' and '*The only way to get ahead is to take advantage of others*'. The participants answered 20 statements which were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disbelieve, 5= Strongly Believe). Higher scores represented greater levels of social cynicism. The original

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Cronbach's alpha for the SAS was .79, indicating a good level of reliability (Leung et al., 2012).

3.3 Procedure

The participants were recruited from workplaces and various universities across the UAE. Participants were given an information sheet and consent form which ensured their anonymity along with assuring voluntary participation. Inclusion criteria was that participants were a) residing in the UAE and had b) at least a few cross-cultural friends. It took them approximately 10 minutes each to fill out the survey. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any given point of time. They were provided with a debriefing sheet with researchers' contact information upon completion of the study. Ethical approval was obtained from Middlesex University Dubai Ethics Committee. The sample reflects the demographic representation of the UAE.

3.4 Participants

Survey 1: The sample consisted of 155 participants (127 females, 28 males). The age range varied from 17 to 40 ($M = 21.6$, $SD = 4.44$). The sample is characterised by students and employees from universities and workplaces in the UAE, recruited through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. They also belonged to different ethnic groups: 44.5% Asians, 38.7% Middle Eastern, 10.4% Europeans, 3.9% Africans, and 2.6% North Americans.

Survey 2: The sample consisted of 166 participants (98 females, 68 males). The age range varied from 17 to 33 ($M = 19.44$, $SD = 2.40$). The sample is characterised by students from universities across Dubai (UAE), also recruited through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. They also belonged to different ethnic groups: 62.04% Asians, 20.48% Middle Eastern, 7.83% Europeans, 4.8% Africans, and 4.8% North Americans.

3.5 Analytical procedure

Correlations were administered to explore the relationship between demographic variables of interest and outcome variables. Four one-way ANOVAs were administered to examine the impact of the number of cross-cultural friendships (few, some, many) and residency status (short-term expatriates, long-term expatriates, locals) on sociocultural development and social cynicism in young adults. Post-hoc test was administered when the ANOVA was found to be significant.

4 Findings

4.1 Survey 1: Sociocultural development (H1-H2)

Correlations of key variables of interest are presented in Table I. It appears that older participants had lived in the UAE for a longer duration. Also, participants with more cross-cultural friends were more likely to be younger and had lived in the UAE for a shorter duration.

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Levene's test indicated equal variances at $p > .05$. One-way ANOVA found no significant effect of the number of cross-cultural friendships on sociocultural development of participants, $F(2,152) = .66, p > .05, \eta^2 = .009, MSe = .092$ (see Table II).

Levene's test indicated equal variances at $p > .05$. One-way ANOVA found that there was no significant effect of residency status on the sociocultural development of participants, $F(2,152) = .09, p > .05, \eta^2 = .001, MSe = .093$ (Table III).

4.2 Survey 2: Social cynicism (H3-H4)

Correlations of key variables and social cynicism are presented in Table IV. Contrary to the first survey, it appears that younger participants had lived in the UAE for a longer duration.

Levene's test indicated equal variances at $p > .05$. Results of one-way ANOVA showed that having many cross-cultural friendships does not significantly decrease levels of social cynicism in participants, $F(2,160) = 0.656, p > .05, \eta^2 = .81, MSe = .90$ (see Table V).

Levene's test indicated equal variances at $p > .05$. One-way ANOVA found that residency status significantly affected participants' social cynicism levels, $F(2,160) = 3.18, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03, MSe = .90$. Mean scores indicate that people who resided in the host country for the least amount of time (short-term expatriates) showed lowest levels of social cynicism as compared to people who have lived here for longer (long-term expatriates) and locals (see Table VI).

Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's test indicated that the mean score for short-term expatriates was significantly different from the mean score for long-term expatriates and locals (see table VI) ($p = .03$). Interestingly, short term expats also do not significantly differ in their social cynicism levels from locals ($p > .05$). The social cynicism scores of locals and long-term expatriates were similar ($p > .05$).

5 Discussion

The present study investigated the effects of cross-cultural interactions, based on cross-cultural friendships and residency status, on both positive and negative impact of multicultural attitudes, namely, sociocultural development and social cynicism. Given 80% of the population in the UAE are expatriates, this region offers a unique setup to study acculturation. The study provides important information on immigrant behaviors and building a cohesive society.

Survey 1 examined whether the number of cross-cultural friendships and residency status of the participants had an effect on the sociocultural development of young adults in the UAE. It was found that both cross-cultural friendships and residency status were not significantly associated with higher sociocultural development. Contrary to expectations, the findings indicate that participants who have more cross-cultural friends do not depict higher sociocultural development than participants who have less in-depth cross-cultural interactions. It was further found that locals, short-term expatriates, and long-term expatriates did not differ in their levels of sociocultural development in the UAE; indicating that greater exposure to different cultures did not create significant differences in residents' or citizens' interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive development. Both findings contradict prior literature which suggested that cross-cultural interactions have a positive impact on individuals' holistic development (Ng et al., 2009; Keller et al., 2003), including sociocultural development (Gu et al., 2010; Keller et al., 2003) and intercultural competence (Williams and Johnson, 2011). Previous research further suggested that locals (Lefringhausen and Marshall, 2016) and long-term expatriates (Wechtler et al., 2015; Berry and Sabatier, 2010) demonstrate higher levels of sociocultural adjustment. Future studies could utilise different questionnaires to examine sociocultural development which may include a more diversified understanding of cultural development. For example, future studies could examine cultural competence in the UAE. It is also important to note that, in the first study, contrary to expectations, participants who had more cross-cultural friends were more likely to be younger and short-term expats. This may have reduced the expected differences between groups.

The results of this survey support the theory proposed by Olteanu (2019), namely the Semiotic Theory of Multiculturalism. It challenges the notion of diversity facilitating identity formation and development. This theory critically evaluates the importance placed on globalization and multiculturalism. It further suggests that culture does not have clearly defined borders that we attribute to them. These factors perhaps explain why cross-cultural exposure did not lead to socio-cultural development in the current sample.

In the pursuit of building tolerant and cohesive societies, the findings indicate that instead of 'cross-cultural interaction', perhaps the primary focus should be 'cross-cultural exposure'. In fact, Adler (1981) has pointed out that intercultural interactions run the risk of increased mistrust and decreased cohesion, which delays actions in societies. Since UAE is regarded as a 'melting pot' of cultures, cross-cultural exposure is almost at every personal and professional setting. Participants may not consider these multicultural exposures as 'friendships', but these may still positively impact their sociocultural development. This may have accounted for similar scores for locals, short-term expatriates, and long-term expatriates. In addition, this study mainly emphasised on in-depth and personal face-to-face interactions with individuals from various cultures as a

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means of being introduced to and learning about different cultures. However, technological advancements, especially visual mediums with social media, web series, films, literature, and global news may also increase cultural knowledge and facilitate socio-cultural development. Also, a more robust result might have been obtained if the study examined not only quantity but also the quality of friendships.

Survey 2 examined the potential negative effect of cross-cultural interaction. It examined how exposure to different cultures had an impact on levels of social cynicism of young adults in the UAE. The findings of hypothesis 3 suggest that having more cross-cultural friendships does not significantly decrease levels of social cynicism in individuals. Generally, it is believed that having personal and in-depth cross-cultural interactions increases open-mindedness and decreases mistrust in others. In the present study, regardless of number of cross-cultural friends, participants tend to display similar levels of social cynicism. However, that was not the case in the present study, and the findings are in contrast to previous research that stated short term expats experience higher social cynicism and develop lower interpersonal trust and lower conscientiousness (Baron et al., 2007; Kaplan et al., 2004; McCrae et al., 2002; Singelis et al., 2003). Unlike most countries in the West with high immigration, the host culture in the UAE is a minority. With 80% expats, it is possible that multicultural interactions in routine life in the UAE reduced differences which may have emerged due to close intercultural friendships. Perhaps routine life interactions contribute towards cultural synergy and shared cultural experiences as intergroup assimilation is reflected in frequency of interaction and not necessarily depth of interaction (Allport, 1954).

The findings for Hypothesis 4 further showed that short-term expatriates have significantly lower levels of social cynicism compared to long-term expatriates. However, interestingly social cynicism levels in expats and locals did not significantly differ from each other. It is usually believed that new immigrants tend to feel threatened by 'others' in a different environment and initially find it difficult to feel part of the community (Safdar et al., 2006; Williams and Johnson, 2011); therefore, the findings are not in line with previous research. It is possible that due to a large expat community in the UAE, especially in Dubai, short-term expatriates feel more accepted and do not experience higher levels of mistrust in others. It is also likely that, despite cultural differences, they feel a sense of belonging with other expatriates (Ward et al., 2018). Also, short-term expats in the UAE, unlike the West, do not commonly come across 'local bubble friendships' which are likely to contribute towards feeling different and experiencing passive xenophobia (McKenzie and Baldassar, 2017). They also move to this country with greater optimism of earning a good livelihood and gaining a better quality of life. It is also important to note that short term expats in survey 2, were more likely to be older and showed lower levels of social cynicism compared to long term expats. Due to limited research on multicultural attitudes in the UAE, this study provides novel findings.

Data further shows that social cynicism increased with time as long-term expatriates showed greater social cynicism than short-term expatriates. It is possible that the longer immigrants reside in a country, they start building deeper roots within their own community, and start viewing 'others' with mistrust. It is also interesting to note that long-term expatriates and locals do not differ in their social cynicism levels. It perhaps

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depicts harmonious understanding between residents who have lived here for a longer duration and citizens of the UAE, however more studies are required to explore this further.

6 Conclusion

The present study showed that both the number of cross-cultural friendships and residency status did not impact participants' sociocultural development. Meanwhile, only residency status, not cross-cultural friendships, had a significant effect on social cynicism, with short-term expatriates showing the least social cynicism levels compared to long-term expatriates and locals. The findings show that for short-term expatriates, the UAE offers tolerance and inclusivity.

Some notable strengths of the current study are as follows. This is one of the first few research studies to have explored multicultural interactions in the Gulf region. The findings provide insight towards our globalised modern living. Since overall cross-cultural friendships did not significantly affect participants' attitudes, the results contribute to the reduction of prospective stigma against those people who prefer living in the confines of their own culture and country. It further challenges the emphasis on cross-cultural interaction for growth and development. The use of quantitative methodology increases generalisability of findings. Furthermore, the use of reliable and standardised tools to measure the variables makes both studies more robust.

With UAE's vision for building tolerance, a cohesive society, and strong and active communities (UAE Vision 2019, 2021), this study provides a deeper insight into UAE's cultural environment. In fact, more research is required to explore acculturation in the region. This study positively contributes to the body of work related to diversity and cultural inclusivity. It shows that in global cities with various sources of gaining cultural exposure and knowledge at our disposal, factors such as cross-cultural friendships and time spent as an immigrant do not significantly impact our sociocultural development. This indicates towards a more 'inclusive' experience in terms of sociocultural development.

Therefore, this study also positively contributes to the 11th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), namely, Sustainable Cities and Communities (United Nations, 2015) of building inclusive, safe, and resilient settlements. A population is more likely to contribute towards the growth of the economy when they experience tolerance and greater acculturation. This indicates that short-term expats are more likely to be prosocial in their approach when they move to the UAE (Choy et al., 2021). Cross-cultural interactions have been found to not significantly affect sociocultural development implying that perhaps access to cross-cultural knowledge is perhaps more uniform in the UAE as compared to other countries. Future research could explore acculturation with the goal of having sustainable cities in mind.

Moreover, not only short-term expatriates feel welcomed, but long-term expatriates do not show differences from locals in their levels of social cynicism. It indicates that short term expat population experience trust and faith in the institutions in the UAE. Future research could explore the reasons why social cynicism increases in long-term expats. There are various implications seen on a political and governmental scale, this study also

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provides insights to how a multicultural environment may influence an individual's cultural attitudes.

In terms of limitations, it is important to point out that this study examined the quantity rather than quality of cross-cultural friendships. Hence, looking into the influence of personal and in-depth cross-cultural bonds rather than just a number of cross-cultural friendships could have yielded different results. People are also exposed to different cultures through social media or global news, which were not taken into consideration. Also, the definition of culture and friendships are highly subjective, which may have led to some misinterpretations by participants. Gender imbalance in the sample may have also contributed results which are less representative of the population. Another possible drawback that was not taken into consideration is that even though individuals living in the UAE may not have many friends from different cultures, they interact with a diverse population on a daily basis. This could potentially reduce stigmas of negative attitudes due to constant exposure to diversity. Finally, it is also important to note that a large majority of the participants were long-term expats which may have skewed the results slightly.

Future research should aim for balanced representations from both genders and could examine factors which contribute to increase in social cynicism in long-term expats. This will further contribute to creating a more sustainable community. It might inform policies and campaigns related to improving cross-cultural awareness and engagement. For cross-cultural studies in the region, researchers could also re-define the concept of international students in the UAE. In the West an international student is usually a first-generation immigrant, whereas in the UAE, given the lack of an opportunity to become a citizen, even a second-generation immigrant could be considered an international student. Future research could also include a qualitative aspect and explore an in-depth understanding of multicultural attitudes and see how it may be associated with sociocultural development or social cynicism. A qualitative analysis would embrace the subjective understanding of culture and friendships. Additionally, cross-sectional studies can be implemented that explore various cultural backgrounds. Future studies could try to replicate the findings with larger sample size and investigate whether younger adults differ from older adults in the UAE.

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Table I Correlation between demographic variables of interest and socio-cultural development

Tables

	1	2	3	4
1. Age	1			
2. Residency Status	.51**	1		
3. Cross-cultural friends	-.26**	-.45**	1	
4. Socio-cultural development	.07	-.02	-.08	1

Note: Pearson correlation coefficient r is reported. ** $p < .001$
 Residency status: short term expats = 1, long term expats = 2, locals = 3
 Cross-cultural friends: few = 1, some = 2, many = 3

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Table II Means and standard deviations of sociocultural development scores of the participants based on the number of cross-cultural friendships

Sociocultural development	N =155	Mean	Standard Deviation
Few Cross-cultural friendships	55	2.66	.26
Some Cross-cultural friendships	64	2.64	.33
Many Cross-cultural friendships	36	2.59	.32

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Table III Means and standard deviations of sociocultural development scores of the participants based on the residency status

Sociocultural development	N =155	Mean	Standard Deviation
Short-term Expatriates	27	2.65	.35
Long-term Expatriates	74	2.64	.29
Locals	54	2.63	.30

Author

Table IV Correlation between demographic variables of interest and social cynicism

	1	2	3	4
1. Age	1			
2. Residency Status	-.23*	1		
3. Cross-cultural friends	.13	-.06	1	
4. Social cynicism	.03	-.11	-.03	1

Note: Pearson correlation coefficient r is reported. $*p < .01$
Residency status: short term expats = 1, long term expats = 2, locals = 3
Cross-cultural friends: few = 1, some = 2, many = 3

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Table V Mean and standard deviation of social cynicism scores of the participants based on the number of cross-cultural friendships

Social cynicism	N = 163	Mean	Standard Deviation
Few Cross-cultural friendships	23	62.43	10.96
Some Cross-cultural friendships	46	64.59	9.15
Many Cross-cultural friendships	94	62.23	12.79

Author

Table VI Mean and standard deviation of social cynicism scores of the participants based on the residency status

Social cynicism	N = 163	Mean	Standard Deviation
Short-term expatriates	34	58.76	13.89
Long-term expatriates	104	64.43	10.82
Locals	25	62.32	10.29