

## Foreign Students' Intercultural Adaptation at IIUI: An Intercultural Pragmatic Study

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### Abstract:

The aim of this research was to examine how foreign students at IIUI adapt to intercultural communication in relation to three key factors: Context, Salience, and Common Ground. To explore the experiences and challenges faced by these students, the study employed Colleen Ward's Cultural Adjustment Process Model and the Socio-cognitive approach, specifically focusing on context, salience, and common background. Data was gathered through a questionnaire consisting of both open-ended and close-ended questions from 18 randomly selected students of IIUI, from various countries. The results suggest that the students rely heavily on their prior experiences and use a combination of these experiences and the emergent situation, salience, and common ground to adjust to intercultural communication.

### Keywords:

Intercultural Communication, Context, Salience, Common Ground

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## **Introduction:**

Communication is a means by which a thought is transferred from one person to another (Chappel & Read 1984). Seema Hasssan (2010) describes communication in the following words;

The process of communication includes the transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, and knowledge, by using symbols, words, pictures, figures, graphs, or illustrations. Seema Hasssan (2010)

While intercultural communication is communication across cultural boundaries. Usually, it happens when people belonging to different countries interact and communicate. As is the case with foreign students studying at International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI). These foreign students interact in an intercultural environment. According to Ting-Toomey, S. (1999), Intercultural communication takes place when individuals influenced by different cultural communities negotiate shared meaning in interactions.

The present research studies the intercultural adaptation process of foreign students studying at IIUI. The process of intercultural adaptation involves the acquisition of sociocultural knowledge and skills from a social learning perspective. This enables an individual to interact effectively with members of the host culture, as it is necessary to adjust and negotiate interactive aspects of the host culture to fit in. In the words of Xiaoqing Su (2017), Intercultural adaptation refers to the ability to adapt to a new culture.

Intercultural pragmatics, which has its foundations in the socio-cognitive approach (SCA), integrates the pragmatic view of cooperation based on the intention with the cognitive view of egocentrism, taking into account emerging features of communication. This field is characterized by the interplay of intention, attention, cooperation, and egocentrism. Istvan Kecskes (2013) emphasizes the importance of equal attention given to the speaker's production and the hearer's interpretation within a particular frame. It also highlights that a speaker's utterance represents a complete proposition with no ambiguity from the speaker's point of view. A number of recent studies have utilized the socio-cognitive approach to investigate intercultural pragmatics. As Khatib, Mohammad, and Shakouri, Nima (2013) state; the socio-cognitive approach strives to find a balance between communication from a pragmatic and a cognitive viewpoint, employing a dialectical approach. Communication is seen as an intention-directed practice that also possesses attention-oriented qualities.

The present study examines the application of the “Big Three’ factors to the intercultural communication and adaptation aspects. “Big Three” factors include, ‘Context’, ‘Common ground’, ‘Salience’.

Istvan Kecskes (2013) is of the view that the significance of context in intercultural communication lies in its impact on the formation and understanding of meaning. Both the prior and situational contexts interact and contribute to this process. However, the way context operates in intercultural communication differs from intracultural communication because interlocutors may not share a common prior experience.

Common ground is another crucial factor, encompassing shared information such as worldviews, values, beliefs, and situational context. Research indicates that common ground

emerges when people have similar prior experiences, participate in comparable actions and events, know each other, and have been in similar situations before. Building common ground requires the co-construction of shared knowledge and understanding during the communicative process. While a core common ground exists, emergent common ground is particularly vital in intercultural interactions, as emphasized by Istvan Kecskes in 2013.

The third big factor in intercultural communication is salience which refers to the relative importance or prominence of signs. Intercultural pragmatics research has identified three key factors that have been relatively overlooked in salience research. First, there is a two-way relationship between linguistic salience and perceptual salience. Second, salience is significant not only in comprehension but also in production. This is noteworthy because current salience research has focused primarily on comprehension. Finally, salience is specific to both language and culture. According to the socio-cognitive approach, the interplay between three types of salience-inherent salience, collective salience, and emergent situational salience - has a significant impact on both language production and comprehension. Istvan Kecskes (2013) highlights the importance of this interplay in understanding the role of salience in intercultural communication.

The study is based on foreign students studying at IIUI. IIUI is a public sector university in Pakistan that is host to almost 23000 students. 8% of its enrolled students belong to foreign countries which is a high ratio when compared with other public sector universities in Pakistan.

#### ***Objectives of the Study:***

- To examine how foreign students at IIUI adapt to intercultural communication in relation to the key factors of context, salience, and common ground.
- To explore the experiences and challenges faced by foreign students at IIUI as they navigate intercultural communication
- To investigate the strategies and resources that foreign students at IIUI utilize to adapt to intercultural communication

#### ***Research Questions:***

- How do foreign students at IIUI perceive and interpret the role of context, salience, and common ground in their adaptation to intercultural communication experiences?
- What are the specific challenges that foreign students at IIUI encounter when navigating intercultural communication?
- How do foreign students at IIUI adapt to intercultural communication and to what extent are their strategies effective in achieving successful communication outcomes?

#### ***Literature Review:***

The process of intercultural adaptation is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon that is of utmost importance for foreign students, who face the challenges of adjusting to a new cultural environment while pursuing their academic goals. In recent years, researchers have

shown increasing interest in examining the factors that contribute to successful intercultural adaptation among foreign students, particularly in the context of higher education.

The current literature review explores the intercultural adaptation of foreign students, focusing on the role of intercultural pragmatic competence in their successful adaptation. Intercultural pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language in culturally appropriate ways, taking into account the social norms and values of the target culture (Kasper & Rose, 2002). It is an essential component of communicative competence and plays a crucial role in intercultural communication, where misunderstandings can easily arise due to cultural differences in linguistic practices.

Several studies have highlighted the significance of intercultural pragmatic competence in the intercultural adaptation of foreign students. For instance, Taguchi and Roever (2017) investigated the relationship between intercultural pragmatic competence and sociocultural adaptation of Japanese learners of English in Australia. They found that learners who had higher levels of intercultural pragmatic competence demonstrated greater success in adapting to the local culture and building social relationships with native speakers.

Another important aspect of intercultural pragmatic competence is the ability to interpret and respond appropriately to nonverbal cues in intercultural communication. Nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice, can convey meanings that are often different from the literal meaning of the words. Therefore, foreign students need to develop their sensitivity to these cues in order to avoid misunderstandings and build rapport with their interlocutors.

Xiaoqing Su (2017) conducted a study on Pakistani students' intercultural adaptation at Chinese universities, which highlighted the significant challenges faced by Chinese higher education institutions in the process of internationalization. The study employed a questionnaire and interview to collect data and utilized Colleen Ward's cultural adjustment process model as a framework. In a separate study, Noreen, S., Wei, F. W., Zareen, M., & Malik, S. (2019) conducted qualitative research on 15 Pakistani students studying at Huazhong University of Science and Technology to explore their intercultural adjustment. The researchers developed a questionnaire for in-depth analysis, and the results indicated that the Pakistani students were content with their life in China.

Competency for intercultural adaptation has been assessed by Ruben, B. D. (1976) who suggested an approach for the evaluation of training and selection of programs utilizing behavioral assessment of participants 'communicative competence. In 1997, Cai and Rodriguez introduced an Intercultural Adaptation Model that specifically highlights the process of communicative adjustment in initial cross-cultural interactions. They focused on how persons may or may not achieve understanding during initial intercultural encounters.

In their paper (2011) titled "Intercultural Adaptation - It is a Two-way process: Examples from a British MBA Program," Zhao and Bourne discuss a larger ethnographic study that examines the process of intercultural adaptation between Mainland Chinese students and their British lecturers and classmates in the UK. They draw on Kim's (1988, 2001) Model of cross-cultural adaptation and Jin's (1992; Jin & Cortazzi, 1993) cultural synergy model, and present qualitative

data to demonstrate that intercultural adaptation is not a one-way process, but rather a two-way process.

Eginli, A. T. (2016) has studied the circle of intercultural communication barriers to intercultural adaptation. To achieve this goal, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with international students from various countries who are studying in Turkey, using the thematic analysis method.

Kecskes, I. (2010) talks about the paradoxical nature of communication which is a socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics. Rapaport (2003) challenges the commonly held view of communication as a smooth process, arguing that despite our best efforts, communication often fails. He refers to this as the "paradox of communication." Rapaport proposes an approach that can account for the ups and downs of the communication process by examining both its positive and negative aspects. He presents a socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics that takes into account both individual and societal factors, including cooperation and egocentrism. According to this approach, cooperation and egocentrism are not opposing forces but rather coexist in the interactive process.

Milosevic, I. T. (2019) talks about the role of common ground in the light of the Socio-cognitive approach. Building on Kecskes' (2008) perspective on the role of context, particularly the private context, in co-constructing shared understanding among conversation participants, the author argues that the unsuccessful establishment of common ground in intercultural conversations can be attributed to partial differences or similarities in the private contexts of the interlocutors, a phenomenon he refers to as "skidding on the common ground."

Overall, these studies demonstrate the importance of intercultural pragmatic competence in the intercultural adaptation of foreign students. Students who possess this competence are better equipped to navigate the challenges of intercultural communication, build social relationships, and achieve their academic goals. Therefore, it is essential for educators and institutions to provide opportunities for foreign students to develop their intercultural pragmatic competence, both in and outside the classroom.

Intercultural adaptation is a vital aspect of the foreign student experience, and intercultural pragmatic competence plays a critical role in facilitating this process. The ability to use language in culturally appropriate ways, interpret nonverbal cues, and navigate cultural differences is crucial for foreign students to succeed in their academic and personal lives. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the factors that contribute to the development of intercultural pragmatic competence and its relationship to successful intercultural adaptation among foreign students.

### **Methodology:**

The purpose of this research is to investigate how foreign students at the International Islamic University Islamabad adapt to their new cultural environment, focusing on three crucial elements of intercultural communication: Context, Salience, and Common ground. To achieve this goal, the study employs Colleen Ward's cultural adjustment process model as a framework to examine the foreign students' experiences and challenges while interacting at IIUI, from their own point of view.

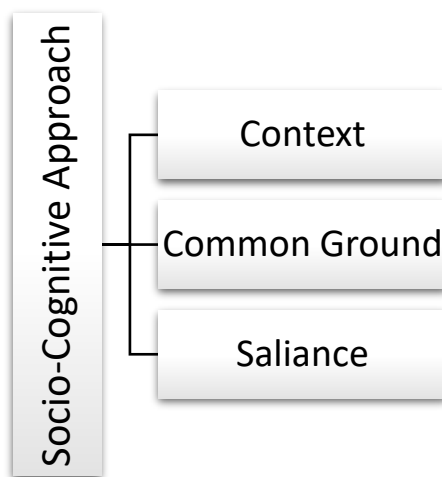
The data were collected from randomly selected 18 students belonging to different countries through a questionnaire that included both, open-ended and close-ended questions. The project was explained very well before consent was sought from all students. Because of some unfamiliar terms such as prior experience, intercultural communication, salience, and common ground, the researcher had to explain every question and gave possible instances and created situations so that the respondents may understand the statement of the question very well and give genuine responses.

***The Framework:***

A mix-method is used to explore the two interlinked factors i.e., Intercultural adaptation and communication. Colleen Ward’s cultural adjustment process model and Socio-cognitive Approach (SCA) both were employed. With respect to SCA, “three big factors” (Context, Salience, and Common ground) were considered for the analysis of intercultural communication.

***Socio-Cognitive Approach:***

In his introduction to the socio-cognitive approach (SCA), Istvan Kecskes (2014) highlights two essential claims. First, both speakers and hearers are active participants in the communicative process, and their personal contexts significantly influence the salience of their knowledge in language production and comprehension. Therefore, a comprehensive interpretation of an utterance requires considering both the speaker's and the hearer's perspectives. Interlocutors should be seen as complete individuals with different cognitive statuses and interpretations of the same information and communicative situation. Second, communication is not a static process but rather a dynamic one in which individuals both shape and are shaped by societal conditions.

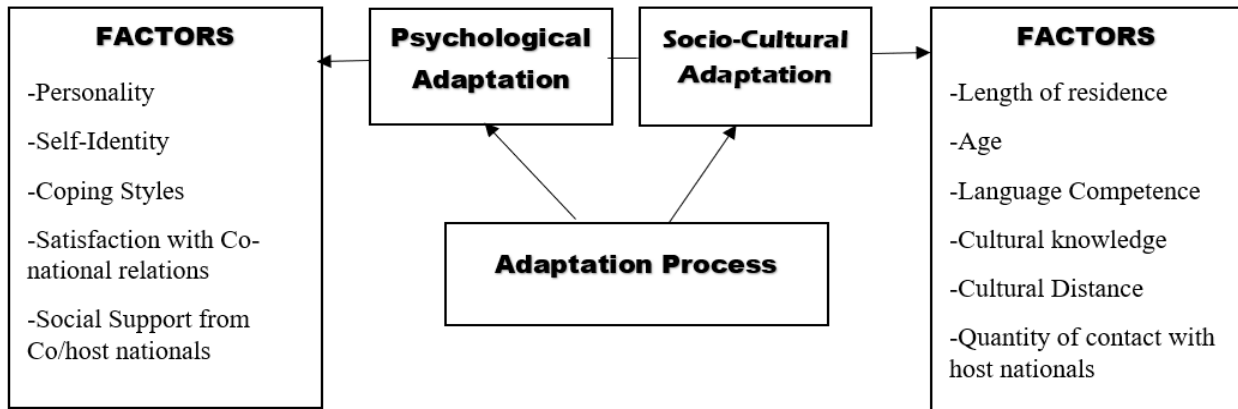


***Colleen Ward’s Cultural Adjustment Process Model:***

The process of intercultural adaptation is concerned with the social and cultural aspects of adaptation, from the perspective of social learning. This involves the acquisition of culturally appropriate knowledge and skills, allowing individuals to interact effectively with members of the host culture. To achieve this, individuals must either conform to the cultural norms of the

host country or negotiate and adjust interactive aspects of the host culture to fit their own cultural background.

**Figure 1: Colleen Ward’s Cultural Adjustment Process Model**



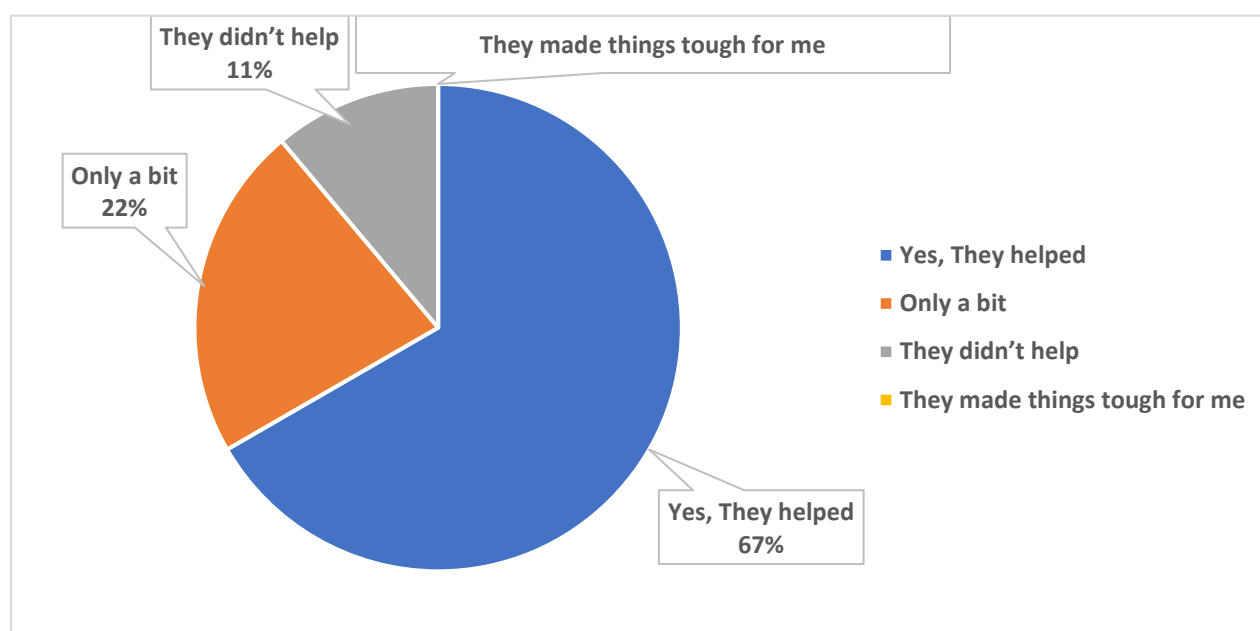
**Table 1: Participants Details**

Name	Country	First Language	2 <sup>nd</sup> Language	Duration of Stay in Pakistan	Degree	Department
Amro Taufiq	Sudan	Arabic	English	10 Years	BBA	FMS
Abdul Rehman	Nigeria	English	Yoruba	7 Years	MS Sociology	Sociology
Sagir	Nigeria	English	Hausa	4 Years	BS IT	IT
Ali Zafar	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	English	6 Months	BS Accounting & Finance	Accounting & Finance
Suhfi Lutfi	Indonesia	Indonesian	Arabic	2.5 years	BS Islamic Studies	Usuluddin
Row Kurniawan	Indonesia	Indonesian	Arabic	2 years	BS Usuluddin	Islamic Studies
Abdullah	Indonesia	Indonesian	Arabic	2 Years	BS Usuluddin	Islamic Studies
M. Hafeezullah	Qatar	Arabic	English	9 Months	BBA	FMS
Abdullah Asifi	Afghanistan	Dari	Pashto	7 Months	BS Accounting & Finance	Accounting & Finance
Ahmad Seyar	Afghanistan	Pashto	Dari	8 Months	BS Accounting & finance	Accounting & Finance
M. Islam Zardan	Afghanistan	Pashto	Dari	6 Years	BS Economics	Economics

Abdurehman	Kenya	Kiswahili	English	4 Years	LLB Hons.	Sharia & Law
Yang Tian Yj	China	Chinese	English	4 Years	BS Economics	Economics
Ma Xiao Long	China	Chinese	Arabic	6 Years	BS Economics	Economics
Yusuf Abdiraohid	Somalia	Somali	Arabic	6 Months	BS Accounting & Finance	Accounting & Finance
Dhiblawe	Somalia	Somali	Arabic	13 Months	BS Economics	Economics
Issa	Somalia	Somali	Arabic	8 Months	BS Economics	Economics
Abdirashid	Somalia	Somali	Arabic	4 Years	BS Economics	Economics

**Results:**

**Figure 2: Role of the co-nationals in the adaptation of the Intercultural Environment**



According to Colleen Ward’s Cultural Adjustment Process Model, the role of the co-nationals in adjusting to the new intercultural environment is very crucial. There was a huge majority that responded with yes when asked whether the co-nationals helped in adjusting to the intercultural environment at IIU or not. Only 11% were of the opinion that could get the support of their co-nationals in this regard.

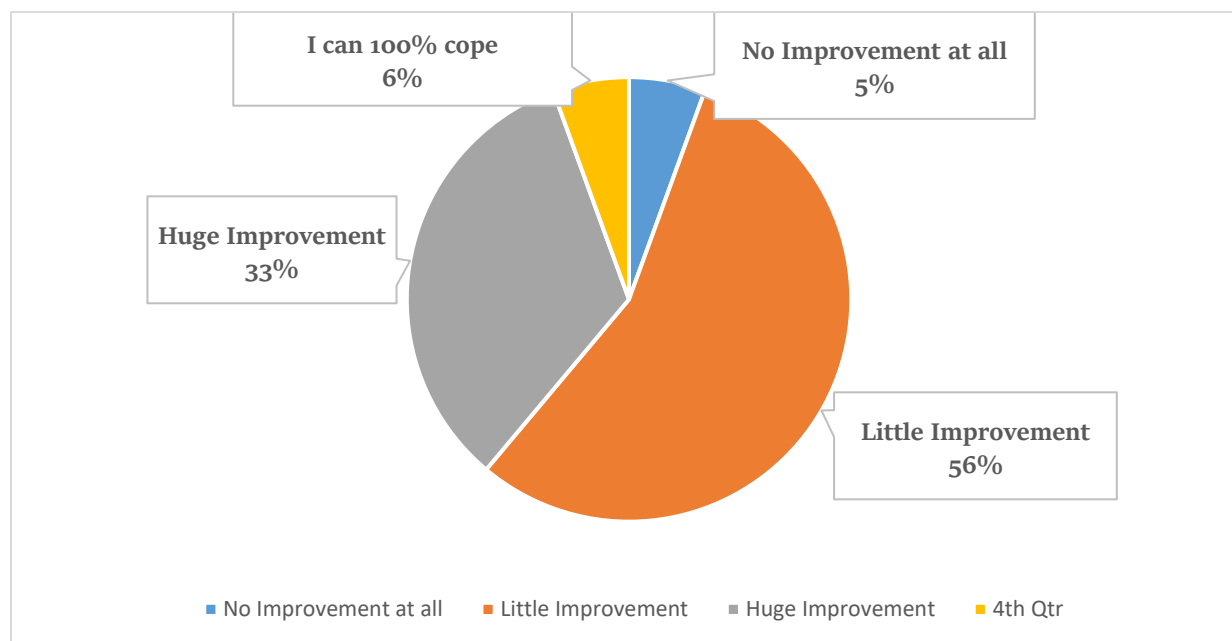


**Table 2: Some Urdu words/phrases/sentences that Foreign Students Already knew before they reached Pakistan and they helped them in Intercultural Communication at the Initial Stage**

No.	Words/Phrases	Frequency
01	Acha hy	03
02	Bhai	03
03	Thhek hy	03
04	Not a Single Word	05
05	Kia hal hy	03
06	Tm kesay ho	02
07	Bahot shukria	03
08	Apka nam kya hy	01
09	Nahi	03
10	Chalo	01
11	Jaldi	01

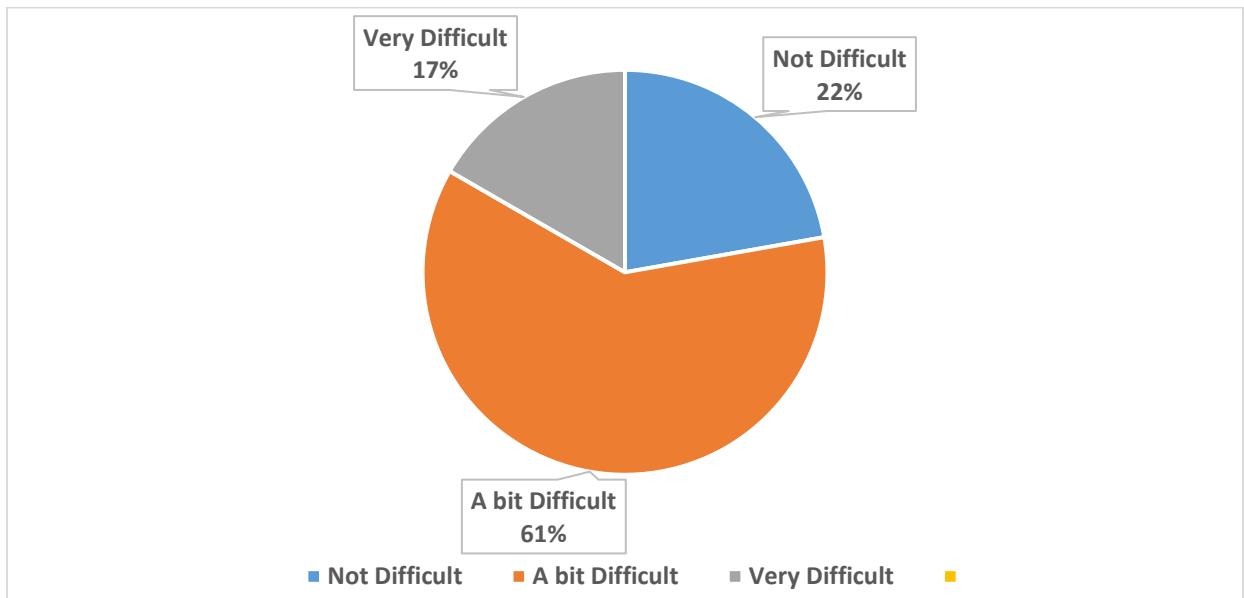
In order to judge the improvement of intercultural pragmatics competence in the later stage, students were asked about their knowledge of the words they might possess even before they reached Pakistan. Except for 5 students who responded with having no knowledge of words, most of the students had little vocabulary bank.

**Figure 3: Improvement Ratio in Intercultural Communication after (Minimum) 6 months Stay in Pakistan**



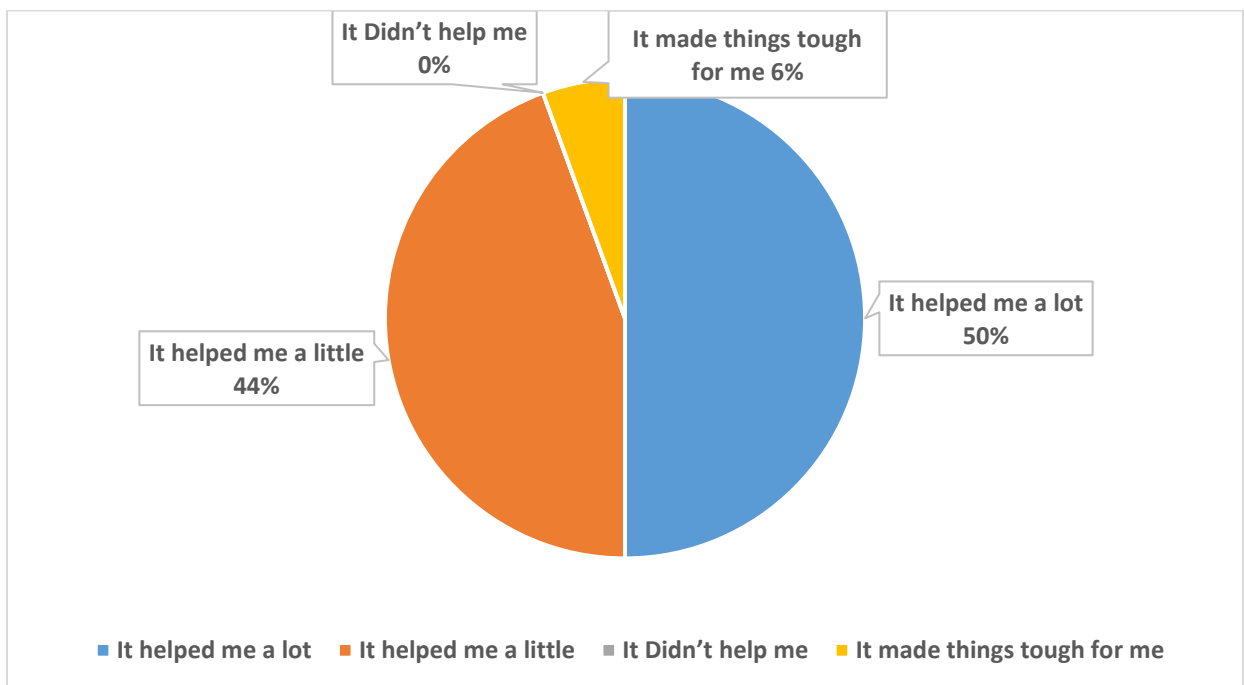
The next question asked from the foreign students studying at IIU was about their improvement in intercultural communication and adjustment after the minimum stay of 6 months. 33% responded with a huge improvement in their intercultural communication while only 5% saw no improvement at all. A huge majority saw little improvement which is understandable.

**Figure 4: Difficulty Level of Adapting to the Intercultural Communication at IIU as a Foreign Student**



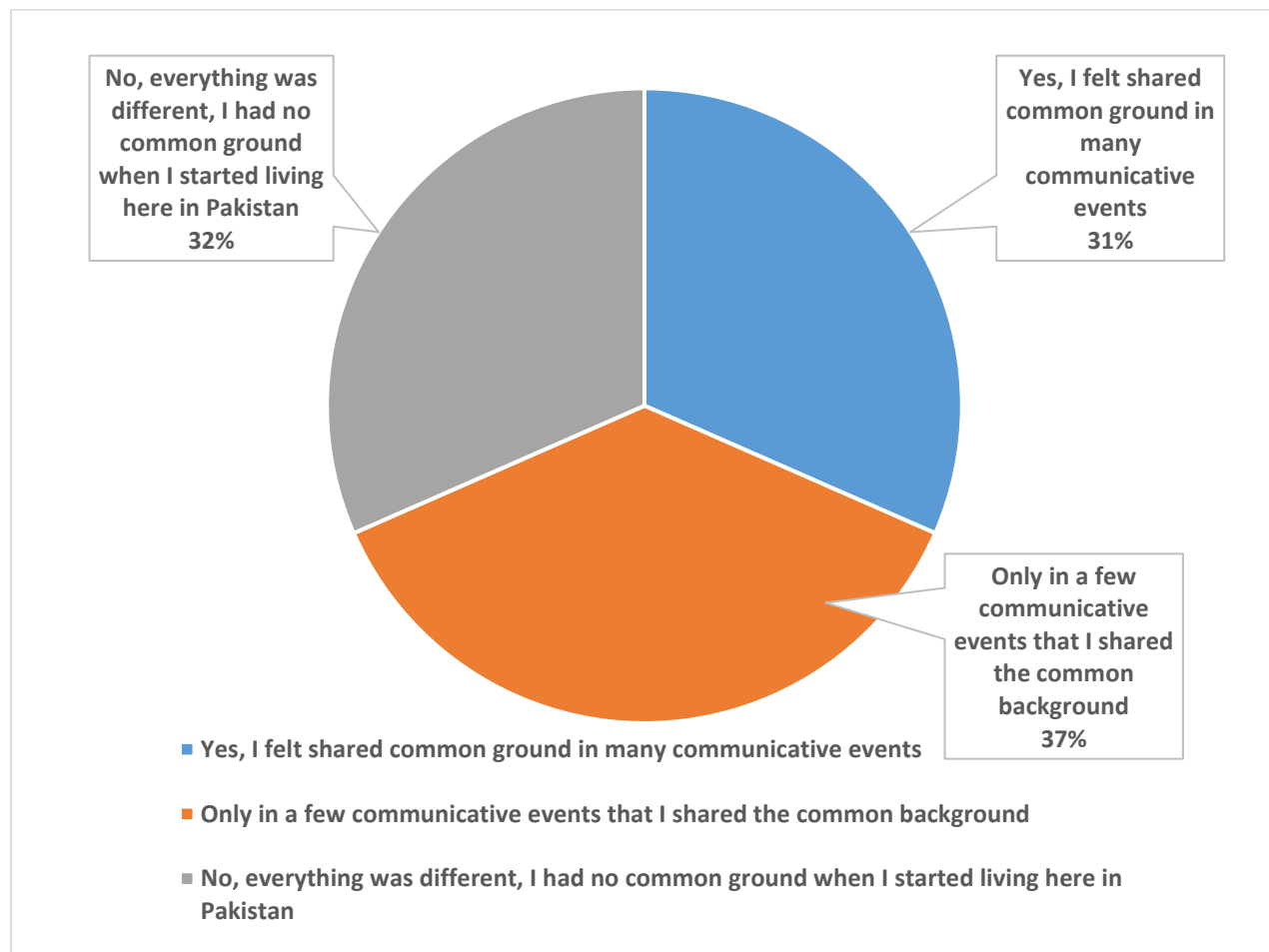
In order to judge how easy or difficult it was for the students to adjust to Intercultural communication at IIU as foreign students, they were asked about their difficulty level. 61% of the students had little difficulty in adapting to the intercultural environment while 22% had no difficulty at all. For 17% it was very difficult to adapt to the new intercultural environment.

**Figure 5: Importance of Prior Experience of Dealing and Communicating with Teachers, Students, Classmates, and Shopkeepers in your Own Country in helping you Adjust at IIU**



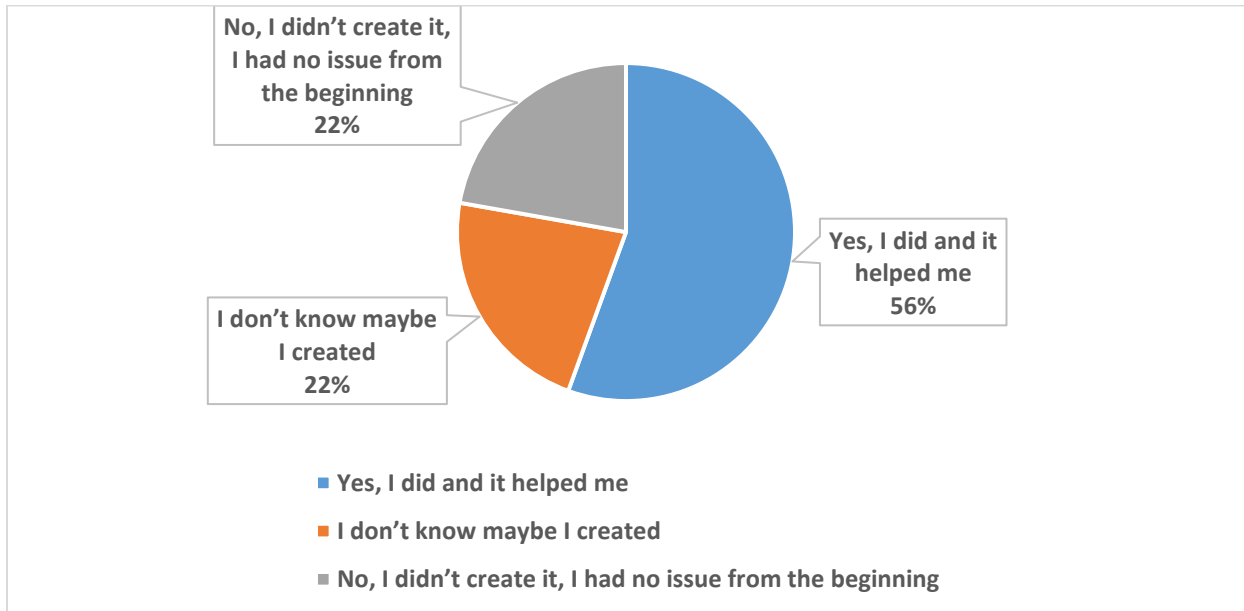
The socio-cognitive approach argues that context is a dynamic construct that appears in different formats in language use both as a repository (Prior experience) and a trigger of knowledge (Kecskes, I. 2014). Prior experience in dealing with shopkeepers, classmates, and teachers in their own country might have helped them in similar conditions. 50% nodded yes! Only 6% either couldn't get help or it made things tough for them as they might have a very different situation from their prior experience. 44% had little help. So, one might say that 96% of the students had a positive response about their prior experience helping them adjust to the new intercultural environment.

**Figure 6: Do you think you felt a common ground in communication that helped you understand the communicative events in Pakistan when you started living at IIU?**



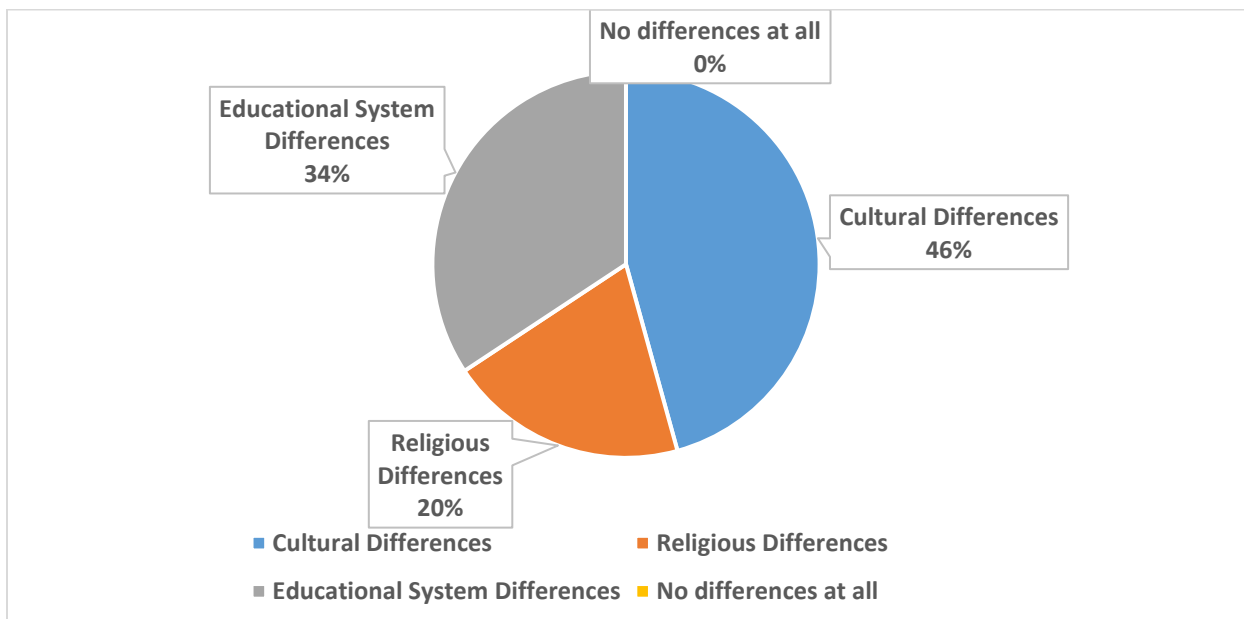
Co-constructing intercultural communication lead to common ground in intercultural communication. (Kecskes, I. 2014). According to Clark (2016), in order for one person to understand another, there must be a “Common ground” of knowledge between them. Even for the very ordinary exchanges of communication, the interlocutors manage their discussion by sharing knowledge in the shape of common ground (Duranti 1997). Only 31% of the students felt a shared common ground. 37% had common ground in only a few communicative events. One reason behind this % of common ground available to the foreign students was possible because of the shared religious beliefs and some cultural events.

**Figure 7: Do you think you started creating common ground with the passage of time?**



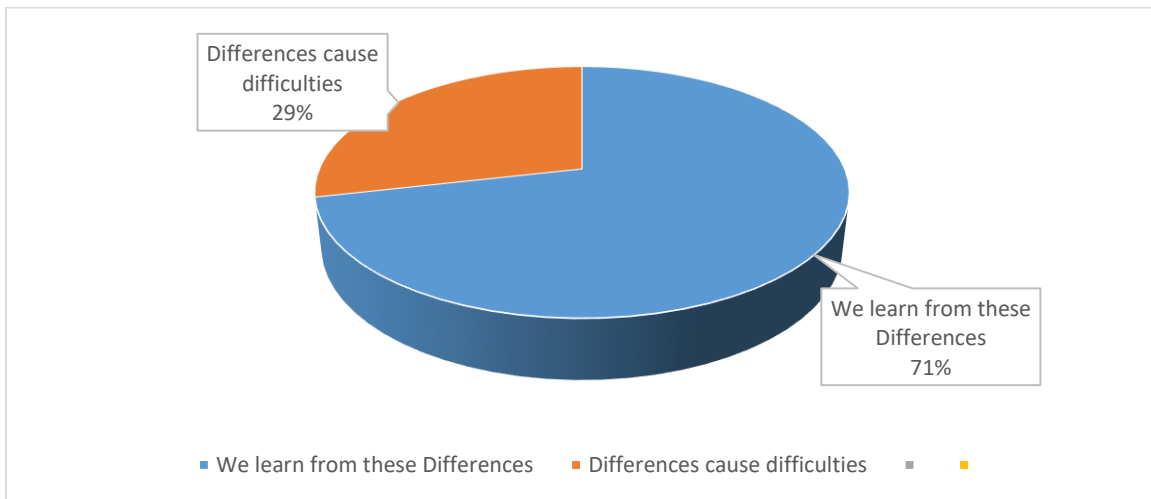
The previous analysis shows that a huge majority of foreign students had no or little common ground. It is a main problem in intercultural interaction. Consequently, because of the little mutual knowledge to activate and seek, they must create common ground in the course of conversation (Kecskes, I. 2014). When asked about whether they created common ground or not; 56% agreed that they did it. 22% had no idea. Only 22% were of the opinion that they didn't need to create it as they had no issues. This is understandable as in the previous analysis we saw 31% of the participants had felt the common ground in many communicative events.

**Figure 8: Types of differences with Pakistani nationals**



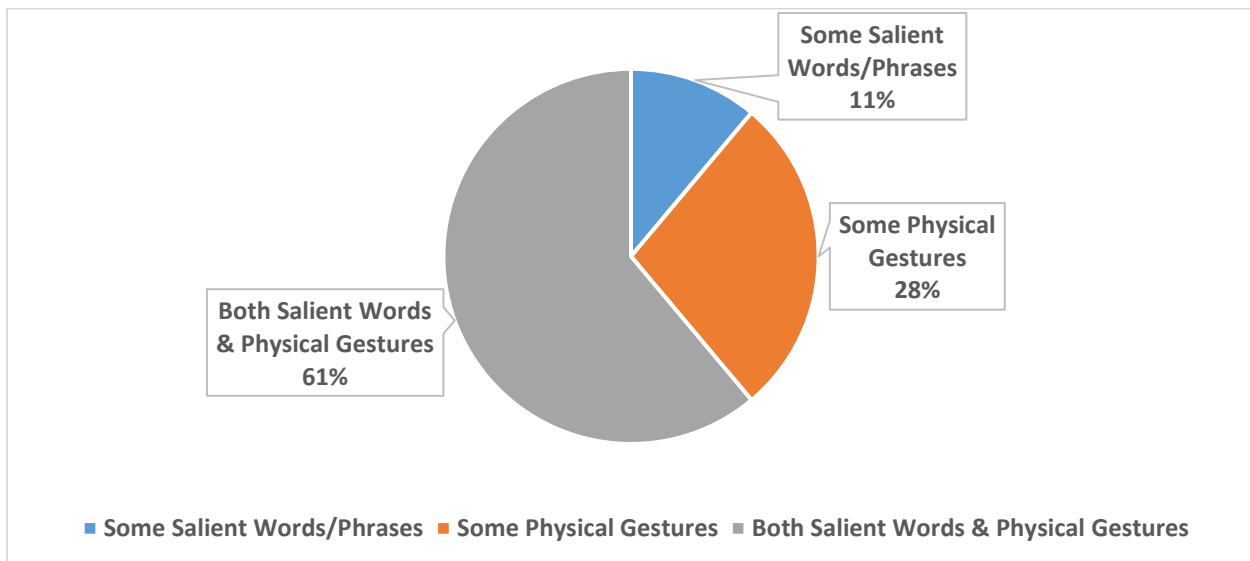
According to Colleen Ward’s Cultural Adjustment Process Model, the quantity of contrast in different measures can certainly affect the adaptation process of foreigners in an intercultural environment. There was not a single student who saw no difference. All experienced differences in one or more aspects. Important to mention is that 20% had religious differences. We all know that IIU is host to a huge majority of Muslim students. There is no non-Muslim student to my knowledge. So, the mention of the difference was somehow surprising to me. When asked about how they find differences, the answer was that they found differences in some ways we practice our religious duties, otherwise, all participants were Muslims as their names show. But majorly they were the cultural and educational system differences that cause difficulties for them in adapting to the environment, especially in the initial stage.

**Figure 9: How do these differences affect your intercultural communication?**



A surprise package for the researcher where respondents were not shy about the differences rather, they took these differences as an opportunity to learn. A huge majority of 71% believed it was not about causing difficulty rather they learned from these differences and they enjoyed learning.

**Figure 10: What salient features help you in communication?**



As per Istvan Kecskes (2013), the third key element affecting intercultural communication is salience. This notion pertains to the significance or visibility of signs in the context of communication. The importance of a specific sign is determined by its relative salience when considered in conjunction with other signs, allowing individuals to prioritize vast amounts of information and focus on the most crucial aspects.

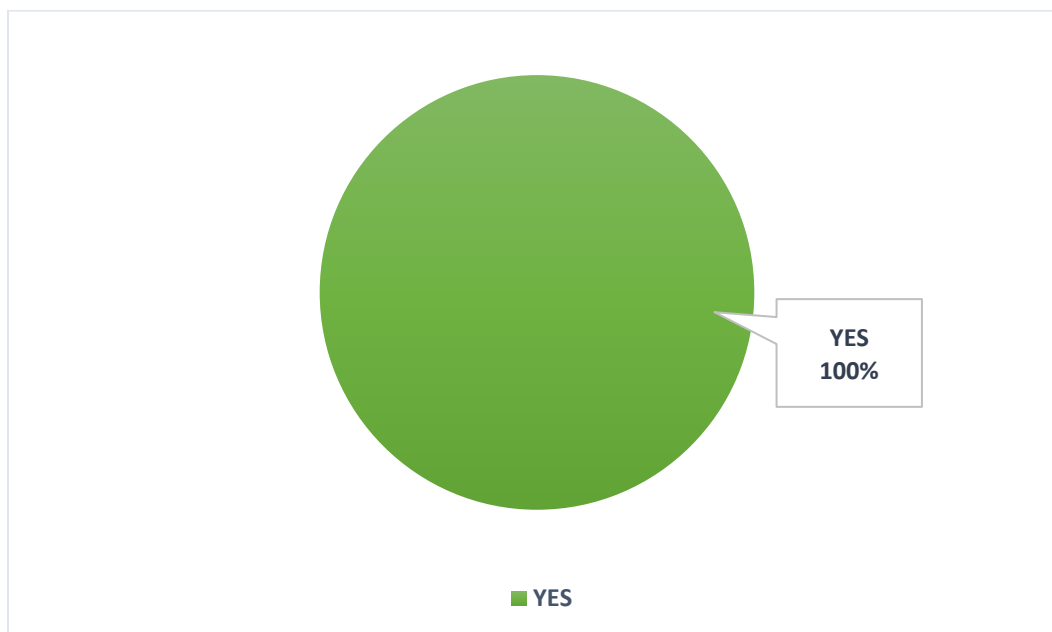
Rather than making it complex for the foreign students the researcher asked a simple question about whether linguistic salience (along with the physical gestures) helped them or not. 61% said these both have great value when talking about saliency.

**Table 3: Tell us what are some words/phrases that seem very salient to you and they help you understand the communicative event?**

Insha Allah	Kya hy	Nahi	Bhai	Kidhar	Don't Know	Acha	Dukaan
theek hy	thumbs up (Physical Gesture)	haan	jana(to go)	Idhar ao	Kala (Black)	Salam	

The researcher asked about some salient words/phrases that might catch the attention of the foreign students and help them rank that salient information to gather the overall meaning of the communication: They certainly had some salient words which helped them understand the communication. One of the Somalian told the researcher that the word 'dukaan' was very salient to him as this word was already present in his mother tongue.

**Figure 11: Do you think you manage your prior experience of communication with the emergent situation and make it possible for you to understand the situation? (In Pakistani Context)**



Finally, after all the questions when students were familiar with the concepts of Intercultural communication and adaptation, the researcher asked about the importance of the prior experience of communication in the Pakistani context and the blending of that with the

emergent situation. It was no surprise to see that 100% responded with a big yes. They felt a clear help from the merging of the two.

### **Discussion:**

The results of the study highlight the crucial role of co-nationals in helping foreign students adjust to the new intercultural environment. While a majority of students reported receiving support from co-nationals, only a small percentage of students reported having no difficulty adapting to the new environment. In addition, the study found that prior experience in dealing with people from the host culture was a significant factor in helping students adjust to the new intercultural environment.

The study also revealed that the majority of students experienced differences in one or more aspects, including religious and cultural differences. However, students viewed these differences as an opportunity to learn rather than as a source of the difficulty. The study found that linguistic salience and physical gestures were also significant factors in facilitating intercultural communication.

The results suggest that creating common ground is critical to successful intercultural communication. While many students reported having little common ground, a majority reported taking steps to create common ground in their conversations. The study also highlights the importance of blending prior communication experience in the Pakistani context with intercultural communication in order to facilitate successful adaptation to the new environment.

Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of support from co-nationals, prior experience, and the creation of common ground in facilitating successful intercultural communication and adjustment to a new environment. It also highlights the importance of recognizing and valuing differences as opportunities to learn rather than as sources of difficulty

### **Conclusion:**

The study was conducted to investigate how foreign students adjust themselves in an intercultural environment at IIUI. The questionnaire was designed for this purpose. 18 students from 9 different countries responded. The statements of the questions in the questionnaire were explained clearly with instances and supposed situations. It was noted that students felt excited in response to those questions. Some students took it as an opportunity to identify their own problems and solutions related to intercultural communication. The minimum time duration of stay in Pakistan which was set for this study was 6 months but a majority of them were residents of IIUI for more than a year or even much more. It made the study more effective as they could analyze their progress in adjusting to the intercultural environment very well. The role of prior experience, its blending with the emergent situation, salience, and common background was endorsed by a huge majority of the participants.

### **Further Study:**

The current study is limited to only 18 foreign students. More students can be added to the study to strengthen the results. Moreover, the region-specified study could be very interesting, as IIUI is host to the Arab region, African region, and other Asian countries including China,

Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Afghanistan. A comparative study of all these regions is also possible in this regard.

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