Personality and Social Relations in the Views of International Exchange Students

Toe Oo Wai Yan [1*]
Paing Phyo Thu [2]
Raajshivar Saetan [3]

Abstract

This review article aims to explore the relationship between personality and social relations, particularly within the context of international exchange students who must navigate cultural, linguistic, and value system differences. It emphasizes that personality is not a fixed trait, but a flexible construct shaped by socio-cultural contexts. The study described an integrated framework that includes the Five-Factor Model of personality, cultural psychology, and social constructionist theory.

The article covers the foundational aspects of personality and its interaction with various social groups, ranging from primary groups to cultural institutions. It discusses how individuals adapt through strategies such as self-awareness and cultural agility. A comparison is made between collectivist cultures—such as those in Thailand and Myanmar—and individualist cultures in the West, showing how personality is shaped by language, norms, and institutional structures.

Furthermore, the article offers practical recommendations for personal development in multicultural settings at the individual, group, and policy. These include designing experiential learning-focused exchange programs, fostering cultural awareness, and establishing institutional frameworks for sustainable adaptation. Notably, the integration of cultural virtues—particularly the Saraniya Dhamma—into personality development and social adaptation is highlighted as a valuable approach to fostering self-understanding and intercultural cooperation.

Keywords: Personality, Social Groups, Cultural Adaptation

[1-2] College of Industry Technology King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok
[*] Email: raajshivar.s@cit.kmutnb.ac.th

[3] Department of Social and Applied Science, College of Industrial Technology, King Mongkut's University of Technology North Bangkok

Introduction

In an era defined by globalization and cross-border communication, individuals must navigate increasingly diverse cultural, linguistic, and social environments. Personality—often understood as a unique constellation of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—is shaped not only by biological predispositions but also by the cultural and social frameworks in which individuals operate (McCrae & Costa, 1999) Social associations, including family, education, and peer groups, act as key agents in shaping and reinforcing behavioral norms, social values, and personal identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966)

Understanding the relationship between personality and social context offers valuable insight into why individuals behave differently across cultures and why the same person may exhibit different aspects of their personality depending on the setting. For international exchange students, who must adjust to new cultural landscapes and unfamiliar social expectations, personality becomes a reflection of both personal identity and social adaptation. Their experiences provide a unique lens through which to observe how cross-cultural transitions influence personal growth, resilience, and social integration (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001)

This article aims to analyze the mutual influence between personality and social relations, drawing from the perspectives of international exchange students and theoretical models across disciplines. By comparing collectivist societies like Thailand and Myanmar with individualist cultures in the West, this study provides a comprehensive view of how personality adapts to social norms, and how such adaptation facilitates survival and success in multicultural societies. Through this lens, personality is not viewed as fixed but as fluid and responsive to context—a critical quality in an interconnected world.

Why Personality and Society Matter

We all have our personalities - our mix of traits, behaviors and thinking patterns that make us who we are. At the same time, we're living in social groups made up of families, schools, workplaces, and cultural groups. These two forces constantly cross and influence each other in fascinating ways. Your personality determines the kind of friends you'll have, the kind of work you enjoy, and how you interact with people in social settings. But your groups also shape your personality in the long run, introducing you to new patterns of acting and thinking. Understanding that give-and-take relationship allows us to see why people act differently in different cultures or social situations and teaches us valuable tools for personal development.

Exploring the Connection

This paper will guide you through five important aspects of this relationship:
1. The building blocks of personality - what it is and how it develops
2. How social groups form and function, from small friend circles to large organizations
3. The two-way street between personality and society - how they change each other
4. Real-life examples showing these dynamics in different cultures
5. Practical ways to understand yourself better and adapt to social situations

By examining these elements, we'll uncover a fundamental truth: our personalities and social worlds are deeply connected in ways that affect our daily lives more than we might realize. This understanding can help us navigate relationships, careers, and personal development more effectively.

Literature Review

Personality has long been a central topic in psychology. While early theories emphasized biological roots, contemporary perspectives highlight how personality develops through social and cultural influences. The Five-Factor Model (FFM) remains widely used, categorizing traits into openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (McCrae and John, 1992), which are now understood to be shaped by cultural context (Church, 2000) Social constructionism also frames personality as a product of ongoing social interaction (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) In cultural psychology, Markus and Kitayama (1991) distinguish between independent and interdependent self-construal's, showing how Western and Eastern societies promote different personality structures. Theories of cross-cultural adjustment, such as the U-Curve and W-Curve, further explain how individuals, especially international students, adapt emotionally and behaviorally to unfamiliar environments. (Oberg, 1960; Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 2010)

Empirical research supports these theories. Ward and Kennedy (1993) found that intercultural competence and personality jointly predict adaptation success, while Heine et al. (1999) emphasized the context-sensitivity of self-concepts. Real-life accounts reinforce this: a Brazilian student credited Japanese punctuality with improving his conscientiousness, while a Canadian in Myanmar gained patience and emotional restraint. In Thailand, a study on Saraniya Dhamma found that integrating cultural values—such as compassion, shared goals, and public welfare—into community engagement fosters personal and collective development (Papan, Nilkote, Sukpom, and Saisena, 2024). These insights affirm that personality evolves not in isolation but in constant dialogue with social and cultural surroundings, especially for those navigating cross-cultural transitions.

Body of Knowledge

Personality refers to the dynamic organization of individual characteristic emotional, cognitive, and behavioral—that influence one's consistent patterns of interaction with the environment. It is not static but rather a process influenced by both biological predispositions and environmental stimuli. According to McCrae and Costa's Five-Factor Model (1992), personality traits can be categorized into five dimensions: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. These traits interact with the surrounding cultural and social environments to shape individuals' behaviors and worldviews (McCrae & John, 1992)

International exchange students provide a unique perspective on how personality adapts in response to new social environments. Their experiences demonstrate how traits can evolve

as they integrate into different cultural systems. The negotiation between their original cultural frameworks and host environments reflects the sociocultural construction of personality.

1. Understanding Basics

1.1 What Is Personality?

Personality is the unique mix of characteristics, habits, and tendencies that shape how individuals engage with the world. While some traits may be innate—such as a natural inclination toward novelty or routine—others are formed through social interaction and life experience. Classic psychological theories such as Freud's psychosexual stages and Erikson's psychosocial development emphasize the formative power of early experiences. Freud believed that unresolved conflicts in early childhood could lead to rigid traits in adulthood, while Erikson emphasized the identity struggles that occur across the lifespan (Erikson, 1968)

Contemporary psychology, however, distills these ideas into a more empirical model: the Five-Factor Model (FFM). This framework posits that personality can be described using five broad traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (McCrae & Costa, 1999) These traits can evolve based on cultural exposure, social expectations, and personal growth. For example, an introverted employee in a customer service role may learn to exhibit more extroverted behaviors over time due to job demands.

Trait	High Score Characteristics	Low Score Characteristics
Openness	Imaginative, curious	Conventional, prefers routine
Conscientiousness	Organized, goal-directed	Disorganized, spontaneous
Extraversion	Outgoing, energetic	Reserved, solitary
Agreeableness	Compassionate, cooperative	Critical, competitive
Neuroticism	Sensitive to stress, anxious	Emotionally stable, calm

Note: Adapted from McCrae & Costa (1999) and John & Srivastava (1999)

For instance, highly open individuals may gravitate toward artistic careers, while conscientious individuals often succeed in structured roles like project management.

1.2 What Are Social Relations?

Social relations refer to the cultural, familial, and institutional contexts that shape personality. These include primary groups like family and close friends, secondary groups such as school or workplace communities, and broader cultural institutions like media or religion. Each context contributes norms, roles, and expectations that guide behavior (Berger & Luckmann, 1966)

1.2.1 Primary Groups shape core values and communication styles.

In Thailand, the concept of kreng jai instills humility and deference, leading to conflict-avoidant behavior. In contrast, Western families may promote assertiveness through open discussions.

Examples: Family, lifelong friends.
Impact: Shapes core values and communication styles.

In Thailand, extended families teach kreng jai—a cultural norm where people avoid direct conflict to maintain harmony. A child raised this way might grow into an adult who prioritizes teamwork over personal opinions.

In Western nuclear families, open debates at dinner tables often encourage assertiveness and independent thinking.

1.2.2 Secondary Groups such as schools or companies provide structured roles.

Japanese schools emphasize communal responsibility, while U.S. startups reward innovation and boldness.

Examples: Schools, workplaces, clubs.

Impact: Teaches practical skills and social roles.

Japanese schools emphasize group activities like cleaning classrooms, fostering teamwork and humility.

Silicon Valley startups reward employees who pitch bold ideas, subtly encouraging innovation and risk-taking.

1.2.3 Cultural Institutions such as religion or mass media further reinforce behaviors.

In Myanmar, Buddhist temples promote calmness and generosity; in contrast, Western media often glorifies individuality.

Examples: Religion, education, media.

Impact: Reinforces societal norms over generations.

Buddhist monasteries in Myanmar teach patience and humility through daily rituals.

Western social media glorifies individualism, promoting self-expression through platforms like Instagram or TikTok.

2. How Personality and Social Structures Shape Each Other?

Personality and social context continuously influence one another in a reciprocal process. According to niche-picking theory, individuals tend to seek environments that match their traits—such as a creative student choosing art school or a conscientious one entering law or engineering—where their personality is further reinforced by social norms and rewards (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008). Conversely, immersion in new cultural settings can reshape personality traits and values: a shy student may become more assertive through public speaking, while cultural exchange can shift one's orientation toward individuality or emotional restraint depending on the host culture. This mutual shaping helps explain why siblings raised in the same household may develop different personalities based on their social affiliations, and why immigrants often adapt their behavior to fit new cultural norms.

2.1 Personality Guides Social Choices

From childhood, we tend to gravitate toward environments that match our natural tendencies—a process psychologists call niche-picking. An extroverted teen may choose the stage, while a quieter sibling might prefer the chess club. Over time, these small choices shape habits and reinforce personality traits. A highly open person may attend art school, surrounded

by peers who encourage experimentation, while a conscientious individual might thrive in a law firm that rewards precision and diligence. Cultural context also plays a key role: in collectivist cultures like Thailand, where social harmony is valued, peacekeepers find fitting roles in family businesses; in contrast, individualist hubs like Silicon Valley attract high-openness, risk-taking personalities to fast-paced start-ups. Ultimately, personality not only influences our social paths—it actively constructs them through the environments we choose again and again.

2.2 Society Shapes Who We Become

But personality is not fixed—it evolves through ongoing interaction with social environments. A shy student may gain confidence through debate practice and peer approval, illustrating how group norms reshape individual traits, much like Erikson's view of growth through challenge. Cultural institutions also influence personality: Buddhist monastic life in Myanmar fosters patience, while Western corporate culture rewards assertiveness. Even digital platforms shape behavior—social media may amplify anger or, alternatively, promote openness through thoughtful dialogue. Longitudinal studies confirm this adaptive process: cooperative workplaces like nursing tend to increase agreeableness over time, while competitive fields like sales boost assertiveness. These shifts show that personality responds dynamically to feedback, preparing us to explore how such adjustments unfold across cultures.

3. Cultural Comparisons: Contrasting Collectivism and Individualism

In collectivist societies like Thailand and Myanmar, cultural norms emphasize harmony, hierarchy, and interdependence, with concepts like the words 'kreng jai' [เกรงใจ] and 'ah-nar-de' [အားနာသည်] encouraging indirect communication and social unity. Even language reinforces these values through honorifics that reflect age and status (Hofstede, 2001). In contrast, Western cultures prioritize autonomy, directness, and self-expression—seen in classrooms that welcome debate and workplaces that reward initiative and risk-taking. These differing cultural values shape the personality traits that are cultivated and reinforced across contexts (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

3.1 Collectivism: Thailand and Myanmar – The Symphony of the Collective

In Thailand and Myanmar, neighboring cultures bound by Buddhist heritage and agrarian roots, personality is defined by a shared ethos of harmony, hierarchy, and interdependence. Despite having different customs, their cultural closeness displays astounding similarities in the way they form identity.

Harmony as the Heartbeat of Identity

Conflict Avoidance: Thailand's kreng jai (a version to imposing or confrontational) and Myanmar's ah-nar-de (social dignity) respect emotional constraint and situational awareness. In both cultures, direct disagreement is generally dampened by being replaced by indirectness to ensure group cohesion. To illustrate, a Thai employee would phrase critique as a "suggestion," and a Burmese elder would use proverbs to guide conduct—both exhibiting high agreeableness and tact personae.

Hierarchy Built into Language: Patterns of language reinforce social order. Burmese and Thai languages use complex honorifics that depend upon age, status, and relation. A Myanmar younger brother speaks to an older one as ko (brother) or ma (sister), while Thai children use phîi (older) and nóng (younger). Such linguistic rules build personalities attuned to social roles, where submission to authority is second nature.

3.2 Individualism: The West – The Soloist's Journey

In Western cultures, personality is shaped around autonomy, ambition, and self-definition. Traits like openness to experience and extraversion are actively reinforced classrooms promote debate and originality, while workplaces reward innovation and risk-taking. This fosters low uncertainty, avoidance and a comfort with ambiguity. Social networks are often voluntary, centered on shared goals rather than inherited obligations; people form ties through professional groups, hobbies, or online communities that reflect personal choice. While collectivist cultures like Thailand and Myanmar emphasize harmony, hierarchy, and interdependence, individualist societies cultivate agency and self-expression. In both cases, personality is neither purely innate nor entirely constructed—it emerges through dynamic interaction with cultural norms, shaped by how individuals choose to conform, negotiate, or redefine their social worlds.

4. Thriving in Change: Self-Awareness Tools

To navigate cultural transitions successfully, individuals must develop self-awareness. This means identifying which traits are culturally conditioned and which represent core personal values. For example, a Japanese manager might preserve respect for hierarchy while learning to give direct feedback in multicultural teams. This blend of authenticity and adaptability is a hallmark of cultural agility (Livermore, 2015)

4.1 Self-Awareness Tools

Personality adaptation begins with self-awareness, recognizing how our cultural upbringing has shaped our default behaviors and emotional responses. By conducting a kind of cultural archaeology, we can uncover which traits are deeply ingrained (like a Thai professional's instinctive conflict avoidance or an American's comfort with self-promotion) and which potential abilities remain underdeveloped. This process requires distinguishing between core values that define our authentic self (such as integrity or loyalty) and adaptable behaviors that can be consciously modified for different contexts (like communication styles or decision-making approaches). The key to successful adaptation lies in maintaining this stable inner compass while developing the flexibility to express our values in culturally appropriate ways— what we might call the flexibility paradox of personality growth. For instance, a Japanese manager working internationally might preserve their fundamental respect for hierarchy while learning to communicate more directly when leading diverse teams, demonstrating how cultural agility operates in practice. This foundational self-knowledge becomes the bedrock for all subsequent personality development, allowing us to navigate cultural complexity without losing our sense of authentic identity.

4.2 Adaptability Strategies

While self-awareness is the first step in navigating cultural diversity, adaptability turns that awareness into effective action. Since cultural norms vary, people from different backgrounds need specific strategies to adjust both behavior and mindset.

1) For Collectivist Backgrounds

In cultures where harmony and group approval are important, speaking up can feel risky. Practicing strategic assertiveness helps. Start by sharing opinions in safe spaces—like team meetings—using phrases such as "I'd like to add a perspective..." and build up to more direct suggestions. This lets you speak up while keeping respect.

Another helpful strategy is framing self-expression as a group benefit. Instead of saying, "This is my idea," say, "This idea might help us succeed together." You still share your voice, but in a way that supports the team.

2) For Individualist Backgrounds

People used to independence and direct talk may need to adjust by building consensus. This means using "we" language and asking for group opinions before making decisions. It shows you value others, not just your own view.

Also, focus on building relationships, not just getting tasks done. Sharing meals or small talk may seem optional, but they build trust and make teamwork easier in cultures where relationships come first.

3) Universal Strategies

Some tools work for everyone. One is trying small new behaviors. For example, a naturally direct person might try listening more; a quiet person might try speaking up. These small steps build comfort in new situations.

Another is cognitive reframing. Instead of thinking, "This feels wrong," try asking, "What value is being shown here?" or "How can I respond in a way that fits both cultures?"

Finally, think of building a bilingual personality—knowing when to be more indirect or more direct, depending on who you're with. Just like switching languages, switching styles shows skill and respect.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the mutual and dynamic influence between personality and social associations, particularly through the lens of international exchange students. It reveals that personality is neither fixed nor purely biologically inherited but a construct that evolves within and in response to diverse social environments. Cross-cultural transitions provide opportunities for growth, as students must adapt to new behavioral norms while retaining aspects of their authentic identity.

Summary of Key Findings:

1. Personality traits such as openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness are significantly shaped by cultural context and social interaction.

2. Exchange students exhibit adaptive behaviors that align with host cultures, such as assertiveness in Western classrooms and emotional restraint in Buddhist communities.

3. Social groups—including family, school, and religion—play critical roles in reinforcing or reshaping personality across cultures.

Applications and Practical Implications:

1. Understanding the fluidity of personality in multicultural environments supports better program design in student exchange and global education.

2. Culturally grounded frameworks like Saraniya Dhamma can complement psychological models to promote emotional intelligence, social cohesion, and civic values.

3. These insights may inform the development of intercultural training modules for students, teachers, and community hosts.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Integrate intercultural competence into exchange program curricula to promote adaptability and global awareness.

2. Design bilateral exchanges that emphasize cultural immersion and community-based experiences.

3. Provide host institutions with clear guidelines and funding to support culturally sensitive services for international students.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. Conduct longitudinal studies to examine personality changes across different phases of exchange experiences.

2. Compare cultural frameworks—such as Confucian, Islamic, and Western liberal traditions—in shaping personality development.

3. Investigate the role of digital media and global networks in influencing personality adaptation in multicultural contexts.

Acknowledgement

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