Comparative Analysis of Locus of Control and Social Contact Distances among International Students from the Republic of Moldova

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the intricate relationship between social contact distances (SCD) and locus of control (LOC) among international students. The research highlights that progress during academic years may contribute to reducing SCD, indicating an evolution in accepting and approaching other cultures as students advance academically. The analysis of correlations between LOC and SCD shows that students with an internal LOC reveals lower SCD towards their home country's population, emphasizing the influence of cultural cohesion and emotional bonds in managing social relationships. The study also reveals that students with an internal LOC show reduced SCD with the host country's population, highlighting how the perception of personal control influences the level of social closeness in an intercultural context. In conclusion, the research underscores the importance of academic context and cultural factors in shaping intercultural attitudes and behaviors.*

KEYWORDS*: social distance, social contact distance, locus of control, international students, academic evolution, cultural cohesion.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The current state and developmental directions of higher education indicate the formation of a global market for educational services, offering a diversified range of options and supporting international student mobility. According to a report by the European Association for International Education (EAIE), analyzing admission results for the academic year 2023-2024 in 27 countries, out of a total of over 2 million students, approximately 300,000 are international [1]. Statistics attest to the increasing attractiveness of higher education in the Republic of Moldova for young people from various countries. In the academic year 2023-2024, the number of international students in the Republic of Moldova increased by 4.0% compared to the previous year, reaching 5.2 thousand individuals (approximately 9.2% of the total number of students), with significant proportions for students from Romania (51.7%), Israel (10.3%), India (21.1%), and Ukraine (7.5%) [2].

Academic mobility requires an increasingly extensive involvement of university psychological services in understanding the peculiarities of international students' adaptation to the socio-cultural and academic environment, aiming to propose support and intervention programs that facilitate this process dynamically and efficiently. The study presented below provides data on locus of control (LOC) and social (cultural) distances, which, in a series of research, have been identified as conditions for cultural adaptation, including for international students.

The concept of "locus of control" (LOC), initially developed in the research of Rotter J. [3], represents a generalized way of anticipating rewards and sanctions through a distinct organization of judgments about oneself, life, and its events. LOC influences an individual's perception of the ability to control, accept, or disapprove of the events they go through. According to Rotter J.'s theory, internals feel personally responsible for events in their lives, while externals believe these events are determined by forces beyond their control. In the context of contemporary psychology, this concept has become extremely popular and has been explored by numerous researchers, including in studies on various intercultural subjects.

Social distance, for which in this research we used the notion of "social contact distance" (SCD), has also been frequently employed in intercultural studies. The term "social distance" was introduced by Park R. E. in 1924 [4]. Park defined social distance as an attempt "to reduce to something like measurable terms the grades and degrees of understanding and intimacy which characterize personal and social relations generally" inferring with race or class consciousness, qualifying and modifying interpersonal relationships. Developing Park's ideas, Bogardus E. S. [5] created the Social Distance Scale, a variant of which was used in this research.

The field of education represents one of the highly relevant research areas that have generated extensive topics regarding the role of LOC. In a study conducted at a university in Turkey, Kutanis, R. O., and Masci, M. [6], investigated the relationship between LOC (internal and external) and learning factors, analyzing

302 questionnaires completed by students. The results indicate that LOC influences capacity, method, and observation factors, and significant differences were identified in students' thinking based on age and gender, with women predominantly exhibiting external LOC, while men manifested internal LOC.

In another study by Anderson A. and Hamilton R. [7], the relationship between LOC, motivation, and academic performance was explored. It confirmed previous findings in the literature, suggesting that high values of externality can have a detrimental impact on academic performance, while strongly expressed internality may contribute less positively to it. Using an instrument that examines LOC as a multidimensional construct, the authors emphasize the particularities of the relationship between externality, internality, motivation, or academic performance. The results suggest that environmental influences may exert a more pronounced influence on academic performance and motivation than personality traits, although moderate levels of LOC are associated with realistic expectations and better adaptation outcomes.

In a study conducted at the University of Bucharest with 225 students, it was observed that active and pragmatic learning styles are characteristic of participants with an internal LOC, while participants with an external LOC adopt reflexive and theoretical styles. The research results were used to propose innovative ideas and approaches in academic teaching and learning [8].

Research in the Republic of Moldova has been carried out regarding the relationship between the appreciative style and LOC in students [9]. In a study with 360 participants, divided into groups with a social and educational profile, respectively a real profile, it was found that subjects in the first group predominantly exhibit an internal LOC, while those in the second group predominantly manifest an external LOC. This aspect was associated with different learning styles, indicating that LOC can influence preferences in the learning and adaptation process in the academic context.

It is noteworthy that interest in the role of LOC in various aspects of education has a long history. In 1983, Findley M. J. and Cooper H. M. [10] analyzed 98 studies comparing LOC with the level of academic performance, highlighting a significantly positive correlation in 70% of them.

This dimension can provide an explanation for variations in students' adaptation to the academic and cultural environment of the host country.

Research has revealed diverse results, such as identifying internal LOC as the strongest predictor of effective communication with hosts in a study of international students in the United States [11]. Other significant predictors were the country of origin and the length of stay in the USA.

Studies have also been conducted, such as the one carried out by Yamaguchi Y. and Wiseman R. L. [12], which explored the relationship between self-construction, LOC, intercultural communication skills, and the mental health status of international students. The results highlighted the importance of internal LOC on the perception of individual autonomy and emphasized its influence on effective stress management and positive interactions in the host environment.

In another study by Schwartzman R. and Boger E. K. [13], through focus-group interviews, the role of internal and external LOC levels in the intensive English language learning process among international students in a university in the southeastern United States was investigated. The conclusions revealed a dynamic interaction between internal and external control, emphasizing that traditional characterizations of internality and externality should be reconsidered, as these dimensions synergistically interact in the process of learning a new language and adapting to a new culture.

A notable example in the field of LOC research is the study conducted by McGinnies E. and collaborators [14], who administered the Internal-External Locus of Control Scale to an extensive sample of over 1,500 students from various countries, including Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States. The main purpose of this study was to investigate how individuals from different cultural contexts perceive control over their lives. The results highlighted significant differences in the perception of internal and external control based on the cultural background of the participants, thus emphasizing the influence of cultural context on this personality dimension. Specifically, the results showed that students from Sweden and Japan scored the highest on the external locus of control, expressing a tendency to attribute the events of their lives to external factors. In contrast, participants from Australia, the United States, and New Zealand scored lower on the external locus of control, indicating a greater propensity to attribute control over the events of their lives to themselves. Through this, the research provides a broad perspective on how perceptions of control may vary depending on cultural influences, contributing to a deeper understanding of the complexity of LOC in an intercultural context.

Research on social (or cultural) distance, in the context of challenges faced by international students in adapting to academic requirements and the new sociocultural environment, highlights several relevant aspects to the subject analyzed in this publication.

A study by Chapdelaine R. F. and Alexitch L. R. [15] on a sample of 156 international students in Canada investigated the associations between cultural shock, the quality of interactions with hosts, intercultural differences, and the experience of communicating with representatives of the host culture. Conclusions indicated that an increase in intercultural differences between the students' home countries and the host society was

negatively correlated with the degree of interaction with hosts. Additionally, the size of the co-national group was negatively associated with interaction with hosts, and a decrease in social interaction led to an intensification of cultural shock. Although the results did not confirm the initial hypothesis regarding the relationship between cultural shock, intercultural differences, and previous intercultural experience, these variables were integrated into a model highlighting the role of intercultural interactions in the manifestation of cultural shock.

A study by Ward C. and Kennedy A. [16], conducted on 84 adults from New Zealand settled in Singapore, explored the relationship between LOC, satisfaction in interpersonal relationships, social contact distance with hosts, and emotional distress. Variables such as the duration of contact with the host culture, cultural distance, cultural identity, and mood disorders correlated with the quality of sociocultural adaptation. However, the research did not provide evidence supporting the existence of a relationship between LOC and sociocultural competence or the potential for adaptation to a different cultural environment.

In a recent study [17], addressing psychological distance through the prism of perceived control and LOC as moderators, the predictive power of these variables on psychological distances was investigated. The four studies included in the research provided evidence of the influence of psychological distance on individual perceived control and motivation to obtain and maintain it, emphasizing the functional role of information organization. The involvement of LOC was also highlighted, influencing the motivation to regain control and, consequently, modifying the relationship between psychological distance and cognitive target representation.

In conclusion, research on LOC and social distances has brought to light significant aspects in understanding the adaptation to new academic and sociocultural environments for international students. Regarding LOC, studies have highlighted its impact on educational factors, motivation, and academic performance. Significant differences between student categories based on LOC have also been identified, with implications for learning styles and adaptation to academic requirements.

Regarding social distances, studies have revealed how they influence intercultural interactions and adaptation to host societies. Aspects such as intercultural differences, the size of the co-national group, and social interactions have been analyzed in the context of cultural shock and sociocultural adaptation.

Recent research has also explored the interaction between LOC and social distances, highlighting their influence on individual perception, motivation, and adaptive capacity. These integrated approaches have contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of psychological and social dynamics in the context of adaptation to diverse environments.

As a result of the theoretical analysis, we formulated the following research question: What is the nature and significance of the relationship between LOC and social contact distances within the experience of international students, considering cultural affiliation variables, subjects' gender, and the duration of stay in the host country? This research question aims to explore the complex relationship between individual psychological aspects (expressed through LOC) and how they influence the level of social interaction (social contact distances - SCD) of international students.

II.   MATERIAL AND METHODS

Participants. This study involved 159 international students, members of the Free International University of Moldova (Republic of Moldova) community, randomly selected and in accordance with their personal agreement to participate and process the obtained test results. The diversity of the participants' countries of origin was considerable, reflecting a broad and significant cultural palette, including representatives from China (16 individuals - 10.1%), Congo (29 - 18.2%), Korea (11 - 6.9%), Israel (23 - 14.5%), Romania (36 - 22.6%), Turkey (14 - 8.8%), and Ukraine (30 - 18.9%). The distribution of participants by year of study was balanced, with 51 students in the first year (32.1%), 53 in the second year (33.3%), and 55 in the third year (34.6%). The gender composition of the participants reflected the overall university student structure, being predominantly female. Thus, 46 males (28.9%) and 113 females (71.1%) participated in the research. Although students from all faculties were involved in the study, this breakdown was not analyzed as it did not provide significant information for the research objectives. Moreover, participants' age, mostly ranging between 19 and 25 years, was not included in the analysis as it was not considered a significant factor in the context of this research.

**Methods.** Two measurement instruments were used for data collection:

1. **Rotter's Locus of Control Scale** [18]: This scale was used to assess participants' perceptions of locus of control, allowing the determination of the level of internal or external control and the identification of a mixed profile. The scale was translated and adapted to the context of the Republic of Moldova, presenting an acceptable level of internal consistency with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.734. This result indicates adequate reliability for the research purposes;

2. **Social Distance Scale**, adapted in Romania by SeptimiuChelcea [19]: It was used to assess the level of social distance, allowing the calculation of an index of social contact distance. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.704, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency. Adapting this scale in the research context facilitated the evaluation and analysis of social distances among international students.

Inferential statistical calculations were performed using the JASP (Jeffreys's Amazing Statistics Program) software, ensuring a rigorous and robust approach in analyzing the collected study data. These tools and methods were carefully selected to provide reliable and relevant results within the established research purpose.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To identify the type of Locus of Control (LOC), additional calculations were conducted. Differences up to -1 (score obtained by subtracting the coefficient obtained for internal LOC from that for external LOC) were assigned to external subjects – 36 students (22.6%). Differences greater than -1 and less than 1 defined a mixed LOC – 71 students (44.7%). Differences greater than 1 were classified as illustrating internal LOC – 52 students (32.7%) (Fig. 1).
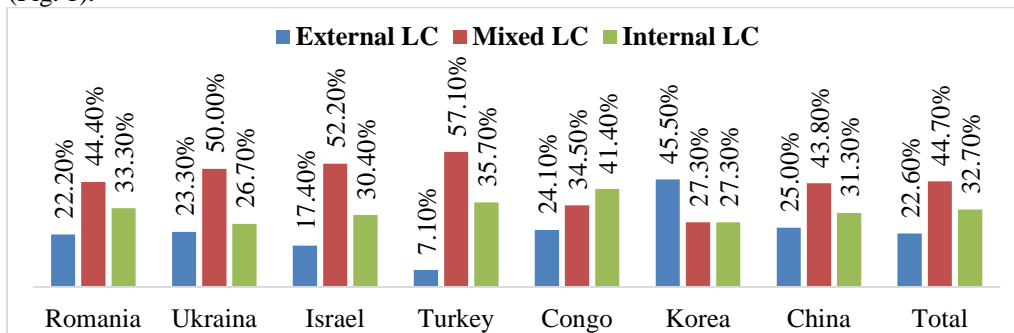
Fig. 1. LOC for groups of international students from various countries

External LOC is characteristic in varying proportions, ranging from 7.1% for students from Turkey to 45.5% for those from Korea. Based on the frequency of external LOC, students from Korea are followed by those from China (25%), Congo (24.1%), Ukraine (23.3%), Romania (22.2%), Israel (17.4%). We assume that the evaluation was influenced by the situation of being in another country, which affected some of the young participants in the study, as the rate of students with internal LOC is, in most cases, even higher than that of those with external LOC. Thus, internal LOC was established for 41.4% of students from Congo, 35.7% from Turkey, 33.3% from Romania, 31.3% from China, 30.4% from Israel, 27.3% from Korea, and 26.7% from Ukraine.

To capture the difference between groups, the Tukey multiple comparison statistical test, also known as the Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test, was used. The results of comparing means for internality-externality rejected the null hypothesis in all cases, p>0.1. This indicates that the effect between groups is not significant; overall, the means for the seven groups do not differ considerably. This difference was captured by comparing the results for the LOC of international students with those of host students, presented in a previous publication [20].

Comparison of means using the independent samples t-test indicated values for t that suggest a significance threshold greater than 0.1, confirming once again the rejection of the null hypothesis about LOC differences determined by gender and year of study.

While previous research often focused on the role of LOC in academic outcomes, positive social behaviors, and the relationship between its types and cultural affiliation, recent studies identify its importance in interpersonal relationships, influenced differently by LOC [21]. Intercultural research on LOC is becoming increasingly diversified, presenting its relationship with cognitive development through training [22] or collective action [23], among other topics. However, the LOC topic continues to be of interest to researchers.

The use of the Bogardus scale indicated Social Contact Distances (SCD) adopted by international students concerning citizens of other countries, including the host country. These distances range from 2.6 – acceptance of those from Romania as friends and neighbors to 3.8 – for those from China, illustrating acceptance as neighbors and colleagues (Fig. 2).
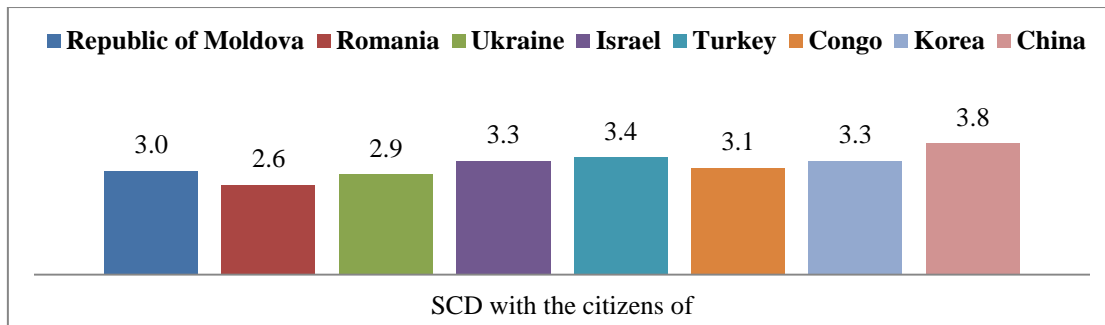
Fig. 2. Social contact distances of international students

The SCD were measured for students from various countries (Fig. 3), and statistical differences between the average SCD with citizens of different countries were calculated using the Tukey test. The results are presented below.

All students exhibit a significant closeness to citizens of their own country, expressed in very low SCD. Statistical comparisons with any other SCD show significant differences ($p<0.01$). Perceptions of other distances, including with citizens of the host country, vary.

Comparative Analysis for Specific Countries:

1. Students from Romania:
   - Significant Differences: SCD with citizens of the Republic of Moldova are significantly different from those with citizens of other countries ($p<0.01$).
   - Low SCD: Reduced SCD is observed in relation to citizens of Ukraine, significantly different from SCD with citizens of Israel and China ($p<0.01$).
   - Uniformity: No significant differences are observed in SCD adopted by Romanian students for other countries.

2. Students from Ukraine:
   - Significant Differences: SCD with citizens of the Republic of Moldova is significantly different from that with citizens of other countries ($p<0.001$).
   - Low SCD: Reduced SCD is observed in relation to citizens of Romania, significantly different from SCD with citizens of Korea, Israel, and China ($p<0.01$).
   - Uniformity: No significant differences are observed in SCD adopted by Ukrainian students for other countries: Turkey, Congo.

3. Students from Israel:
   - Significant Differences: SCD with citizens of the Republic of Moldova is significantly different from that with citizens of Congo, Korea, and China ($p<0.01$).
   - Uniformity: No significant differences are observed in SCD adopted by Israeli students for other countries.
     4. Students from Turkey:
   - Significant Differences: Significant SCD with citizens of the Republic of Moldova, Israel, Romania, and Ukraine is significantly different from that with citizens of Congo, Korea, and China ($p<0.01$).
     5. Students from Congo:
   - Significant Differences: SCD with citizens of the Republic of Moldova, Romania, and Ukraine is significantly different from that with citizens of Turkey, Israel, Korea, and China ($p<0.01$).
     3. Students from Korea and China:
   - Similar SCD: Korean and Chinese students manifest similar SCD with citizens of other countries.
   - Significant Differences: SCD with citizens of the Republic of Moldova and Congo are significantly different, highlighting cultural variations ($p<0.01$).
     Reflections on SCD Patterns:
   - Cultural Influences: SCD adopted by international students may reflect cultural, religious, and experiential differences in communication with representatives of other countries.
   - Diversity of Factors: SCD can be influenced by various factors, including cultural traditions, social norms, life experiences, and exposure to cultural diversity.
   - Cultural and Historical Similarities: Students from Romania and Ukraine exhibit lower SCD with citizens of the host country, possibly due to cultural and historical similarities. The same situation is in mutual SCD of Korean and Chinese students.
   - Varied Interpretations. These differences should not be automatically considered as reflecting positive or negative attitudes. Individual variability and the complexity of intercultural interactions should be considered in interpreting these results.

This analysis emphasizes the intricate nature of social contact distances among international students and underscores the need to consider diverse cultural and individual factors influencing these patterns.
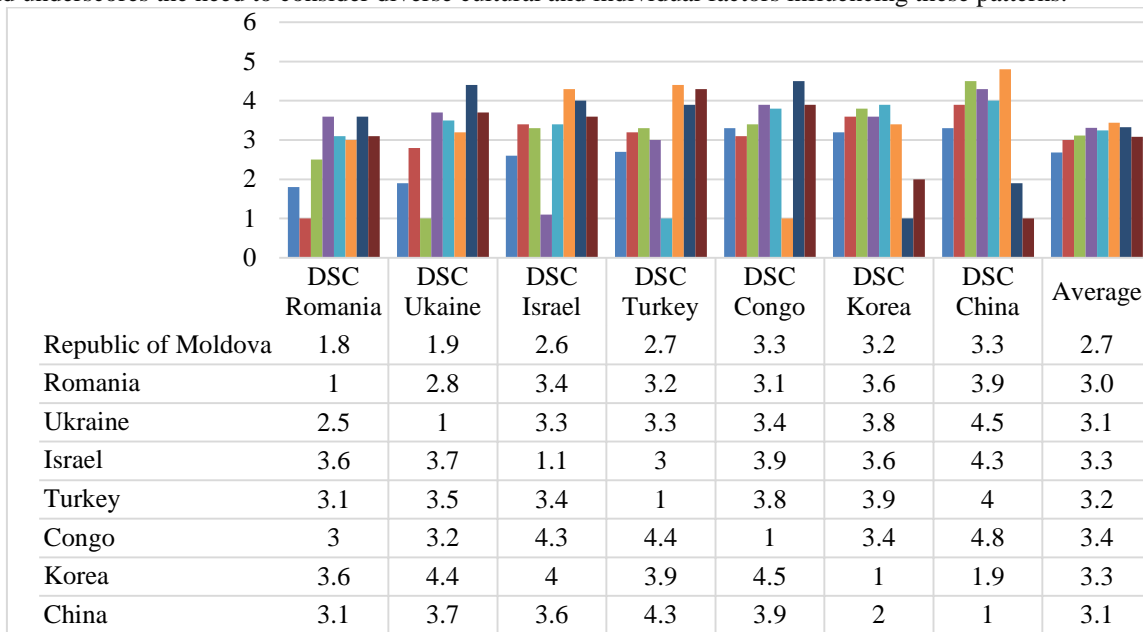
	DSC Romania	DSC Ukaine	DSC Israel	DSC Turkey	DSC Congo	DSC Korea	DSC China	Average
Republic of Moldova	1.8	1.9	2.6	2.7	3.3	3.2	3.3	2.7
Romania	1	2.8	3.4	3.2	3.1	3.6	3.9	3.0
Ukraine	2.5	1	3.3	3.3	3.4	3.8	4.5	3.1
Israel	3.6	3.7	1.1	3	3.9	3.6	4.3	3.3
Turkey	3.1	3.5	3.4	1	3.8	3.9	4	3.2
Congo	3	3.2	4.3	4.4	1	3.4	4.8	3.4
Korea	3.6	4.4	4	3.9	4.5	1	1.9	3.3
China	3.1	3.7	3.6	4.3	3.9	2	1	3.1

Fig. 3. SCD among International Students: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

Data analysis regarding the influence of the "gender" factor indicates that gender does not play a decisive role in how students perceive and establish SCD in their relationships with citizens of other countries. In other words, female and male students exhibit similar behaviors and attitudes in this specific context. This finding suggests that, within the analyzed academic environment, factors such as personal experiences, cultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness may have a more significant impact on establishing SCD than the factor of gender. This conclusion can serve as a basis for educational and intercultural initiatives aimed at promoting better understanding and collaboration among students.

The analysis of data in the study suggests that the "academic year" factor can exert a significant influence on the establishment of SCD. It is observed that, with advancing academic years, there is a tendency toward more efficient communication and improved mutual understanding, leading to a significant reduction in SCD. Statistical comparison highlighted significant differences in SCD, with notable changes in more favorable acceptance of citizens from Israel, Turkey, Congo, Korea, and China(p<0.01). The means differ significantly among the three categories of students - from year 1, 2, and 3. For example, for citizens of Israel, no significant differences were observed between students from year 1 and 3, but significant differences were found between those from year 2 and 3. In the case of Turkish citizens, significant differences were observed between years 1 and 2, as well as between years 1 and 3, 2 and 3. For citizens of Congo, significant differences were observed between years 1 and 2, 2 and 3. The same dynamic was noted for citizens of Korea and China, where significant differences were observed between all specified study years.
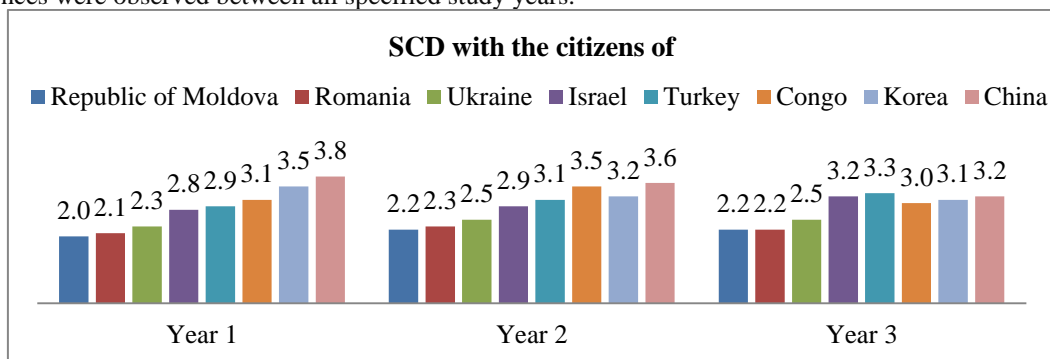
SCD with the citizens of

■ Republic of Moldova ■ Romania ■ Ukraine ■ Israel ■ Turkey ■ Congo ■ Korea ■ China

Year 1: 2.0 2.1 2.3 2.8 2.9 3.1 3.5 3.8
Year 2: 2.2 2.3 2.5 2.9 3.1 3.5 3.2 3.6
Year 3: 2.2 2.2 2.5 3.2 3.3 3.0 3.1 3.2

Fig. 4. SCD of international students from different years of study

These findings underline the importance of evolving in terms of acceptance and closeness to other cultures as students' progress through their academic years. Thus, educational programs can be directed toward facilitating intercultural interactions throughout students' academic trajectories.

Another hypothesis investigated in the study referred to the relationship between LOC and SCD. SCD represents a subjective experience in which the individual perceives the degree of closeness to the "other" [24].

On the other hand, LOC refers to the perception of the ability to control situations and constraints, indicating to what extent the individual believes they can influence or control their environment, identifying obstacles that may interfere with personal goals. According to the provided definitions, it is assumed that internal LOC correlates negatively with SCD, meaning it decreases distances with the "other." This is because large SCD complicate the process of individual decision-making, not allowing the individual to exercise personal control. Additionally, the farther the "other" is perceived, the more uncertain and incomplete the information about them, conditioning an inability for personal control and, implicitly, reduced mastery over the environment [17]

The analysis of the correlation between LOC and SCD, performed using the Pearson correlation test, revealed significant conclusions. It is noteworthy that LOC, especially when leaning towards internality, has a significant influence on SCD with representatives of the home country (r=-0.538**, p<0.01) and with the host country's population (r=-0.413*, p<0.03) in the case of international students. The fact that students with a leaning towards internal LOC denote lower SCD with the home country's population suggests the existence of a certain cultural cohesion or a deep emotional connection. Additionally, the indirect correlation between the "internality" scale and SCD with representatives of the host country illustrates the ability of students with internal LOC to socially approach the local population, considering this proximity as a way to control their environment and events in their lives.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the research has provided a detailed perspective on the types of LOC among international students from various countries, reflecting the cultural diversity of the sample. The results highlighted that the majority of participants exhibited a mixed LOC, indicative of a balanced approach between internal and external influences. Additionally, differences in LOC evaluations were influenced by the cultural context, with students from Korea more frequently presenting an external LOC. Comparative analysis of the results, using Tukey and t-Student tests, did not reveal significant differences between groups of students regarding LOC, emphasizing coherence across diverse cultural contexts represented.

This research contributes to understanding how LOC influences the perceptions and attitudes of international students, emphasizing the importance of adapting to the specific cultural and academic environment of the host country. Further research on LOC in an intercultural context provides significant insights into the psychological and relational dynamics of students in a diverse academic environment.

The conclusions from the research on SCD among international students offer a complex perspective on how they establish social relationships in the academic and cultural environment of the host country. Here are some key conclusions. Results highlight significant differences in SCD based on the students' country of origin, suggesting a strong influence of cultural factors on how individuals perceive and approach others in a social context.

The research underscores a significant change in SCD as students progress through their academic years. This evolution indicates the potential for students to adapt and adjust to the academic and social environment of the host country as they become more familiar with it.

Findings suggest that factors such as gender and internal LOC may influence to some extent the establishment of SCD but are not determinative. Other influences, such as personal experiences and the level of intercultural awareness, appear to play a more significant role.

The conclusions indicate that understanding the level of internal control and how students perceive social contact distances can make significant contributions to the development of intercultural educational programs and the facilitation of more effective communication between international students and the host community.

The results of this study provide valuable insights for the practice of psychological counseling and the development of support programs for international students. Some practical implications include the following.

1. Adaptation of Support Programs. Identifying the prevalence of a mixed LOC among international students suggests that support programs should address aspects of both internal and external control. This balanced approach can contribute to facilitating their adaptation to the cultural and academic environment of the host country.

2. Cultural Sensitization. Data on SCD highlight the significant influence of cultural factors on the establishment of social relationships. Therefore, counseling and support programs should include cultural awareness components, promoting understanding and appreciation of diversity for more effective integration.

3. Integration with Academic Levels. Considering the influence of study years on SCD, support programs should be tailored to the specific needs of students based on their academic level. Emphasizing adaptation to the academic environment as they progress through the years of study can contribute to a smoother transition.

4. Incorporation of Personal Experiences. The role of personal experiences in establishing SCD suggests that counseling sessions should provide space for exploring and managing these individual experiences, thereby facilitating adaptation to the new cultural context.
5. Promotion of Interpersonal Collaboration. Understanding the correlation between LOC and SCD indicates that support for developing a positive attitude and healthy relationships can include promoting an internal LOC and facilitating social interactions in the academic environment and local community.

By integrating these implications into the practice of psychological counseling and support programs, institutions can contribute to improving the well-being and adaptation of international students in the host country.

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