The Impact of Cultural Similarity and Social Network Characteristics on Re-Expatriation Intention among Self-Initiated Academic Expatriates

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper sheds light on re-expatriation intention among self-initiated academic expatriates who have completed their international assignments, and returned their home country and then intended to re-expatriate to have another experience in the host country by their own initiatives. Cultural similarity and social network characteristics which involve size, closeness and frequency appeared to have a significant impact on the expatriates' decisions to move abroad for the first time. Therefore, these variables are predicted in the study to be associated with their intentions to re-expatriate. Push-pull theory is utilized in this paper to better understanding the impact of cultural similarity and social network characteristics on re-expatriation intention among academic SIEs. Thus, this study contributes to fill the gap in literature by addressing the influence of cultural similarity and social network characteristics on re-expatriation intention.

1.   Introduction

As a result of the globalization, a higher importance is placed by organizations on the role of international assignment (Isakovic & Whitmann, 2013), and also paved the way for the importance of expatriates to achieve competitive advantages and to complete strategic tasks (Selmer & Lauring, 2010). This is actually consistent with the increasing number of expatriates seeking jobs abroad as reported by Finaccord's (2014) study which revealed that there are about 50.5 million of skilled expatriates around the globe and it is expected to reach 56.8 million by 2017. The expatriate literature thus far focused on the organizational expatriates (OEs) who were sent by their employers to fill a position in the host country subsidiaries (Colings, Scullion & Morley, 2007; Sri Ramalu, 2010). Furthermore, there is another form of expatriates who did not receive enough research attention labelled as self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) who moved to work and live abroad by their own initiatives

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(Isakovic & Whitmann, 2013; Doherty, Dickmann & Mills, 2011). SIEs are those skilled individuals who decided by their initiatives to work in various fields, such as educational institutions in the host country, without assistance from the home country organizations (Al Shammari, 2013; Selmer & Lauring, 2010). While there is a little number of studies focused on SIEs, there are fewer studies found on academic SIEs who are increasingly moving abroad as a result of the globalization that drives many educational systems to cope with all changes in the global marketplace (Austin *et al.*, 2014; Kirk & Napier, 2009).

Accordingly, the expatriate literature witnesses increasing efforts on academic SIEs having new work experience outside their native country (Howe-Walsh & Schyns, 2010; Trembath, 2016). Academic SIEs are highly employed in the global marketplace due to their specific skills (Selmer & Lauring, 2010) and also as a result of the increasing demands on academics who are needed globally by the universities and other educational institutions to cope with the rapid growth of global universities (Dessoff, 2011), which led to increasing the number of academics seeking jobs in these universities (Cai & Hall, 2016). In spite of the ever-increasing number of academic SIEs abroad, scholars and researchers still fail in identifying and exploring the reasons standing behind their fast-rising trend (Al Ariss & Ozbiling, 2010; Selmer & Lauring, 2009; Trembath, 2016). Though the motivational factors for academic SIEs in the developed countries have been studied broadly (Andresen, Biemann & Pattie, 2015; Richardson & McKenna, 2006), there are limited studies existed in the developing countries which in turn led to lack of sources that could explore the dynamic nature of the motivational factors attracting academic SIEs to move abroad (Al Shammari, 2013).

Despite the fact that the majority of studies have focused on the challenges of expatriation phase among academic SIEs, repatriation is considered as one of the major challenges faced by those expatriates who completed their international assignment (Ernist & Young, 2009) for a number of reasons, including:

1. Readjustment to the familiar culture which is difficult as same as adjusting to the host country (Hyder & Lovblad, 2007).
2. Reverse culture shock and re-entry, experience specially after staying awhile in the host country (Adler & Gundersen, 2007), which in turn may contribute to a negative attitude toward staying in the home country (Szkudlarek, 2010) and intention to re-expatriate in the future (Ho, Seet & Johns, 2015).

However, re-expatriation intention among academic SIEs did not receive research attention as the overwhelming majority of research has focused on the expatriation phase but not on re-expatriation phase (Ho *et al.*, 2015; Tharenou & Seet, 2014) which caused a difficulty in understanding the primary reasons that drive academic SIEs to re-expatriate. Therefore, this study contributes to fill the gap in literature to better understand the factors associated with re-expatriation intention. In line with this, the aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between cultural similarity, social network characteristics and re-expatriation intention among self-initiated academic expatriates as there may be different reasons for moving abroad that either they decide to move abroad for the first time or they have already experienced the differences between home and host countries conditions and intended to re-expatriate (Ho *et al.*, 2015). Thus, this paper proposes a framework depending on the motivational factors, namely cultural similarity and social network characteristics that motive academic SIEs to step forward toward re-expatriation.

2.   Theoretical development

2.1   Re-expatriation intention

The concept of re-expatriation is defined as the process in which individuals are applying for another movement toward the host country after arriving at their home country (Ho *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, on the one hand, a massive number of research has mainly focused on the process of expatriation for the first time and the factors that encourage individuals to move abroad (McKenna & Richardson, 2007, Sri Ramalu, 2010, Selmar & Lauring, 2012; Tharenou, 2013). On the other hand, other studies have focused on their repatriation and the challenges faced by these expatriates once they have arrived at their home country (Bailey & Dragone, 2013; Solomon, 1995; Tharenou & Seet, 2014). However, very limited studies have recognized that the re-expatriation intention is resulted in a lack of

understanding the nature of the motivational factors that motivate these individuals to have another experience abroad (Ho *et al.*, 2015). Jackson et al. (2005) conducted a study based on New Zealanders working around the world. They revealed that lifestyle and family concerns are factors pulling them to stay abroad. Similarly, Thorn (2009) in the same context of New Zealand found that career, cultural and travel opportunities are factors ranked to be the most attractive factors to move abroad.

In line with this, once the international assignment is completed, the next step is repatriation to the home country (Bailey & Dragone, 2013). Accordingly, repatriation is the last phase of expatriation stages as it starts from selecting a candidate for overseas assignment, training, career management, completing the assignment, and ends with repatriation (Solomon, 1995). Obviously, individuals who repatriate to their home countries may face a number of difficulties, such as reverse culture shock, readjustment, and re-joining family and relatives (Ho *et al.*, 2015; Tharenou & Caufield, 2010) which in turn may lead to a negative attitude of life in their home countries and may affect their decisions to stay (Ligard, 2001). As a result, this may contribute to consider re-expatriation as a plan for their future (Ho *et al.*, 2015), especially for academic SIEs as the opportunity for financial income and the availability of jobs for them would be higher (Al Shammari, 2013). In addition, individuals who repatriate after completing the international assignment expect a number of benefits to be obtained in home country, such as social ties and better environment (Tharenou & Caufield, 2010). Such individuals may get shocked when such considerations did not meet their desires (Begley, Collings & Scullion, 2008), then may contribute to a negative image about staying in the home country (Ligard, 2001). Consequently, this may result in a plan to re-expatriate to the host country in the future (Ho *et al.*, 2015).

2.2   Cultural Similarity

Cultural similarity is one of the contextual factors that appeared in the literature to have a significant impact on the individuals' decisions in terms of accepting the international assignment (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). Cultural similarity is defined as the degree to which the norms, values, and thoughts of a country are similar to those of another country (Kogut & Singh, 1988; Vromance, Engen & Mol, 2013). Accordingly, it is argued that accepting the international assignment among expatriates and academic SIEs, in particular, is associated with relocating in countries that are culturally similar rather than relocating in countries that are culturally dissimilar (Selmer & Lauring, 2009; Wanger & Westaby, 2009). However, those individuals who are relocated in a different country may face a number of difficulties, for instance, they may start trying to learn about the new culture while adjusting to the new life in the same time which may lead to culture shock, stress, uncertainty and complexity (Oberg, 1960; Selmer & Lauring, 2009; Brett & Reilly, 1988). Therefore, academic SIEs who accept the overseas assignment in countries sharing the same culture, thoughts and values may experience more success, better adjustment and higher performance as found in Selmer & Lauring's (2009) study.

Theories in social identities (Tajfel, 1972) and cultural toughness (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985) indicated that individuals who move to culturally similar countries would be enhanced to interact positively with others in the host country, unlike those who move to culturally dissimilar countries because it would impact negatively on their adjustment and on themselves too. Yurkiewicz and Rosen (1995) found that individuals are highly motivated and feel more comfortable to relocate in a country that is culturally similar to their own ones because the similarities in culture between both home and host countries are highly important to those who are willing to accept the overseas assignment (Wagner & Westaby, 2009). Tanova and Ajaya's (2016) study that examined the influence of cultural similarity on intention to stay in the host country among academic SIEs revealed that cultural similarity has a significant impact on their intention to stay. This, in turn, leads to more success, avoid stress, uncertainty, and complexity that are caused by expatriation.

Therefore, these expatriates and academic SIEs, in particular, who repatriate to their countries after completing the international assignment may face a number of difficulties in the home country, such as reverse culture shock, readjustment, and re-joining family and friends (Tharenou & Caufield, 2010). This may lead to a negative attitude toward their decisions to stay in their country and may consider re-expatriation as one of the potential plans for their future (Ho *et al.*, 2015). Hence, re-expatriation to culturally similar countries that share the same values and norms would be more preferred for them as cultural similarity is considered as one of the motivational factors that attract them to first accept the international assignment.

2.3   Social network characteristics

Establishing a social network in the host country is found to play a significant role in the expatriates' lives in coping with all challenges abroad (Reade & Lee, 2012). Social network is defined as the social relationships between expatriates and others, such as peer expatriates, local friends and non-local friends, and family and relatives (Bader & Schuster, 2015; Osman-Gani & Rockstuhl, 2008; Li & Rothstein, 2009). Accordingly, social network is considered as a channel of support resources for expatriates, such as informational, appraisal, emotional, and instrumental support resources (Wang & Kuango, 2004). These support resources lead to enhance expatriates' well-being with higher interaction with others, which in turn may result in a greater performance, faster adjustment and effectiveness, avoiding uncertainty and stress that are caused by expatriation (Bader & Schuster, 2015; Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002).

Therefore, establishing a social network in the host country with a big number of ties helps the expatriates and academic SIEs to feel more comfortable during the international assignment, faster adjustment and higher performance, and the opportunity to stay for longer time in the host country would be higher. In line with this, the patterns of social ties within the social network of expatriates could be classified into a number of social network characteristics, such as **"size"** that refers to the total number of actors connected within a network (Bader & Schuster, 2015; Kuo & Tsai, 1986), **"closeness"** that refers to the intensity of social ties between individuals within a network (Marsden & Campbell, 1984; Wang & Nayir, 2006), and **"frequency"** that refers to the number of regular contacts between individuals within a network in a specific time (Wang & Kuango, 2004; Wang, 2002).

2.3.1   Social network size

Previous studies in the literature argued that large network size aligns positively with enhancing expatriates with a big number of support resources, such as beneficial information and emotional supports which enhance them to stay abroad with a higher level of effectiveness (Wang, 2002; Wang & Nayir, 2006; Wang & Kuango, 2004) through interactions with others in the host country. It is also revealed that network size is considered as a strong predictor for expatriates' effectiveness, performance and adjustment during the international assignment (Bader & Schuster, 2015; Wang & Kuango, 2004). Accordingly, as large as the social network in the host country will be, more support resources, such as informational, emotional, instrumental and appraisal resources would be obtained. Consequently, this enhances them to reduce uncertainty, stress, and complexity and helping them to adjust faster and perform effectively (Bader & Schuster, 2015; Wang & Kuango, 2004; Wang, 2002). Therefore, the larger social network the expatriates have in the host country, the higher effectiveness and performance would be considered. Hence, as the network size has a significant impact on expatriates and academic SIEs during their first expatriation, it is predicted that their re-expatriation to countries with a larger social network size would be higher.

2.3.2   Social network closeness

As mentioned earlier, network closeness refers to the intensity of social relationship between individuals and how close the relationship between them is (Ibarra, 1992; Wang & Nayir, 2006). It is argued that close relationships within a network would have a significant impact on expatriates' outcomes through providing them more support resources, such as appraisal and informational supports, which in turn may reduce stress, uncertainty and complexity during expatriation (Amato, 1990; Wang, 2002). Along these lines, such support resources seem to be offered when the relationship between individuals was closer (Shen & Kram, 2011). In addition, expatriates are willing and feel more comfortable to gather more information from close friends regarding private matters or work tasks (Bader & Schuster, 2015). In this regard, it seems that social network closeness has a positive impact on expatriates' outcomes during their international assignment (Bruning, Sonpar & Wang, 2012; Wang & Kuango, 2004).

Aligning with the importance of social network closeness on expatriates' lives in the host country (Bader & Schuster, 2015), those expatriates and academic SIEs, in particular, who already completed their international assignment and repatriated to the home country may re-expatriate if they were dissatisfied with the home country conditions (Ho et al., 2015) or attracted by the

motivational factors in the host country, such as social network closeness, specially after experiencing the life in the host country.

2.3.3   Social network frequency

Expectedly, the more frequent contacts of ties within a network, the more support resources that influence expatriates' outcomes will be available, such as their psychological outcomes (Wang, 2002). Therefore, it is argued that frequent contacts are associated with more social supports and allow the expatriates to obtain valuable information from network partners (Kantor, 2005), which would result in reducing stress, complexity and uncertainty in the host country (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2002). In this regard, frequent contacts of individuals within a network in the host country appears to be one of the strong predictors that help them in adjusting faster and perform effectively (Bader & Schuster, 2015; Johnson, Kristof-brown & Klein, 2003; Osman-Gani & Rockstuhl, 2008). In addition, it is argued that frequent contacts of individuals within their network increase the opportunity for a higher level of effectiveness and participating effectively in the host country activities, leading them to stay abroad for longer time (Kantor, 2005).

Therefore, frequent contacts among expatriates are found to be associated with their positive outcomes during the first expatriation (Bader & Schuster, 2015). Hence, this is predicted to align positively with those expatriates' and academic SIEs' decisions, in particular, if they plan to re-expatriate to the host country. The limited studies on re-expatriation intention among this group of expatriates contribute to misunderstanding the reasons of why and what attract them to experience another movement toward the host country (Ho et al., 2015).

3.   Propositions

Based on the above discussion, this study proposes the following propositions which will be tested later in another study.
Proposition 1: for academic SIEs, cultural similarity is considered as a motivational factor for their intentions to re-expatriate.
Proposition 2: for academic SIEs, social network is considered as a motivational factor for their intentions to re-expatriate.
Proposition 2(a): for academic SIEs, social network size indicates their intentions to re-expatriate.
Proposition 2(b): for academic SIEs, social network closeness indicates their intentions to re-expatriate.
Proposition 2(c): for academic SIEs, social network frequency indicates their intentions to re-expatriate.

4.   Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1. supposes that cultural similarity and social network characteristics which involve size, closeness and frequency have a significant impact on the re-expatriation intention among academic SIEs. Push-pull theory (Toren, 1976) stated that push factors are those factors that drive individuals to leave their native country to another including religious, climate and poor employment conditions; whereas pull factors are those factors that motivate these individuals toward moving to a specific country, such as social and economic factors. Ho et al. (2015) and Tharenou and Seet (2014) in their studies suggested this theory to explore the reasons and motivational factors that pull individuals to re-expatriate after completing their international assignment. In this regard, cultural similarity and social network characteristics which involve size, closeness and frequency are considered to be among the motivational factors that attract individuals to accept the international assignment (Bader & Schuster, 2015; Wang & Kanungo, 2004; Wagner & westaby, 2009; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985).

Therefore, push-pull theory (Toren, 1976) is employed in this study to better explore the impact of cultural similarity and social network characteristics which involve size, closeness and frequency on re-expatriation intention among academic SIEs. Hence, it is predicted that these mentioned variables play a significant role in the decisions of academic SIEs to re-expatriate after returning to their home country.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework
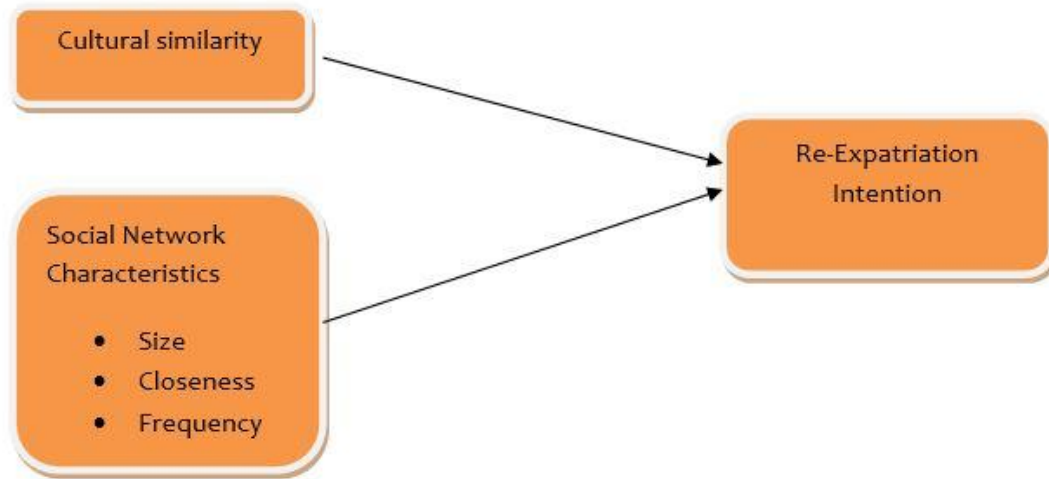
5. Discussion

Based on the literature, empirical studies revealed that the motivational factors in the host country are associated with expatriates' intention to re-expatriate (Ho et al., 2015; Tharenou & Seet, 2014). This study proposes that motivational factors, such as cultural similarity and social network characteristics involving size, closeness and frequency are related to academic SIEs' intention to re-expatriate again to the host country. Theoretically, one of the contributions to be added to the existing literature is re-expatriation intention as most of previous studies have focused on the first expatriation but not on the re-expatriation (Carr et al., 2005; Doherty et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2005). In addition, most of the literature mainly concentrated on the organizational form of expatriates, whereas SIEs and academic SIEs, in particular, did not receive as same research attention as the organizational one (Al Shammari, 2013; Selmer & Lauring, 2009; Trembath, 2016). In this regard, this study contributes to better understand the nature of the reasons standing behind their fast-rising trend in the global marketplace.

Practically, this study aims at helping the academic SIEs to better understand the major factors that put them away of a lot of obstacles that may be faced by others. In addition, this study also aims at helping the human resources departments to consider the most significant criteria in the process of selecting new staff. Moreover, the recruitment of re-expatriated academics is considerably more valuable compared to the ones who are going to be selected for their first time due to their previous experience that allows them to be more familiar with the host country culture to which they could adjust faster and more success will be achieved in shorter time.

6. Conclusion

This conceptual paper discussed the relationship between cultural similarity, social network characteristics and re-expatriation intention among academic SIEs. Push-pull theory (Toren, 1976) stated that pull factors are the factors that motivate and attract the expatriates to move to live abroad. Cultural similarity and social network characteristics are among the factors that attract the expatriates to accept the international assignment. Accordingly, these factors appeared to have a significant impact on individuals for the first expatriation. Therefore, these factors in this paper are predicted to have a significant impact on individuals' decisions to re-expatriate. However, these are not the only factors that might attract individuals to move abroad. Future research should investigate other pull factors on re-expatriation intention, such as career success and family outcomes. Additionally, future research should also examine the influence of home country push factors on re-expatriation intention, such as financial issues and unemployment as this research focused only on pull factors in the host country. Moreover, this study focused on academic SIEs who have worked abroad and who have repatriated, and then intended to re-expatriate. Future research needs to investigate re-expatriation intentions of skilled individuals in different occupations, such as nurses and accountants who may have a higher desire to go abroad.

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