

“Why Doesn’t He Care About Me?” Intercultural Misunderstandings Between Chinese Doctoral Students and Their Malaysian Supervisors

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Addressing intercultural misunderstandings has become crucial with the rise in students pursuing doctoral studies overseas. This study examines the factors contributing to intercultural misunderstandings and the processes by which they arise. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Chinese doctoral students from various disciplines. Through thematic analysis, key factors leading to misunderstandings were gender, language, social culture, research culture, and communication style. Furthermore, guided by expectancy violation theory, the study develops a framework for understanding how misunderstandings arise. It enriches existing literature by examining intercultural misunderstandings in the Asian higher education context and highlights future directions for exploring strategies to mitigate them.

Keywords: intercultural doctoral supervision, international students, intercultural misunderstanding, expectancy violation theory, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Functional interaction within postgraduate research supervision is crucial for supervisory relationships. Supervisory relationships are often formed gradually through encounters in which supervisors and doctoral students assess each other’s values, behaviors, tones, and manners of communication (Vähämäki et al., 2021). Functional interactions between doctoral students and their supervisors are crucial for positive doctoral experience, timely graduation, and favourable employment (Anttila et al., 2024). Moreover, a positive doctoral-supervisory relationship is especially important for student inclusion, motivation, and mental health (Al Makhamreh & Stockley, 2020). However, supervisor-supervisee relationships are not always smooth. As highlighted in recent research, Singh et al. (2022) noted that doctoral supervision is a complex and demanding pedagogical practice that usually involves various academic and interpersonal skills. When functional interaction is insufficient, misunderstandings may arise from any aspect, such as supervisory feedback (Neupane Bastola, 2022), novice co-supervisors (Almlöv & Grubbström, 2024), co-publication (Bao & Feng, 2023), doctoral applications, and admission (Burford et al., 2024). Chien and Li (2024) further analysed the writing problems faced by EFL students at the postgraduate level in domestic environment. Given the complexity of supervisory communication, Kohout-Diaz (2024) stressed that failure in doctoral-supervisory relationships can be extremely disappointing and scarring on both sides for a long time.

While doctoral supervision is inherently challenging, intercultural supervision is even more complicated for the EFL students, as contextual factors deeply influence it. In intercultural educational environments, misunderstandings occur frequently because of the interrelated influence of cultural differences and the language spoken by neither part as their mother tongue, that is, English as Lingua Franca (ELF) (Izadi, 2022). For example, a study by Wu and Hu (2020) found that cultural differences were responsible for mismatched concepts of self-confidence, critical thinking, and independence between Chinese doctoral students and Western supervisors. Similarly, language differences have been linked to cultural differences, wherein expression of politeness in face-to-face and digital conversations was a cause of misunderstanding between Malaysian supervisors and Iranian students (Izadi, 2022).

With socioeconomic growth in the Global South, the quality of higher education in Malaysia has increased. As illustrated by Amzat et al. (2023), higher education institutions in Malaysia have swiftly shifted from sending to receiving international students and from seeking aid to collaborating. Numerous international students are pursuing their doctoral studies in Malaysia, breathing new vigor into the multiethnic and multicultural society. As few studies have yet been conducted about intercultural misunderstandings in the academic context of Malaysia, this study is significant as it contributes to the existing literature by examining the actual encounters of intercultural misunderstandings between doctoral Chinese EFL students and their Malaysian supervisors. Through this exploration, the study offers a framework to explain the factors that lead to misunderstandings, providing practical insights to help improve intercultural communication in supervisory relationships within the context of international postgraduate academic settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Doctoral Supervision

A systematic review was conducted on the Web of Science and Scopus databases for existing literature on misunderstandings during intercultural doctoral supervision. The keywords used for search were, ‘intercultural doctoral supervision’, ‘international doctoral student’, and ‘intercultural misunderstanding’. According to Verdonik (2010), misunderstandings can include misperceptions or misinterpretations. However, the search yielded limited studies on intercultural doctoral supervision, with even fewer studies addressing the specific issue of misunderstanding. After screening the literature by abstract and full text, the 17 most relevant journal articles were selected for thorough analysis. Three distinct categories of literature on intercultural doctoral supervision were identified: self-development and identity construction of international doctoral students, intercultural challenges faced by international doctoral students in host countries, and intercultural relationships between international doctoral students and supervisors (See Table 1).

TABLE 1
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON INTERCULTURAL DOCTORAL SUPERVISION

Intercultural doctoral supervision	
Category 1	Self-development and identity construction
Category 2	Intercultural challenges
Category 3	Intercultural relationship

The first category focuses on an international doctoral student’s journey regarding their process of acquiring essential qualities such as critical thinking and independence. Anikina et al. (2020) asserted that academic identity construction was not formed personally, but influenced by national and institutional contexts. Xu and Hu (2020) unfolded the complexity of identity construction from the aspect of considering different cultural frames of academic writing. Another major impact on self-development was the guidance provided by the supervisor on understanding critical thinking, along with the impact of the social values of

gender on the development of an independent researcher (Wu & Hu, 2020). Although these studies primarily focus on students' personal growth, they may overlook the degree of autonomy individuals have within these contexts.

The second category examined the intercultural challenges international doctoral students face in their host countries. According to Yang and MacCallum (2022), the supervisory challenges could be divided into personal and social aspects. Personal challenges, such as homelessness (Gjøtterud & Ahmad, 2018) and financial difficulties, have been identified (Pinto, 2021). Bahtilla (2022) highlighted the difficulties international doctoral students encounter when adapting to a new environment, particularly emphasising the role of language and sociocultural barriers. Pinto (2023) also uncovered the influence of different educational contexts on learning and research approaches, such as written feedback and plagiarism, research frameworks, and research tools. However, these studies fail to address how personal and contextual factors intersect. According to Bakeer (2023), language is a means of communication and a complex system that transfers ideas, feelings, experiences, beliefs, and cultural values to others. Similarly, cultural background and tradition influence the transformation and creation of knowledge and work and life in general (Gjøtterud & Ahmad, 2018). Thus, international doctoral students are more vulnerable to challenges in various aspects of their experiences.

The third category of literature emphasizes the positive impact of supervisory relationships on developing academic, pedagogical, research, and knowledge cultures (Pinto & Araújo e Sá, 2020). Wang and Byram (2019) demonstrated some modes of supervisory relationships prevalent in Chinese culture, such as the concept of lifetime personal bonds, family, teachers, and friends. However, the supervisory style differs across countries, and the relationship is affected by many elements, such as race (Cavanagh et al., 2022), power (Bahtilla, 2022), different interaction routines, and degree of closeness (Pinto, 2020). If not perceived as cultural differences, these different interactional patterns and expectations might lead to misunderstandings, biased judgments, and even poor-quality supervision (Hu et al., 2016). However, the studies neglect the process of how these misunderstandings arise and escalate.

To summarise, intercultural misunderstandings have been studied from several perspectives, including politeness (Izadi, 2022), time management (Pinto, 2021), name use (Gjøtterud & Ahmad, 2018), and implicit expectations (Hu et al., 2016). Cultural and language factors are considered the primary causes of intercultural supervisory misunderstandings. However, research on intercultural misunderstandings of EFL students in Asian academic contexts is limited, particularly in theoretical discussions of how these misunderstandings occur. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the research question: what factors contribute to intercultural misunderstandings between Chinese doctoral students and their Malaysian supervisors?

Expectancy Violations Theory

Expectancy violation theory (EVT) refers to the expectations in interactions and responses to violations of expectations. Originally developed by Burgoon (2005) to explain proxemic violations in interactions, the theory was later expanded to encompass various verbal and nonverbal violations. Goffman (2016) noted that successful interactions depended on recognizing and conforming to expectations in a given situation. According to Burgoon (2005), expectancy covers elements of both predictive and prescriptive expectations, reflecting not only what individuals anticipate will happen based on former experiences but also what they believe should happen in interactions according to social norms. She further argued that three factors form communication expectancies—traits of the communicators, attributes of the relationship between the sender and receiver, and the context of communication (Burgoon, 2005)—all of which are strongly influenced by culture.

Individual characteristics include sociodemographic information, personal traits, and language fluency; relationship attributes mainly cover liking, status equality, and closeness; and context refers to environmental constraints and situations (Burgoon et al., 2005). Given the inherent complexity of intercultural communication, determining whether personality traits or cultural differences influence misunderstandings is challenging, as relational attributes are often easier to identify. As illustrated by Burgoon (2005), when personal information is insufficient, communicators tend to refer to cultural factors,

such as stereotypes, which may lead to false assumptions. Furthermore, EVT usually draws on cultural dimensions to explain various situations such as collectivism-individualism, power distance, and high- and low-context communication (Burgoon, 2005).

In the research field of communication, EVT is a commonly employed theory to examine complex intercultural dynamics, such as non-verbal adaptation (Le Poire & Yoshimura, 1999), health communication (Campo et al., 2004), Facebook social media (Bevan et al., 2014), decision-making (Burgoon et al., 2016), and human-chatbot interactions (Rheu et al., 2024). However, using EVT for intercultural misunderstandings is rare. Cionea et al. (2019) adopted EVT to explain the misunderstandings between romantic partners. The study (Mullen, 2018) was one of the few to explore the expectations of international students in the educational context using EVT.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this study is the first to apply EVT to explain misunderstandings among EFL students in the context of intercultural doctoral supervision. It also underscores the intricate interplay between the personal, relational, and contextual factors of Chinese doctoral students and their Malaysian supervisors.

METHODS

This empirical study adopted a qualitative method. Intercultural communication in social sciences is an acknowledged multidisciplinary field that usually incorporates knowledge from anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and communication. According to Hu and Fan (2011), anthropologists prefer to collect qualitative holistic data, psychologists usually use quantitative methods for their persuasiveness, linguists are keen to collect specific language data, and communication experts explore theories. Therefore, this study intends to contribute to the theory of intercultural misunderstandings. Furthermore, a qualitative approach enables researchers to explore a practical phenomenon within a specific context, providing an opportunity to analyse and describe a research problem (Bahtilla, 2022).

In this study, the researchers used a qualitative research approach to explore the complex factors and processes of intercultural misunderstanding. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data, focusing on questions about participants' expectations of their supervisors, experiences of misunderstandings, and their reactions to these misunderstandings. This interview protocol is consistent with EVT and provides opportunities for unstructured conversations (Zheng et al., 2024).

To ensure more representative findings of varied intercultural interactions in higher education, this study was conducted on two campuses of a research-intensive university in Malaysia: Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur. Through purposeful sampling, a study population of 10 Chinese international students pursuing a doctorate under the guidance of Malaysian supervisors was established. The selection included male and female students from social science and engineering disciplines. The students hailed from various provinces in China and differed in their academic qualifications and stages (research planning, proposal writing, data collection, and Viva Voce) of study. All participants were from English-taught programs. They immersed themselves in an intercultural context, integrating themselves with their supervisors, universities, the doctoral education system, etc. Some participants were self-sponsored, while others were recipients of Chinese scholarships. To protect their privacy, the researchers conducted the interviews with the participants' consent and assigned identifiers ranging from P1 to P10. Participants' general demographic information is presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Identifier	Time of interview	Mode of interview	Discipline	Gender
P1	April 2024	Face to face	Social science	Male
P2	April 2024	Face to face	Social science	Female
P3	April 2024	Face to face	Social science	Female
P4	April 2024	Online	Social science	Female
P5	April 2024	Online	Engineering	Female
P6	April 2024	Face to face	Engineering	Male
P7	April 2024	Online	Engineering	Male
P8	April 2024	Face to face	Engineering	Female
P9	July 2024	Face to face	Social science	Female
P10	August 2024	Face to face	Social science	Female

The interviews were conducted between April and August, 2024, through both in-person meetings and online WeChat audio or video calls, based on the convenience of the participants. Each participant was asked about their expectations regarding their doctoral studies, interactions with Malaysian supervisors, and the intercultural misunderstandings between them. To allow students to speak more openly about the misunderstandings they experience, supervisors were excluded to prevent potential conflicts between supervisors and students (Baydarova, 2023). Additionally, this approach ensures that the focus remains on how EFL doctoral students perceive and interpret intercultural misunderstandings.

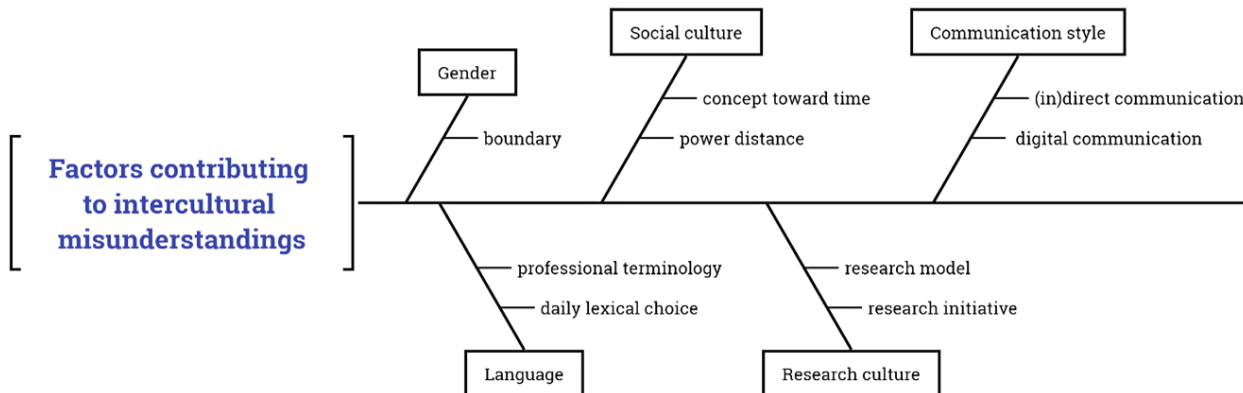
The interviews were primarily conducted in Chinese, allowing participants to fully express themselves in their native languages. Participants could also be interviewed in English, and two interviews were conducted in English. Each interview lasted 30–90 minutes, was recorded with the participants' consent, and was later transcribed for analysis. Certain quotations were translated into English for reporting in this study.

This study used a hybrid of inductive and deductive thematic analyses (Proudfoot, 2023). According to Lochmiller (2021), the analytical process includes the setup, analysis, and interpretive phases. Data sets must be inventoried and prepared for analysis during the setup phase, and documentation is created and organized. The inductive analysis phase includes familiarity with the dataset, developing an initial set of codes, a second coding cycle, searching for themes, and reviewing possible themes. The interpretive phase identifies connections across categories to generate themes. In addition to inductive thematic analysis, the researchers used deductive thematic analysis based on the research questions of the factors and processes of intercultural misunderstandings (Pearse, 2019). The data were imported and analyzed using ATLAS.ti 24 software, which is a promising strategy to assist in accomplishing thematic content analysis in the pre-analysis, material exploration, and interpretation stages (Soratto et al., 2020).

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews identified the following factors contributing to intercultural misunderstandings: gender, language, social culture, research culture, and communication style (See Figure 1).

FIGURE 1
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO INTERCULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS



Gender

Some participants reported that they expected their supervisors to provide more guidance on the research methodology (P1), help broaden their horizons (P3), hold regular meetings (P2), and maintain closer relationships (P8). While most of their expectations were partially met, one participant (P8) expressed confusion about the perceived sense of distance from her male Malay supervisor. According to her, his attitude was formal and detached. This phenomenon violated the female doctoral student’s expectation of closeness with her supervisor and left her confused and unable to understand the reason for this sense of distance.

I expected him to be a teacher and friend. I didn’t know why he always kept a distance from me... It might be because he is a male Muslim (P8).

Her expectation of a supervisor was someone who could guide her research and become a close friend. P8 had not expected her supervisor to maintain distance; she attributed this to him being a Muslim. The cross-gender interactions of Muslims are usually closely scrutinised, making cross-gender friendships challenging (Kretschmer, 2024). This suggests that gender differences could be a possible reason for intercultural misunderstandings.

Language

When describing language misunderstandings, some participants, reported misinterpretations of imprecise lexical choice, and others reported their limited English language competence, such as the use of complex professional terminology. Most students’ English language proficiency did not meet their supervisors’ performance expectations. This resulted in intercultural misunderstandings in academic discussions and the development of personal biases.

P5, whose research field was medical materials, had prepared questions in advance to initiate deeper discussion during her supervisory meeting. However, the supervisor’s presumption about his EFL students’ language proficiency exceeded the students’ actual proficiency, particularly in professional terminology and knowledge. Their communication dynamics was interrupted because neither side could understand the other.

I prepared all the questions I wanted to ask about my research. He answered me with another solution, and mentioned several terminologies I was not familiar with. It was hard for us to have a further discussion. We totally didn’t understand each other (P5).

P2 recounted another instance of intercultural misunderstanding during an academic trip with her supervisor. She suggested going to Independence Square, a landmark in Malaysia, ‘for a walk’. Her supervisor, instead interpreted as ‘walk to’, and agreed to walk under the hot sun, likely out of respect for her suggestion. Speakers of different natural languages typically use different labels for the same stimulus, particularly when the language is ambiguous (Koçak & Puranam, 2024). She had not expected her supervisor to misinterpret her intentions, and the frustrating experience in hot weather made her further uncomfortable.

I once went to Kuala Lumpur with my supervisor. After she finished her work, I wanted to go to Independence Square for a walk with her. But she thought I wanted to walk there. We didn’t take a Grab car, but walked more than 20 minutes. It was really hot in Malaysia. I was really tired (P2).

P9 was new to academic research and unfamiliar with certain professional terminologies used in management. She sometimes needed help for translating her supervisor’s statements, which slowed her responses to instant messages. The supervisor had the misconception that she lacked intelligence or sufficient mastery of academic content. She had not anticipated her student’s limited proficiency in English as an EFL student.

Sometimes, I replied to her messages slowly. She said I was not very smart. But I needed to translate them into Chinese (P9).

Social Culture

Regarding time, participants mentioned that their supervisors often delayed tasks and had low work efficiency. This led to growing confusion and impatience among students, who did not understand the reasons for these delays. During interactions with their supervisors, students had a different understanding of terms like ‘later’ and feedback speed. For example, P1 described how he was puzzled by the delays and began to feel neglected. Misalignment in time management can cause frustration.

Malaysian people treat time differently from our Chinese people. I knew we were different, but I didn’t know the difference was so big. When she said, ‘I will give you a response later’, I just waited and waited, and I felt neglected. Most of the time, I had to wait much longer than she said (P1).

P4 presented a similar situation, but she tried to rationalise the slower pace. Coming from a culture expecting efficiency and immediacy, Chinese individuals often struggle to acclimatise to the culture of slowness in Malaysia (Khoo, 2022). P4 believed that the slow pace of her Malaysian supervisors could be because they prefer a more deliberate approach, allowing them to maintain quality of work and work–life balance. While this explanation helped her understand the difference, the slow pace clashed with the faster, efficiency-driven Chinese way of life.

Maybe the overall pace of life for Chinese people is relatively fast, and we tend to push things forward quickly. However, the feedback from my supervisor, and from other supervisors I’ve heard about, is slow. Perhaps they just prefer to take their time (P4).

Moreover, in the case of P2, the power distance was reflected as an indicator of misunderstanding in intercultural situations and hindered correction. Power distance, which represents the degree to which members of a culture accept that institutions and organisations have power, often causes stress for those in lower positions within a relationship (Redmond, 2000). Both P2 and her supervisor seemed to hold different views on the power dynamics in a supervisory relationship. The student did not expect her supervisor to treat her equally, respect her suggestion, and agree to walk under the hot sun. As a Chinese person, whose

culture of power distance is usually high (Hu et al., 2016), she treated her supervisor as an authority figure who could not be challenged easily. Additionally, she did not correct her supervisor. Influenced by Confucian heritage culture, Chinese students highly respect their supervisors (K. Dai & Elliot, 2023). The supervisor remained unaware of the implicit misunderstanding. Misunderstandings have to be detected to be addressed (Macagno, 2017).

Later, I actually realized she had a misunderstanding. I wanted to express it again. But I still didn't have the courage to correct her (P2).

Research Culture

Some participants stated they had different research cultures, such as research initiatives and models, which led to intercultural misunderstandings between both parties. As a Chinese doctoral student, P6 expected his supervisor to provide some research direction, just as his peers had received from their supervisors in China. However, his supervisor was not proactive in providing such direction. Hands-off supervision appears to conflict with the expectations of close academic relationships typically found in research-intensive institutions in China (Lu, 2024). This caused P6 to believe that his supervisor did not care for him.

I really couldn't understand, 'why doesn't my supervisor care about me? Why doesn't he give me some research directions?' (P6).

Similarly, P3 asked her supervisor to provide clear instructions before meetings. She asked about the tasks that required preparation for the next meeting. This practice is common in China, where students expect their supervisors to provide specific guidance and directions. However, her supervisor asked students to establish their own next steps, demonstrating autonomy. P3 felt anxious because she was not given clear instructions and worried that her supervisor might question her ability to conduct research.

I asked her before we met, 'what do I need to prepare for the next time we meet?' But I was surprised by her asking me in turn, 'What do you want to submit to me?' I was afraid that my supervisor would think I was not good at research (P3).

P4 was accustomed to the Chinese research model, but her supervisor seemed unaware of it and suggested an alternative one. Faced with this unfamiliar research model, P4 felt disappointed that her supervisor did not understand her model. Moreover, her supervisor asked P4 to revise her thesis based on alternative model. As P4 continued using the original model, the supervisor mistakenly believed she was not taking the feedback seriously, leading to further misunderstanding.

China's research model is very different from that of foreign countries, especially for doctoral dissertations. At first, she couldn't understand what I said, and I couldn't understand what she said. Both of us were very frustrated. She would think that I didn't revise it seriously, and I would feel that she wasn't giving me the right guidance (P4).

Communication Style

Unexpected communication styles were also mentioned, both in-person and online. P8, a civil engineering student, faced difficulties in reproducing a code and expected her supervisor to guide her through the coding process. She indirectly conveyed this need by expressing her difficulties: An indirect communication style arises from the high level of context-dependence commonly found in collectivist cultures (Schulze et al., 2022). This led her supervisor to misunderstand her intent and misinterpret her need as a sign of anxiety. Consequently, the supervisor missed P8's subtle cues for help with the coding process and instead responded by offering emotional support. The student's indirect communication style failed to convey the intended implicit meaning (Verdonik, 2010). Furthermore, as seen in the case of P2, the power

distance between the student and the supervisor further complicated the situation, making it more difficult for the supervisor to recognize implicit misunderstandings and take corrective actions.

At that time, I found that the results I reproduced were not quite right. I was actually a little anxious. I said to him that I was having a hard time. But my underlying meaning was that I wanted him to help with the code. But he provided me with emotional support (P8).

In addition to the indirect communication style, participants also mentioned digital communication styles. P10 described an intercultural misunderstanding with her supervisor. The supervisor had asked her to share her paper's citations on WhatsApp, an online instant messaging platform. P10 initially responded by explaining her citation approach, but was uncertain about how to interpret the additional questions from her supervisor. P10 belongs to a high-context culture and is accustomed to incorporating images into messages. However, such messages can be interpreted differently (Lim & Urakami, 2019).

Consequently, she struggled to gauge her supervisor's tone of voice and became worried that her supervisor was angry. For fear of authority, she decided not to argue and instead compromised during the conversation. Recognizing the potential for misinterpretation, the supervisor subsequently used friendly digital cues such as modal particles, which helped reduce tension in the conversation (Abubakar et al., 2021; Fehringer & Cornips, 2019).

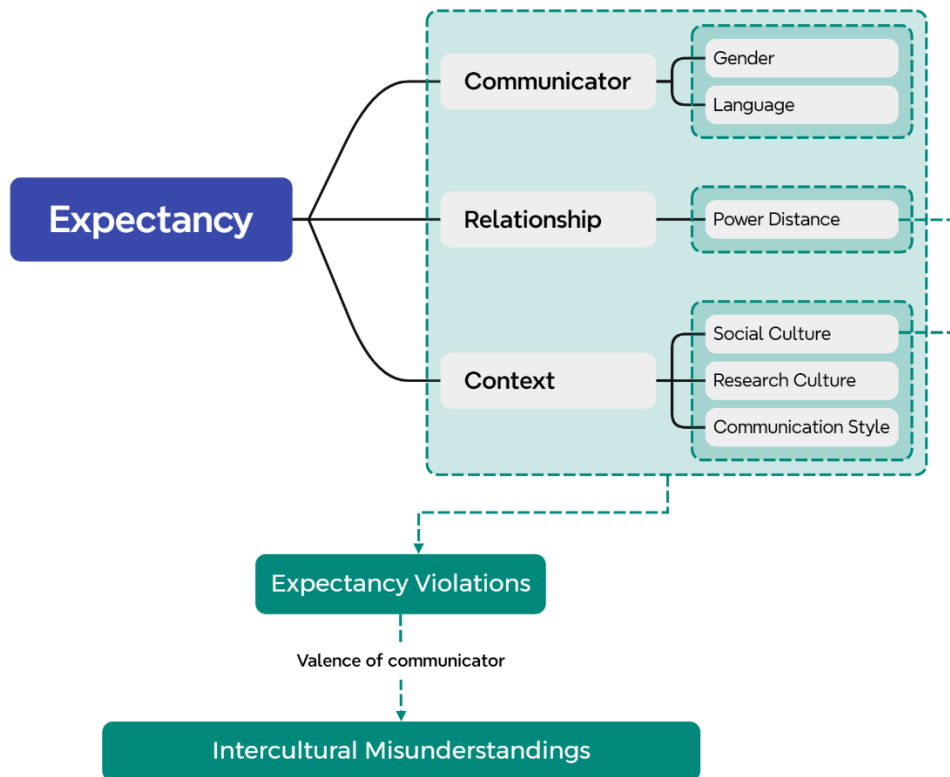
She said, 'are you sure you are using APA style?' I thought she was angry at me, and I replied, 'Ok, I'll correct it.' From that time, she will add 'ya' at the end of the sentence (P10).

DISCUSSION

First, from the perspective of EVT, intercultural misunderstandings can be caused by negatively violating expectations from one or both parties (Burgoon, 2005). In this intercultural study, gender and language represented the communicator factor; the power distance between students and their Malaysian supervisors represented the relationship factor; and culture and communication style represented the contextual factors. Failure to meet the expectations of the identified factors can lead to misunderstanding and frustration among students. This knowledge is consistent with previous studies on violating expectations owing to communication factors like gender (Izadi, 2022), language (Rodriguez & Chornet-Roses, 2014), power distance (Baydarova, 2023), social culture, research culture (Neupane Bastola, 2022; Pinto, 2020), and communication style (Hu et al., 2020).

While misunderstandings can have negative impacts, they may not always harm a relationship, provided supervisors can maintain respect and professional credibility with students. In this study, some students attempted to justify the reasons for their unmet expectations, thus preventing further misunderstandings. This aligns with Burgoon's (2005) theory that positive valence factors, such as expertise and status, can help alleviate tension. Consequently, a framework was created to better understand the process of intercultural misunderstandings (See Figure 2).

FIGURE 2
FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING HOW INTERCULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS ARISE



Second, culture seems to be the most complex factor contributing to unmet expectations. This could be because culture usually influences other factors, such as the communicator’s personality, relationships, and communication style (Burgoon, 2005). Muslim religious beliefs require supervisors to maintain a certain distance and set boundaries when interacting with the opposite sex (Mernissi, 2011). Similarly, Malaysian social culture considers haste as a breach of ethics and rushing to get ahead is considered as a sign of greed for material wealth (Levine, 1998). Moreover, the research culture of Malaysia is dynamic with more independence for doctoral students. This movement away from the Chinese linear style of supervision can violate Chinese students’ expectations. For example, intercultural misunderstandings caused anxiety for students (P9), loneliness (P7), tension in supervisory relationships (P10), and invalid outcomes such as waste of time (P4).

Third, relational factors, such as relationships with high power distance can exacerbate intercultural misunderstandings. This is because high power distance often results in avoidance behaviours or silence, leading to ineffective communication (Y. Dai et al., 2022). This phenomenon creates barriers to open dialogue, intensifying intercultural misunderstandings, some of which may remain unnoticed (Wu & Hu, 2020). Similarly, indirect communication styles can also contribute to implicit intercultural misunderstandings. In China, indirect communication is more common, and the Chinese prefer a more subtle and implicit method that is often referred to as high-context communication (Halford et al., 2018). Although indirect communication avoids disapproval or criticism and maintain social harmony, its misinterpretation may lead to intercultural misunderstandings (Pang et al., 2024). Moreover, language barriers exacerbate intercultural misunderstandings, particularly for EFL learners.

Lastly, intercultural misunderstandings are often shaped by factors such as language proficiency, digital communication styles, and power distance. This is consistent with Taylan and Weber’s (2023) finding that combination of communication skills, cultural background, and religious beliefs often influences

expectations. The language competence of EFL students must be given special attention, especially given the global dominance of ELF in international communication among people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Yilmaz, 2020). Furthermore, it is quite challenging to differentiate whether personality or national culture shapes expectations such as research independence, time efficiency, and interaction style. However, when specific individual information is unavailable, expectations tend to revert to cultural norms and stereotypes (Burgoon, 2005). This suggests that effective communication in an intercultural environment requires an understanding of cultural norms and knowledge about personal characteristics. Therefore, researchers must further examine how culture affects individuals' communication process (Singelis & Brown, 1995).

Consequently, educational institutions should design intercultural training, workshops, and immersion activities for both students and their supervisors to raise their awareness of intercultural communication challenges (Caligiuri et al., 2001). Moreover, Ergai et al., (2023) emphasize an individual's attitude as the starting point in enhancing intercultural communication. Educational institutions should also provide language courses, such as academic speaking and writing, to support EFL students. Educational institutions are expected to provide language corpora for doctoral students across various disciplines. This could significantly enhance English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for the students, as Cortes (2022) noted.

Furthermore, doctoral students must be encouraged to engage in open communication with their supervisors to reduce misunderstandings and foster positive relationships. Additionally, supervisors should be equipped with the knowledge and strategies to understand and support students' linguistic backgrounds (Pinto, 2023). This is crucial for effectively guiding international students through their academic journeys, particularly for those EFL students.

LIMITATIONS

This study had several limitations. First, the sample size is small, which limits the ability to draw broader conclusions about the factors contributing to intercultural misunderstandings. Second, this study is context specific, focusing only on the intercultural misunderstandings of Chinese doctoral students and their Malaysian supervisors. Future research should explore EFL students from different countries in diversified international academic settings to enhance the results' generalisability. Third, this study could not completely capture implicit misunderstandings, which are often undetectable owing to their subtlety. Future research should consider a range of observational methods to identify implicit misunderstandings in real-time interactions. Finally, although this study explores some communication strategies, it does not comprehensively explore them. Future research should investigate additional strategies and incorporate them into a framework that can address intercultural misunderstandings.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, EVT provides a unique perspective to analyse factors and processes that cause intercultural misunderstandings, including themes of gender, language, social culture, research culture, and communication style. Intercultural misunderstandings in educational institutions can result in emotional frustration and feelings of neglect for both EFL students and their supervisors. This study enriches the existing literature by providing a framework for understanding how these intercultural misunderstandings arise within the Asian context. However, the researchers did not further explore the theme of strategies for mitigating intercultural misunderstandings, as it focused on identifying the causes and explaining the process of EFL students' intercultural misunderstandings. Nonetheless, this study paves the way for future research. The findings are relevant for practitioners and policymakers working towards identifying targeted strategies to bridge the cultural gap and significantly improve the quality of intercultural doctoral supervision for EFL students. Incorporating the theme of strategies may enrich the framework of intercultural misunderstandings. Addressing these challenges is beneficial to the current theory and critical for creating a more inclusive and effective academic environment.

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