

The Role of Cross-Cultural Communication in the Adaptation Process of Participants in the 2024 Mulawarman University Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards

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Abstract

The increasing participation of students in international mobility programs has created new challenges related to cross-cultural adaptation, particularly in communication processes within unfamiliar cultural environments. The Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) program provides opportunities for students to gain global academic experiences; however, differences in language, cultural values, communication patterns, and social norms may influence their adaptation processes. This study aimed to analyze the role of cross-cultural communication in the adaptation process of 2024 IISMA participants from Mulawarman University based on Young Yun Kim's Integrative Communication Theory. This research employed a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and literature reviews, while data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The findings indicated that cross-cultural communication played a significant role in supporting students' adaptation through six dimensions: host social communication, ethnic social communication, personal communication, environmental factors, predisposing factors, and cross-cultural transformation. Interactions with host communities and exposure to local media enhanced cultural understanding, while communication barriers and cultural differences initially generated stress during the adaptation process. Nevertheless, continuous interaction enabled students to develop communication competence, cultural awareness, and a cross-cultural identity. This study concluded that effective cross-cultural communication facilitated the transition from stress to adaptation and personal growth, enabling international students to successfully integrate into new cultural environments.

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) is a program under the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) initiative organized by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi [Kemendikbudristek]) in collaboration with the Education Fund Management Agency (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan [LPDP]). The program provides undergraduate

students with opportunities to pursue academic and professional experiences at leading international universities and partner institutions to enhance their knowledge, competencies, and skills according to their academic interests, a form of study-abroad mobility increasingly examined through the lens of Kim's Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation (Guerriche & Grimshaw, 2024).

Through the implementation of the IISMA program, selected students have the opportunity to participate in academic activities for one semester at overseas universities partnered with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. The study period is subsequently recognized and converted into 20 credits within the Indonesian higher education credit system (Satuan Kredit Semester [SKS]) (Budiarti et al., 2022).

For students selected to participate in the program, adapting to the learning process can be challenging due to differences in language, educational systems, learning cultures, and daily communication practices within the host environment. Kamal Bahrain et al. (2023) stated that differences in communication styles, both verbal and nonverbal, may arise from several barriers, including (1) language barriers, (2) cultural barriers, and (3) physical barriers. Although their study focused on workplace environments, similar challenges may occur within academic settings, where these barriers can contribute to reduced productivity, misunderstandings, dissatisfaction, ineffective teamwork, and decreased individual confidence during the adaptation process. The study also emphasized that maintaining empathy and emotional intelligence can support healthier communication processes through tolerant and adaptive attitudes, a pattern also documented among Asian sojourners whose host communication competence and interpersonal engagement were found to positively predict their psychological health during cross-cultural adaptation (Kim & Kim, 2022).

Tolerance and adaptive attitudes represent continuous processes that develop over time rather than changes that can occur instantly. For IISMA students, developing tolerant and adaptive attitudes becomes more complex because participants must adjust not only to linguistic and cultural differences but also to various aspects of daily life, including routines, social behaviors, and personal habits.

In deeper communication processes, interactions may be hindered by fundamental differences in language and cultural backgrounds. These differences can result in prejudice, stereotypes, and misinterpretations during intercultural interactions. One example can be observed in the differences between collectivist and individualist cultures, where communication approaches vary significantly between societies with collective orientations and those with individualistic orientations, a dynamic that has also been shown to shape how sojourning students negotiate and ultimately develop their intercultural identity abroad (Sobkowiak, 2021). A common example is the intercultural relationship between Japan and the United States, where Japan is generally characterized by collectivist cultural values, while the United States is commonly associated with individualistic cultural values (Aririguzoh, 2022).

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) described an interaction involving a Japanese company official who attempted to motivate employees; however, employees in a United States-based company were instructed to disregard the Japanese official's statements. This interaction demonstrated how cultural differences can create misunderstandings, as Japanese communication styles emphasizing hierarchical relationships and collective responsibility may be perceived differently within an individualistic cultural context. Consequently, conflicts may

emerge between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This example illustrates that language proficiency alone is insufficient to overcome intercultural communication barriers; individuals must also develop adaptive capabilities when interacting with unfamiliar cultures, particularly since cultural intelligence has been found to moderate the intensity of both culture shock and reverse culture shock among international students (Presbitero, 2016).

Self-adaptation among IISMA participants may become a significant challenge in daily life, particularly due to the phenomenon of culture shock. Oberg (1960) defined culture shock as anxiety resulting from the loss of familiar symbols and social relationships. Such anxiety may appear in several forms, including (1) cultural exhaustion, characterized by irritability, sleep difficulties, and psychosomatic symptoms; (2) feelings of loss caused by separation from familiar environments; (3) rejection toward individuals from the new cultural environment; and (4) feelings of helplessness resulting from difficulties in managing unfamiliar situations. Generally, culture shock occurs due to differences in habits, behaviors, and social norms between individuals entering a new culture and members of the host culture. Ward et al. (2001) explained that immigrants or sojourners may experience confusion regarding cultural norms and appropriate communication practices within the host environment. They may face difficulties in initiating and maintaining interactions with host community members, presenting themselves appropriately, interpreting nonverbal responses, and understanding behaviors that appear unfamiliar within the new cultural context, experiences recently reframed as communicative triggers that international students actively manage through resilience-oriented communication practices across the stress-adaptation-growth process (Fanari & Kim, 2025).

Based on this background, this study aimed to examine the adaptation process and intercultural communication experiences of students participating in the IISMA program, both in academic activities and daily interactions. To explore this phenomenon, the study employed a theoretical approach entitled “The Role of Cross-Cultural Communication in the Adaptation Process of Participants in the 2024 Mulawarman University Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards.

METHOD

Types of Research

This study employed a qualitative research method, which focused on interpreting and analyzing the collected data (Scott, 2013). Qualitative research emphasizes the examination of phenomena within their natural contexts, allowing researchers to explore experiences and meanings through descriptive and comprehensive analysis (Williams in Hardani et al., 2020). The study involved purposive sampling to select participants who were considered relevant to the research objectives.

The research adopted a case study approach, which enabled an in-depth examination of the factors influencing the adaptation process and cross-cultural communication experiences of the participants. This approach emphasized intensive analysis of interactions among relevant factors within the research context (Hardani et al., 2020).

Data Analysis Techniques

Sugiyono explained that data analysis is the process of systematically searching and compiling data obtained from interview results, field notes and other sources, so that it can be easily understood and the findings can be informed to others (Scott, 2013).

In this study, the analysis technique that will be used by the author to analyze the data obtained from the field is using the Miles and Huberman Model, with stages;

1. Data collection, where data will be collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and literature studies, and combine the three when necessary (triangulation).
2. Data reduction, where the data that has been collected will be summarized and sorted based on relevance to the research topic, so as to provide a clearer picture and make it easier for researchers to find data again if needed.
3. Data presentation, where data that has been reduced is presented in a form that is easier to understand such as brief descriptions, charts, flowcharts, and so on. In qualitative research, Miles & Huberman (in Sugiyono, 2013) stated that in general, the most commonly used form of data presentation is narrative text.
4. Conclusion and data verification, where the conclusion is a new finding that has never existed before. Findings can be in the form of descriptions or descriptions of objects that were previously unclear, and become clear after research.

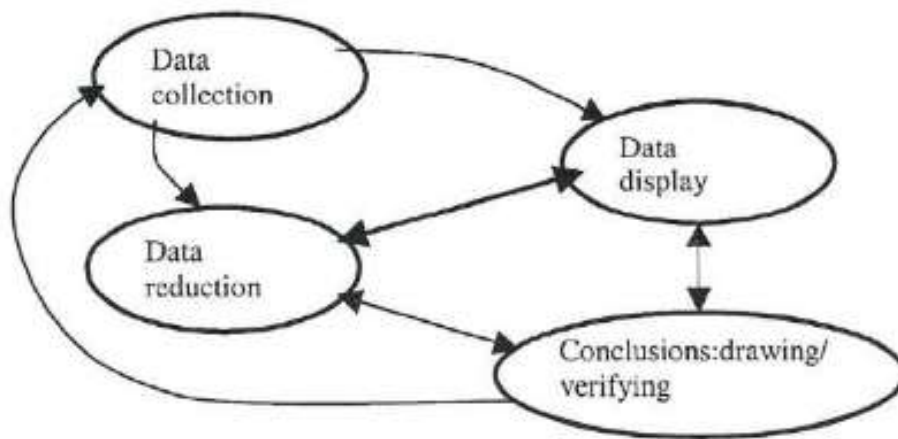


Figure 1. Miles & Huberman's data analysis model (in Sugiyono, 2013: 247)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research and Discussion Results

The research was carried out with the aim of obtaining answers from the formulation of the problems that have been explained in Chapter I. One of the most important stages is data collection to then be processed and presented and conclusions drawn. In this study, the data obtained will be developed to determine how the communication process that occurs as measured based on the dimensions of communication proposed by Young Yun Kim in Integrative Communication Theory during the informant participation in the program can affect the adaptation process that occurs.

Host Social Communication

Kim (2001) affirms that communication competence with the host culture cannot develop without the participation of foreign individuals in that culture, and instead foreign individuals can only participate to the extent that the foreign individual's ability to communicate in accordance with the norms and behaviors of the host society, a process that is further reinforced

when foreign individuals receive adequate social support that helps buffer the acculturative stress accompanying this participation (Kristiana et al., 2022). A foreign individual who interacts more and more often with the host culture will have more opportunities to develop his communication competence with the host culture, but in practice many foreign individuals only communicate with their own ethnicity.

Informant Ghilman explained that he had more interaction with the local community because he had the role of Student Representative (SR) for his departure group at the Università di Pisa where he was required to interact more, as he explained as follows;

“but I think I believe that I interacted more with the locals and other international students because I would say that amongst my peers, I was the most social. As I’m the SR”

("But I think I interact a lot with the local community and other international students because I can tell among my friends, I'm the most social. Because I'm the SR") (Ghilman Interview, January 15, 2026)

According to Young Yun Kim, through the relationship that exists between foreign individuals and indigenous people of a culture, they observe and learn the basics of verbal and non-verbal communication practices, assumptions and emotional sensitivity from local cultures. Based on Young Yun Kim's statement and the experience of Ghilman's informant, the communication that occurred between him and the new cultural environment he lived in had a positive role in the adaptation process that he experienced.

Bella's informant also expressed the same thing about her interaction with the community in the foreign environment she lives in, where she said;

“I had a balanced interaction with all groups. I spent time with locals, I also connected with other international students, and I enjoyed spending time with fellow Indonesians.”

("I have a balanced interaction with all the groups. I spend time with locals, I also connect with other international students, and I enjoy time with my fellow Indonesians.") (Bella Interview, January 29, 2026)

The two statements from informants Bella and Ghilman highlight how interpersonal communication is one of the indicators in the Host Social Communication dimension which has a role in the adaptation process that they go through. Apart from interpersonal communication, the use of media in the foreign cultural environment is also an indicator in the adaptation process faced by every foreign individual. Gordon and Lasswell (in Kim, 2001) explained that mass media has a function in the adaptation process of a foreign individual, where they can convey social values and perspectives in interpreting the environment, a role that has since been extended to social media, whose active use has been associated with stronger cross-culture adaption and academic integration among boundary-crossing students (Pang, 2020).

Bella's informant said that during the duration of the program, she consumed more local mass media to find out more information about her new home, which she hoped could help in her adaptation process. Kim stated that the use of information-based media content versus entertainment-oriented content had a more positive relationship with the formation of relationships with the host environment.

“I definitely consumed more local media during my stay. I followed recent news, explored recommendations for places to visit, and learned about how things work in Washington, D.C.”

("I obviously consumed more local media during my visit. I followed the news, looked for recommendations for places to visit, and learned how things are going in Washington, D.C.") (Bella Interview, January 29, 2026)

The same thing was also experienced by informant Angga, where he experienced a situation that allowed him to consume local media through his residence where he lived with his family, as he explained as follows;

"But I sometimes watch TV with my host family. So sometimes when I have breakfast myself, I have breakfast to see what the people there are watching, oh so I often watch the news there." (Interview Angga, May 14, 2026).

In more depth, informant Angga explained that through the media consumption he experienced, he could learn more about the elements of local culture that he could not get directly, as he explained as follows;

"But what I can say is that the takeaway from that is that by watching and consuming local TV, we know "Oh, it turns out that the culture is like this, yes, it turns out that Australia is diverse, there are many people from India, from Africa and all sorts of things." Moreover, Australia, especially Perth, is one of the many international students there. So yes, it also has an impact on adaptation." (Interview Angga, May 14, 2026)

Informants Ghilman and Marcello said that they already have familiarity with foreign cultures through the exposure they have experienced through social media through entertainment-based content, and the exposure has a positive impact on their adaptation process because they feel that it becomes easier to interact with the local community through the knowledge of foreign cultures that they have gained through exposure to the media content, echoing findings that social media use allows international sojourners to remain socially and culturally connected despite physical distance from the host community (Yu et al., 2019). as they conveyed as follows;

"... If the problem of communication in English is not too much of a problem, because the media I consume is mostly western media, so for pop culture references I am used to it." (Marcello Interview, January 25, 2026)

"I mean, it doesn't really affect me because even before the departure, my Instagram page was already I would say international, the pop culture with the memes. Not like the average Indonesian FYP page. So it doesn't really affect me in any way."

("For me, it didn't affect too much because before leaving, my Instagram page could already be said to be "International". Pop culture and memes. Unlike most Indonesian FYP pages. So it doesn't really affect me in any way.") (Ghilman interview, January 15, 2026)

Young Yun Kim (2001) explained that through media exposure, a foreign individual can learn about foreign cultures beyond existing boundaries if they only rely on direct interaction with their interpersonal environment. Through media exposure, a foreign individual can learn about the local culture in a wider range because they are exposed to traditions, myths, art, humor, as well as the latest problems and events that exist in the host culture.

Based on the results of interviews conducted together with informants, the experience they have in interacting with the host cultural environment both through personal communication and media consumption has a positive role in the adaptation process that they go through during the duration of their stay.

Ethnic Social Communication

The host social communication dimension occurs simultaneously with the ethnic social communication dimension, where foreign individuals who arrive in a new cultural environment will definitely still have ties to their respective ethnicities. Young Yun Kim (2001) Explains that the communication process that occurs in the ethnic sphere tends to hinder the adaptation process and ultimately the cross-cultural communication competence of foreign individuals to the new culture they occupy.

The dimension of ethnic social communication has the same construction and indicators as the dimension of host cultural social communication, namely interpersonal communication and mass communication which includes the size or proportion of ethnic ties and the use of ethnic mass media. In the case of this study, informants who are program participants depart with other groups of participants who have the same destination university, thus increasing the number or size of ethnic ties owned by the group which ultimately opens up the possibility of more intense interpersonal communication for fellow ethnicities that will hinder the long-term adaptation process, consistent with evidence that the structure and composition of a student's support network shape the extent to which that network facilitates or constrains adjustment (Shu et al., 2020).

The experience of informant Marcello, where he felt that because many IISMA students went to his destination campus, they tended to hang out more than with students or the local community, and this made him feel left behind by what was happening in Malaysia, where he lived during the program.

"Yes, fellow Indonesians talk to each other, "Eh, how is this the story of Indonesia?" So yes, still keep in touch. If the news of Malaysia becomes even less. Yes because it seems like the effect because there are many... There are so many IISMA students that you can say in their own bubble." (Marcello Interview, January 25, 2026)

Marcello's informant statement also emphasized that because fellow ethnic Indonesians interact more, it causes the consumption of local mass media to decrease and he does not keep up with the latest developments in his destination country which can hinder the long-term adaptation process, a pattern that mirrors findings that heavy reliance on home-country social media contact can come at the expense of the host-country interactions needed to reduce feelings of homesickness (Billedo et al., 2020). Young Yun Kim (2001) states that in the broad scope of mass media, a foreign individual can participate more broadly than just their direct interpersonal environment.

Informant Angga also said the same thing, where he interacted more with fellow IISMA participants who were of the same ethnicity, which made him more exposed to news from Indonesia.

"Obviously, our fellow Indonesians are like that, because we study together, right, so we will meet every day. At least if you don't meet it, it's when you're not in class, for example Saturday-Sunday because the class is Monday to Friday. So we have more to meet with Indonesia. And if I may reflect again, at that time it was the election period for the Governor of East Kalimantan at that time. I myself still had time to watch the debate for the election of the Governor of East Kalimantan at that time. So still... It's still going to be there." (Interview Angga, May 14, 2026)

Based on interviews with informants Marcello and Angga, they experienced intense social communication within the scope of fellow ethnicities. In Integrative Communication

Theory, it should have a negative role in the adaptation process, but because the duration of the program only runs for six months or less, the negative role of intense communication between fellow ethnicities is not so much felt by the informant.

Young Yun Kim (2001) explains that interpersonal communication within the scope of fellow ethnicities will have a positive role in the short-term adaptation process, where foreign individuals will interact more within their ethnic sphere to gain a "sense of security" in an environment that is unfamiliar to them, a coping pattern also observed among first-year international students, for whom co-ethnic support was found to ease acculturative stress especially during the earliest stage of adjustment (Koo et al., 2021), which explains the experience shared by informant Marcello and informant Angga. The negative impact of interactions that exclusively involve fellow ethnicities will only have a bad influence on the adaptation process if foreign individuals live in a new environment in the long term, especially if they place themselves among fellow ethnicities who are still not well adapted, due to a shift in function in inter-ethnic interactions, from the previous one as a supporter in the initial process of adaptation to an interaction that only maintains ties with a place of water and language from foreign individuals.

Personal Communications

An individual's ability to understand the cultural communication system is the main determining factor in the individual's adaptation process. As their ability to communicate in foreign cultures increases, they will understand how to accept and respond effectively to the foreign cultural environment. Kim (2001) Define communication competence as an internal capacity or set of abilities that can be identified with results such as perceived effectiveness, a construct closely linked to sociocultural and psychological adaptation, both of which have been shown to be strengthened when international students build supportive friendships in the host environment (Sheng et al., 2022).

Cognitively, communication competence towards the host culture is influenced by knowledge of the host's communication system. An individual's understanding of the host culture is primarily facilitated by an understanding of the language of the local culture. In addition to being a medium to convey and receive new information, understanding the use of local languages makes a foreign individual think and perceive information.

Informant Marcello said that in his destination country, he learned that despite ethnic closeness, it did not always make understanding similar grammars easier to understand. He stated this as follows;

Oh yes, language differences. So even though Malay and Indonesian have similar languages, there are some words, especially those that are risky, like "need", right, Banjar knows what it means, right? Now that is the same meaning in Malay. (Marcello Interview, January 25, 2026)

Marcello's informant experience highlights an indicator of cognitive complexity, where he understands that although there are similarities in the vocabulary of Malay and Banjar as the regional languages he understands, there are two different meanings in the two languages. His experience is an obstacle in communication where he faces the risk of misunderstandings in verbal communication where what he understands can be offensive in the host culture, and has a negative role in the adaptation process because he has to readjust the way he communicates with the host cultural environment.

Beyond the ability to understand language, nonverbal codes such as intonation, body language, and facial expressions also affect the meaning of interaction between an unfamiliar individual and the host environment. Informant Ghilman said that he had communication habits when interacting in Indonesian, he had to change so that the message he conveyed in the host culture could be better understood by the local community, as he conveyed as follows;

("... I feel like I have to tone it down because in Indonesian, aku orangnya asbun banget kalau sama temen. So, because I'm meeting with new people, I need to, you know, be more polite, be less... be less sarcastic") (Wawancara Ghilman, 15 Januari 2026)

It also highlights the identity flexibility of the affective component as an indicator of the construction of personal communication competence, where he is able to adjust the identity he has as a talkative person to be more careful when communicating with a new cultural environment to achieve harmony. However, Ghilman's informant also said that he had doubts about the local community's assessment of him based on the interactions he had, which he conveyed as follows;

"One thing I feel is that while I'm there, I'm like I don't know, if in Indonesia I feel the same thing, I can be more talkative to people but while I'm there, I don't know, I can't just sit there and talk like that. Yes, right? It's like they're scared of what they're going to think. It's like, "Is this weird person?" or "This is a weird person...", you know people will think of us in a certain way." (Ghilman interview, January 15, 2026)

The doubts he has about the perception of the host cultural community towards him highlights the obstacles he faces in the indicators of alignment from the operational aspects of the construction of the host cultural communication competence. This then has a negative role in the adaptation process because he has to suppress his original personality to achieve harmony in communicating with the host cultural environment.

Angga's informant experience also highlights the identity flexibility component of affective indicators in the construction of host cultural communication competencies, where the experience he has in placing himself in a foreign cultural environment makes him have the ability to adjust his identity to achieve harmony in operational construction, as he conveys the following;

"... But yes, yes, we appreciate that we live it, how the culture there is, as long as it doesn't interfere with the values we have, the principles we have." (Interview Angga, May 14, 2026) Meanwhile, Bella's informant said that she had a positive experience when she began to have a deeper understanding of the host cultural communication system, an outcome consistent with research showing that perceived stress during cross-cultural adaptation can be buffered through supportive interpersonal relationships, ultimately protecting students' psychological health (Wang et al., 2021), which she conveyed as follows;

"one cultural difference I noticed was how much people there enjoyed giving compliments. I'm not sure if it's just me, but I didn't experience this as often in Indonesia. they were also very affectionate, often hugging, which I found warm and welcoming. most of the people I encountered always remembered to say "please" and "thank you," and they often held the door for others, even at the elevator, which made me feel that they were kind and considerate"

("One cultural difference I noticed was how people there always gave compliments. I'm not sure if this is just my feelings, but I rarely experience that in Indonesia. They were also very

affectionate, even hugging each other which I thought was very warm and friendly. Most of the people I met also always remembered to say "please" and "thank you", and they often held the door for others, even when in the elevator, which made me feel that they were very kind and caring..." (Bella Interview, January 29, 2026)

However, affectively Bella's informant finds it difficult to adjust the identity she has as a closed person to become more open and adapt her personality to the customs of the local community, as she conveys below;

At the beginning, it was quite challenging to adjust to the local norms and habits. simple things like making small talk and giving compliments took effort since I'm not naturally a very social person.

("At first, it was quite challenging to adjust to local norms and customs. Simple things like making small talk and giving compliments take effort because I'm not an easy person.") (Bella Interview, January 29, 2026)

Although Bella's informant had a hard time adjusting to her identity, she admits that it encouraged her to delve into the culture and customs of the local community when interacting, as she recounts below;

"the cultural differences I experienced had a positive impact on me. they motivated me to learn more about the local culture and to adapt to new habits."

("The cultural differences I experienced had a positive impact on me. They motivated me to learn more about the local culture and adapt to new habits.") (Bella Interview, January 29, 2026)

This then highlights the dynamics of stress-adaptation-growth where the informant Bella finds obstacles that are included in the affective indicators in the construction of the host cultural competency when she adapts, then tries to overcome the existing obstacles through efforts to learn more about the host cultural communication system until finally she will experience growth in herself and reach the growth phase.

Cross-Cultural Transformation

As time goes by when foreign individuals are in the host cultural environment, they will go through a cross-cultural transformation along with the level of their communication activity towards the host society. Cross-cultural transformation occurs simultaneously with dynamics stress-adaptation-growth Where after experiencing difficulties, if the individual is able to overcome them, they will have the ability to face better challenges.

The construction in the dimension of Cross-Cultural Transformation that is an indicator is functional compatibility, which represents the results of the efforts and abilities possessed by foreign individuals in facing challenges from the foreign environment. The functional fit of an individual can be seen from his ability to carry out daily activities smoothly and feel comfortable in a certain environment. For a foreign individual, functional compatibility is directly related to the host's communication competence and participation in the host's communication process. Heath (1977) states that competence is the ability of an individual to respond in a way that optimally meets and integrates demands from the environment.

Marcello's informant stated something in line with the statement, where in the experience he had during his studies in the country and university of his destination, he felt that he was able to follow a learning process that was different from what he had undergone at his home university, as he conveyed the following;

"Well... in Malaysia it can be a little more intense if for me personally, yes, my personal preference. He-eh. That's what I was looking for when I was in college, but I think if I really want to push back, I can still do it. I'm going to have to go back to the drawing board and try to do it again because that's where I'm going to learn." (Marcello Interview, January 25, 2026)

Bella's informant also conveyed the same thing related to the customs of the local people that she learned during her stay in her destination country;

I dealt with the cultural changes by adapting to the local ways of living. I made an effort to engage in small talk, give compliments, and greet people warmly, even if it didn't come naturally at first.

(I cope with cultural change by adapting to the local way of life. I try to engage in small talk, giving compliments and warm greetings, even though this doesn't happen naturally at first.) (Bella Interview, January 29, 2026)

Bella's informant's statement is in line with what Kim (2001) Individuals who are functionally compatible with their environment will have a broader and clearer view of the communication patterns and culture of the host environment, as well as an increased capacity to participate in the emotional experiences of local communities, as well as be adept enough to make behavioural changes to specific situations and execute them effectively and creatively. The experience of Bella's informant shows that she can make adjustments to the behavior of the local community so that it can be accepted by the host cultural environment.

This functional fit will then intrinsically develop into an identity for foreign individuals who experience it, where they will internalize the habits that have been exposed to them into a cross-cultural identity, which is one of the constructions in the dimension of intercultural transformation. The development of cross-cultural identity can only be obtained after foreign individuals go through the process of acculturation, where their identity that has been possessed since childhood changes through the process of acculturation and deculturation through the process of communication with the new cultural environment. In this process of identity development, the dynamics of stress-adaptation-growth run simultaneously. The experience of foreign individuals in adjusting their identity will inevitably experience obstacles and setbacks before they can finally adjust and develop.

Informants Ghilman and Bella said that in the end, after some time of placing themselves in a foreign cultural environment, they were able to adjust and understand the verbal and nonverbal codes that he received, as conveyed as follows;

Maybe I got a bit confused, but eventually I adjusted and already understood what it meant, what it, you know... So yeah, I don't have that much of a struggle to adjust.

(Maybe I got a little confused, but in the end I was able to adjust and finally understand what it meant... So I didn't really have a hard time adjusting.) (Ghilman interview, January 15, 2026)

However, I became more comfortable and confident. I learned to engage with locals and other students and adapt to the environment. By the end of the program, I felt much more at ease even though moments of self-doubt still popped up sometimes.

(However, I became more comfortable and confident. I learned to interact with locals and other students and adapt to the environment. By the end of the program, I felt much calmer even though there were still doubts at times.) (Bella Interview, January 29, 2026)

Discussion of Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamics

The six dimensions that have been described earlier then become indicators of the adaptation process experienced by each program participant which is reflected in the dynamics Stress-Adaptation-Growth. Ideally, over time, an individual will go through a phase stress in the early days of their arrival in the new cultural environment, until finally they adapted to the obstacles they faced, and passed through the phase of stress and adaptation repeatedly up to the level of stress and their adaptation is gradually reduced because they have developed the competence of the host culture through repeated interaction with the host cultural environment. (Kim, 2001)

The informants who were the subjects of this study experienced stress phases in different dimensions which then became obstacles in their adaptation process, although in the end they were able to overcome the existing obstacles and then reached a phase of growth in their adaptation process which showed that they were able to adapt.

The findings found by the author are that the dynamic phase of stress-adaptation-growth occurs again in program participants when they return to their place of origin, as conveyed by informants Ghilman and Angga as follows:

I see. I think the hardest... the hardest part of the adjusting... I didn't have that much struggle, but instead the hardest part was, you know, when the trip was finished, when the exchange and you have to go back. That's the hardest part. This finding echoes research showing that reentry problems upon returning home can be closely tied to how returning sojourners renegotiate their cultural identity after time abroad (Kranz & Goedderz, 2020).

("Oh, I see. I think the hardest part... The hardest part of customizing... I didn't have a lot of difficulty, but the hardest part was, you know, when the trip was over, when the change and you had to come back. That's the hardest part.") (Ghilman interview, January 15, 2026)

So if you say that adaptation is the most difficult, it is actually readaptation, aka when you return to your home country, right? (Interview Angga, May 14, 2026)

This aligns with studies of returning sojourners which found that reverse culture shock upon reintegration into one's home culture can, in some cases, be even more disorienting than the culture shock originally experienced abroad (Winkel et al., 2022).

The findings are in line with what Kim put forward (Kim, 2001) that everyone will be hampered by an unfamiliar environment that involves a new learning process and changes in the habits of the old culture, without taking into account the duration of the individual's stay in the foreign environment they are inhabited.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and analysis of the adaptation process among IISMA students from Mulawarman University in 2024, it was concluded that cross-cultural adaptation experiences were shaped by six main dimensions: personal communication, host social communication, ethnic social communication, environmental factors, predisposing factors, and cross-cultural transformation. These dimensions collectively contributed to the dynamics of the Stress-Adaptation-Growth process. The predisposing dimension played an important role before departure and during the initial stage of arrival, serving as a foundation for adaptation. Prior education, training, and previous exposure to cross-cultural experiences positively supported students in adjusting to new cultural environments. The environmental dimension

emerged after students arrived in the host country and demonstrated that an open and supportive environment reduced external pressures and facilitated smoother adaptation processes, thereby positively influencing overall adjustment.

The host social communication dimension highlighted interpersonal interactions between students and members of the host community, including media utilization. Most informants reported minimal communication barriers, which supported their adaptation process. The ethnic social communication dimension reflected interactions among international students with similar cultural backgrounds. These interactions provided comfort and a sense of security in the short term, although excessive dependence on ethnic networks could potentially limit deeper cultural integration. The personal communication dimension revealed challenges related to cognitive understanding, affective adjustment, and operational communication skills, which initially placed students in the stress phase of the adaptation cycle. However, the cross-cultural transformation dimension demonstrated that these challenges encouraged students to develop a new cross-cultural identity and enhance their ability to integrate into the host culture, indicating progression toward the adaptation and growth phases. Overall, the integration of these six dimensions demonstrated that although students initially experienced stress, supportive preparation, environmental openness, and continuous intercultural interaction enabled them to successfully navigate the Stress–Adaptation–Growth process and ultimately achieve cultural adjustment and personal growth within the foreign environment.

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