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## Transformation of International Students' Perceptions of Indonesian Culture in the Era of Diversity

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#### **Abstract:**

This study focuses on Australian students' perceptions of Indonesian cultural values and their interaction experiences in a new social context. Applying qualitative research methods and a phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 Indonesian students at two universities in Indonesia. The study results indicate that students appreciate the traditional values in society and recognize the challenges in adjusting to the prevailing social norms in their new environment. Furthermore, students perceive Indonesian cultural diversity as a phenomenon that enriches their experiences, and their adaptation process shows the depth of understanding achieved through interaction with the local community. The implications of this study emphasize that the integration of teaching about cultural values in the language education curriculum is essential to help international students interact more effectively and enrich their understanding of the complexity of existing cultures. The findings also contribute to developing learning strategies that are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of cross-cultural students.

Key Words: Australian Students, Cross-cultural Interaction, Social Norms, Inclusive Education

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## INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving era of globalization, intercultural interactions have become increasingly intensive and complex (Loonam & O'Regan, 2022; Rowe & Krause, 2022; Jiang et al., 2023). Indonesia, with its rich ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, faces both challenges and opportunities in facilitating cross-cultural relations, including among international students (Lou, 2023; Chuanchen, 2023; Karimova et al., 2024). Demographic data shows that the number of international students studying in Indonesia has risen significantly in recent years (Pambudi & Harjanto, 2020; Beatty et al., 2021; Lambey et al., 2023), necessitating a proper approach to managing this multicultural interaction phenomenon. Recently, there has been significant attention on the importance of cultural understanding in language education (Barrot, 2022; Soyoof et al., 2023;

Shadiev & Yu, 2024), considering that linguistic skills alone are insufficient for efficient navigation within diverse social contexts (Marge et al., 2022; Yudintseva, 2023; Gao et al., 2024). Therefore, it is crucial to investigate international students' perceptions of local cultural values and how they adapt to existing social norms in Indonesia (Koehrsen, 2021).

Field studies reveal that many Australian Indonesian students face challenges internalizing traditional values and social norms. These challenges arise from the significant differences between their cultural backgrounds and the social practices they encounter in Indonesia. Students' awareness of this cultural diversity often leads to tension, both in terms of behavioral adaptation and in understanding how they should conduct themselves in a new social space. These differences in perception underscore the importance of in-depth research to understand how students navigate challenges and opportunities in integrating their understanding of Indonesian culture into their learning experiences (Kain et al., 2024). Thus, this study will focus on students' concrete experiences interacting with and understanding local culture, offering new insights into language learning within a multicultural context.

The literature review indicates that several studies have been conducted on the influence of cultural values on language learning. For instance, Kara et al. (2020) examined how cultural understanding affects language learning in multicultural contexts, finding that social interaction plays a key role in language acquisition and cultural comprehension. Xu and Ali (2021) highlighted the importance of cultural awareness in the context of language education; however, their study was more limited to classroom settings, excluding more direct field experiences. On the other hand, research by Rahman et al. (2022) focused on cultural perceptions but did not explore how students adapt to different social norms.

This research gap is significant, as although there are numerous studies on cultural values and their influence on language learning, no studies specifically investigate the real experiences of students in a local context. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the experiences of Australian students during their studies in Indonesia, analyzing their perceptions of traditional values and prevailing social norms, and how these influence their ability to interact effectively. By employing a deep qualitative approach, this study will not only enrich the existing literature but also provide practical insights for developing a language education curriculum that is more relevant and responsive to the needs of international students.

The novelty of this research lies in its in-depth investigation into how traditional values and norms of social interaction affect students' learning experiences. This study presents an innovative method by applying in-depth interviews and observations in specific social contexts, a technique that has not been widely applied in previous studies. Thus, this research complements

existing knowledge and offers new perspectives that could positively impact how language education is approached in cross-cultural contexts.

The main objective of this study is to understand how Australian students interpret and adapt to cultural values and social norms prevailing in Indonesia. This research contributes to a strong academic foundation for improving language teaching and student empowerment and strengthening intercultural bridges in education. This research becomes increasingly relevant in today's global context, where a deep understanding of other cultures is essential for positive collaboration and interaction in various fields.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach to explore and understand the perceptions of Australian students regarding Indonesian cultural values and their experiences of interaction within a new social context. The phenomenological approach was chosen because the primary objective of this research is to gain an in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret their experiences; in this case, their experiences in learning the language and interacting with the local community (Valtakoski, 2020; Stickley et al., 2022; De Villiers et al., 2022). The qualitative method allows the researcher to delve into the personal meanings of students' narratives, resulting in more prosperous and contextualized data. In this regard, in-depth interviews are appropriate, allowing respondents to express their views, feelings, and reflections without constraints.

The study was conducted at two universities in Indonesia that offer Indonesian language programs with a significant number of international students. These locations were chosen because both universities provide an academic environment that supports rich cultural interactions and firsthand experiences, which benefit students in learning the language and understanding the social context in Indonesia. The researcher must involve Australian students currently studying Indonesian; thus, this study includes 20 informants. The criteria for selecting respondents were based on their experiences interacting with the local community and participating in cultural activities, ensuring that the data collected is relevant and representative.

This study employs the data analysis techniques of Miles and Huberman (Dhakal, 2022), which consist of three main stages: data collection, data reduction, and data presentation. First, the recorded interview data will be transcribed and then carefully read to identify emerging patterns or themes. In the data reduction stage, the researcher filters the information by organizing it into specific categories relevant to the research focus. Subsequently, data presentation is conducted as a structured narrative to illustrate students' perspectives on traditional values and cultural diversity in Indonesia. By using this approach, the researcher can ensure that the analysis reflects the accuracy and depth required by the phenomenological approach underlying this study

(Van der Weele & Bredewold, 2021; Prosek & Gibson, 2021; Thunberg & Arnell, 2022), enabling a comprehensive understanding of the students' intercultural experiences.

# RESULT AND DISCUSSION Result

In this study, in-depth interviews were conducted with Australian students learning Indonesian to reveal their perceptions of Indonesian culture and their intercultural experiences. The findings are organized into several subsections that connect the research topics with data obtained through interviews and observations.

## Perceptions of Traditional Indonesian Cultural Values

One of the main findings shows that students perceive traditional values as an important part of Indonesian culture. However, these values are often encountered in a more complex context than expected. In an interview, J2 commented, "I often feel that traditional values like politeness and respect are very strong here, but sometimes they also feel restrictive—like when I have to dress in a certain way to respect the norms around me." (Interview, 2023). This quote indicates that although students appreciate these values, there is also an awareness of the limitations imposed by cultural norms.

B1 also emphasized the importance of religion in traditional culture by stating, "Religion in Indonesia is not just about belief; it also serves as a foundation for social norms. You can't ignore it." (Interview, 2023). The deeper meaning of this statement suggests that religion functions as a social glue that regulates behavior and individual interactions within the community.

Furthermore, A1 added, "The rituals and traditions at certain events make me feel connected to the community, but I also feel that I have to learn a lot to understand their purpose." (Interview, 2023). This indicates a need for cultural adaptation, where students must strive to understand and adhere to the numerous nuances underlying these rituals and traditions.

Students actively participated and interacted with the surrounding community during a local celebration in Yogyakarta. Their curiosity drove them to understand the rituals they witnessed while also experiencing a sense of harmony in the practice of local culture. This is depicted in Figure 1.

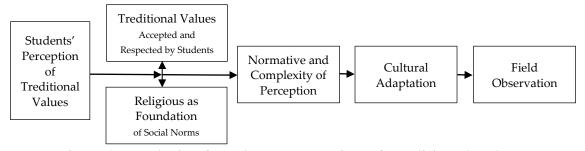


Figure 1. Analysis of Students' Perception of Traditional Values

Figure 1 shows that students' perception of traditional values is a complex and multidimensional process. Starting from a basic understanding of traditional values that the foundation of religion strongly influences as a social norm. This process then develops through normative aspects emphasizing politeness and respect, further manifested in cultural adaptation through rituals and traditions. This adaptation creates a connection with the community and a deeper understanding of cultural nuances. The culmination of this process is where students participate directly in local celebrations in Yogyakarta. This allows them to grow in curiosity and enhance social interaction, resulting in a deeper understanding of traditional values in real contexts.

## **Diversity in Indonesian Society**

Diversity is one of the most striking characteristics of Indonesian society and is often a topic of discussion in cultural studies. Indonesia offers a diverse range of traditions, languages, and cultural practices that illustrate its people's complexity and rich cultural heritage. The study found that Australian students who study Indonesian are highly aware of and appreciate this diversity, which inspires them to understand better and appreciate cultural differences. With direct interaction in the field, they undergo academic experiences and develop new perspectives on identity and culture.

In the interview, J2 revealed, "One thing that surprised me was how diverse the backgrounds of the people here, from languages to traditions." (Interview, 2023). This statement shows students' astonishment and admiration when facing Indonesia's rich culture. Jan's insights show that diversity is not just a fact but also a direct experience that touches their feelings and adds depth to their understanding.

C1 also highlighted these differences; he argued, "Each region seems to have something unique to offer; I never thought Friday would feel so different in Bali than in Java." (Interview, 2023). This quote shows that each region of Indonesia not only has a different viewpoint and beliefs but offers a unique and distinctive experience. For example, Balinese culture, rich in religious ceremonies and art, is very different from the traditional nuances in other regions, such as Java, which is more structured in its customs.

In addition, J2 describes the uniqueness of society by stating, "Diversity here is not only in terms of ethnicity but also in the way, people live their daily lives. I feel connected to the local culture when I see the dynamic social interactions." (Interview, 2023). Through this statement, Jim emphasized that diversity is seen in the physical aspects of culture, such as language and customs, and in the social dynamics that shape daily interactions. These social interactions span various cultural backgrounds and teach students the importance of intercultural dialogue and social collaboration.

During the visit to the traditional market, there was intense interaction between traders and visitors from various backgrounds, with variations in language, vocabulary, and ways of interacting. The students seemed eager to engage in conversation, ask questions, and try to adapt to various local communication methods. This situation created an inclusive atmosphere and showed the extent to which the diversity of Indonesian society can be a place for collaboration that enriches their experiences.

The importance of this diversity shows that students learn languages and develop the ability to embrace a broader thinking framework in understanding people and cultures. Each experience they experience equips them with a new perspective, where acceptance of differences becomes a highly valued value, in line with Nelson Mandela's view that education is the most powerful weapon to change the world. By adopting this perspective, students are not only competent language learners but also those who are more sensitive to differences and can bridge the gap between cultures.

## **Social Interaction Norms**

The norms of social interaction in Indonesia are greatly influenced by deep cultural values and the motto of community life that respects manners and politeness. Australian students studying Indonesian are experiencing a paradigm shift in interacting in a new social environment. The meaning of these norms often develops through hands-on experience on the ground and daily interactions with local communities. This study found that students are required to understand language and adjust to applicable social norms.

A1 explained, "The people here appreciate politeness and manners; I feel that there is a high expectation to treat others with respect." (Interview, 2023). This statement reflects students' sensitivity to the expectation to act politely when interacting with others. This shows that politeness is not just a ritual but an integral part of their social identity. This awareness shows that the norms of respect and politeness serve as tools to build positive relationships within the community.

J4 added his view on the norms of interaction by saying, "In Indonesia, they are very direct, making me feel easier to interact with, even though I am not used to questions that are too personal." (Interview, 2023). Here, Bob notes the norms of social interaction that reflect sincerity and transparency in communicating, which is a contradiction for students who are used to a more covert culture. Being direct in expressing concern or asking personal things can create a quick bond, but it can also be awkward for those not used to it.

Classroom interactions show that students often prefer to ask questions outside of their formal schedule, creating space for more open and relaxed discussions. In more informal learning settings, students appear more comfortable and willing to share personal experiences and open up

conversations about their cultures. This suggests that interaction norms can vary depending on the space and context provided.

The findings show that Asian students studying Indonesian have a complex and deep perception of traditional values, community diversity, and social interaction norms in Indonesian culture. They appreciate the richness and diversity of the existing culture while being aware of the challenges of adjusting to applicable social norms. Hands-on experience in social interaction and participation in traditional rituals allows them to connect with the local community, create curiosity, and develop a deeper understanding of the nuances of Indonesian culture. The following coding table provides a systematic overview of the interviews and summarizes the key findings regarding students' perceptions of Indonesian culture.

**Table 2. Thematic Coding** 

Table 2. Thematic Coding		
Interview Sentences	Coding	Category / Theme
"I often feel that traditional values such as	Tension in	Traditional Values/
politeness and respect are very strong here."	appreciating	Perception of Culture
	norms	
"Religion in Indonesia is not only about belief,	Religion as a	Traditional/Religious
but also the foundation of social norms. You	social norm	and Social Values
can't ignore it."		
"The rituals and traditions in certain events	Connectedness	Traditional Values/
make me feel connected to the community"	through	Intercultural
	tradition	Experience
"One thing that surprises me is how diverse the	Admire	Diversity/Perception
backgrounds of the people here, from languages	diversity	of Culture
to traditions."		
"Each region seems to have something unique to	Unique and	Diversity/ Cultural
offer; I never thought Friday would feel so	diverse in each	Experiences
different in Bali than in Java."	region	
"The diversity here is not only in terms of	Diversity in life	Diversity/ Social
ethnicity, but also in the way people go about		Dynamics
their daily lives." (Jim, 2023)		
"The people here really appreciate politeness	Modesty as the	Norms of Social
and manners; I feel that there is a high	norm	Interaction/Social
expectation to treat others with respect."		Learning
"Sometimes, I feel pressured to always be polite,	Pressure to be	Norms of Social
even when I don't feel comfortable with	polite	Interaction/ Cultural
personal questions."		Adaptation
"In Indonesia, they are very direct, making me	Sincerity in	Norms of Social
feel easier to interact with, even though I'm not	interaction	Interaction/
used to questions that are too personal."		Intercultural
		Experience
"Intense interaction between traders and visitors	Collaborative	Diversity/ Social
from different backgrounds, with variations in	social	Connectedness
language, vocabulary, and ways of interacting."	interaction	

Table 2 illustrates the process of encoding interview data of Australian students learning Indonesian about their perception of Indonesian culture. The questions explore their views on social norms, cultural diversity, and how they adapt to local cultural practices. Each quoted interview sentence is asserted with a code highlighting the main theme of what is expressed without repeating the same references. With this structuring, the research can demonstrate how Australian students' perceptions and experiences contribute to their deeper understanding of Indonesian culture.

## Discussion

Students' perceptions of traditional values also develop through their understanding and participation in traditional ceremonies, as found in field observations in Yogyakarta, which allow them to feel connected to the community through existing traditions. Although traditional cultural values are highly valued, they are often perceived as barriers that hinder individual expression (Naicker, 2021). Religion in Indonesia is not only a personal belief but also a social guideline that influences the structure of society.

Botha and Gillespie-Lynch (2022) stated that the younger generation often experiences tension between traditional values and the desire to express their modern identity. Religion is an important element in maintaining the integrity of cultural values in Indonesia, contributing to social character formation. Manca and Delfino (2021) showed that adapting to traditional values is more prominent when students are directly involved in local cultural activities, as experienced by students in celebrations in Yogyakarta.

The cultural diversity of Indonesia is not only a phenomenon observed by Australian students but also provides a transformative experience in their understanding of identity and social interaction. Karimova et al. (2024) emphasized that direct interaction with a multicultural society increases crosscultural understanding and strengthens the social awareness of international students. Field experience in a multicultural environment allows individuals to understand social complexity better and build empathy towards other groups.

Direct experience dealing with the diversity of Indonesian society's languages, traditions, and life patterns enriches their perspective on diversity as a dynamic social reality. Zhang et al. (2022) revealed that international students who interact with local communities experience significant development in their social adaptation skills and appreciation of cultural differences. The diversity of Indonesian culture can be an effective learning tool for students in building intercultural understanding.

The relationship between social interaction norms and identity is very important. According to Kain et al. (2024), identity can be seen as a construction formed through interaction and social exchange. Therefore, students who study and interact in Indonesia face diverse identity dynamics, constantly teaching them to adapt and become more sensitive to different contexts (Gao et al., 2024).

This creates a more in-depth and rewarding learning journey, where they acquire language mastery and social skills essential for interacting with the diversity and complexity of the global world.

The study's findings on Australian students' perceptions of traditional values, diversity, and norms of social interaction in Indonesian culture reflect a significant theoretical and practical contribution. Theoretically, this study adds to the academic discourse on cross-border cultural interaction by showing how students learn languages and internalize complex social values and norms, thus enriching the understanding of identity construction in different contexts. From a practical perspective, these findings provide important insights for developing a more inclusive and contextual language education curriculum, where introducing local cultural elements becomes an integral part of the learning process. This prepares students to interact effectively in Indonesian society and teaches the importance of respecting and celebrating cultural diversity. This can further create bridges of understanding between cultures in the era of increasing globalization.

## **CONCLUSION**

Australian students' perceptions of traditional values, cultural diversity, and norms of social interaction in Indonesian culture provide important insights into how the acculturation process takes place. Although students value and respect existing cultural values, they also experience challenges adjusting to prevailing social norms. The lesson that can be learned from this study is the importance of direct experience in intercultural interaction, which not only enriches linguistic knowledge but also forms an awareness of social and cultural complexity.

This study has limitations in scope, such as focusing on a specific demographic group and limited location context, suggesting that further research is needed to understand broader dynamics, including gender and age differences. By exploring these aspects, future research will provide a more comprehensive and contextual picture, which can form the basis for more effective and responsive education policies for multicultural communities' needs.

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