From Disparity to Belonging: The Role of Inter-Ethnic Friendship in Migrant Students Adaptation in Central Java and Yogyakarta

Fadhil Maliky Islah[1*], Riza Akhdisholikhah[1]
[1]Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia

Abstract. This study aimed to explore how inter-ethnic friendship are initiated and sustained among migrant students in Java, and the effect on social adaptation and identity negotiation. Using a qualitative design, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 students from diverse ethnic backgrounds who had migrated to Java for higher education. The results showed that thematic analysis identified four major themes, namely (1) migration, educational inequality, and the opportunity for encounter, (2) the "frog in a shell" relationship and conditional friendship, (3) social skills in identity negotiation, and (4) alien guests vs. guests at home. Despite initial barriers, participants demonstrated openness, empathy, and a shared national identity that allowed for significant cross-ethnic relationships. Inter-ethnic friendship were found to facilitate social inclusion, personal growth, and deeper appreciation of cultural diversity. In conclusion, this study contributes to a better understanding of how students navigate intergroup boundaries and transform educational migration into opportunities for unity in a plural society.

Keywords: Cultural adaptation, educational migration, inter-ethnic friendship, plural society, social identity negotiation

Psympathic :
Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi
Vol. 13:1, June 2026,
Page 69-86

eISSN: 2502-2903
pISSN: 2356-3591

Article Info
Received:
November 14, 2025
Accepted:
May 25, 2026
Published:
June 30, 2026

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.15575/psy.v13i1.52042

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). Published by Fakultas Psikologi UIN SGD Bandung, Indonesia.
This is an Open Access article under the CC BY 4.0 license

[*]Corresponding author: Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia
E-mail: fadhil.maliky@unm.ac.id

Introduction

In recent decades, the unequal distribution of higher education infrastructure in Indonesia has led to significant internal migration, especially among students from peripheral regions pursuing quality academic experiences in Java. According to the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology, Kemdiktisaintek (2025), among the 4,416 higher education institutions across the country, over 73.8% are concentrated on the island of Java. This centralization has reinforced regional disparities in access to quality education, study opportunities, and campus facilities. Consequently, migration to Java has become not only an educational necessity but also a socio-cultural transition, particularly for students from ethnically and geographically distinct regions.

This pattern of migration shapes a dynamic and diverse academic environment in which individuals from various ethnic backgrounds interact daily. For many students, migration offers a first experience engaging with individuals of different cultural identities. The university, as a social institution, is often considered an ideal setting for fostering intergroup contact (Punti & Dingel, 2021). Higher education traditionally upholds democratic and universalistic values that promote openness and equality (Koshy et al., 2023). Therefore, campuses serve as microcosms of society, where students not only pursue academic goals but also develop social identities and relationships across ethnic lines.

Studies have consistently shown that higher education settings, especially classrooms and collaborative academic activities, facilitate intergroup contact under favorable conditions. These include equal status among participants, institutional support, and shared objectives (McKeown et al., 2025). Through lectures, group work, and campus organizations, students are exposed to peers from diverse backgrounds, enabling cross-cultural friendship that are essential for promoting mutual understanding and reducing intergroup prejudice (Mickus & Bowen, 2017).

Inter-ethnic friendship formed in these contexts are not only social bonds but also act as mechanisms for psychosocial support and integration. Students engaged in cross-group friendship report higher levels of psychological well-being (Liu et al., 2020), lower levels of acculturative stress (Farrell & Langrehr, 2017), better academic performance (Kahalon et al., 2023), and greater life satisfaction during studies

abroad or outside cultural regions (Juma, 2024). These friendship also enhance long-term intergroup attitudes, affecting how individuals relate to outgroup members beyond academic years (Merlino et al., 2019).

Despite these advantages, forging inter-ethnic friendship is not always a straightforward process. Several studies have shown that ethnic diversity within a school or university may increase the potential for intergroup tension, particularly when social inequality, group size parity, or resource competition are present (Sun et al., 2021). Furthermore, both international and domestic migrant students tend to self-segregate, forming ethnically homogeneous networks that limit cross-cultural interaction (Jones & Tonkiss, 2024). This social distance often results in underdeveloped inter-ethnic competencies and the underutilization of diversity as an educational asset (Zhao, 2023).

In the Indonesian context, these dynamics become even more significant given the country pronounced ethnic, linguistic, and regional diversity. Migrant students are not only crossing physical space but also navigating symbolic, cultural, and relational boundaries (Bazzi et al., 2017). In this study, inter-ethnic friendship refers to voluntary and reciprocal relationships between migrant students and host-community members from different ethnic or regional-cultural backgrounds, involving sustained interaction, trust, and emotional support beyond casual contact. However, Islah et al. (2025) showed that migrant–host relations in Indonesia may still include asymmetric intimacy, where social inclusion coexists with selective emotional boundaries. Successful integration often depends on the students social skills, particularly tolerance, empathy, and identity flexibility. Tolerance, in this regard, is not simply passive acceptance but includes an active, multifaceted disposition of openness, restraint from prejudice, and willingness to engage with disapproved differences (Adelman et al., 2022; Hjerm et al., 2020).

Young adults, particularly university students, are ideal candidates for intergroup contact studies, given the developmental openness to diversity and identity exploration (Liao et al., 2017). Educational attainment has also been positively associated with more favorable intergroup attitudes and a greater possibility of forming inter-ethnic friendship (Velásquez, 2024). Conversely, lower education levels are associated with stronger in-group preference and avoidance of out-group contact (Paolini et al., 2024).

Although cross-group friendship has been widely examined, there is limited information about how migrant students in Indonesia form and maintain inter-ethnic friendship as part of adaptation and identity negotiation. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how inter-ethnic friendship is initiated and sustained among migrant students in Java, and how the friendship supports social adaptation and identity negotiation. The focus is not only on the contexts in which inter-ethnic contact occurs but also on the relational processes, such as trust-building, value-sharing, and boundary-crossing, that underpin the friendship. This study is guided by the following question: How do migrant students initiate, experience, and sustain inter-ethnic friendship with members of host communities in Java, and in what ways do the friendship shape adaptation and sense of identity? By centering this study in Indonesia, a country characterized by a unique blend of unity and diversity, the results contribute to the broader literature on multicultural contact, friendship formation, and students integration in plural societies.

Methods

A qualitative approach was adopted to explore diverse cultural perspectives and context-based narratives surrounding inter-ethnic friendship. Specifically, this study used a generic qualitative inquiry approach because it focused on participants subjective meanings and relational experiences without being bound to a single qualitative tradition such as phenomenology or case study (Percy et al., 2015; Tisdell et al., 2025). The approach is appropriate for understanding how individuals co-construct meaning and live through interactions with ethnically different groups (Camic, 2021).

Participants

Eighteen participants aged 22 to 29 were recruited using purposive sampling combined with snowball recruitment (Noy, 2008). This age range reflects the actual demographic profile, which included undergraduate and graduate students who were still actively enrolled in higher education. Therefore, the category of “student” in this study was defined by current educational status rather than by a narrow age category. Participants were selected based on the criteria of being students originally from outside Java, had migrated to Central Java or Yogyakarta for higher education, had lived in Java for at least one year, and had experience interacting or forming friendship with members of the host community or students from different ethnic backgrounds. This sampling strategy was used to ensure that participants had relevant experiences related to educational migration, cultural adaptation, and inter-ethnic friendship formation. (Patton, 2014).

Recruitment started with several migrant students who met the criteria and continued through referrals. Although participants from Malay backgrounds were more represented, this was not based on a predetermined quota but reflected the availability and willingness of the eligible population within the recruitment network. Data collection was stopped at 18 participants because thematic saturation had been

reached. Saturation was identified when subsequent interviews no longer produced new codes or substantially new meanings related to inter-ethnic friendship, adaptation, and identity negotiation (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017). Most participants were undergraduates nearing graduation, while others were postgraduate and working students. The sample included individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, allowing variation in experience and representation (Table 1).

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews designed to capture the relational structure and lived experiences of migrant students (Fedyuk & Zentai, 2018). This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Gadjah Mada, on 22 April 2021, approval number 2626/UN1/FPSi. 1.3/SD/PT.01.04/2021. Before participation, informed consent was obtained, ensuring confidentiality and permission to record the sessions when participants agreed (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

Interviews were primarily conducted through Zoom, lasting approximately one hour each, and were audio-visually recorded to facilitate transcription. However, several interviews were conducted in person depending on participants willingness, comfort, and preference regarding the mode. Although both modes produced relevant narratives, in-person interviews tended to create a stronger sense of presence, emotional openness, and immediacy in understanding participants experiences. In online interviews, minor adjustments were made by giving participants more time to respond and using follow-up probes more carefully to maintain depth and clarity. However, not all participants agreed to have sessions recorded (Heath et al., 2018).

To ensure consistency, all interviews followed the same semi-structured interview guide and covered similar core topics. The interview guide covered several domains, including migration background, first encounters with host communities, experiences of inter-ethnic friendship, challenges in cultural adaptation, and strategies for maintaining friendship. For participants who did not agree to be recorded, detailed field notes were written immediately after the interview and included in the data corpus. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian and scheduled based on participant availability. For anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to guide the analysis because it allows interpretation of patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun et al., 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2022). An inductive thematic approach allowed themes to arise organically from participant narratives. The analysis involved familiarization with transcripts and field notes, generating initial codes, searching for potential themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, as well as producing the final narrative report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Cross-perspective coding and analytic memoing were used to identify and organize recurring patterns. To strengthen trustworthiness, credibility was supported through repeated engagement with the interview data, peer discussion, and cross-checking themes against the raw narratives (Nowell et al., 2017). Dependability, confirmability, and transferability were maintained through analytic memoing, documentation of coding decisions, a clear decision trail, and contextual descriptions of participants, migration backgrounds, and study settings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). These narratives reflect the contextualized experiences of migrant students engaging in inter-ethnic friendship. Data management was conducted manually through iterative coding, categorization, cross-participant comparison, and thematic mapping to identify recurring patterns and relationships within the narratives (Saldaña, 2025).

Results and Discussion

Results

Through reflexive thematic analysis, four interrelated themes were developed from participants narratives. The results are presented by emphasizing both shared patterns across participants and variations in experience based on gender, ethnic background, educational level, length of stay, and host region. Participants offered varying perspectives on inter-ethnic friendship, making the topic particularly engaging. However, all participants generally perceived forming inter-ethnic friendship during time away from home as normal and even expected. The longer the stay in the host region, the more positive the relationships, shifting from mere acquaintances to a willingness to seek and offer help. Participants typically described inter-ethnic friends using terms such as helpful, trustworthy, respectful, patient, nonjudgmental, supportive, positive, tolerant, open-minded, and honest. These terms represent the positive characteristics demonstrated by inter-ethnic friends in the relationships. All participants reported that offering assistance, good deeds, as well as providing support and advice, were the main strategies used to affirm mutual interest in friendship.

Although the results show shared patterns across participants, the experiences of inter-ethnic friendship were not entirely homogeneous. Variations appeared across gender, ethnic background, educational level,

Table 1.
Participant Demographics

No	Initial	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Current Education Level	Length of Stay in Java	Host Region
1	RI	23	Male	Minangkabau	Undergraduate	3 years	Banyumas
2	IN	22	Female	Malay	Undergraduate	2 years	Banyumas
3	RE	22	Female	Komering	Undergraduate	2 years	Banyumas
4	RA	23	Female	Malay	Undergraduate	3 years	Banyumas
5	NU	23	Female	Malay	Undergraduate	3 years	Banyumas
6	RO	27	Male	Malay	Graduate	2 years	Semarang
7	RN	26	Female	Malay (Pontianak)	Graduate	1 tahun	Semarang
8	JM	29	Male	Lamaholot	Graduate	2 years	Surakarta
9	AW	25	Male	Sumba	Graduate	1 tahun	Surakarta
10	TN	28	Female	Bugis	Graduate	3 years	Yogyakarta
11	FZ	27	Male	Bugis	Graduate	2 years	Yogyakarta
12	TR	26	Female	Makassar	Graduate	2 years	Yogyakarta
13	ND	23	Female	Malay	Undergraduate	3 years	Yogyakarta
14	AP	23	Male	Malay	Undergraduate	3 years	Yogyakarta
15	RM	24	Male	Buton	Undergraduate	3 years	Yogyakarta
16	NN	27	Female	Toraja	Undergraduate	2 years	Yogyakarta
17	IR	26	Male	Makassar	Undergraduate	5 years	Yogyakarta
18	RK	23	Female	Dayak	Undergraduate	3 years	Yogyakarta

Table 2.
Variations in Inter-Ethnic Friendship Experiences Across Participant Groups

Grouping Aspect	Pattern of Experience
Gender	Female participants more often emphasized emotional closeness, care, shared stories, and support in friendship, while male participants more often described friendship through organizational involvement, community participation, and practical assistance.
Ethnic background	Participants from ethnic groups with fewer peers in the host region tended to report stronger feelings of being different or foreign, while those with wider regional networks found initial adjustment easier through peer support.
Educational level	Undergraduate students more often described friendship through classroom interaction, dormitory life, and peer groups, while graduate students emphasized broader social networks, independence, and reflective identity negotiation.
Length of stay	Participants who had stayed longer in Java tended to describe more positive relationships with host communities, greater familiarity with local norms, and stronger feelings of belonging.
Host region	Experiences differed by city context; larger cities such as Yogyakarta offered more diverse encounters, while smaller or less diverse settings could intensify feelings of isolation among some migrant students.

length of stay, and host region. These variations are summarized in Table 2 to clarify how participants social positions shaped the experiences of friendship, adaptation, and belonging.

For instance, RN described an inter-ethnic friend as

> *Seseorang yang dapat berbagi kehidupan dan masalah dengannya ketika harus sama-sama tinggal di asrama perempuan, saya ditakdirkan dengan dia untuk berbagi nasib sebagai mahasiswa yang merantau (dari Jawa Timur ke Jawa Tengah), mungkin itu juga yang membuat saya punya ikatan kuat dengan orang yang berstatus seperti saya, jadi kami mudah saling percaya.*
>
> Someone I could share life and struggles with while living together in a women's dormitory. I felt like I was destined to share the same fate as students studying away from home (from East Java to Central Java), and maybe that's what made me feel such a strong connection with someone in a similar position. We could easily trust each other.

In line with the RN view, TN specifically described the lived experience of picking up Gisel at the train station and how the activity symbolized friendship. As stated by TN:

> *Saat saya menjemput Gisel di stasiun, saya merasa seperti menyambut kembali sahabat dekat yang telah lama tidak bertemu. Meskipun sebenarnya hanya beberapa minggu, tapi rasanya seperti berbulan-bulan kami tidak bertemu. Ketika Gisel turun dari kereta, senyumnya langsung*

membuat saya tersenyum lebar, dan kami langsung berpelukan dengan hangat.
When I picked Gisel up at the station, I felt like I was welcoming back a close friend I hadn't seen in a long time. Even though it had only been a few weeks, it felt like months since we'd met. When Gisel got off the train, her smile made me smile widely, and we immediately hugged warmly.

Inter-ethnic friendship is always an intriguing topic and raises questions about how people are drawn to each other despite clearly different ethnic preferences. Four significant themes were identified during the analysis of migrant students interviews. These results demonstrate that participants experiences of living away from home for more than a year played an important role in shaping inter-ethnic friendship. Through daily interactions and involvement in various social, academic, and organizational activities, participants deepened understanding of ethnic diversity.

Migration, Educational Inequality, And Opportunity For Encounter

Students from various regions in Indonesia often feel compelled to migrate to Java due to significant disparities in the quantity and quality of higher education. As FZ expressed,

saya merasa bahwa kondisi pendidikan tinggi di Indonesia masih mengalami ketimpangan yang signifikan, terutama dari segi aksesibilitas dan kualitas pendidikan. Hal ini membuat saya merasa seperti dipaksa untuk meninggalkan daerah asal dan merantau ke Jawa untuk melanjutkan studi.
I believe that higher education in Indonesia still suffers from significant inequality, especially in terms of accessibility and quality. This made me feel like I had no choice but to leave my hometown and migrate to Java to pursue further studies.

TR, reinforcing the sentiment, added personal experience as the eldest daughter who had to migrate for education:

Awalnya, saya merasa terpaksa untuk meninggalkan kemapanan di daerah asal dan merantau ke Jawa untuk melanjutkan studi di sini. Apalagi saya ini perempuan dan anak pertama. Mungkin sebagian adat kami mengatur kalau anak perempuan pertama yang harus merawat kedua orangtuanya ketika sudah tua. Ini membuat saya harus segera mengambil keputusan dan kembali setelah menyelesaikan studi saya.
Initially, I felt reluctant to leave the comfort of my hometown and move to Java for my studies. Especially since I'm the eldest daughter. Some of our traditions expect the first daughter to care for her aging parents. That made me have to decide quickly and return only after finishing my education.

One of the main reasons for this migration was the unavailability of desired academic programs in the home regions,

Saya sangat menghargai banyaknya kampus berkualitas di Yogyakarta. Namun, di tempat saya, belum ada program studi yang sebanding dengan yang ditawarkan di sana. Oleh karena itu, saya merasa perlu untuk mencari jalan menuju Yogyakarta agar bisa mengikuti program studi yang sesuai dengan minat dan keinginan saya. (ND)
I really appreciate the number of quality universities in Yogyakarta. But in my hometown, there are no study programs comparable to what's offered there. That's why I felt the need to go to Yogyakarta to pursue a program aligned with my interests and aspirations. (ND)

Most reputable universities are concentrated in Java, prompting students to migrate in pursuit of better educational opportunities. The existence of specific programs only in Java further contributes to the migration. This inequality is reflected in the limited facilities and educational resources outside the island.

These conditions demonstrate that educational inequality is not only a matter of quality but also of access to equitable education across Indonesia. Consequently, migration to Java has become a common phenomenon among Indonesian students responding to regional disparities in higher education.

Saya menemukan bahwa merantau ke Pulau Jawa memberi saya perspektif baru tentang pendidikan tinggi dan tantangan yang dihadapi oleh mahasiswa dari daerah-daerah lain. Saya melihat adanya ketimpangan dalam pendidikan tinggi di Indonesia, dan saya ingin mendapatkan pengalaman yang lebih luas dan peluang yang lebih baik. (AP)
I found that moving to Java gave me a new perspective on higher education and the challenges faced by students from other regions. I saw firsthand the inequalities in Indonesian higher education, and I wanted a broader experience and better opportunities. (AP)

Although educational disparities initially prompted migration, the experience often brought positive impacts,

Saya merasa sangat bersyukur bisa mendapatkan kesempatan untuk merantau ke Yogya dan melanjutkan studi di sini. Awalnya, saya agak ragu dengan keputusan ini, tapi sekarang saya melihat banyak sisi baik di baliknya. Lingkungan yang beragam memberi saya pengalaman unik sekaligus berharga. (FZ)

I feel very grateful for the opportunity to migrate to Yogya and continue my studies here. At first, I was hesitant about the decision, but now I see many good things that have come from it. The diverse environment gave me unique and valuable experiences. (FZ)

Supporting FZ, RM also found purpose in migration,

Meskipun awalnya saya khawatir dengan perbedaan tersebut, namun pada akhirnya, hal itu membuka pandangan saya dan membuat saya lebih terbuka terhadap perbedaan. (RM)

Although I was initially worried about the differences, in the end, it opened my mind and made me more accepting of diversity. (RM)

One of the benefits was the opportunity to meet people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds in Java,

Saya berkesempatan untuk mendengarkan berbagai pandangan dan pengalaman hidup yang berbeda, yang membuat saya semakin menghargai keragaman dan kompleksitas dunia ini. (TN)

I got the chance to hear different perspectives and life stories, which made me appreciate the richness and complexity of the world more. (TN)

These inter-ethnic interactions helped forge strong cross-ethnic friendship and enriched students social and cultural experiences. Through migration, students could understand and appreciate cultural diversity and different life perspectives. This also helped expand social networks and build tolerance and cooperation in academic environments,

Saya percaya bahwa merantau bukan hanya tentang belajar di kelas, tetapi juga belajar dari lingkungan sekitar. Saya merasa lebih siap untuk menghadapi tantangan global dan bekerja sama dengan orang-orang dari berbagai latar belakang untuk mencapai tujuan bersama. (ND)

I believe that studying away from home isn't just about classroom learning but also learning from the surrounding environment. I feel better prepared to face global challenges and work with people from different backgrounds to achieve shared goals. (ND)

Although educational migration started as a response to inequality, it also opened opportunities for developing inter-ethnic friendship and a deeper understanding of Indonesia cultural plurality. Migration to Java brought positive impacts, enriching students educational experience with cultural insights and social diversity.

The "Frog In A Shell" Relationship And Conditional Friendship

The phrase "frog in a shell" is used as a cultural metaphor to describe a guarded form of friendship in which students may interact socially while remaining emotionally cautious. In this theme, the phrase captures inter-ethnic relationships that are present in everyday life but not fully open or intimate. Although the participants recognized the positive aspects of migration, embraced pluralism, and felt comfortable in the host areas, the attitudes did not always lead to initiatives for inter-ethnic interaction. This result indicates a mismatch between participants attitudes and behaviors. As expressed by AP, a migrant students from Riau,

... dengan bergabung di Organda (Organisasi Mahasiswa Daerah), saya merasa bisa lebih mudah berinteraksi dengan orang lain. Di sana, saya menemukan banyak kesamaan dengan orang-orangnya, yang membuatnya lebih mudah untuk berbicara dan berkoneksi. Bergabung dengan Organda juga telah membantu saya dalam meningkatkan keterampilan komunikasi dan kepemimpinan saya.

... by joining Organda (Regional Student Association), I found it easier to interact with others. There, I found many similarities with the people, which made it easier to talk and connect. Joining Organda also helped me improve my communication and leadership skills.

At the same time, AP had a partner from a different ethnic background, but this did not prompt the initiation of inter-ethnic friendship in the new environment,

Mungkin ini terasa aneh, karena saya sendiri memiliki pacar yang berasal dari Kalimantan, tapi itulah yang terjadi, mungkin ini karena keragaman yang saya tidak temukan sebelumnya (rantau), nah anehnya karena selama saya berpacaran, itu tidak membuat saya justru berteman dengan orang setempat. Atau mungkin ini disebabkan karena bukan orang sini pacar saya atau sekadar saya memang menutup diri dari orang-orang sini.

Maybe it sounds strange, since I have a girlfriend from Kalimantan, but that's what happened. Maybe it's because I never experienced such

> diversity before (moving), and oddly enough, despite being in a relationship, it didn't make me want to befriend local people. Or maybe it's because my partner isn't from here either, or perhaps I just closed myself off from the people here.

The comfort of shared preferences may attract but also discourage the initiative to form cross-ethnic connections. Generally, participants decided to align values and beliefs more closely with those of inter-ethnic friends. Other participants, in some situations, opted to deal with cultural differences in alternative ways. For RI and IN, the key to addressing cultural differences was acceptance, respect, and appreciation. This strategy should be a shared principle, not only in Indonesia but universally, when students study outside home regions. RI and IN leaned toward tolerance rather than cultivating intimate inter-ethnic friendship.

Participants reported difficulties in connecting with residents, as life experiences and cultural backgrounds were different. These differences often posed challenges to building closer relationships and mutual understanding. For instance, RE struggled to connect and share childhood memories with Purwokerto friends because of feeling alienated from the experiences. RE was unsure how to place the 'cultural uniqueness' of personal stories in conversations with inter-ethnic friends, but felt comfortable expressing herself when speaking about shared cultural experiences with those from similar backgrounds.

The situation led participants to prefer befriending those who shared similar circumstances or came from the same region. This was reflected in AP behavior, who preferred to live in a dormitory and felt more comfortable staying with peers from the hometown. AP did not deny the value of inter-ethnic friendship, since the partner was met through a social group, and were of different ethnic backgrounds. However, in many other situations, participants rarely interacted with individuals from other ethnic groups.

Referring to the tendencies of several participants, the formation of inter-ethnic friendship was often mediated by organizations or other social activities that created opportunities to meet individuals from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Based on RM experience, the participant found inter-ethnic friends after joining a literacy community:

> *Namun, dengan berjalannya waktu, saya mulai menemukan kesempatan untuk berteman dengan penduduk lokal. Meskipun tidak mudah, tetapi bergabung dengan komunitas dan terlibat dalam kegiatan kampus membantu saya mendekatkan diri kepada mereka. Saya menyadari bahwa membangun koneksi memerlukan waktu dan usaha, tetapi pengalaman ini mengajarkan saya tentang pentingnya inklusivitas dan saling memahami antarberagam etnis di lingkungan kampus.*
> Over time, I began to find opportunities to befriend residents. Although it wasn't easy, joining communities and engaging in campus activities helped me get closer to them. I realized that building connections requires time and effort, but this experience taught me the importance of inclusivity and mutual understanding among diverse ethnicities on campus.

Participants had selective motives and drives in selecting friends and social circles. Social groups or organizations provided more opportunities to interact with peers within and beyond the university. Social clubs were identified as places where migrants have a greater probability of building interactions with host and multi-ethnic students. Various social events, both related and unrelated to academic life, provided more chances to connect with inter-ethnic individuals and engage socially through casual conversations and shared activities. Participants stated that interactions with classmates from other ethnic backgrounds mostly centered around group assignments and rarely extended into personal friendship.

NN spoke about friendship with host community members through participation in students organization. The friendship enhanced communication skills by helping to build a social network. The participant was positive about expanding inter-ethnic friendship with those outside the organization.

Social skills in identity negotiation

Participants consistently grounded attitudes in principle-based reasoning, particularly the national motto Bhinneka Tunggal Ika (Unity in Diversity), which unites all ethnic groups in Indonesia. Therefore, ethnic differences were often viewed as enhancing friendship rather than causing limitations. Indonesians share a common sense of belonging to the nation. The country enables its people to form relationships and interact with others, even strangers or fellow citizens. As RA stated,

> *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika dong, malahan seru kalau ketemu teman yang beda-beda budaya. Beda etnis akan memberi keragaman dan Indonesia ada berbagai macam etnis, karena Indonesia bukan hanya satu etnis saja.*
> Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, of course. It's actually fun when you meet friends from different cultures. Ethnic differences bring richness, and Indonesia has many ethnic groups because Indonesia isn't just one ethnicity.

This national frame became an important social resource for participants when negotiating inter-ethnic friendship. Rather than perceiving ethnic difference as a barrier, participants often interpreted it through a shared Indonesian identity that made interaction feel possible and legitimate. Attitude toward out-groups provided a personal foundation for reducing intergroup prejudice and fostering significant and positive contact. Participants showed acceptance and openness in interacting with people from different ethnic backgrounds. This was partly because, even before forming friendship, migrant students already considered fellow Indonesians as part of the same group. Consequently, the formation of close inter-ethnic friendship has a greater possibility of fulfilling the conditions of optimal intergroup contact.

The results support the idea that previous inter-ethnic experience also facilitates friendship formation. Ethnic differences enhanced friendship development, especially because participants viewed these variances as interesting and natural. The participants were not only open to ethnic differences but actively made an effort to learn about other cultures and build relationships. In this context, openness functioned as a social skill by helping participants approach difference with curiosity rather than avoidance. Previous positive experiences in inter-ethnic settings appeared to increase acceptance of migrants. This indicates the importance of preparing for inter-ethnic encounters and how the experience can influence future inter-ethnic engagements.

A participant named JM explained that the experience helped in engaging with other cultures.

> *Ketika kita terbiasa dengan budaya yang berbeda dan mencari tahu alasan mengapa mereka melakukan beberapa hal, suatu saat kita mulai menghormatinya. Ketika kita memiliki lebih banyak pengetahuan tentang budaya yang berbeda, kemungkinan kita akan melakukan stereotip semakin kecil. Itulah alasan mengapa kita akan berteman dari budaya yang berbeda daripada berpikir secara stereotip.*
> When we become familiar with different cultures and try to understand why they do certain things, we start to respect them. The more we know about other cultures, the less likely we are to stereotype. That's why we choose to be friends with people from other cultures rather than thinking in stereotypes.

The migrants understanding of the host culture was crucial for adjustment and relationship development. As stated by AW,

> *Pertemanan ini telah sangat mendorong saya untuk mengenal budaya lain dengan lebih personal. Saya percaya bahwa berteman dan belajar budaya melalui teman baru jauh lebih efektif daripada hanya mengamati dari kejauhan. Ini memberi saya kesempatan untuk benar-benar merasakan, memahami, dan menghargai keunikan budaya yang berbeda.*
> This friendship has really encouraged me to learn about another culture more personally. I believe that forming friendship and learning about culture through new friends is far more effective than merely observing from afar. It allows me to truly feel, understand, and appreciate the uniqueness of a different culture.

These responses show that inter-ethnic friendship became a site of cultural learning, where participants developed empathy, perspective-taking, and more flexible ways of understanding others.

In general, once a relationship was established, whether under conditioned or unconditioned circumstances, participants were found to be open to exploring both similarities and differences in cultures. Migrant students could learn more about new cultures and gain greater confidence with improved communication. Some participants even stated that discussions about migrant and host cultures were a central topic early in the friendship. Interestingly, these conversations helped reduce awareness of ethnic differences in the relationships. RO stated that:

> *Saya memiliki kesadaran apakah itu sadar atau tidak sadar, selama ini ada perbedaan nilai dan pendapat dan keinginan di antara kami, tetapi kami telah dapat mengatasi perbedaan apa pun dengan kepentingan bersama kami untuk mengembangkan persahabatan kami atau mendapatkan saling mengenal atau menghargai budaya dan cara hidup satu sama lain.*
> I had this awareness, whether consciously or unconsciously, that there were differences in values, opinions, and desires among us, but we've managed to overcome those differences through our shared interest in developing our friendship, or getting to know and appreciate each other's culture and way of life.

Among inter-ethnic friends, differences were identifiable as similarities. The participants often chose to focus on shared similarities rather than dwell on differences. For example, when asked how culture affected friendship, NU responded:

> *Saya pikir saya tidak sadar tentang perbedaan budaya. Saya akan mengatakan, ketika kita sudah terlalu dekat dengan seorang teman, mungkin, interaksi sehari-hari tidak akan membuat batas begitu jelas sehingga ada perbedaan budaya di antara kita. Saya pikir saya tidak mengingat perbedaan itu, tetapi kadang-kadang kita akan*

melihat perbedaannya, dan itu sangat jelas. Tapi terkadang, saya tahu, meskipun itu perbedaan budaya, itu tidak memengaruhi pertemanan kita atau apa pun atau menghentikan pertemanan kami.
I think I'm not very aware of cultural differences. I'd say, when you're really close with a friend, maybe everyday interaction doesn't make the boundaries clear, so the cultural difference between us doesn't feel obvious. I don't think I remember it. But sometimes, yes, we do notice the difference, and it's very clear. But sometimes I know—even though it's a cultural difference—it doesn't affect our friendship or stop it in any way.

In other words, facing cultural differences was not perceived as strange in inter-ethnic friendship. However, after growing accustomed to each other through daily interactions, individuals tended to overlook differences. Other participants emphasized that discussing differences did not negatively impact friendship. On the contrary, it was useful for comparing different perspectives on the same issues. This suggests that identity negotiation did not require participants to erase ethnic differences. Instead, participants learned to manage differences relationally by shifting between awareness of cultural distinction and recognition of shared social bonds.

The concepts of proximal and transactional identity construction were frequently observed during participants' early period of living away from home. In the host locations, participants interacted with peers and continuously received and gave feedback about the identities. Inter-ethnic friends helped one another learn about cultures through storytelling, comparison, and contrasting cultural differences. Participants observed that it was enjoyable to talk about the differences or similarities in cultures. Within this context, migrant students continued to negotiate a sense of self and belonging. Therefore, social skills such as openness, adaptive communication, empathy, and willingness to learn became central to identity negotiation, allowing migrant students to maintain cultural background while also developing a broader sense of belonging in inter-ethnic friendship.

Alien guests vs. Guests at home

This theme shows how migrant students moved between two relational positions, namely a feeling of being "alien guests" who were socially present but emotionally distant, and gradually becoming "guests at home" through familiarity, language learning, and community participation. Participants had diverse experiences and challenges during the early stages of stay in Java. These challenges include feelings of loneliness in both social and academic environments. Migrant students sometimes found themselves facing a sense of alienation within the host region. As RI shared,

Di Banyumas, saya mengalami kesulitan untuk bertemu dengan orang yang berasal dari Sumatera. Mungkin hal ini disebabkan karena daerah ini tidak sebesar daerah-daerah besar lainnya yang menjadi tujuan utama mahasiswa dari berbagai wilayah. Saya menyadari bahwa di sini, mahasiswa masih sangat didominasi oleh orang-orang dari Jawa Tengah sendiri. Mungkin karena jarang bertemu dengan teman yang juga dari Sumatera, apalagi Padang, jadi kayak merasa kurang saja.
In Banyumas, I found it difficult to meet people from Sumatra. Maybe it's because this area isn't as big as other major cities that are more popular among students from various regions. I realized that here, students are still very much dominated by people from Central Java. Maybe because I rarely meet anyone… also from Sumatra, especially from Padang, it just felt like something was missing.

In a similar vein, RM described loneliness within the host community:

Saya menjadi satu-satunya orang Buton di lingkungan saya yang mayoritas dihuni oleh penduduk lokal dengan beragam etnis, saya merasa awalnya sulit untuk membangun koneksi dengan orang-orang lokal. Saya sering merasa berbeda dan terkadang merasa aneh karena perbedaan fisik saya yang sering dikaitkan dari Maluku, padahal saya ini dari Sulawesi.
I was the only person from Buton in my neighborhood, which was mostly populated by local residents of various ethnic backgrounds. At first, I found it hard to build connections with the locals. I often felt different, and sometimes even weird, because of my physical appearance, which people often assumed meant I was from Maluku, when in fact I'm from Sulawesi.

This sense of alienation arose because people often made assumptions based on RM appearance, without considering the actual origin or background. However, RM subsequently realized that physical differences should not be used to judge an individual identity.

Saya berusaha untuk lebih fokus pada nilai-nilai, kepribadian, dan keunikan lainnya yang saya miliki, daripada hanya membiarkan pandangan orang lain tentang penampilan saya mengendalikan bagaimana saya melihat diri saya sendiri dan orang lain.

I tried to focus more on values, personality, and other unique traits that I possess, rather than letting people's views of my appearance control how I see myself or others.

This experience suggests that identity negotiation occurred when participants had to reinterpret the perceptions of others while maintaining a more stable sense of self. Rather than accepting external assumptions passively, participants actively reconstructed identity through personal values and relational engagement.

Interestingly, common challenges such as culture shock were less prevalent among the participants. Although participants had varying interpretations of what culture shock meant, most reported only mild discomfort and disorientation during the first year of transition and adjustment. Some even felt the initial adjustment was not particularly difficult, but faced challenges in changing lifestyle and finding a healthy balance between study, work, and leisure. TR stated,

Tidak, saya tidak berpikir bahwa ini merupakan culture shock, melainkan lebih merupakan transisi yang sulit dari kebebasan menjadi mahasiswa yang harus mandiri dan disiplin. Saya merasa adanya perbedaan status, persepsi tentang diri saya, dan fokus yang berbeda dari kehidupan sebelumnya.
No, I don't think of this as culture shock. It's more like a tough transition from freedom to becoming a students who must be independent and disciplined. I felt differences in status, self-perception, and focus compared to my previous life.

The cultural gap between students hometown and the host community was not always perceived as significant. IR stated that

Saya tidak akan menganggapnya sebagai culture shock, karena sebelum itu meskipun saya tidak memiliki pengalaman di luar Pontianak, setidaknya saya sudah memahami orang di sini, karena dapat informasi dari kakak saya. Jadi pada situasi seperti ini, saya selalu menganggap diri saya sudah menjadi bagian dari orang sini, karena mungkin sudah berbaur dengan aktivitas dan makan makanan orang di sini, tapi bagaimanapun saya tetap merasakan perubahan akibat perantauan ini, meskipun itu sifatnya tidak besar.
I wouldn't call it culture shock, because even though I didn't have experience outside Pontianak before, I had already heard about people here through my brother. So in that kind of situation, I always considered myself part of the people here, maybe because I've blended into the activities and eaten the food here. But no matter what, I still feel the changes that come with migration, even if they're not major ones.

Despite coming from different regions and having unique traits, the foundation of unity in diversity remained a strong base for participants to feel a shared national identity as Indonesians. This comfort was also supported by the feeling of not being alone while living in the host region. As stated by TR,

Apalagi saya di sini tidak sendirian, banyak asrama mahasiswa dari daerah asal saya. Keberadaan mereka di sini memberikan dukungan dan kehangatan tersendiri bagi saya. Kami saling mendukung dan memahami perasaan kami yang mungkin sering kali merasa asing di lingkungan baru ini. Mungkin yang bisa buat saya jadi sedikit lebih nyaman karena melihat orang-orang seperti saya juga tinggal.
Especially since I'm not alone here—there are many dorms for people from my region. Their presence gives me support and warmth. We support one another and understand the feeling of often being 'foreign' in this new environment. Maybe what helps me feel a bit more comfortable is seeing that people like me also live here.

Language was no longer a major issue, as most participants had become fluent in Indonesian. Although the participants initially struggled with their own dialects, effective communication was subsequently achieved.

Terkadang, sulit untuk sepenuhnya dimengerti atau memahami percakapan atau budaya lokal yang sangat terkait dengan dialek dan bahasa tertentu. Hal ini menambah rasa aneh dan membuat saya merasa terpisah meskipun saya berada di lingkungan yang sama. (RM)
Sometimes it's hard to fully understand or be understood in conversations or local culture that's deeply tied to specific dialects and languages. It adds to the 'strangeness' and makes me feel separate even though I'm in the same environment. (RM)

Communication competence was viewed as part of 'cultural learning' and contributed to building and maintaining interpersonal engagement in inter-ethnic friendship.

Bahasa bisa membantu menjadi akrab jika kita tahu bahasa mereka, ini mungkin akan menyebabkan nepotisme, tapi mereka merasa senang kalau mereka tahu saya bukan dari Jawa tapi bisa ngomong Jawa. (IR)
Language can help (build closeness) if we know how to speak their language—it might cause a bit

of favoritism, but they're happy to know that I'm not from Java but I can speak Javanese (IR).

Therefore, language functioned not only as a communication tool but also a cultural boundary. For migrant students, learning or understanding local language practices became part of relational adaptation, helping in the transition from outsider status toward greater familiarity with the host community.

When interactions involved older people, language became more of a challenge at the start of migration. The participants stated that many elderly people in Java used Javanese as primary language instead of Indonesian, often making conversation difficult.

Some communities were deeply rooted in and proud of using regional languages. This difficulty limited the depth of conversation needed to develop relationships with the host society. As RI stated:

> *Saya menemukan bahwa di daerah Jawa, para orang yang sudah tua-tua cenderung tidak pakai bahasa Indonesia dalam berkomunikasi sehari-hari. Saya pikir kemungkinan mereka tidak bisa atau justru kesulitan berbahasa Indonesia. Karena itu juga yang terjadi di daerah asalku sebenarnya, orang yang sudah tua sangat jarang saya dengar pakai bahasa Indonesia. Tapi justru ini menjadi gambaran kekayaan budaya dan tradisi yang kuat di daerah ini, di mana bahasa Jawa menjadi simbol identitas dan kebanggaan bagi mereka.*
>
> I found that in Java, older people tend not to use Indonesian in daily communication. I think it's possible they can't speak it, or at least struggle with it. Because that's also what happens in my hometown—older people rarely speak Indonesian. But this actually shows the richness of culture and strong traditions here, where Javanese is a symbol of identity and pride.

According to RK, the use of Javanese by elders was not only about preserving tradition but also a way to pass down values, wisdom, and knowledge for generations. Javanese becomes a symbol of closeness, respect for ancestors, and a means to maintain the continuity of cultural heritage in Java.

RK experienced this situation when visiting a friend and family in Magelang. The participant witnessed this kind of gesture as a deeper sign of closeness in inter-ethnic friendship. It passed a clear message that the friend truly valued their friendship and wanted to expand social bonds. These invitations also marked a shift in relational position, showing that migrant students were no longer treated merely as outsiders, but gradually included within more intimate social and family spaces.

The situation proves that time is a key factor in adapting to a new environment.

> *Saya merasa bahwa waktu adalah faktor utama yang membuat kita betah tinggal di sini. Sejak awal, saya kurang percaya dengan istilah bahwa semakin lama tinggal di suatu tempat, semakin sulit untuk meninggalkannya. Namun, sepertinya itu mulai terjadi pada saya di Yogyakarta. (RM)*
>
> I feel like time is the main factor that makes us feel at home here. At first, I didn't believe the saying that the longer you stay in a place, the harder it is to leave. But now, I think that's starting to happen to me in Yogyakarta. (RM)

Being involved in community activities also became another way to build comfort in the host area,

> *Untuk penyesuaian, mungkin bisa aktif berpartisipasi dalam kegiatan yang diadakan masyarakat di sini, mungkin kayak ikut ronda untuk laki-laki ya, tapi kemarin itu waktu ada yang meninggal saya ikut pergi melayat, karena kebetulan itu yang meninggal kemarin langganan tempat beli nasi uduk saya. (TR)*
>
> To adjust, maybe participate in local community events—maybe things like night patrol for men. But yesterday, when someone passed away, I went to the funeral because that person used to sell me my favorite rice dish. (TR)

With a prolonged stay in the host region, participants started to feel more at ease and familiar with the cultural characteristics. This was also accompanied by a deeper understanding and adaptation to existing social expectations.

> *Karena sudah terbiasa dengan situasi tersebut, saya menjadi lebih nyaman dan kadang-kadang, rasa ingin pulang tidak lagi muncul. (TN)*
>
> Because I've gotten used to this situation, I feel more comfortable now, and sometimes, the urge to go home no longer appears (TN).

Overall, this theme shows that becoming comfortable in the host region was a gradual process shaped by time, everyday participation, and recognition from others. Migrant students did not immediately feel at home, but repeated interactions with local people, peers, and community activities helped transform feelings of foreignness into a more grounded sense of belonging.

Process Model of Adaptation Through Inter-Ethnic Friendship

Collectively, the four themes show that the adaptation

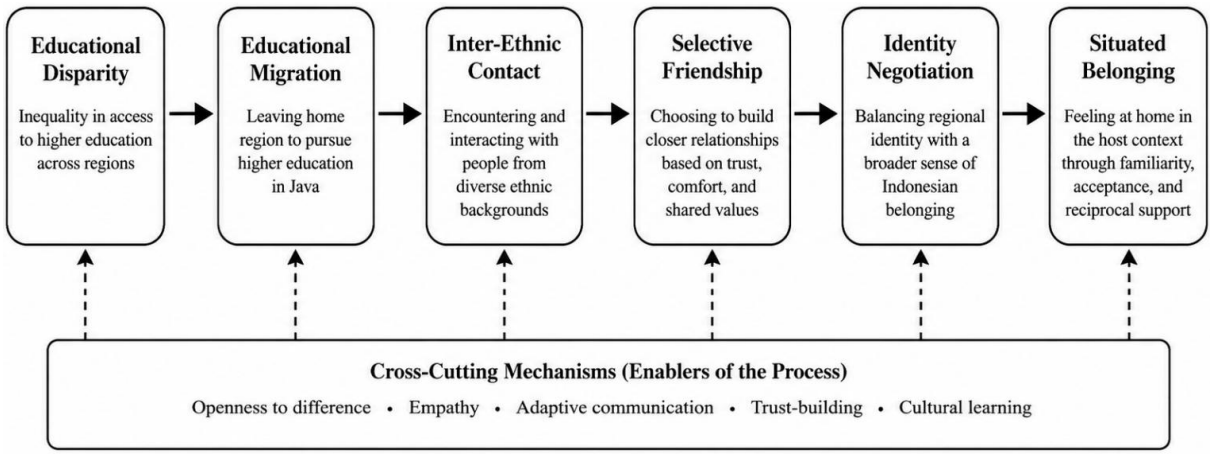


Figure 1. Process Model of Adaptation through Inter-Ethnic Friendship

of migrant students through inter-ethnic friendship developed as a gradual relational process, as illustrated in Figure 1. The process started with educational disparity, which encouraged students to leave home regions and pursue higher education in Java. This movement then became educational migration, placing students in more diverse academic and social environments while also creating opportunities for inter-ethnic contact through classrooms, dormitories, organizations, and community activities. However, the contact did not automatically develop into an intimate relationship, because students often showed selective friendship, balancing openness to difference with emotional caution and attachment to familiar ethnic or regional networks. Through repeated interaction, cultural learning, empathy, and adaptive communication, students engaged in identity negotiation, maintaining their regional identities while developing a broader sense of shared Indonesian belonging. Over time, this process supported situated belonging, marked by familiarity with local norms, emotional comfort, and reciprocal support.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the interactions and formation of friendship between migrant students and host communities, particularly focusing on the social skills employed by migrant students during cross-cultural transitions, environmental adaptation, and social engagement. Students, on migrating for educational purposes, start to establish new interactions with host community members and individuals from diverse backgrounds, forming friendship as a unique and significant type of interpersonal relationship (Alkharusi & Segumpan, 2024). Perceived similarity was identified as a key factor in initiating friendship, while cultural differences often marked the distinctiveness of inter-ethnic relationships. Previous studies have shown that cultural differences may limit the initiation and development of intercultural relationships (e.g., Bahns et al., 2019; Poslon & Láštičová, 2019).

Participants in this study retained a tendency to form friendship based on similarity. However, the friendship was grounded in allophilia (Korol, 2019), a positive attitude toward outgroup members. Participants viewed themselves and inter-ethnic friends as fellow Indonesians, united under a shared national identity despite ethnic distinctions. This sense of shared identity, rooted in early socialization into pluralistic values, slightly reduced the ingroup bias and enabled a more inclusive categorization of others as part of the national ingroup (Priwati et al., 2021; Suryani et al., 2019). Although some participants faced difficulty integrating into tightly knit social circles within host communities, it was uncommon to report having no host friends at all (Fong et al., 2024).

Participants observed both challenges and reluctance in expanding friendship with host individuals due to a lack of reciprocal acceptance or social preferences. On the other hand, many acknowledged the importance of inter-ethnic friendship in supporting adjustment and adaptation processes (Byrne et al., 2019). Some participants demonstrated curiosity and openness toward learning about other cultures through shared friendship and experiences of common struggle in adaptation (Alkharusi & Segumpan, 2024).

Inter-ethnic friendship in higher education contexts does not occur spontaneously but must be facilitated through situations that create opportunities for meaningful intergroup contact (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2018a, 2018b). Although migration is not a policy-designed contact strategy, it inadvertently opens space for mediated inter-ethnic encounters between newcomers and host community members (Pekerti et al., 2020). Even when friendship initially forms among co-migrants, these networks often lead to broader intergroup encounters (Zhao, 2023).

The increasing ethnic diversity in educational settings creates greater opportunities for inter-ethnic contact. Theories of intergroup contact (Allport et al., 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) propose that this contact can reduce prejudice and foster positive intergroup attitudes, especially when conducted under conditions of equal status and shared goals (McKeown et al., 2025). Therefore, educational inequality, which drives migration, paradoxically yields positive intergroup outcomes such as reduced ethnocentrism, increased inter-ethnic friendship, and heightened outgroup solidarity.

Pettigrew (1998) describes this phenomenon as friendship potential, asserting that optimal intergroup contact must allow space for friendship development. Without this opportunity, even highly inclusive individuals may not form meaningful inter-ethnic bonds (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In this study, several participants decided to remain within pre-existing social circles, reducing the initiation of inter-ethnic friendship. Previous studies have reported similar challenges, with international and migrant students often struggling to build friendship with host nationals due to the hosts established social networks (Robinson et al., 2020). Reports indicate that at least one-third of international students have no friendship with individuals from the host country (Pho & Schartner, 2021).

From a social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals are motivated to associate with ingroup members to maintain a positive social identity (Hogg & Rinella, 2018). Ethnicity, as a salient social category, becomes a foundation for comparison and bias (Todd et al., 2021). Association with coethnic peers provides a psychologically safe environment for identity exploration, validation, and acceptance (Hoare, 2019; Nelson et al., 2018). Therefore, initial preferences for coethnic companionship are understandable.

Building contact with outgroup members requires intentional effort. Individuals often emphasize differences over similarities, potentially reinforcing prejudice and impeding intergroup bonding (Turner et al., 2020). However, this does not imply that participants avoided inter-ethnic friendship altogether. Many reported forming such relationships within shared membership in extracurricular organizations or activities. These settings provided opportunities for deeper familiarity and more authentic engagement. Previous studies also support the role of group affiliations, such as housing, clubs, or study groups, in improving adjustment, interaction, and academic outcomes for migrant students (Brown et al., 2019; Ward et al., 2020).

Migrant students build relationships with multiple groups, shaping social networks through institutional affiliations and students communities (Robinson et al., 2020). These communities often reflect shared non-dominant cultural identities, goals, and values, providing academic and emotional support (Duran & Pérez II, 2019). However, the existence may also limit broader integration by reinforcing internal solidarity at the expense of external inclusion (Mallet-Garcia & Garcia, 2025).

In the process of establishing inter-ethnic friendship, migrant students inevitably experience cultural adaptation and acculturation (Alkharusi & Segumpan, 2024; Sheng et al., 2022). This adjustment involves social, emotional, and cultural challenges, even when the broader national identity is shared. Therefore, adaptation is a means to develop and enhance social competencies (Upadhyay, 2018), facilitating personal growth (Hwang et al., 2016).

Cultural adjustment is both a social and psychological skill set necessary for functioning effectively in a new environment (Ward & Kennedy, 2021). It is a continuous, complex process requiring effort from both migrants and hosts (Shekriladze & Javakhishvili, 2024). Successful adjustment arises through reciprocal exchanges and intentional integration (Miller et al., 2017).

As part of this adjustment, identity negotiation is critical. Migrant students carry multiple social identities, which can help discover points of similarity across ethnic lines. According to Identity Management Theory (Merrigan, 2017), developing relational identity requires overcoming value differences, language gaps, and stereotypes through continuous communication (Zhao & Ebanda de B'beri, 2022). This results in the co-creation of a third culture, a shared symbolic framework for sustaining friendship (Chang, 2021).

Although cultural transitions may be emotionally challenging and accompanied by culture shock (Belford, 2017), most participants in this study did not report significant distress. Some discomfort and disorientation occurred in the first year, but most participants adjusted well, suggesting high intercultural competence and an ability to find common ground in diversity (Brunsting & Zachry, 2018).

The absence of overt rejection, ethnocentrism, or discrimination possibly contributed to participants confidence and willingness to engage across ethnic lines (Freddi et al., 2024). Participants felt emotionally secure and welcomed, conditions known to foster intergroup friendship (Tropp et al., 2018). These supportive environments helped rebuild social networks lost in migration and facilitated cross-cultural adjustment (Lauer, 2024).

The role of educators and community leaders is crucial in fostering inter-ethnic understanding, trust, and inclusion through intentional programming. Social life both inside and outside the classroom shapes how migrant and host students collaborate and form relationships (Kim, 2023; Mittelmeier et al., 2018). Sustained multicultural relations can build mutual trust, intensify information exchange, and promote deeper integration.

Although inter-ethnic friendship may appear difficult at first, studies have shown that with time, patience, and shared experiences, the relationship can become strong and enduring (Chen & Graham, 2017). This result offers an optimistic view on inter-ethnic contact within the context of a shared national identity, such as Indonesia (Hwang et al., 2016; Priwati et al., 2021). It is paradoxical for citizens of the same country to show deficits in social skills when engaging across ethnic lines, given that this engagement is central to the nation foundational vision.

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to 18 participants from selected host cities in Central Java and Yogyakarta, which may not fully capture the diversity of inter-ethnic experiences across Indonesia. Second, the study focused only on the perspective of migrant students, without incorporating the viewpoints of host community members. Third, the retrospective nature of interviews may lead to memory biases or selective recollections. Future studies may benefit from a longitudinal approach, incorporating both migrant and host perspectives, as well as exploring the role of institutional support in fostering inter-ethnic contact.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study found that inter-ethnic friendship among migrant students in Java is shaped by multiple interrelated factors, including educational inequality, cultural transition, identity negotiation, and time. The results show that migrant students initiate, experience, and sustain inter-ethnic friendship not simply through physical proximity, but by repeated interaction, shared academic and organizational spaces, openness to cultural difference, as well as gradual trust-building with members of host communities. Although students often initially cluster within familiar ethnic networks, sustained exposure and intentional engagement lead to deeper intercultural relationships. A strong sense of national identity, grounded in values such as Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, plays a crucial role in reducing prejudice and fostering inclusion. These friendship support social adaptation by reducing loneliness, increasing familiarity with local norms, and strengthening a sense of belonging, while also shaping identity negotiation by allowing students to maintain regional identities and develop a broader shared Indonesian identity. In the context of Indonesia ethnic diversity, the inter-ethnic bonds are critical for reinforcing social cohesion and countering fragmentation. This study underscores the value of educational migration as not only an academic pursuit but also a vehicle for civic integration and intercultural growth.

Declaration

Acknowledgments

This study was conducted independently without any external funding. The authors are grateful to the migrant communities in Java who generously shared their time and stories during the data collection process.

Funding

This study received no external funding and was conducted as an independent project by the authors.

Author Contributions

FMI conceptualized the study, conducted data collection, performed the analysis, and wrote the manuscript. RA assisted in data collection, contributed to data analysis, and prepared the references.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

AI-assisted tools were used to support Indonesian-to-English translation and to help develop a visual figure based on the authors' conceptual direction. The authors reviewed and approved all AI-assisted outputs. AI was not used for data collection, participant quotations, or thematic analysis.

Ethical Clearance

This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Gadjah Mada, on 22 April 2021, approval number 2626/UN1/FPSi. 1.3/SD/PT.01.04/2021.

Data Availability

The study data consist of audio recordings where consent was given, interview transcripts, and field notes. Some interviews were fully transcribed, while others were documented through partial transcription or detailed notes. Due to confidentiality and ethical considerations, raw data are not publicly available, but de-identified supporting information may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

References

Adelman, L., Verkuyten, M., & Yogeeswaran, K. (2022). Distinguishing active and passive outgroup tolerance: Understanding its prevalence and the role of moral concern.

Political Psychology, *43*(4), 731–750. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12790

Alkharusi, M. J., & Segumpan, R. G. (2024). I wish that I could have friends: The intercultural friendship experience of Omani students at US universities. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, *24*(1), 28–42. https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v24i1.274

Allport, G. W., Clark, K., & Pettigrew, T. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Addison-Wesley.

Bahns, A. J., Lee, J., & Crandall, C. S. (2019). Culture and mobility determine the importance of similarity in friendship. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *50*(6), 731–750. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022119852424

Bazzi, S., Gaduh, A., Rothenberg, A. D., & Wong, M. (2017). *Unity in diversity?: Ethnicity, migration, and nation building in Indonesia* (Vol. 2). Centre for Economic Policy Research.

Belford, N. (2017). International students from Melbourne describing their cross-cultural transition experiences: Culture shock, social interaction, and friendship development. *Journal of International Students*, *7*(3), 499–521. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i3.206

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, *9*(1), 3–26. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196

Braun, V., Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., Davey, L., & Jenkinson, E. (2023). Doing reflexive thematic analysis. Dalam S. Bager-Charleson & A. McBeath (Eds.), *Supporting research in counselling and psychotherapy: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research* (hlm. 19–38). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-13942-0_2

Brown, J., Volk, F., & Spratto, E. M. (2019). The hidden structure: The influence of residence hall design on academic outcomes. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *56*(3), 267–283. https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1611590

Brunsting, N. C., & Zachry, C. (2018). International students: Efficacy and socio. *Journal of International Students*, *8*(4), 1497–1521. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1467805

Byrne, E., Brugha, R., & McGarvey, A. (2019). 'A melting pot of cultures'–challenges in social adaptation and interactions amongst international medical students. *BMC Medical Education*, *19*(1), Article 86. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-019-1514-1

Camic, P. M. (2021). *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design*. American Psychological Association.

Chang, Y. Y. (2021). A qualitative study of intercultural friendship through new social media. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, *21*(1), 92–105. https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v21i1.8

Chen, X., & Graham, S. (2017). Same-ethnic, interethnic, and interracial friendship among Asian early adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *27*(3), 705–713. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12309

Duran, A., & Pérez, D., II. (2019). The multiple roles of chosen familia: Exploring the interconnections of queer Latino men's community cultural wealth. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *32*(1), 67–84. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2018.1523484

Farrell, M., & Langrehr, K. J. (2017). Stress, social support, and psychosocial functioning of ethnically diverse students. *Journal of College Counseling*, *20*(3), 208–223. https://doi.org/10.1002/jocc.12070

Fedyuk, O., & Zentai, V. (2018). The interview in migration studies: A step towards a dialogue and knowledge co-production? Dalam R. Zapata-Barrero & E. Yalaz (Eds.), *Qualitative research in European migration studies* (hlm. 171–188). Springer International Publishing.

Fong, M., Liu, A., Lung, B., Alayche, I., Sayfi, S., Kirenga, R. Y., Chomienne, M. H., Saad, A., Grenier, J., & Kassam, A. (2024). From struggle to strength in African and Middle Eastern newcomers' integration stories to Canada: A participatory health equity research study. *PLOS ONE*, *19*(4), Article e0302591. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0302591

Freddi, E., Potters, J., & Suetens, S. (2024). The effect of brief cooperative contact with ethnic minorities on discrimination. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, *222*, 64–76. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2024.04.003

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, *18*(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903

Heath, J., Williamson, H., Williams, L., & Harcourt, D. (2018). "It's just more personal": Using multiple

methods of qualitative data collection to facilitate participation in research focusing on sensitive subjects. *Applied Nursing Research*, *43*, 30–35. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnr.2018.06.015

Hennink, M. M., Kaiser, B. N., & Marconi, V. C. (2017). Code saturation versus meaning saturation: How many interviews are enough? *Qualitative Health Research*, *27*(4), 591–608. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316665344

Hjerm, M., Eger, M. A., Bohman, A., & Fors Connolly, F. (2020). A new approach to the study of tolerance: Conceptualizing and measuring acceptance, respect, and appreciation of difference. *Social Indicators Research*, *147*(3), 897–919. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-019-02176-y

Hoare, R. (2019). 'I can only be properly myself when I'm with her': Early adolescent intra-ethnic immigrant group friendship as a safe space for identity exploration, negotiation and validation. *Childhood*, *26*(2), 202–220. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568218824389

Hogg, M. A., & Rinella, M. J. (2018). Social identities and shared realities. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, *23*, 6–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.10.003

Hwang, E., Martirosyan, N. M., & Moore, G. W. (2016). A review of literature on adjustment issues of international students: Recommendations for future practices and research. Dalam K. Bista & C. Foster (Eds.), *Global perspectives and local challenges surrounding international student mobility* (hlm. 223–242). IGI Global.

Islah, F. M., Tetteng, B., Zainuddin, K., & Firdaus, F. (2025). Asymmetric intimacies: Negotiating inter-ethnic friendship between migrants and urban hosts in selected Javanese cities. *Indigenous: Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi*, *10*(3), 326–343. https://doi.org/10.23917/indigenous.v10i3.13220

Jones, D., & Tonkiss, K. (2024). Belonging and becoming in the city and the countryside: Young people, (multi) culture and the urban/rural divide. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *47*(6), 1307–1328. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2247463

Juma, M. (2024). International students' relationship formation in a multicultural setting: A phenomenological inquiry. *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Science*, *1*(3), 18–37. https://doi.org/10.69739/jahss.v1i3.168

Kahalon, R., Shnabel, N., Sharvit, K., Halabi, S., & Wright, S. C. (2023). High-quality contact with fellow majority group students is associated with better academic performance of minority group students. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *49*(12), 1723–1736. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672221115943

Kemdiktisaintek. (2025). *Statistik perguruan tinggi di Indonesia*. Pangkalan Data Perguruan Tinggi.

Kim, Y.-R. (2023). Classed education trajectories and intimate partnering of international students: A case of Chinese international undergraduate students in the United States. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, *49*(5), 1331–1349. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1828841

Korol, L. (2019). Does multicultural personality moderate the relationship between cross-group friendship and allophilia? *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *159*(6), 649–663. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2018.1549012

Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, *24*(1), 120–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092

Koshy, P., Cabalu, H., & Valencia, V. (2023). Higher education and the importance of values: Evidence from the World Values Survey. *Higher Education*, *85*(6), 1401–1426. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00896-8

Lauer, S. (2024). Cosmopolitan social infrastructure and immigrant cross-ethnic friendship. *Current Sociology*, *72*(1), 3–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921221102983

Liao, H.-Y., Spanierman, L. B., Harlow, A. J., & Neville, H. A. (2017). Do parents matter? Examination of White college students' intergroup experiences and attitudes. *The Counseling Psychologist*, *45*(2), 193–212. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000017694337

Liu, S., Wang, Y., & Nuttall, A. K. (2020). Cross-race and cross-ethnic friendship and psychological well-being trajectories among Asian American adolescents: Variations by school context. *Developmental Psychology*, *56*(11), 2121–2136. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001109

Mallet-Garcia, M. L., & Garcia, E. (2025). Building bridges in a sanctuary city: Pan-ethnic identity among precarious Latino immigrants. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-024-01216-y

McKeown, S., Vezzali, L., & Stathi, S. (2025). Understanding and harnessing intergroup

contact in educational contexts. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *64*(2), Article e12876. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12876

Merlino, L. P., Steinhardt, M. F., & Wren-Lewis, L. (2019). More than just friends? School peers and adult interracial relationships. *Journal of Labor Economics*, *37*(3), 663–713. https://doi.org/10.1086/702626

Merrigan, G. (2017). Identity management theory. *The International Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783665.ieicc0038

Mickus, M., & Bowen, D. (2017). Reducing the cultural divide among US and Mexican students through application of the contact hypothesis. *Intercultural Education*, *28*(6), 496–507. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2017.1388685

Miller, J. G., Goyal, N., & Wice, M. (2017). A cultural psychology of agency: Morality, motivation, and reciprocity. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *12*(5), 867–875. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691617706099

Mittelmeier, J., Rienties, B., Tempelaar, D., & Whitelock, D. (2018). Overcoming cross-cultural group work tensions: Mixed student perspectives on the role of social relationships. *Higher Education*, *75*(1), 149–166. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-017-0131-3

Nelson, S. C., Syed, M., Tran, A. G. T. T., Hu, A. W., & Lee, R. M. (2018). Pathways to ethnic-racial identity development and psychological adjustment: The differential associations of cultural socialization by parents and peers. *Developmental Psychology*, *54*(11), 2166–2180. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000597

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *11*(4), 327–344. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701401305

O'Sullivan, L., Feeney, L., Crowley, R. K., Sukumar, P., McAuliffe, E., & Doran, P. (2021). An evaluation of the process of informed consent: Views from research participants and staff. *Trials*, *22*(1), Article 544. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13063-021-05493-1

Paolini, S., Gibbs, M., Sales, B., Anderson, D., & McIntyre, K. (2024). Negativity bias in intergroup contact: Meta-analytical evidence that bad is stronger than good, especially when people have the opportunity and motivation to opt out of contact. *Psychological Bulletin*, *150*(8), 921–964. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000439

Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Pekerti, A. A., van de Vijver, F. J. R., Moeller, M., & Okimoto, T. G. (2020). Intercultural contacts and acculturation resources among international students in Australia: A mixed-methods study. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *75*, 56–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.12.004

Percy, W. H., Kostere, K., & Kostere, S. (2015). Generic qualitative research in psychology. *The Qualitative Report*, *20*(2), 76–85. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2015.2097

Pettigrew, T. F. (1998). Intergroup contact theory. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *49*(1), 65–85. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.49.1.65

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *90*(5), 751–783. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751

Pho, H., & Schartner, A. (2021). Social contact patterns of international students and their impact on academic adaptation. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *42*(6), 489–502. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1707214

Poslon, X. D., & Lášticová, B. (2019). The silver lining between perceived similarity and intergroup differences: Increasing confidence in intergroup contact. *Human Affairs*, *29*(1), 63–73. https://doi.org/10.1515/humaff-2019-0006

Priwati, A. R., Putri, A. K., Puri, V. G. S., Ayuningtya, A. A., Minza, W. M., & Yuniarti, K. W. (2021). Multiculturalism as a mediator of ethnic identity and national identity among Javanese adolescents. *Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia*, *25*(1), 108–115. https://doi.org/10.7454/hubs.asia.1030521

Punti, G., & Dingel, M. (2021). Rethinking race, ethnicity, and the assessment of intercultural competence in higher education. *Education Sciences*, *11*(3), Article 110. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11030110

Robinson, O., Somerville, K., & Walsworth, S. (2020). Understanding friendship formation between international and host-national students in a Canadian university. *Journal of International*

and Intercultural Communication, *13*(1), 49–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2019.1609067

Rose-Redwood, C., & Rose-Redwood, R. (2018a). Building bridges across the international divide: Fostering meaningful cross-cultural interactions between domestic and international students. *Journal of International Students*, *8*(3), 1328–1336. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i3.56

Rose-Redwood, C., & Rose-Redwood, R. (2018b). Fostering successful integration and engagement between domestic and international students on college and university campuses. *Journal of International Students*, *8*(3), 1267–1273. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i3.84

Saldaña, J. (2025). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781036235611

Shekriladze, I., & Javakhishvili, N. (2024). Sociocultural predictors of immigrant adjustment and well-being. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *9*, Article 1251871. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1251871

Sheng, L., Dai, J., & Lei, J. (2022). The impacts of academic adaptation on psychological and sociocultural adaptation among international students in China: The moderating role of friendship. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *89*, 79–89. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.06.001

Sun, X., Lee, J. J.-H., Rhoads, R. A., & Wang, X. (2021). Cross-ethnic friendship among ethnic minority and Han students at a Chinese university. *Comparative Education Review*, *65*(2), 248–270. https://doi.org/10.1086/713542

Suryani, A. O., Setiadi, B., Nurrachman, N., Panggabean, H., & Wibawa, D. S. (2019). National identity as predicted by ethnic identity and social distance with multiculturalism as mediator: A study involving Chinese Indonesian students in Jakarta. *Makara Human Behavior Studies in Asia*, *23*(2), 172–180. https://doi.org/10.7454/hubs.asia.1170719

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). The social identity theory of intergroup behavior. Dalam W. S. & A. W. G. (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relation* (hlm. 7–24). Hall Publishers.

Tisdell, E. J., Merriam, S. B., & Stuckey-Peyrot, H. L. (2025). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Todd, A. R., Johnson, D. J., Lassetter, B., Neel, R., Simpson, A. J., & Cesario, J. (2021). Category salience and racial bias in weapon identification: A diffusion modeling approach. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *120*(3), 672–693. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000279

Tropp, L. R., Okamoto, D. G., Marrow, H. B., & Jones-Correa, M. (2018). How contact experiences shape welcoming: Perspectives from US-born and immigrant groups. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *81*(1), 23–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272517747265

Turner, R. N., Hodson, G., & Dhont, K. (2020). The role of individual differences in understanding and enhancing intergroup contact. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *14*(6), Article e12533. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12533

Upadhyay, P. (2018). You can't go home again: International students adjustment to new cultural environments. *Janapriya Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, *7*(1), 105–115.

Velásquez, P. (2024). Education and inter-ethnic attitudes among recent immigrants in the Netherlands. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, *25*(1), 109–131. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-023-01061-5

Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2020). *Psychology culture shock*. Routledge.

Ward, C., & Kennedy, A. (2021). Before and after cross-cultural transition: A study of New Zealand volunteers on field assignments. Dalam H. Grad, A. Blanco, & J. Georgas (Eds.), *Key issues in cross-cultural psychology* (1st ed., hlm. 138–154). Garland Science. https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003077442

Zhao, L. (2023). From superdiversity to consolidation: Implications of structural intersectionality for interethnic friendship. *American Journal of Sociology*, *128*(4), 1114–1157. https://doi.org/10.1086/723435

Zhao, S., & Ebanda de B'beri, B. (2022). Identity negotiation of Chinese international students in Canada: A study on cosmopolitan post-graduation settlement. *International Journal of Chinese Education*, *11*(1), Article 22125868211059196. https://doi.org/10.1177/22125868211059197