

## **Having the First-Year as Overseas Students: Intercultural Communication as Identity Negotiation of Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim Women Students in the United States**

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**Abstract:** This study examined the first-year intercultural communication experiences of Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students in the United States as their identity negotiation. The following questions were addressed using Ting Toomey's intercultural communication theory: What problems do Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students face in their new environment in the United States? How do they use intercultural communication as an adaptive strategy? And, to what extent can this intercultural communication skill affect their academic achievement as international students? Using an ethnographic approach, data were obtained through online observations and interviews via WhatsApp and Skype video calls with 11 Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students regarding their first-year experiences in the United States. According to the findings of this study, their ability in intercultural communication in their first year becomes the primary capital for their lives during their stay to complete their study. Their experience has turned into knowledge, motivation, and skills that turn out to be beneficial in facing challenges.

**Keywords:** Intercultural communication, international student, identity negotiation, Muslim women, adaptive strategies.

Studying abroad commonly has its challenges, especially in the early years. Some of these difficulties are frequently caused by differences in language and culture, which can interfere with their efforts to achieve academic success in a limited amount of time. Academically, international students from Indonesia (and possibly other countries) encounter challenges due to differences in the education system and academic culture in the United States. This circumstance compels them to work harder to complete their studies than students from the host country. Felix and Lawson's (1994) findings align with this notion, noting that international students commonly face pressures during lectures and seminars and laboratory research and essay completion.

To understand the problems that international students encounter studying overseas, it is crucial to remember that they have lives outside the campus; thus, the problems they encounter are related to their studies and personal problems stemming from their decision to study overseas. Although these issues cannot be generalized, most international students,

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especially Indonesian students, experience common problems like adjustment issues, financial difficulties, and communication barriers. As a result, personal and general problems must be addressed promptly to accommodate their academic and social expectations when living and studying outside their home country (Mukminin, 2012).

The reality they encounter frequently differs from their expectations (Mukminin, 2012). This typically refers to problems with everyday lifestyle, social life, different educational systems, cultures, and value systems in interaction and communication at US universities. The Individualistic character and social life in the United States are extremely different from Indonesia's communal pattern of life. According to Hofstede (1986), in an individualistic culture such as the United States, relationships between individuals are not overly close. Everyone is responsible for themselves. Conversely, Indonesia is a more collective culture, as seen by communally social interpersonal relationships.

The nature of individualism in campus life in the United States is also confirmed by Robinson's (1992) findings, which show that the academic culture in the United States is accustomed to individualism and competition, similarity and informality, pragmatism, reasoning style, and philosophy of knowledge. These features are highly different from the Indonesian education system, emphasizing harmonious ideals and mutual assistance while remaining competitive. Students have particularly intense emotional experiences at the beginning of the semester when attempting to adapt to a new socio-cultural milieu and unfamiliar academic situations (Church, 1982; Ward, 2001).

In her study, Brown (2009) demonstrated this phenomenon. She found that during the first few weeks of the semester, the terms "together" and "not alone" were frequently heard, indicating the establishment of a community of international students that provided a sense of belonging and shared identity. The unifying characteristics of this subculture of the heterogeneous university population stemmed from the difficult situation in which students found themselves: 1) they were all away from home; 2) most were struggling with language difficulties; 3) they were all studying in a foreign academic culture; and 4) they were all under the pressure of an intensive assignment schedule (Brown 2009). All of these circumstances generally cause international students to feel homesick and lonely (Furnham & Erdmann, 1995; Hamburg & Adams, 1967), and they must try to adjust promptly.

The current article concentrates on Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students who have additional concerns connected with include gender and religion. In addition, international students at the Ph.D. level usually live with their spouses and children, complicating matters. Furthermore, their appearance as a Muslim woman wearing the hijab can be a barrier to adjusting to the new environment. As a result, this research aims to investigate how Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students spend their first years in the United States in a new environment and culture. The main foci of this article are on the following questions: what are the problems that Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students face in their new environment in the United States? Does the involvement of Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students in intercultural communication serve as an adaptive strategy? To what extent do their intercultural communication skills have implications for their academic achievement as international students?

## **Literature Review**

According to Weiss and Ford (2011), the first year of studying and living abroad is the most challenging (see Luo et al., 2019; Xiong & Zhou, 2018). Thurber and Malton (2012) noted that the first year of living is a changeover period from someone's home country to a new setting, while Hotta and Ting-Toomey (2013) discovered that local students limited their interactions with international students. That might be because they focus on their academic

achievements rather than assisting international students. This condition causes international students to sense alienation (Klomegah, 2006), marginalization (Brown, 2009), discrimination, and various types of rejection, which leads to loneliness (Sawir et al., 2008) and attaches helplessness (Klomegah, 2006). This uncertain state is often managed by maximizing conational engagement to engage in mono-cultural interactions (Li & Zizzi, 2018).

This condition seems to be worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic situation where international students again experienced attacks of racism and discrimination fueled by bigotry and fear of the virus, especially when this virus first attacked the United States in January 2020. In fact, President Trump used the terms “Chinese virus” and “kung flu” to refer to COVID-19 so it became a global virus that contributed to distrust, blame, and retaliatory acts against Asians and Asian Americans (Yao & Mwangi, 2022). This can also be seen in several other western countries such as Australia (Oanh (Olena) & Balakrishnan, 2020) and Canada (Firang, 2020) which generally describe the impact of COVID-19 on international students.

Therefore, friendship has been identified as a crucial aspect in the adjustment process of international students, particularly when they experience homesickness and loneliness (Furnham & Erdmann, 1995; Hamburg & Adams, 1967; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). This is not surprising because, psychologically, a new environment is still perceived as unfamiliar, requiring the support of friends to maintain their emotional well-being; additionally, friendship can have significance for coping abilities with daily, academic or professional life (Furnham & Erdmann, 1995; Wiseman, 1997). However, according to Hendrickson et al. (2011), conational interactions cause international students to lose the opportunity for intercultural communication and interrupt the acculturation process to a new culture.

In the context of international students’ friendship, Bochner et al. (1977) identified three types of friends. First, a national host friend serves as a cultural informant and is an essential source of the host culture and language learning (Gudykunst, 1998; Ward, 2001). According to Hofstede (2001), this form of friendship provides an opportunity to expand a person’s language and cultural knowledge.

Second, a conational friend serves as a comforting reference for values from the home culture while also inhibiting the development of communicative competence (Kim, 1988). According to several studies, compatriots play a crucial role in minimizing loneliness and stress. For example, Mohamed (1997) noted how southeast Asian students assimilating to the same national group were associated with positive mental health. Fakhruroji (2019) highlighted the involvement of Indonesian Muslims in maintaining their Islamic identity in Australia through Islamic study group activities. However, Bradley (2000) contended that, while their mental health appears to be improving, they risk missing opportunities to engage in multicultural exchanges, causing their language abilities to stagnate (see Wiseman, 1997).

Third, and least essential, is the multicultural friendship network formed by students of various nationalities (Bochner et al., 1977). Friendships with different nationalities are not only related to academic outcomes (Pho & Schartner, 2019), but also have the potential to transform their competence as international students where they can gain intercultural competence that will aid global understanding and positive outcomes for international students (Gudykunst, 1998). Moreover, Bender et al. (2019) argue that support from mixed sources (i.e., not distinguishing between internationals, host, or conationals) is associated with a stronger effect of social support than support from conationals or from fellow international students. As Hammer et al., (2003) defined, intercultural competence is the ability to think and act in an intercultural acceptable manner. Gudykunst (1998) defined an intercultural competent individual as someone whose cognitive, behavioral, and affective traits are open to growth beyond the psychological boundaries of any one culture, a “model for human development” unbound by originating culture norms and values. The attributes associated with intercultural

competence are respect, empathy, cultural knowledge, tolerance for ambiguity, and the capacity to manage interaction (Koester & Lustig, 2003).

However, international students should initiate interactions with locals to improve their language and social communication skills (Hendrickson et al., 2011). Language gaps that a lack of use of the host language cause in daily life may indicate a failure of transnationals improvement (Li & Kaye, 1998). Though this cannot be generalized, one of the major causes of intercultural communication failure is these Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students are not used to initiating communication and prefer to communicate in their native language with families and conational friends. This is not due to their inability to communicate in the host language but rather to cultural norms in which a Muslim woman does not initiate conversation with strangers.

According to Snell and Zhou (2015), environmental supports, such as those local students, lecturers, supervisors, staff, and hosts provide as well as the eagerness of international students to participate in acculturation, whether done virtually or in person, will be beneficial to the success and effectiveness of intercultural communication. The efficiency of intercultural communication partly depends on international students' motivation, knowledge, and skills in developing strategies during the interaction process.

Studies related to this are also related to the concept of interculturalism, which is a concept that originated in Europe as a way of thinking about increasing cohesion between established populations and immigrants (Holm & Zilliacus, 2009) so that studies around interculturalism explore the types of skills, knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, and behavior that can be expected from intercultural citizens. These conceptualizations span from intercultural sensitivity/understanding development models for use in educational contexts to intercultural theories as qualities and behavior of people impacted by their social, spatial, and historical context (Kymlicka, 2003; Mahoney, 2019). Meanwhile, the construction of one's identity in interaction is also influenced by religion. Those who are positioned as racial/ethnic and religious minorities are better able to adopt various perspectives when discussing religion and gender issues (Mahoney, 2019).

It is necessary to build accurate and effective verbal and nonverbal skills that are compatible with the change, transition, comprehension of beliefs, cultures, values, and communication styles in a new environment. One must also broaden their understanding of other cultures and challenges in that new location's communication system (Ting-Toomey, 1999). This remark is influenced by the concept that culture is the primary regulator controlling individuals in interpreting meanings, generating labels, and describing the communicators and others' limited existence. Thus, communication is part of the process of constructing identity in a different environment as a negotiation.

Ting-Toomey's approach is essential to understand the context of intercultural communication among international students studying overseas in various cultural contexts, as personal circumstances influence these interactions. According to the theory, adaptive competence is assumed to assist people in the negotiation process in multicultural contexts. In other words, Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students in the United States must be adaptable because it relates to their academic, familial, and social goals as an integral aspect of their personal goals. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), this adaptive strategy achieves communication goals while avoiding miscommunication. Thus, in general, identity negotiations reflected in intercultural communication attempt to fulfill the feelings of being understood, appreciated, and supported.

On the other hand, this adaptive process can fail when their communication is ineffective; it can even cause conflict and feelings of insecurity. As a result, Ting-Toomey (1999) identifies three types of challenges that the failure to adapt causes: 1) differences in beliefs, values, and social norms between the origin culture and the host culture; 2) loss of

valuable values from origin cultural norms; and 3) entrants' inability to accurately and effectively respond to the new environment. As a result, if international students do not participate in conscious intercultural communication as part of their identity negotiation, the adaptation process will fail and leave the individual unable to accept the new environment.

## **Methodology**

This article employs an ethnographic approach which is assumed to be able to understand the behavior of participants in a community in certain social situations by using their own interpretations (Dewan, 2018). Therefore, this study examines the intercultural communication experienced by Indonesian Muslim women Ph.D. students in the United States from the speaker's standpoint. This method gathers as much information as possible in the field on the informants' communication experiences during their first year in the United States and the activities they took as a strategy to overcome these challenges in both their academic and social environments.

There were 11 informants involved in this study, each of which was a student at State Albany University, Boston University, and Northern Illinois University, which were selected purposively. All informants are disguised to avoid violation of privacy. Some were married with children, some were married without children, while others were single. This disparity in informant status impacts the data extraction and processing since they have varied schedules in addition to residing in various places. As a result, the primary data collection strategies were observation and in-depth interviews. Due to the pandemic situation, the observation technique was performed online which was carried out through observing their daily activities through statuses and conversations on WhatsApp groups which were then sorted according to the research objectives, namely related to their experiences as students in the first year.

Meanwhile, open in-depth interviews were held to allow them to convey their feelings and experiences throughout their first years as international students. Interviews were conducted throughout late 2019 and early 2020 via WhatsApp and Skype video calls where those years were the beginning of the pandemic. Technically, the interviews were conducted separately and adjusted to the willingness of each informant and all interviews were conducted using bahasa which was then transcribed and translated. The questions focused on the issues they encountered during their first years as international students, their involvement in intercultural communication, and the extent to which their intercultural communication competence can affect their academic progress as international students. These themes were then developed through the concept of identity negotiation so that they could describe the transformation they experienced as international students.

## **Results and Discussion**

During their first year living in the United States, Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students experienced problems and challenges experienced by many international students, which are generally framed as intercultural interactions. Therefore, this section will describe the problems faced, including general problems, personal problems, social problems, and academic problems as international students. The discussion then explores their involvement in intercultural communication as an adaptive strategy and how their intercultural communication skills have implications for their academic achievement as international students.

According to previous studies, environmental and cultural shifts are determining factors that cause challenges for international students, particularly in their first year (Oanh (Olena) & Balakrishnan, 2020; Peng & Wu, 2019). They are still attempting to grasp the situation and the norms that drive the new environment. In this first year, four kinds of problems can be

identified: common problems, personal problems, social problems, and academic problems. Common problems are issues that emerge for everyone living abroad in their first year, as students and as temporary residents; therefore, this type of issue is not limited to international students.

First, homesickness is a common problem faced by almost all international students, including Indonesia. The phenomenon of homesickness is commonplace for international students in the first year. If homesickness cannot be overcome, it can drive loneliness, dislocation, alienated feeling, and self-isolation. This related study has also been described by Brown (2009), which reveals that the longing for various things related to the country of origin is a challenge for those living abroad. Although technology has enabled long-distance communication to connect with their families via video calls and the like, it does not entirely eliminate the homesickness they experience. Moreover, this homesickness is more often experienced by international students who leave their spouses and children in their home country than those who are single and live far away from their parents. Those who live far away from their parents can cope better with homesickness than those who leave their spouses and children.

Homesickness can also be triggered by various factors, including differences in food and weather that necessitate appropriate adjustments. The difference in food is one of the most significant factors for Muslim students from Indonesia who live a religiously committed lifestyle and must consume halal food. Most students bring various spices and food stocks from Indonesia to survive because they will find it hard to find in the United States. As Muslims in a country where Islam is a minority, halal food should be considered. In addition, the weather is also challenging. It requires quite a long adaptation, so they usually bring herbs and traditional medicine from Indonesia to overcome the inconvenient weather.

These steps constitute a kind of preventive strategy. For example, Thurber and Malton (2012) recommend several preventive strategies to avoid extreme homesickness. These strategies are as follows: 1) making and improving control for decision-making by maximizing agencies such as choosing the schedules and subjects of school materials to assist the adaptation process; 2) seeking information about important places such as campus life, public spaces, and recreational destinations to avoid anxieties; and 3) making plans to maintain family tight in the home country as social support by enhancing intense communication to strengthen the adaptation process; and (4) making healthy lifestyle by routinely doing exercises, consuming nutritious food, and attending positive meetings with friends and colleagues.

Several other attempts were made to increase their engagement with conational friends by attending gatherings and other meetings to establish a strong bond with their nationality. The majority of them stated that they obtained advantageous fulfillment from being reached by other more experienced Indonesians in the United States, such as being involved in the celebration of Independence Day, Ramadan Fest, holidays, and other events, which have contributed to their homesickness situation. These events become a medium that helps release them from the pressures as reflected in the following expressions,

*I admit that I always miss the family atmosphere, having good time while enjoying traditional food together, the atmosphere of family warmth and the like... I think this is something natural, my friends feel that way too. Fortunately, several communities from Indonesia and the Indonesian embassy here occasionally facilitate such activities so that we can gather and socialize with fellow Indonesians... (Interview, Informant 03, January 2020).*

*The events held by the Indonesian community are enough to cure my longing for my family and hometown. In this event, I can speak bahasa, even my local languages if I meet people from the same ethnicities with mine... and of course it made me realize that I am not alone...*  
(Interview, Informant 09, January 2020).

Second, dislocation/negative place attachment. Place attachment is bonding formed by people with their place (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001). The bonding should grow and be positive during the stay in a new environment. Though it needs time, place attachment also depends on the psychological state of the newcomer. There is a correlation between a person's level of 'place attachment' and their boundaries. They become more concerned about the place (Hashemnezhad et al., 2013). Newcomers commonly encounter dislocation (negative place attachment), which is a common reaction to a new environment. Ting-Toomey (1999) agrees with this assertion, stating that a newcomer frequently experiences dislocation when they initially enter the new environment. These students had the same experience, but they turned the situation around by establishing boundaries to make the new location pleasant and homey.

According to the findings of this study, the majority of these Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students were encountering uncertain psychological states associated with place attachment. The primary factors were language and cultural barriers, making them feel different and alienated while socializing in the United States. They then solve this problem by interacting with locals and recognizing the lifestyle and culture in the United States as a form of acceptance of other parties to be connected as means to a well-ongoing location connection. This was conveyed by one of the informants as follows,

*According to suggestions from some of my friends who have lived longer, I started to build friendships with my closest neighbors and local residents. This was quite difficult at first, but now I have several friends who are local residents, although not all of them are students...*  
(Interview, Informant 05, December 2019).

Third, cultural shock. This phenomenon frequently occurs when international students with particular values and norms move to a new location with different values and norms, perhaps resulting in an adverse reaction to what they see and experience. According to Ting-Toomey (1999), culture shock is a social phenomenon that occurs when a newcomers' cognitive confusion influences their identity. She adds that culture shock has double faces that will cause both physical and mental health if not handled properly. On the other hand, it is surprising that culture shock can also increase independence, cognitive flexibility in thinking, self-confidence, and open-mindedness in the interaction process.

For international students from Indonesia, culture shock is more of a symptom experienced in the first few months. It can be overcome in a short time. However, it is interesting that this adjustment takes place more quickly in daily interactions outside the campus because, in the context of academic culture, they experience culture shock relatively longer.

Fourth, financial problems. This problem is mainly faced by international students in the United States, particularly those from developing countries such as Indonesia. Although some of the informants in this study were scholarship awardees, the disparity in living costs pushed them to confront this issue. This situation is especially visible in individuals who bring family members with them while they are bound by the rules not to have extra jobs outside of

their duties as students; thus, their decision to bring family also pushes them to make financial management decisions.

However, each student has their preparation. A scholarship was the primary source of income for single individuals. For students who previously held secure positions (such as civil servants or work in other fields), the scholarship might be handled in tandem with their wages. Usually, they have sufficient savings before accepting the scholarship. While for their husbands also contributed to the family's income by working extra jobs to cover everyday expenses, house rents, children's schools, and other necessities. Another way to manage finance was self-cooking for meals and bringing food to campus.

Most of these students believe that financial expertise could help them get out of a problem. Local food that suited their tastes was a good method to save money because Indonesian food stocks were more expensive and harder to find. For those married with children, they already introduced American food for the children so that they would not have a problem with taste. Local food, on the other hand, was not a big deal for single students.

### ***Negotiate with the Situations: Overcoming Personal and Social-Related Problems***

Another problem that international students encounter is personal-related problems, often tied to family issues, especially for those who bring their spouse and children to the United States. Some of these personal-related problems concern parenting, communication with spouses, and the state of being a single mother for those whose spouse does not accompany them. Meanwhile, these issues are not too prominent for those who are single.

When it comes to parenting, those who bring their spouse and children are attempting to adjust to their new surroundings and urging their spouse and children to do the same. This is usually avoided by obtaining information from colleagues who lived in the United States long before coming to the United States. They seek advice on suitable schools for their children. In this context, conational friends served as a support system outside of the family, providing parenting advice to focus on completing their studies.

Other personal-related problems are also present in terms of communicating with spouses. Effective communication with a spouse can be a valuable resource for these students while continuing their studies in the United States. Their spouse became a focal point to talk about their studies, personal, and social lives. Well-maintained communication with spouses boosted the success of these students' lives, especially when it came to going hand in hand for the household, child-raising, and the students' professional lives as students. Partners might provide ideas into the ideal childrearing that would not jeopardize their academic life.

Some students live in the United States without their spouses but bring their children with them. This is usually because their spouses do not have permission from their jobs to travel. Or students who are single mothers because their husbands have died or they have divorced. Of course, being a single mother and a student simultaneously is not easy and even more significant hardship. They had to be wise in arranging everything without the assistance of life partners to share with.

Though there were few, there were still single students; that is, they had not married. For them, being unmarried did not impede continuing their studies overseas. Although they were still unmarried, they had planned their marriage in their home country. They wanted to maximize their prospects of completing their education because they were at a very productive age. Being unmarried was also advantageous since they had plenty of time to finish their degrees. They had managed to keep their relationship after finishing their degree. When their degrees were completed, the majority of these single students would be under 35. This single status made them more independent and could do better mobility than those with statuses as wives or mothers.



Single-status students have more free time to complete their studies and prepare for their primary responsibilities as international students. On the other hand, those who married thought they were more sociable than those who were single. Surprisingly, both married and single students worked together to solve challenges due to their conational relationship, such as preparing discussions for gatherings for Ramadan fest, religious sermons, Independence Day, and so on. They also encouraged and supported one another in their academic endeavors to achieve the best results.

Meanwhile, some of the social-related problems they face include; discrimination, cultural counterpart, and self-confidence. In general, informants claimed to have faced discrimination based on their gender, race, or religious beliefs. Objectively, these international students from Indonesia stand apart from the crowd, physical appearance, and lifestyle. As a Muslim woman who wears the hijab, the majority group's discriminatory and intolerant behavior can cause further problems, causing them to disengage from their academic and social lives. More specifically, discrimination against international students can impact their acculturation process in a new setting. According to Wadsworth (2008), acculturation is a positive outcome for international students, particularly academic achievement.

However, the sorts of discrimination individuals confront on campus are not considered overly upsetting because the discriminatory behavior they encounter is still within reasonable bounds, such as a suspicious judgment of their appearance. These Muslim students see this as a result of their lack of knowledge about Islamic teachings. They can solve this situation by explaining their physical appearance.

Meanwhile, social problems regarding cultural counterparts are primarily manifested by their attachment to their homeland's customs. They perceive culture in the United States as negative and not according to what they desire. For them, Indonesian culture and outlook are better than American, which can lead to unfavorable communication patterns and a delay in adapting to the new environment. This stigma can be addressed by knowing and getting to know it better through increasing interaction with the host, promoting respectful manners, and protecting norms and values. In terms of cultural differences, most of the students were wise enough to manage the situation by seeking the help of both international and local friends.

Another social-related problem is self-confidence. In general, this issue emerges due to their different viewpoints on various lifestyle standards. However, they concluded that having the opportunity to interact with people from other backgrounds makes them feel more at ease in a new context. Giving details about one's background will make it easier for international students to make friends. The information gained can help to increase one's self-esteem. The similar problems of being different in a particular country encourage the friendship of international students from diverse nations.

The intense engagement with many people contributes to these Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students' rising self-confidence. Self-confidence is directly tied to self-adaptation, which contributes to societal comfort. This level of familiarity in international dialogue can help to reduce societal conflict. The more powerful the interaction, the more experience and insights gained, both verbally and nonverbally, with the host without leaving their backgrounds. Active participation in communication has evolved into an adaptive method for increasing self-confidence.

As a result, international students from various backgrounds face similar difficulties in the transition process during their first year in the United States. This includes students who have previously studied abroad, such as in Australia and England. Furthermore, being mothers and wives and being Ph.D. students pose additional issues. Thus, the first and best strategy to overcome challenges in intercultural communication is to understand the barriers. Differences in language, gesture, contextual level, stereotype and negative bias, mood, and emotion are commonly triggering factors.

On the other hand, language and cultural differences are the most troublesome reason. Those who continue to demonstrate the phenomena of cultural counterparts make it even more difficult for them to adapt. It relates to an essential principle that language negotiation to identify a further cultural and religious background is necessary to associate with the surroundings. A well-maintained communication leads to acculturation and assimilation as long as it does not touch on a personal topic, which will trigger identity discrimination. Religion is the most personal and respected right that can be effectively articulated in an effective communication pattern.

### ***Pursuing Dreams: Dealing with Academic-Related Problems***

Regardless of the difficulties they experience, Indonesian Muslim Ph.D. students maintain that their primary goal is to complete their studies. This is not only a social reason but also an individual motive, especially since they are generally scholarship awardees, indicating that they have come a long way to pursue education in the United States. Their most precious ambition is to complete their studies, and to achieve that dream, they strive to make peace with the various obstacles they face. Some of the previously stated problems are non-academic-related problems, which means they have nothing to do with their status as students. The problems they experience become more measurable in their position as international students with tasks and targets to accomplish. As a result, individuals employ various strategies in an effort not only to adjust but also to truly live it in diverse ways.

### ***Differences in the Educational System and Academic Culture***

As previously stated, the education system and academic culture in the United States are distinct from those in Indonesia. Similarly, the norms and values of international students from the host and other countries are varied. The differences in education systems can make it difficult for international students to follow the educational process of lecturing, assignments, and writing; therefore, they should be more active in addressing challenges that may arise during their time on campus. Hellsten (2002) state that personal and social adaptation in the country to pursue study and the characteristics both inside and outside the class is the key toward academic adjustment.

Meanwhile, the Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students stated their reasons for using this academic system in the United States to expedite their degree completion. They preferred to participate in discussions that were expected to be more critical and active. Although the system was informal, allowing them to address lecturers, supervisors, and professors just by name, they preferred to implement their origin culture correctly. According to these Indonesian students, studying abroad is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn about a different culture. They take the opportunity to showcase their original culture. As international students, they must adjust to a new academic system.

### ***Communication with Other Students***

International students are more likely to complete research and academic writing if they have a good relationship with local or other international students. They can get social support and informal learning for their academic goals. When they begin to write dissertations, input from friends might be very helpful. Having friends from various ethnic and identity backgrounds will help with formal and informal English proficiency through meetings and discussions inside and outside of class. Making friends with students from other countries

provides beneficial opportunities for negotiating identities and sharing unfamiliar things for mutual intercultural understanding.

The majority of these notables used this connection to improve cross-cultural understanding. They participated in university-hosted seminars, workshops, discussions, and intercultural and traditional events to gain a better understanding. They also urged families to participate in the events to promote tolerance.

### ***Communication with Lecturers***

The American education system encourages students to express themselves freely in class. Unfortunately, there was a perception that international students lacked satisfied knowledge of critical thinking in the discussion, academic journal writing, key concepts, and theoretical foundations. Their language barrier worsened this perception since most international students were unable to use their opportunities to express themselves critically in the classroom.

As a result, they were expected to participate more actively in discussions to enhance their critical thinking skills. This, of course, impacted their English proficiency. Active communication with lecturers is typical in English-speaking countries, although it is not yet common in Indonesia. Most Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students have learned a lot about the circumstances of communicating with lecturers both inside and outside of the classroom.

Although the educational systems in the United States and Indonesia emphasize the importance of writing skills, Indonesian students believe they are expected to be better at writing in English; therefore, they must put in more effort. This, of course, becomes one of the exhausting requirements. They are, nevertheless, completely aware of their objectives, which they overcome by spending most of their time at the office and library researching various references related to their studies. They also hold additional meetings to discuss their study subjects and take writing lessons to improve their writing skills. Slowly but sure, they showed advanced improvement though they must experience hard times.

Supervisors have become the best place to ask questions, even though these students must prepare for many things before the meetings. These students also indicated that their supervisors advised them on dissertation writing and supported them during difficult moments (Hofstede, 1991) by providing them with a wealth of knowledge regarding campus life. They expressed gratitude for the informal relationship they had with the supervisors, which made the writing progress easier. However, their well-kept relationship was difficult to maintain throughout their first year since they lacked the confidence to initiate the conversation. When the communication became more flexible, these students could freely express their points of view. This was one of the academic atmosphere's main goals, where students should develop a collegial qualified and critical connection.

### ***Communication with Staff***

Communication abridgment with university staff is one of the supportive factors for international students' academic achievement. They had university life connectors for these students who had issues with education, health, finances, etc. Most international students do not take advantage of admissions professionals to help them get out of difficult university circumstances. When they encountered difficulties, they tended to rely on their staff. This characteristic was common among Indonesian Ph.D. Muslim women students. On the other hand, they were advised by their conational friends to make the most of the staffs' assistance, particularly to request informative inputs for their improvement.

## Conclusion

Internally, Indonesian students faced intercultural communication challenges such as differences in languages, values, styles, and norms in their first year, which made them feel alienated and discriminated. These were only their internal perceptions because they had no tight with the new place (dislocation) and preferred to isolate themselves and only socialize with national networks. Meanwhile, outsiders' opinions of their English inadequacy, such as local friends, lecturers, supervisors, and host people, may have become an external cause of their failure. Though their reliance on national friends was potentially negative, they felt that their conational friends also aided them in overcoming the obstacles.

Even they have problems during their first year; they can eventually participate in the interaction, adaptation, assimilation, and other forms of intercultural communication. All challenges associated with cross-cultural communication can be reduced when they have the information, skills, and motivation (both internal and external) to employ adaptive techniques to assist academic and social success. They ultimately categorized challenges and obstacles encountered during intercultural contact life as transnationals after conquering their initial stumbling blocks of homesickness, dislocation, culture shock, language gap, and financial problems. They may also encounter obstacles related to parenting, communication with spouses, and others that do not detract from their primary purpose as international students.

In other words, their difficulties during their first year overseas had taught them how to develop knowledge, skills, and motivation as both international students and members of society. Meeting and gathering knowledge on topics related to intercultural communication success were aided by both national and local friends, allowing them to build a mutual intercultural communication understanding. Their participation in events organized by their conational friends and other international students from various cultures remains positive. Their eagerness to participate in academic life for seminars, workshops, and discussions both inside and outside the classroom helped them improve their English and critical thinking skills, which was beneficial to their communicative and academic skills and abilities.

However, it is important to note that this study has certain limitations. First, this study only analyzes the experiences of some Muslim women students from Indonesia during their first year as international students; therefore, it does not entirely capture the experiences of all Indonesian students in the United States. As a result, a more extensive study with more diverse informants is required to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Second, the approach of this study focuses more on intercultural communication efforts within the context of negotiating the identity and culture of Muslim women students from Indonesia. With assumptions limited by this concept, the outcomes generated are also limited to the practice of negotiating their identity as a particular cultural group in a new setting. Therefore, although it was briefly mentioned about the issue of discrimination, a more specific and in-depth study is needed regarding the political aspects associated with the position of Indonesian students who in this study are all Muslims so that other perspectives can be obtained that can enrich this study.

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