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Social Media Communication and Cultural Adaptation among University Students in Padang City

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social media in intercultural communication and cultural adaptation among university students in Padang City. The increasing diversity of student backgrounds has intensified interactions across cultural and linguistic boundaries, particularly within digital communication spaces. Using a qualitative approach with a descriptive case study design, this research explores how migrant and local students communicate, adapt, and manage cultural differences through social media platforms. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of online interactions involving university students from various academic institutions in Padang.

Keywords: *Intercultural communication, social media communication, cultural adaptation, university students, digital interaction*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media has significantly transformed the way individuals communicate, interact, and construct social relationships. In higher education settings, social media platforms function not only as tools for academic coordination but also as important spaces for everyday interaction among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a result, digital communication has become a central arena where intercultural encounters and cultural adaptation processes take place (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Padang City, as one of the major educational centers in West Sumatra, presents a unique sociocultural context shaped predominantly by Minangkabau cultural values. Universities in this city attract students from various regions of Indonesia, creating a multicultural academic environment. Interactions between local students and migrant students occur not only through face-to-face communication but also extensively through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and other digital channels. These online interactions provide opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, adjust communication styles, and develop mutual understanding across cultural boundaries.

Intercultural communication scholarship has long emphasized adaptation as a key process in cross-cultural interactions. Kim's (2001) Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation conceptualizes cultural adaptation as a dynamic and continuous process involving

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adjustments within a new sociocultural environment. This process is not unidirectional; rather, it involves reciprocal adaptation between individuals and their social surroundings. In the context of university students, both migrant and local students actively participate in this adaptive process through daily interactions.

In addition, Communication Accommodation Theory proposed by Giles, Coupland, and Coupland (1991) explains how individuals modify their communicative behaviors—such as language choice, speech style, and symbolic expressions—to reduce social distance and achieve social approval. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to social media communication, where students consciously or unconsciously adjust their language, tone, and digital expressions to align with the norms of culturally diverse online groups.

From a technological perspective, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) theory offers further insight into intercultural interaction in digital environments. Walther's (1996) Social Information Processing Theory argues that meaningful interpersonal relationships can develop through mediated communication, despite the absence of nonverbal cues. In intercultural contexts, students employ various symbolic strategies—such as emojis, stickers, and informal language—to convey emotions, manage impressions, and minimize potential misunderstandings (Walther, 1996). Previous studies have highlighted the importance of social media in facilitating cultural adaptation among students. Chen and Starosta (2018) suggest that digital interaction allows individuals to observe and learn cultural communication norms gradually before engaging more actively in direct interaction. Similarly, Park (2020) found that students from different cultural backgrounds often feel more confident expressing themselves in online environments during the early stages of adaptation, as digital spaces offer greater flexibility and lower social pressure.

Despite the growing body of research on intercultural communication and social media, studies that focus on local intercultural dynamics within Indonesian university contexts remain limited. Much of the existing literature concentrates on international or global intercultural interactions, while less attention has been given to communication processes between local and migrant students within specific cultural settings such as Padang City.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how university students in Padang use social media as a space for communication and how cultural adaptation strategies are enacted in their digital interactions. By focusing on everyday online communication practices, this research seeks to contribute to the understanding of intercultural communication in digital contexts and to provide empirical insights into how cultural adaptation unfolds among students within a local Indonesian setting.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive-interpretative approach. The research aimed to explore patterns of social media communication and processes of cultural adaptation among university students in Padang. A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the depth of interaction, meaning-making processes, and contextual nuances embedded in digital communication practices.

The study focused on naturally occurring interactions rather than experimentally controlled settings, allowing cultural adaptation processes to be observed as they unfolded in everyday digital communication.

The research was conducted in university environments located in Padang City, with observations focusing on students' interactions through social media platforms commonly used in academic and social contexts, such as WhatsApp and Instagram.

Aspect Information

Detail Observation:

City	: Padang
Social Media Platforms Observed	: WhatsApp, Instagram, Tiktok
Observation Period	: 20 November - 15 December 2025

The participants consisted of local students originating from West Sumatra and migrant students from various regions outside West Sumatra who were enrolled in universities in Padang. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the following criteria:

- Actively enrolled as university students in Padang
- Actively participating in social media-based academic or social groups
- Involved in intercultural interactions with students from different cultural backgrounds
- To maintain ethical standards, participants' identities were anonymized, and no personal identifiers were included in the data presentation.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through non-participant observation and digital documentation. The researcher did not intervene in the communication process but observed interactions as they naturally occurred. The data collection process included:

- Observing message exchanges in group chats (e.g., class groups, student organizations)
- Analyzing captions, comments, and interaction patterns on Instagram
- Taking field notes on language choice, code-switching, emoji usage, and interactional norms
- Documenting recurring communication patterns related to cultural adaptation

All observed interactions were recorded in the form of written field notes and selected message excerpts, with sensitive content excluded to preserve participant privacy.

The observation was guided by a structured observation framework to ensure consistency and focus during data collection.

- Language Choice: Use of Indonesian, local language, or mixed language
- Code-Switching: Frequency and context of language switching
- Communication Tone: Formal, informal, or neutral
- Emoji and Symbol Use: Type and function of emojis or stickers
- Cultural Adaptation Indicators: Adjustment strategies, inclusion efforts, avoidance of conflict

• Interaction Dynamics: Response patterns and participation levels

Data analysis followed the stages of qualitative thematic analysis. The process involved:

1. Data Familiarization: Reviewing field notes and documented interactions to gain an overall understanding of communication patterns.
2. Coding: Identifying key expressions, language choices, and interactional behaviors related to communication strategies and cultural adaptation.
3. Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes such as language adaptation, digital politeness, and intercultural negotiation.
4. Interpretation: Interpreting the themes by relating them to intercultural communication and cultural adaptation theories.

The analysis was conducted continuously throughout the data collection process to allow emerging patterns to inform subsequent observations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Forms of Social Media Interaction

Social media interactions among university students in Padang can be categorized into formal and informal forms. Formal interactions usually occur in academic-related platforms such as class WhatsApp groups or organizational forums, including announcements, coordination of assignments, and official invitations. Informal interactions, on the other hand, are reflected in casual chats, comment exchanges on Instagram, and spontaneous conversations in group chats.

These interactions serve not only as channels for information exchange but also as spaces where cultural values, norms, and identities are negotiated and expressed. Interaction among students through social media is formed through various patterns, including:

• Casual conversations in WhatsApp class or organization groups.
• Informal exchanges via direct messages (DMs) on Instagram.
• Sharing memes, stories, and short comments that reflect cultural humor.
• Participation in online discussions related to campus or social issues.
• Group coordination for academic tasks and student activities.

Students who actively participate in online interactions tend to be perceived as approachable and cooperative. In contrast, students who remain passive or rarely respond are sometimes labeled as "less engaged" or "difficult to connect with," even when no direct conflict exists. This finding indicates that participation in digital communication significantly influences social perception and relational acceptance among students.

Student Experiences in Intercultural Digital Communication

Despite initial challenges, many students gradually develop confidence in navigating intercultural communication through social media. One migrant student shared:

"At first, I was afraid to speak in the group chat because I didn't understand the jokes and expressions used by local students. But after observing for a while, I realized it was okay to ask or respond slowly. They were actually quite understanding."

Such experiences suggest that social media provides a relatively safe environment for students to learn communication norms, observe interaction patterns, and adapt without the immediate pressure of face-to-face encounters. When students show willingness to engage, their efforts are often met with positive responses from peers.

Adaptation Strategies in Social Media Communication

To manage cultural differences and maintain harmonious relationships, students employ several adaptation strategies, including:

1. Using neutral Indonesian instead of regional languages in mixed-group conversations.
2. Gradually learning local expressions through repeated exposure in chats and comments.
3. Observing interaction patterns before actively participating in discussions.
4. Using emojis, stickers, or humor to soften messages and reduce potential misinterpretation.
5. Communicating privately (via direct messages) when unsure about public responses.

These strategies demonstrate students' awareness that communication is not merely about conveying information, but also about maintaining social harmony. Adaptation, therefore, becomes a conscious effort to balance cultural identity with group inclusivity.

Conflict and Misunderstanding in Digital Interaction

Conflict, understood as a process arising from differences in values, expectations, or communication styles, is a natural aspect of intercultural interaction. In line with Lewis A. Coser's view of conflict as a struggle over incompatible interests and Soerjono Soekanto's perspective on social opposition, conflicts in digital student interactions tend to be subtle and situational rather than overt. Several forms of conflict were identified in the context of social media communication among students in Padang:

- Misinterpretation of jokes or sarcasm in text-based messages.
- Perceived indifference due to delayed responses or short replies.
- Differences in communication tone, such as direct versus indirect expressions.
- Cultural misunderstandings related to politeness and group etiquette.

These conflicts rarely escalate into open disputes but often create temporary discomfort or distance between individuals.

Conflict Resolution Approaches

Students employ various conflict resolution strategies to address misunderstandings and preserve relationships:

1. Clarification: Students often explain their intentions when a message is misunderstood, usually by adding follow-up messages or emojis.

2. Private Communication: Sensitive issues are frequently resolved through direct messages rather than public group chats to avoid embarrassment.
3. Behavioral Adjustment: After receiving feedback, students tend to adjust their communication style, such as being more responsive or cautious in wording.

In addition to these immediate practices, broader conflict resolution strategies can be identified:

- Negotiation: Direct discussion to reach mutual understanding.
- Mediation: Involvement of respected peers or group administrators.
- Compromise: Adjusting expectations from both sides.
- Collaboration: Working together to improve communication norms.

These approaches reflect students' preference for maintaining harmony rather than asserting dominance in digital spaces.

Social Relationships and Intercultural Communication

The findings indicate a strong relationship between communication practices and the quality of social relationships among students. Effective adaptation strategies foster trust, inclusion, and a sense of belonging, particularly for migrant students. Conversely, lack of engagement or rigid communication styles may unintentionally create social distance.

Social media thus functions as a critical arena where relationships are built, maintained, and repaired. Through continuous interaction, students learn not only linguistic forms but also cultural expectations that shape their participation in the academic community.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that intercultural communication among university students in Padang extends beyond language proficiency to include cultural sensitivity, empathy, and adaptive behavior. Social media plays a central role in facilitating these processes by offering flexible, low-pressure spaces for interaction.

While cultural differences initially present challenges, students' willingness to adapt and engage transforms potential conflicts into opportunities for learning. This study highlights the importance of intercultural communication competence in higher education settings and suggests that universities should support initiatives that encourage inclusive digital communication practices.

Ultimately, strengthening students' ability to navigate cultural diversity through communication contributes not only to individual development but also to broader social harmony within multicultural academic environments.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that social media plays a significant role in shaping intercultural communication and cultural adaptation among university students in Padang City. Digital platforms function not only as tools for information exchange but also as social spaces where cultural values, communication norms, and interpersonal relationships are continuously negotiated. For both migrant and local students, social media offers a flexible environment that allows gradual adaptation,

observation, and learning, particularly for those who initially experience cultural or linguistic barriers.

The findings indicate that successful intercultural communication in online settings depends largely on students' adaptive strategies rather than solely on language proficiency. The use of neutral language, awareness of communication tone, and sensitivity to group norms contribute to smoother interactions and stronger social bonds. Students who actively engage in digital communication tend to be more socially accepted, while passive participation may unintentionally lead to perceptions of disengagement or social distance.

Conflict in digital intercultural interactions is generally subtle and situational, often arising from misinterpretation of messages, differences in humor, or variations in response patterns. However, these conflicts rarely escalate when students apply effective resolution strategies such as clarification, private communication, behavioral adjustment, and peer mediation. These practices reflect a shared preference for maintaining social harmony and mutual respect within the student community.

Overall, intercultural communication among university students in Padang is a dynamic process that involves continuous adaptation, empathy, and reciprocal effort. Strengthening intercultural communication competence—particularly in digital environments—can support student integration, reduce misunderstandings, and foster inclusive academic communities. Universities are therefore encouraged to facilitate awareness of intercultural digital communication through orientation programs, student activities, and collaborative forums. By doing so, higher education institutions can contribute to the development of socially aware graduates who are capable of navigating cultural diversity both online and offline.

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