Culture Shock and the Paradox of Adaptation: A Phenomenological Study on Resilience and Self-Identity Reconstruction among Interregional Students

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the phenomenon of culture shock experienced by students from different regions at Universitas Negeri Manado using a phenomenological study approach. The main focus of this research is to describe the experience of culture shock and to explore strategies for developing resilience and reconstructing the self-identity of students from different regions during the adaptation process in a new environment. The research subjects consist of 3 (three) individuals with the following criteria: the subjects are students from different regions who have been studying for at least 3 (three) semesters at Universitas Negeri Manado, possess clear experiences of culture shock, both positive and negative during their studies, originate from various regions and diverse cultural backgrounds, and demonstrate a measurable level of resilience in coping with culture shock. Data collection methods include observation and in-depth interviews, which are thematically analyzed to identify patterns of experiences and adaptation strategies used. The results indicate that students from different face various challenges such as cultural differences, language, social norms, weather, and food, which trigger feelings of alienation, stress, and frustration. Nevertheless, they develop effective adaptation strategies, namely building social support, learning the local language, and appreciating and accepting the new culture. Additionally, self-reflection, increased self-confidence, self-efficacy, positive affirmation, and self-awareness also play important roles in strengthening resilience and helping them reconstruct their self-identity. This study is expected to provide theoretical and practical contributions in the development of policies and support programs capable of assisting students from different in facing culture shock, especially in the context of cultural diversity in Indonesia.
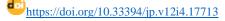
Introduction

The concept of culture shock was first introduced by an anthropologist named Oberg in 1960 to describe the profound and negative responses of frustration, depression, and disorientation experienced by an individual living in a new cultural environment. The concept of culture shock was later refined by Bochner and Furnham. They proposed that culture shock typically occurs due to one or more of the following three causes: 1) Loss of cues or familiar signs. Essentially, cues are part of everyday life, such as signs, facial expressions, habits, or body movements (gestures) that inform an individual on how to behave in certain situations. 2) Disruption of communication between individuals at a conscious level, leading to anxiety and frustration. Language barriers are also a clear cause of this disruption. 3) An identity

crisis resulting from an individual leaving their home region, prompting them to reevaluate their self-concept (Bochner, S., & Furnham, M., 2001).

Samovar argues that people typically go through four stages of culture shock. These four stages are depicted in the form of a U-Curve, hence referred to as the U-Curve, consisting of: 1) The optimistic phase, the first stage positioned at the upper left part of the U curve. This phase involves feelings of hope, excitement, and euphoria as an individual's anticipation before entering a new culture. 2) The cultural problems phase, the second stage where issues with the new environment begin to emerge. This phase is usually marked by dissatisfaction and feelings of disappointment. It represents a crisis period in culture shock. Individuals become stunned and confused by their surroundings, leading to frustration, irritability, impatience, anger, and even incompetence. 3) The recovery phase, the third stage where individuals begin to understand their new culture. During this period, individuals make gradual adjustments and changes in how they respond to the new culture. Events in the new environment become more predictable and less overwhelming. 4) The adjustment phase, the final stage depicted at the right peak of the U curve, where individuals have grasped the key elements of their new culture, such as values, beliefs, specific customs, communication patterns, and more (Samovar et al., 2017).

Cultural differences can make an individual feel like a stranger, as they face new situations that do not align with their cultural background. This can lead to stress and shock, which in turn can disrupt an individual's self-concept and identity, as well as cause anxiety. Such conditions result in psychological and physical disturbances over a certain period.

Research conducted by Bista and Dagley (2018) shows that students experiencing more severe culture shock tend to have lower academic performance, making it essential to understand how culture shock affects various aspects of human life. Similarly, research by Aldi et al. (2024) indicates that participants in the Merdeka Student Exchange Program (PMM) at Universitas Ganesha of Education faced similar challenges, including difficulties in communication, adapting to cultural differences, and adjusting to a new academic environment. The adaptation of PMM students to this new environment is a crucial challenge, as it can impact their mental health and academic performance, underscoring the importance of understanding and supporting this adaptation process.

In facing various psychological and emotional pressures, students from different regions are required to develop effective adaptation strategies to overcome culture shock and achieve balance in campus life. In this adjustment process, resilience and identity reconstruction are two highly important aspects. Students from different regions must be able to recognize and manage their emotions, as well as build a strong social support system to cope with the various pressures they encounter. An individual's ability to adapt to a new environment is greatly influenced by prior experiences and available social support, which play a key role in shaping their self-identity during the adjustment process (Sengkey, Aditama, & Tiwa, 2020). Previous studies have not comprehensively examined the impact of culture shock on individual identity or the adaptation strategies implemented to address pressures in a new environment. In contrast, this research focuses on the subjective experiences of students from different regions and the adaptation strategies they employ to adjust to the new environment. Prior research has more heavily explored the experiences of students from different regions in an international context, whereas this study specifically examines the experiences of students from different regions across Indonesian provinces.

Given the importance of the adaptation process, students from different regions are compelled to develop resilience and the ability to reconstruct their self-identity as primary

strategies for dealing with cultural shocks. Research by Aldi et al. (2024) demonstrates that effective campus orientation programs play a significant role in facilitating adaptation for students from different regions, particularly in helping them build solid social networks. Beyond providing basic information about the new environment, these programs also emphasize the importance of emotional and social support. Providing platforms for social interaction and sharing experiences among students is an effective method for mitigating the negative impacts of stress caused by culture shock.

Universitas Negeri Manado is one of the state universities located in North Sulawesi Province, specifically in the city of Tomohon. Each year, it attracts many prospective new students from outside the region or province with the same motivations and goals: to pursue knowledge and advance to a higher level of education. It is through these students from different regions that cultural diversity begins to form, both in the campus environment and in temporary living spaces (such as boarding houses or rentals).

In a community, culture serves as a binding tool, essentially acting as an effective means for society to interact and socialize with diverse individuals from different cultures, allowing them to get to know one another. However, this does not immediately apply to students from different regions who are just entering the initial stage of their life in a new environment. Upon entering a new environment, students from different regions must face social and psychological challenges as part of their adjustment process to their new place of residence. Differences in cultural backgrounds between students from different regions at Universitas Negeri Manado and the local population create a culturally diverse environment. This diversity, combined with the local socio-cultural conditions, is a primary factor in the occurrence of culture shock. This phenomenon arises because students from different regions are not fully prepared to face the transition from their original culture to a new environment with many differences.

Based on the results of a mini-research conducted by the researcher with several students from different regions—from the islands of Kalimantan, Java, and Sumatra—they experienced symptoms of culture shock. For instance, the student from Kalimantan had difficulty adapting to the language in North Sulawesi, struggled to blend in with other students, and consequently felt unmotivated in their daily activities. Similarly, the student from Java had trouble understanding the North Sulawesi language. They initially struggled to adjust to the local food and found it difficult to communicate with the local community. They often felt sad and frustrated due to being far from family and friends in their home region. The student from Sumatra also faced difficulties adapting and communicating, both in the surrounding social environment and on campus, experiencing homesickness from being away from family and friends in their home region.

Culture shock can be overcome if an individual is able to adapt and adjust to the culture of their current location, leading to effective and smooth communication, greater comfort, and resolution of tensions arising from cultural differences (Samovar et al., 2011). Based on research by Hasibullah (2020), the most important effort to address culture shock is adjusting to the local language, as this enables good communication with the local community.

One of the primary requirements for achieving individual mental health is adaptation. When individuals struggle to adapt to their environment, they become vulnerable to stress or depression. Conversely, those who adapt successfully achieve a balance between fulfilling personal needs and meeting the demands of their social environment. This aligns with the theory proposed by Erikson (1950, as cited in Newman, B. M., & Newman, P. R., 2020),

which states that at every stage of life, individuals are required to adapt to their surroundings; those who succeed in adaptation gain satisfaction in life, while those who fail will face obstacles in subsequent life stages.

Based on the explanations provided, the phenomenon of culture shock experienced by students from different regions, particularly those from outside North Sulawesi who are now pursuing education at Universitas Negeri Manado (in the city of Tomohon), is a highly intriguing topic for in-depth study and research to yield beneficial social discoveries. This research aims to explore and describe the culture shock experiences of students from different regions at Universitas Negeri Manado, both positive and negative, as well as to analyze the strategies for developing resilience and reconstructing self-identity among these students in overcoming the challenges faced during the adaptation process.

Research Method

This research employs a qualitative research design with a phenomenological study approach, aiming to understand the meaning and experiences of students from different regions in the complex and dynamic adaptation process related to the phenomenon of culture shock, as well as to examine how these students develop resilience and reconstruct their self-identity in facing various challenges that arise during the adaptation process.

This research involves 3 (three) subjects from different regions (Java Island, Sumatra, and Kalimantan). The number of participants aligns with methodological recommendations in phenomenological research, whose primary focus is understanding the meaning of individual experiences rather than generalization. The subject selection criteria are as follows: the subjects are students from different regions who have been studying for at least 3 (three) semesters at Universitas Negeri Manado, possess clear experiences of culture shock—both positive and negative—during their studies, originate from various regions and diverse cultural backgrounds, and demonstrate a level of resilience in coping with culture shock.

The research was conducted at Universitas Negeri Manado. The data sources in this research consist of primary data obtained through in-depth interviews and secondary data obtained from various relevant literature, such as articles, books, and previous studies. This research uses three data collection techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. Data validity testing in this research employs the triangulation method. The form of triangulation used is source triangulation, which compares what the subjects say with what the informants say to ensure the obtained data is reliable. The data analysis technique in this research is thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), whose process includes verbatim transcription, coding to identify emerging themes, grouping themes based on similarities and differences (the researcher seeks various patterns emerging from the subjects' experiences related to culture shock, resilience, and self-identity reconstruction), interpretation, and report compilation.

Results and Discussion

This study highlights how regional backgrounds influence the intensity of culture shock. Specifically, the research subjects from Java Island are coded as AL, those from Sumatra Island as RY, and those from Kalimantan Island as CP. The study identifies several key points that explain the subjects' experiences, namely:

1) **Social and Cultural Experiences**

One of the most striking aspects of culture shock is the significant cultural differences, which are often exacerbated by regional variations in Indonesia. Students from different

regions face difficulties in adjusting to differences in language and the ways local communities communicate. These challenges frequently create barriers that lead to feelings of alienation and anxiety. RY and AL expressed that the locals' lack of fluency in standard Indonesian, dominated by the thick Manado dialect, posed a major obstacle hindering their social interactions. This demonstrates that language proficiency is crucial in the adaptation process for students from different regions in new environments. In some cases, these language difficulties even led them to consider transferring universities, underscoring the critical role of domestic linguistic factors in adaptation. These findings align with the theory by Mak et al. (2019) on the stages of uncertainty and confusion in culture shock, where language misunderstandings worsen the experience, but they also offer new insights: in the context of inter-regional Indonesia, culture shock is more "micro-cultural" than international, where international students often face total language barriers (such as entirely foreign languages), whereas here, dialect misunderstandings create a paradox—they feel "close yet distant" culturally. This research enriches the literature by highlighting domestic adaptation, which is rarely discussed compared to global cases, and shows that regional cultural shocks can be as intense as international ones, albeit with more subtle dynamics such as the blend of Indonesian and local languages.

Regarding social interactions, students from different regions also experience culture shock related to differing social norms. RY and CP voiced concerns about the differences in how locals interact, with Manado society being more friendly and expressive compared to the more individualistic societies in their home regions. These differences resulted in feelings of awkwardness and skepticism upon initial arrival, particularly for students from different regions from Kalimantan who are accustomed to more closed communal norms. Beyond confirming the acculturation model by Sam and Berry (2019) on cultural interactions, a deeper interpretation reveals that these findings provide a new perspective: inter-regional adaptation in Indonesia involves faster identity reconstruction due to national similarities (such as Indonesian as a bridge), unlike international students who often face total isolation due to core value differences (e.g., Western individualism vs. Asian collectivism).

Concerning weather differences, students from different regions also struggle to adapt to the cooler and windier climate in Tomohon compared to their home areas. RY revealed that the significant weather changes affected their physical and emotional health, adding to the adaptation burden—an aspect that is also more prominent among students from different regions from Sumatra with their humid tropical climate.

Food essentially becomes a vital element in the daily lives of students from different regions. AL and CP perceived stark differences in food flavors between those from their home regions (such as the typically sweet Javanese and Kalimantanese cuisines) and those in Tomohon (influenced by Sulawesi spices and spicier dishes). Adapting to new food flavors presents a unique challenge, where students often miss their regional specialties, which worsens homesickness for participants from Java and Kalimantan.

2) Emotional Experiences of Students from Different Regions

Students from different regions experience stress and frustration due to difficulties in adjusting to the new environment. RY and CP felt profound homesickness, especially when confronted with moments that reminded them of friends and family back home. Regarding identity crisis, this experience arises when students from different regions feel confused about who they are and how to build social relationships in the new environment. RY and AL expressed feelings of confusion and loss regarding their life purposes, which became

even more complex due to cultural and social norm differences. These findings align with the social identity theory by Phinney and Ong (2019), but they also add innovative insights: in domestic adaptation, identity crises are often temporary and catalytic, differing from international students who may experience long-term identity fragmentation due to greater geographical and cultural distances.

3) Academic Experiences of Students from Different Regions

Beyond social challenges, students from different regions also face academic hurdles. AL stated that language differences (local dialects) and the more collaborative education system in Manado—compared to the more structured one in Java—hindered their understanding of course materials and interactions with lecturers. These findings are consistent with the research by Bista and Dagley (2018), which shows that severe culture shock lowers academic performance, but in the Indonesian context, this offers a new perspective: inter-regional adaptation involves negotiating uniform national education norms, allowing resilience to be built more quickly through local institutional support, unlike international students who often rely on specialized orientation programs. This uniqueness contributes to the literature by illustrating how domestic culture shock can serve as an opportunity for regional educational innovation in Indonesia.

Next, this study discusses strategies for developing resilience and self-identity reconstruction among students from different regions at Universitas Negeri Manado. The findings reveal two main points comprising several aspects that explain the strategies employed by the subjects:

1. Adaptation Strategies

a. Social Support

Support from family, friends, and communities is vital in helping students from different regions adapt to new environments. RY and AL expressed that social interactions and emotional support from close ones, including communities of fellow migrants from Java or Sumatra, helped them feel more connected and comfortable. In interviews, the subjects noted that peers who understood their regional situations greatly assisted in overcoming feelings of alienation. This aligns with Yeh and Inose (2019) on the role of social support, but it adds depth: in domestic adaptation, this support is more effective due to national cultural similarities.

b. Learning the Local Language

Students from different regions strive to learn the local language as a way to improve communication. By lowering their egos and opening themselves up, they find adaptation easier, especially participants from Kalimantan (CP) who sought local friends to learn the Manado dialect. This supports Van de Vijver et al. (2016), with new insights that regional dialect learning accelerates hybrid identity reconstruction in Indonesia.

c. Cultural Acceptance

Subjects displayed an open attitude toward local culture, such as Manado music and food, which reduced discomfort. Participants from Sumatra began accepting and enjoying these differences, building an inclusive identity. Consistent with Minkov et al. (2018) on cultural dimensions, these findings are unique because domestic acceptance occurs more quickly, contributing to the literature with an "intra-national" adaptation model.

d. Stress Coping

The stress coping strategies employed by the subjects in this study include watching films, exercising, and sharing stories. These strategies mitigate the impact of culture shock,

with social support as a key element, particularly for participants from Java who used entertainment to cope with regional homesickness.

2. Self-Development

a. Building Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is a key element in the self-identity reconstruction process for students from different regions, where subjects gradually build confidence through repeated adaptation experiences. In this study, subjects from Java Island (AL) and Sumatra Island (RY) expressed that their confidence grew when taking initiatives to interact with new friends and participate in campus social activities. This helped them face culture shock challenges more calmly and proactively. A deeper interpretation shows that this increase in self-confidence supports the findings of Chen et al. (2021) on the role of self-confidence in cross-cultural student adaptation, where higher confidence correlates with reduced stress.

b. Self-Reflection

Self-reflection serves as an important strategy that enables students from different regions to deeply process culture shock experiences and build a more adaptive identity. Subjects from Kalimantan (CP) and Java (AL) stated that they often reflected on their daily experiences, such as difficulties adapting to the weather or social norms in Manado, to recognize strengths (like emotional resilience) and weaknesses (such as dependence on home routines). This process allows evaluation of their emotional reactions to cultural differences, such as homesickness triggered by local food, and helps identify more effective adaptation strategies. These findings align with Fook and Sidhu (2019), who emphasize reflective practice as a tool for personal development in higher education contexts, where self-reflection can enhance self-understanding and reduce the negative impacts of adaptation. In the inter-regional Indonesian context, this self-reflection provides an innovative perspective, facilitating faster hybrid identity reconstruction due to shared national values, unlike international students who may need more time to integrate global cultural differences. The literature contribution here emphasizes self-reflection as a crucial aspect in helping students adapt more quickly to new environments.

c. Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, or belief in one's ability to overcome challenges, emerges as a crucial factor in developing resilience among students from different regions. Subjects originating from Sumatra (RY) and CP from Kalimantan expressed that supportive messages from their parents, such as "don't overthink others' opinions," helped build self-efficacy, encouraging them to take initiatives like independently seeking solutions to language difficulties or building new social networks in Manado. This was particularly evident in CP, who applied self-efficacy to participate in local communal activities despite their more closed background. Consistent with the findings of Honicke and Broadbent (2016) on self-efficacy as a primary predictor of academic and emotional adaptation among students, where high self-efficacy levels reduce anxiety and improve performance. In domestic adaptation, this self-efficacy adds new insights, where students from different regions can develop through family support based on Indonesian values like perseverance, which is more accessible than for international students who often rely on external sources like counseling. This case's uniqueness also contributes to the literature by illustrating how self-efficacy in a regional context strengthens students' self-identity reconstruction.

d. Self-Awareness

Self-awareness, namely the ability to recognize emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and personal values, plays a central role in facilitating positive adaptation and self-identity

reconstruction. In this study, subjects AL (from Java) and RY (from Sumatra) demonstrated high levels of self-awareness toward their culture shock situations, where they realized the need to blend in with the local community to overcome feelings of alienation, such as directly engaging in Manado cultural activities. This awareness enables proactive steps, like seeking social support or adjusting expectations toward regional norms, ultimately building a more inclusive identity. These findings align with Eurich (2017) on self-awareness as the foundation of personal development, where she argues that better self-awareness improves emotional adaptation and interpersonal relationships in new environments. In the inter-regional Indonesian context, self-awareness also provides an innovative perspective, where the resilience process is more effective due to relatively close cultural distances, thus enabling dynamic identity reconstruction without severe fragmentation as seen in international students. The literature contribution here emphasizes self-awareness as a bridge for the paradox of domestic adaptation, where deep application of self-awareness enriches resilience for students from different regions with diverse cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

The results concluded that students from different face various challenges such as cultural differences, language, social norms, weather, and food, which trigger feelings of alienation, stress, and frustration. Nevertheless, they develop effective adaptation strategies, namely building social support, learning the local language, and appreciating and accepting the new culture. Additionally, self-reflection, increased self-confidence, self-efficacy, positive affirmation, and self-awareness also play important roles in strengthening resilience and helping them reconstruct their self-identity. The findings of this research indicate that there are various important elements in the adaptation process, which enable students from different regions to face challenges more effectively and create a more positive migration experience. This research provides new insights into how students from different regions can overcome culture shock and build a healthier social life in their new environment.

Recommendation

The findings of this study can serve as a foundation for universities to design more comprehensive support programs, such as local language training, inter-student mentoring programs, and psychosocial counseling services specifically aimed at helping students from different regions overcome cultural adaptation challenges. This research also paves the way for future studies that could investigate the long-term impacts of culture shock on students' career development or compare different cross-cultural adaptation dynamics. Thus, this study not only provides meaningful academic contributions but also offers a concrete framework for improving the quality of life for students from different regions as they face new cultural challenges.

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