

From Comfort Zones to Cross-Cultural Interaction: Social Interaction Patterns of International Students in Indonesian Higher Education

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Abstract

Keywords:

international student; social interaction; higher education

The increasing number of international students in higher education has created more diverse and multicultural academic environments, making social interaction an essential aspect of students' adaptation and integration. However, international students often encounter challenges related to language barriers, cultural differences, and communication styles, which may influence their interaction patterns. This study examines the social interaction patterns of international students in Indonesian higher education. While previous studies have mainly focused on challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences, limited attention has been given to how social interaction develops in everyday contexts. This study aims to identify the patterns of social interaction and the factors influencing these patterns. This research employed a qualitative case study design involving 12 international students who completed a questionnaire and five students who participated in semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by descriptive statistical analysis. The findings reveal three main interaction patterns: comfort-zone interaction, transitional interaction, and active cross-cultural interaction. In addition, several factors influence these patterns, including language proficiency, confidence, cultural differences, opportunities for interaction, and the social environment. These findings indicate that social interaction is a dynamic process shaped by both individual and contextual factors.

INTRODUCTION

The rising population of international students in higher education has fostered increasingly diverse and multicultural academic settings (Bakay, 2023; Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017; Olson & Banjong, 2016). Universities are expected to provide both academic support and opportunities for meaningful social interaction (Al-Adwan et al., 2023; De Felice et al., 2023; Sá, 2023; Simper et al., 2022; Wong & Chapman, 2023). Social interaction is essential for international students to adapt to a new environment and develop a sense of belonging.

However, establishing social interaction in a new cultural context is not a simple process. International students often face various challenges, particularly related to language barriers, cultural differences, and unfamiliar communication styles (Alasmari, 2023; Sharipova, 2025; Tanaka, 2025; Thinh, 2025; Zhang & Noels, 2024). These challenges can hinder their participation in both academic and social activities, limiting their opportunities to engage with local students. Previous studies have highlighted that international students frequently encounter difficulties in understanding local norms, interpreting nonverbal communication, and adjusting to different social expectations (Hapsari & Hamamah, 2020; Qulub & Rusmawati, 2025). As a result, many of them tend to rely on peers from similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds, which provides emotional comfort but may reduce opportunities for broader intercultural interaction.

In addition, research by Liang and Pho (2025) indicates that patterns of social contact significantly influence students' intercultural sensitivity, while Kumari et al. (2024) emphasize that emotional challenges such as anxiety and homesickness further limit students' willingness to interact. Similarly, Lee (2025) found that social support from co-national groups plays an important role in helping students cope with feelings of alienation. These studies collectively

demonstrate that social interaction among international students is influenced by a combination of psychological, linguistic, and contextual factors. Nevertheless, most of these studies primarily focus on identifying challenges, barriers, and coping strategies faced by international students.

Previous studies have found that many international students experience communication difficulties and cultural differences in their host countries. Exposure to unfamiliar cultural norms, differences in nonverbal communication, and limited familiarity with local practices can lead to difficulties in communication and direct interaction with local communities (Hapsari & Hamamah, 2020; Qulub & Rusmawati, 2025). International students generally rely on peers from similar cultural backgrounds and prefer to remain within their own communities. This inclination can reduce the potential for extensive social interaction and limit engagement with local students.

While previous studies have extensively examined these issues, the majority concentrate on highlighting difficulties such as language barriers, cultural differences, and adaptation challenges. These studies provide important insights into the experiences of international students but generally give insufficient attention to patterns of social interaction in everyday contexts.

Thus, there remains a limited understanding of the formation, maintenance, and evolution of social interactions among international students, especially in the context of Indonesian higher education. Current research predominantly focuses on obstacles and coping mechanisms rather than analyzing the interaction patterns that develop through students' daily experiences. This results in a limited understanding of how international students navigate their social environments beyond adaptation issues.

Based on this gap, this study aims to identify the social interaction patterns of international students and explore the factors that influence these patterns. The research addresses the following questions: (1) What social interaction patterns are formed among international students? and (2) What factors influence these interaction patterns? The originality of this study lies in its focus on interaction patterns rather than solely on problems. This study analyzes how interaction is formed and developed in daily situations rather than merely focusing on the difficulties faced by international students. This approach offers a more nuanced understanding of the social experiences of international students in Indonesian higher education.

The findings of this study are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, this research contributes to the development of knowledge in the field of intercultural communication and higher education by enriching the literature on social interaction patterns among international students. Practically, the results can serve as a reference for universities in designing policies and programs that promote inclusive and interactive learning environments, such as collaborative learning activities and intercultural engagement programs. In addition, this study may help educators and policymakers better understand the social needs of international students, thereby supporting their academic success and social integration in multicultural educational settings.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative case study design to investigate the social interaction patterns of international students. This methodology was employed to achieve an in-depth understanding of students' experiences in their regular social interactions. The study was carried out at Yogyakarta State University, Indonesia, which supports international students from various countries. The participants consisted of 12 international students who completed a questionnaire and 5 students who were involved in interviews. They were chosen through purposive sampling to guarantee relevant experiences.

Data was collected from semi-structured interviews and a self-assessment questionnaire. The interviews concentrated on students' social interaction experiences, while the questionnaire served to support the data by detecting underlying patterns. The interview data were analyzed by thematic analysis to identify frequent patterns in students' interaction. The questionnaire data were analyzed by descriptive statistical analysis by calculating the average score of each item to identify the perceptions of the participants using the formula $\frac{\sum X}{N}$. $\sum X$ represents the total score of responses and N represents the number of participants. The interpretation of average values followed a simplified categorization to indicate general tendencies in students' responses: (high [3.00 – 4.00], moderate [2.00 – 2.99], and low [1.00 – 1.99]). These categorizations were used only for descriptive interpretation only and were not intended for inferential statistical generalization. The findings were then categorized into several interaction patterns based on similarities in participants' experiences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Social Interaction Patterns

The findings reveal three primary patterns of social interaction among international students.

Comfort-Zone Interaction

The majority of students typically interact with peers who share similar cultural or language backgrounds. This is defined by the use of common language and shared cultural understanding, facilitating conversation. Students expressing this tendency show fewer interaction with local peers and typically confine themselves to their own social groups.

Transitional Interaction

Some students progressively extend their interactions beyond their cultural communities. Their engagement with local children mainly happens in academic environments, including classroom discussions and collaborative projects. This interaction is inconsistent and based to specific conditions, particularly when interaction is necessary.

Active Cross-Cultural Interaction

A small number of students actively interact with local peers and participate in diverse social and cultural events. These students engage with many groups and participate in campus activities, facilitating the growth of their connections.

Factors Influencing Social Interaction Patterns

The results also reveal several factors that influence the formation of social interaction patterns among international students.

1. Language Proficiency

Language proficiency significantly influences interaction. Students that have low proficiency often avoid contact with local peers and prefer communication with familiar groups.

2. Confidence and Psychological Factors

The confidence of students impacts their willingness to engage in interaction. Some students express hesitation and minimize interaction because of fear regarding mistakes or misinterpretation.

3. Cultural Differences

Cultural norms and communication techniques variances affect interactions. Miscommunications and different expectations affect student interactions with peers.

4. Opportunities for Interaction

The interaction is shaped by the accessibility of opportunities, particularly in educational settings. Students participating in collaborative activities and classroom interactions reveal a stronger tendency to engage with other students.

5. Social Environment and Peer Dynamics

The social environment influences interaction as well. The utilization of local languages among peer groups constrains involvement, resulting in certain students remaining inside their own communities.

Table 1. Social Interaction and Influencing Factors

No	Category	Description
1	Comfort-zone interaction	Interaction mainly happens with the culture or linguistic group
2	Transitional interaction	Interaction gradually expands beyond initial groups
3	Active cross-cultural interaction	Students actively engage with local students
4	Language proficiency	Limited language ability restricts interaction with local students
5	Confidence	Low confidence reduces initiate interaction
6	Cultural Differences	Differences in norms and communication styles create misunderstandings
7	Opportunities for interaction	Academic and social opportunities influence interaction
8	Social environment	Use of local language and peer dynamics affect participation

Source: Author's processed data derived from field research results, 2026

Comfort-Zone Interaction and Social Dependence

The findings show that international students prefer to remain with familiar groups, particularly with people from identical cultural milieu. This tendency reflects a form of social dependence that helps students cope with communication difficulties and emotional discomfort. The tendency is rooted in the emotional challenges these students face, including feelings of alienation and the need for social support. Familiar groups provide emotional and informational support, which is crucial for mitigating feelings of alienation and enhancing coping strategies (Lee, 2025). Besides that, familiarity can ease communication difficulties, allowing students to express themselves more freely and reducing anxiety associated with language barriers (Kumari, et al., 2024). This is also consistent with previous studies showing that international students often rely on co-national networks during their adjustment process (Hapsari & Hamamah, 2020). One of participant described this experience:

"I prefer to talk with friends from my country because it is easier to communicate and we understand each other." (P2)

While this pattern provides a sense of comfort, it may also limit opportunities for larger intercultural interaction.

Transitional Interaction and the Role of Academic

The transitional interaction pattern suggests that social interaction develops step by step rather than arising immediately. Students begin to expand their interaction through academic activities such as group discussions and classroom interaction. This finding is in line with a finding of Qulub & Rusmawati (2025), which highlights that intercultural communication build up through exposure and real interaction in specific contexts. Academic environment as an essential role in facilitating this transition by creating structured opportunities for interaction. For example, group work and cooperative learning strategies for developing teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills are essential for social interaction (Garai, 2025).

However, the interaction in this stage remains situational and is often limited to academic requirements rather than voluntary interaction.

Active Cross-Cultural Interaction

Cross-cultural interaction reflects a more advanced stage of interaction, where students actively initiate communication and participate in broader social activities. This pattern indicated that interaction is not only shaped by external conditions but also by students' personal agency. Personal agency refers to the capacity of students to act independently and make their own choices; it can encompass self-reflective and intentional actions that students take in their learning environments (Adhikari, 2024). Vahlenkamp & Harsch (2025) also indicate that international students demonstrate agency by actively navigating their language learning, influenced by personal perceptions and institutional support. Students who express higher confidence and openness tend to engage more actively and develop wider social networks.

Factors Influencing Social Interaction Patterns

The factors that influence how interaction patterns are formed, language proficiency emerges as a key factor, as students with limited language ability tend to avoid interaction. This supports language barriers as a major challenge in intercultural communication (Qulub & Rusmawati, 2025). This issue is reflected in one participant's statement:

"Sometimes I don't speak because I'm not sure if my Indonesian is correct." (P4)

Confidence and psychological factors influence students' willingness to interact. Feelings of anxiety and fear of making mistakes often prevent students from initiating communication. Cultural differences also contribute to interaction challenges. Differences in communication styles and norms may lead to misunderstandings, requiring students to continuously adjust their communication strategies. Furthermore, the social environment take a part as a crucial role. The use of local languages in peer interaction can limit participation, as described by one participant:

"When my friends use Javanese, I cannot understand, so I just stay quiet." (P1)

This finding highlights the importance of creating inclusive environments that support interaction across cultural groups.

Overall, this study shows that social interaction among international students is a dynamic process influenced by both individual and contextual factors. Rather than viewing interaction only as a challenge, this study highlights how interaction is gradually formed and developed through everyday experiences.

CONCLUSION

The study finds that international students in Indonesian higher education exhibit three main social interaction patterns—active cross-cultural interaction, transitional interaction, and comfort-zone interaction—reflecting varying levels of engagement shaped by factors such as language proficiency, self-confidence, cultural differences, interaction opportunities, and social context. These findings highlight that social interaction is a dynamic and evolving process through which students gradually navigate and expand their social environments beyond initial adaptation challenges. However, the study is limited by its focus on a single institutional context and a relatively small sample size, restricting the generalizability of the results. Based on these findings, universities are encouraged to facilitate structured interaction opportunities, such as collaborative learning and multicultural programs, while promoting inclusive environments and intercultural communication awareness among both local and international students to enhance mutual understanding and reduce miscommunication. For future research, it is recommended to investigate social interaction patterns across diverse institutional and cultural settings with larger samples and to adopt longitudinal approaches to better understand how these interaction patterns develop and change over time.

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