

Identity Negotiation as Social Adaptation: Third Space Formation among Ethnic Chinese Students in Multicultural Indonesian Universities

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the social adaptation of Ethnic Chinese students in multicultural public universities in Medan, Indonesia, and explain how the Third Space emerges through identity negotiation within campus environments influenced by Islamic social norms. This study employed a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm. The research was conducted at Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) and Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED), involving ten Ethnic Chinese undergraduate students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and supporting documentation and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings indicate that social adaptation did not occur through complete cultural assimilation but through ongoing identity negotiation, enabling participants to maintain their cultural values while developing harmonious relationships with students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Islamic social norms were perceived as shared social values that encouraged mutual respect and inclusive interaction rather than cultural domination. The study concludes that the Third Space emerged through everyday intercultural interactions, allowing Ethnic Chinese identity and Islamic social norms to coexist within an inclusive social environment. These findings extend Bhabha's Third Space framework in explaining minority students' social adaptation in multicultural higher education settings.

Keywords

Social Adaptation; Ethnic Chinese Students; Third Space; Islamic Social Norms

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is widely recognized as one of the world's most culturally diverse nations, with a population exceeding 280 million people distributed across more than 17,000 islands. According to Statistics Indonesia (BPS), the country is home to more than 600 ethnic groups, over 700 regional languages, and six officially recognized religions, making it one of the most multicultural societies in Southeast Asia. (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2024) This diversity is an important national asset that promotes intercultural interaction while also presenting challenges to maintaining harmonious social relations among individuals from different ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Consequently, multicultural communication in Indonesia involves continuous processes of identity construction, cultural negotiation, and social adaptation, making these issues central to communication and



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multicultural studies. (Aulia Kiftiah et al., 2025)

Within this multicultural context, the Ethnic Chinese community represents one of Indonesia's most prominent minority groups, accounting for approximately 1.2% of the national population. Despite their relatively small proportion, Chinese Indonesians have made substantial contributions to the country's economic, educational, and cultural development. Following the Reformasi era, government policies recognizing Chinese cultural identity have expanded opportunities for cultural expression and participation in public life. Nevertheless, minority status continues to shape the everyday experiences of Ethnic Chinese communities, particularly in relation to identity negotiation, social acceptance, and intercultural interaction within the predominantly non-Chinese society. These conditions make the Ethnic Chinese community an important context for examining social adaptation in contemporary Indonesia. (Hidayat & Farid, 2021)

The dynamics of social adaptation become increasingly significant within higher education institutions, where students from diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds interact intensively in both academic and non-academic settings. Universities function not only as educational institutions but also as multicultural social spaces where students continually build relationships, negotiate identities, and develop communication strategies through classroom activities, collaborative learning, student organizations, and everyday interpersonal interactions. Consequently, higher education provides an important setting for understanding how minority students adapt socially while maintaining their cultural identities within culturally diverse environments. (C. Dong et al., 2025)

Among Indonesia's multicultural cities, Medan provides a particularly relevant setting for examining intercultural adaptation because of its long-standing ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. This diversity is reflected in Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) and Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED), two of the largest public universities in North Sumatra, which enroll students from diverse ethnic, cultural, religious, and regional backgrounds. These universities were intentionally selected as the research sites because their multicultural student populations provide extensive opportunities for intercultural interaction in both academic and non-academic settings. Such characteristics make USU and UNIMED appropriate contexts for examining how students from minority backgrounds navigate everyday social relationships within culturally diverse university environments. (Damanik, 2024)

In addition to their multicultural student populations, USU and UNIMED are characterized by campus environments in which Islamic social norms are visibly embedded in everyday life. Religious facilities, Islamic student organizations, religious celebrations, and various campus activities contribute to a social environment in which Islamic values influence communication and interpersonal interaction. These activities are routinely organized by Islamic student organizations and widely attended by students from different faculties, making Islamic values visible in everyday campus interactions rather than merely in institutional regulations. Although participation in religious activities remains voluntary, the visibility of these practices shapes the social atmosphere of the campuses and forms an important part of students' daily experiences. For Ethnic Chinese students, studying within such environments creates a unique context in which they negotiate their cultural identities while establishing meaningful relationships with Muslim-majority peers. Rather than producing exclusion or cultural conflict, this environment encourages a continuous process of balancing cultural preservation with social inclusion, making these universities an appropriate setting for examining the social adaptation of Ethnic Chinese students. (Cascio, 2026)

Social adaptation provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding how individuals establish and maintain social relationships within culturally diverse environments. Rather

than being viewed solely as behavioral adjustment, contemporary perspectives define social adaptation as a dynamic and reciprocal process through which individuals negotiate meanings, reconstruct identities, and develop communication strategies that enable effective interaction across cultural boundaries. For minority groups, adaptation therefore involves balancing cultural continuity with participation in the broader social environment rather than abandoning their cultural identity. (Ambar, 2020)

Previous studies on Ethnic Chinese communities in Indonesia have primarily examined issues of ethnic identity, discrimination, intercultural communication, acculturation, and social integration. While these studies have substantially contributed to understanding the experiences of minority communities, they generally conceptualize adaptation as adjustment to the dominant social environment. Consequently, limited attention has been paid to examining how adaptation is constructed through ongoing identity negotiation in everyday intercultural interactions, particularly in multicultural higher education settings shaped by Islamic social norms. (Ivana et al., 2023)

This limitation indicates both empirical and theoretical gaps in the existing literature. Empirically, research exploring the social adaptation of Ethnic Chinese students in public universities in Medan remains scarce, especially regarding how Islamic social norms shape their everyday communication, identity negotiation, and social relationships. Theoretically, previous studies have relied predominantly on perspectives on acculturation, intercultural communication, and social integration, offering a limited explanation of how new social meanings and hybrid identities emerge through ongoing intercultural interaction. (Pande et al., 2025). To address these gaps, this study adopts Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space as its primary analytical framework. The Third Space views cultural identity as fluid and continuously reconstructed through interaction rather than as a fixed or homogeneous entity. From this perspective, encounters between minority and majority cultures are understood not as processes that lead solely to assimilation or separation but as opportunities to produce hybrid identities, shared meanings, and new forms of social relationships. Accordingly, the Third Space offers an appropriate framework for explaining how Ethnic Chinese students negotiate their identities as they interact within university environments shaped by Islamic social norms. (Bhandari, 2022)

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study contributes to the literature on intercultural communication and multicultural higher education by examining the social adaptation of Ethnic Chinese students at Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) and Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED), two multicultural public universities in Medan. By applying Bhabha's Third Space, this study extends existing scholarship beyond conventional perspectives of adaptation as assimilation or social integration and demonstrates how social adaptation is constructed through identity negotiation within everyday intercultural interaction. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the social adaptation of Ethnic Chinese students in public universities in Medan and to explain how the Third Space emerges through the negotiation of ethnic identity and Islamic social norms within multicultural university environments. (Suryandari et al., 2025)

2. METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm to examine how Ethnic Chinese students construct social adaptation in public university environments shaped by Islamic social norms in Medan, Indonesia. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, meanings, and identity-negotiation processes that cannot be adequately captured by quantitative measurement. The constructivist paradigm was adopted

based on the assumption that social reality is socially constructed through interaction, interpretation, and subjective experience. Therefore, this paradigm is appropriate for understanding how Ethnic Chinese students interpret, negotiate, and construct their social adaptation within multicultural university environments influenced by Islamic social norms. (Cresswell, 2022)

The research was conducted at Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) and Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED), two of the largest public universities in Medan, North Sumatra. These universities were purposively selected because they represent multicultural academic environments, enrolling students from diverse ethnic, cultural, religious, and regional backgrounds across North Sumatra and other Indonesian provinces. As public universities located in one of Indonesia's most multicultural cities, both institutions provide an appropriate setting for examining interactions among students from different ethnic and religious communities. In addition, Islamic social norms are visibly reflected in campus life through student organizations, religious activities, campus facilities, and everyday communication practices, creating a social environment in which Ethnic Chinese students continuously interact with Muslim-majority peers. These characteristics make USU and UNIMED suitable research settings for examining the social adaptation and identity negotiation of Ethnic Chinese students within multicultural university environments.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling because this technique enables researchers to identify individuals with direct experience and rich information relevant to the study's objectives. Accordingly, the study involved 10 Ethnic Chinese undergraduate students from Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) and Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED) who regularly interacted with Muslim-majority peers in multicultural university environments influenced by Islamic social norms.

To ensure the relevance and richness of the data, participants fulfilled several inclusion criteria: (1) they identified themselves as Ethnic Chinese, (2) were actively enrolled as undergraduate students at either USU or UNIMED, (3) had experienced direct interaction with Muslim-majority peers in both academic and non-academic activities, and (4) were willing to participate voluntarily and share their experiences during the interview process. Participants were excluded from the study if they were first-semester undergraduate students, had not yet experienced direct interaction with Muslim-majority peers in academic or non-academic settings, or were unwilling to participate voluntarily in the interview process. These exclusion criteria were established to ensure that all participants had sufficient intercultural experience relevant to the study's objectives. To obtain diverse perspectives, participants were drawn from different faculties, academic years, and genders. The recruitment process continued until data saturation was achieved, indicating that no substantially new themes or meaningful information emerged during the final interviews.

Data saturation was determined when successive interviews no longer generated new codes, themes, or substantive insights relevant to the research objectives. The final interviews consistently confirmed previously identified patterns, indicating that additional data collection was unlikely to yield new conceptual understanding. To protect participants' privacy and comply with research ethics, all participants were anonymized using identification codes (P1–P10). The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1, while their identities remain confidential.

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants included in this study.

PARTICIPANT	UNIVERSITY	FACULTY	GENDER	SEMESTER
P1	USU	Faculty of Medicine	MALE	VI
P2	USU	Faculty of Economics and Business	MALE	II
P3	USU	Faculty of Engineering	MALE	VI
P4	USU	Faculty of Engineering	MALE	VI
P5	USU	Faculty of Social and Political Sciences	FEMALE	VIII
P6	UNIMED	Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences	FEMALE	VI
P7	UNIMED	Faculty of Engineering	MALE	IV
P8	UNIMED	Faculty of Economics	MALE	VI
P9	UNIMED	Faculty of Economics	FEMALE	VI
P10	UNIMED	Faculty of Economics	FEMALE	VI

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and supporting documentation. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they allowed participants to describe their experiences openly while enabling the researcher to explore issues relevant to social adaptation and identity negotiation in greater depth. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was developed based on the research objectives and the conceptual framework of social adaptation and Bhabha's Third Space. The interviews explored participants' experiences of interacting with Muslim-majority peers, adapting to campus environments shaped by Islamic social norms, maintaining their ethnic identity, and participating in both academic and non-academic activities. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, was conducted face-to-face at locations agreed upon by both the researcher and the participants, was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, and was subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Documentation was employed as supporting data to complement and verify the interview findings. The documentation included field notes recorded during the research process, photographs of relevant campus environments and activities, institutional documents, and other supporting materials related to student activities and campus life. These documents were used to strengthen data interpretation and provide contextual understanding of the research setting. (Arifah et al., 2025). The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data condensation stage, interview transcripts were repeatedly read, coded, reduced, and organized into meaningful categories based on recurring patterns in social adaptation, identity negotiation, intercultural interaction, and the formation of the Third Space. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes representing participants' lived experiences. The data were then presented through thematic narratives and analytical matrices to facilitate comparisons among participants and identify relationships between emerging themes. Finally, conclusions were drawn through continuous interpretation of the empirical findings in relation to Bhabha's Third Space theory. Throughout the analytical process, conclusions were continuously verified by comparing interview data, supporting documentation, and theoretical concepts to ensure analytical consistency and credibility. (Miles et al., 2023).

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed source triangulation, member checking, and continuous verification. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from participants representing different universities, faculties, genders, and social experiences. Member checking was undertaken by returning interview summaries and preliminary interpretations to several participants to confirm that the researchers' interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. Continuous verification was also carried out throughout the coding and interpretation processes to ensure consistency between the empirical data and the analytical conclusions. These procedures enhanced the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and trustworthiness of the findings. (Syahrani, 2023). This study adopted a constructivist paradigm, the researcher served as the primary instrument throughout the study. To minimize subjective bias and enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher continuously reflected on personal assumptions, maintained awareness of potential influences during data collection and interpretation, conducted member checking with several participants, and discussed the emerging findings and interpretations with academic supervisors. These reflexive practices helped ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' experiences rather than the researcher's personal perspectives.

Prior to data collection, the researcher obtained an official research permit from Universitas Sumatera Utara (Research Permit No. 19339/UN5/Dir/DitPP/PT.01.04/2026). Before each interview, participants were informed about the objectives, procedures, and the voluntary nature of the study, and they provided informed consent. Participants were also informed that they had the right to decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences. To protect participants' privacy and ensure confidentiality, all personal identifiers were removed from the interview transcripts and replaced with anonymous identification codes (P1–P10). Only demographic information directly relevant to the research objectives, including university, faculty, gender, and semester, was reported to preserve participants' anonymity, while all other personal information remained confidential throughout the research process and publication of the findings.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

Theme	Main Findings	Supporting Participants
Initial Social Adaptation Experiences	Participants experienced different initial adaptation patterns influenced by previous multicultural exposure.	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10
Negotiating Cultural Identity	Participants maintained family-based cultural values while engaging in multicultural interaction.	All Participants
Adapting to Islamic Social Norms	Participants respected Islamic values without abandoning their ethnic identity.	All Participants
Formation of the Third Space	Participants developed inclusive social relationships through identity negotiation.	All Participants

Initial Social Adaptation Experiences

The interview findings revealed that participants experienced different patterns of social adaptation during the early stages of their entry into public universities in Medan. While several participants reported that adapting to campus life was relatively easy because they had previously been exposed to multicultural environments, others experienced nervousness, communication barriers, feelings of insecurity, and difficulties interacting with peers from different cultural backgrounds. These variations indicate that prior intercultural experiences significantly influenced participants' readiness to navigate the multicultural university environment. The findings further demonstrate that initial adaptation was shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by participants' social experiences before entering higher education.

Several participants reported experiencing relatively smooth transitions during their initial adaptation to university life because they had previously been exposed to culturally diverse social environments. Prior interactions with individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds led them to perceive the multicultural campus environment as a natural continuation of their earlier social experiences rather than a completely unfamiliar setting. Participant P1 explained:

"My first impression was quite ordinary. I did not experience major difficulties adapting because I had already been accustomed to living and studying in multicultural environments since high school. Therefore, entering university felt like a natural continuation of those previous experiences, and I did not encounter significant obstacles in building relationships with other students."

Similarly, P4 described that growing up in a multicultural neighborhood had prepared her to interact comfortably with students from different cultural backgrounds. She stated:

"I did not experience significant difficulties because I had lived in a culturally diverse environment since childhood. As a result, meeting classmates from different ethnic and religious backgrounds at university was something I considered normal rather than challenging."

Comparable experiences were also reported by P7, who emphasized that interacting with students from various ethnic backgrounds became easier because diversity was perceived as an ordinary aspect of campus life. These accounts suggest that prior intercultural experiences served as an important resource, facilitating participants' initial social adaptation in multicultural university environments.

In contrast, several participants experienced various challenges during the initial stage of social adaptation after entering university. The interview findings indicate that these challenges were primarily associated with feelings of nervousness, communication barriers, unfamiliarity with different social environments, and concerns about being part of a minority group. Participant P2 explained that she initially felt anxious because she was uncertain whether she would be able to communicate effectively with classmates from different cultural backgrounds. She stated:

"Initially, I felt nervous because I was worried that I would not be able to communicate well with my classmates. I was also concerned that my way of communicating might be different, making it difficult for me to adapt."

Similarly, P3 described experiencing communication difficulties because many classmates frequently used local languages during informal conversations.

"During my first weeks at university, I sometimes found it difficult to understand conversations because many of my classmates communicated in local languages during informal interactions."

Other participants reported different forms of adjustment challenges. P5 admitted feeling awkward because he had not yet understood the social characteristics of his classmates, while P6 explained that differences in communication styles occasionally resulted in misunderstandings during the early stages of interaction. Meanwhile, P9 revealed that he initially felt insecure because only a small number of Ethnic Chinese students were enrolled in his class, whereas P10 experienced nervousness as he adapted to an unfamiliar academic and social environment. Although most participants gradually adapted to the multicultural campus environment, three participants (P2, P5, and P10) described a slower adaptation process due to persistent feelings of awkwardness, limited social initiative, and hesitation to engage with unfamiliar peers during the early stages of university life. Despite these initial difficulties, all participants emphasized that regular participation in lectures, collaborative assignments, extracurricular activities, and everyday interactions gradually increased their confidence and helped them establish meaningful relationships with students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Overall, the findings indicate that the initial process of social adaptation among Ethnic Chinese students was dynamic rather than uniform. Participants with previous multicultural experiences generally adapted more easily, whereas others initially encountered communication barriers, nervousness, and uncertainty. Nevertheless, regular interaction through academic and non-academic activities gradually enabled all participants to develop confidence and establish meaningful relationships with peers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Negotiating Cultural Identity

The interview findings demonstrate that maintaining cultural identity remained an important aspect of participants' social adaptation throughout their university experiences. Participants consistently maintained their cultural identity while interacting with peers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Rather than describing adaptation as abandoning their cultural identity, they explained that they balanced openness to multicultural interaction with the family-based values they had learned since childhood. Across the interviews, participants consistently referred to values such as respect for parents, politeness, discipline, humility, and social harmony as fundamental principles guiding their everyday interactions both inside and outside the classroom.

Participants consistently explained that family-based cultural values continued to influence their behavior despite studying in multicultural university environments. Participant P5 explained that the values taught by his family encouraged him to respect others regardless of their ethnic or religious background. He stated:

"Since childhood, my parents have always taught me to respect other people, be polite, and maintain harmonious relationships. These values remain my guide when interacting with friends from different backgrounds at university."

Similarly, P8 emphasized that maintaining cultural identity did not prevent her from establishing close relationships with Muslim students. Instead, she believed that preserving values such as courtesy, mutual respect, and tolerance actually facilitated intercultural communication.

"Being an Ethnic Chinese student does not prevent me from making friends with anyone. My family has always taught me to respect differences, and I believe those values help me build good relationships with classmates from different ethnic and religious backgrounds."

Several other participants also described family values as an important source of guidance in everyday campus interactions. Rather than perceiving cultural identity as a barrier, they regarded it as a positive foundation for developing respectful and inclusive social relationships within the multicultural university environment.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants did not perceive social adaptation as a process of replacing or abandoning their cultural identity. Instead, they maintained essential family-based cultural values while simultaneously engaging in meaningful interactions with students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds.

Adapting to Islamic Social Norms

The interview findings indicate that participants consistently described adapting to Islamic social norms as an important part of their everyday experiences within the multicultural university environment. Across the interviews, participants explained that they respected the religious practices and social values observed by their Muslim peers while maintaining their own ethnic and cultural identity. They described adaptation through everyday behaviors such as respectful communication, sensitivity toward religious practices, and appropriate participation in campus activities involving students from different cultural and religious backgrounds. Participants explained that respect for Islamic social norms was evident in various aspects of their daily interactions on campus. Participant P2 stated that she consciously adjusted her communication and behavior to demonstrate respect for Muslim classmates, particularly during religious activities and interactions requiring cultural sensitivity. She explained:

"I always try to respect my Muslim friends by being mindful of my words and behavior. During Ramadan, for example, I avoid eating or drinking in front of friends who are fasting because I want to show respect for their religious practices."

Similarly, P6 reported that understanding Islamic values helped her interact more comfortably with classmates from different religious backgrounds.

"Learning about my friends' religious practices has made communication much easier. Even though our backgrounds are different, respecting each other's beliefs creates a more comfortable and harmonious relationship."

Other participants described similar experiences, explaining that respecting prayer times, being considerate during Ramadan, participating appropriately in campus activities, and maintaining courteous communication became part of their everyday interactions. Across the interviews, participants consistently described these practices as helping them interact comfortably and maintain positive relationships with Muslim classmates while continuing to observe their own cultural traditions.

Overall, the findings indicate that participants consistently described understanding and respecting Islamic social norms as an important part of their everyday campus interactions. While maintaining their own ethnic and cultural identity, they adapted their communication and behavior to reflect respect for the religious practices of their Muslim peers. Across the interviews, participants emphasized that these experiences became a regular part of their social interactions within the multicultural university environment.

Formation of the Third Space

The interview findings reveal that participants gradually developed close, inclusive social relationships through ongoing interactions within the multicultural university environment. Across the interviews, participants consistently described becoming more comfortable communicating, collaborating, and building friendships with students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds over time. Rather than reporting persistent social boundaries, participants explained that regular academic activities, organizational involvement, and everyday interpersonal interactions helped them develop a stronger sense of belonging while maintaining their ethnic and cultural identity. Participants consistently explained that their relationships with classmates from different ethnic and religious backgrounds became stronger through continuous interaction during their university studies. They described how collaborative learning, classroom discussions, student organization activities, and informal social interactions gradually reduced feelings of difference and strengthened mutual understanding. Participant P8 stated:

"As time went by, I realized that our cultural differences were no longer an obstacle. We learned to understand one another, worked together on academic assignments, and respected each other's traditions without expecting anyone to change their identity."

Similarly, P10 emphasized that maintaining his cultural identity did not prevent him from establishing close relationships with Muslim classmates. He explained:

"I never felt that I had to abandon my identity to be accepted. My friends respected my cultural background, and I also respected theirs. Eventually, we became comfortable interacting with one another while appreciating our differences."

Other participants described similar experiences, explaining that continuous participation in classroom discussions, collaborative learning, student organizations, and informal social interactions gradually strengthened their relationships with peers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Across the interviews, participants consistently described these experiences as increasing their sense of comfort, trust, and belonging within the multicultural university environment while maintaining their own ethnic and cultural identity. Overall, the findings indicate that participants gradually developed inclusive social relationships throughout their university experiences while maintaining their own ethnic and cultural identity. Continuous interaction through academic and non-academic activities enabled participants to establish meaningful relationships with students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Across the interviews, participants consistently described these experiences as an important part of their social adaptation within the multicultural university environment.

3.2 Discussion

Theme	Initial Codes	Categories	Analytical Theme
Initial Adaptation	nervous, insecure, language	Early Adjustment	Adaptation Process
Identity	politeness, parents	Cultural Values	Identity Preservation
Islamic Norms	Ramadan, respect	Religious Sensitivity	Inclusive Interaction
Third Space	belonging, friendship	Hybrid Identity	Identity Negotiation

The findings indicate that the initial social adaptation of Ethnic Chinese students in public universities in Medan was characterized by varying adjustment experiences rather than a uniform transition. While several participants adapted relatively easily due to prior exposure to multicultural environments, others initially experienced nervousness, communication barriers, and uncertainty when interacting with peers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. This variation suggests that prior intercultural experiences and individual readiness significantly influenced participants' confidence during the early stages of university life. At the same time, the findings demonstrate that these initial differences gradually diminished as participants became more actively involved in academic activities, collaborative learning, student organizations, and everyday interpersonal interactions. These experiences indicate that social adaptation developed progressively through continuous engagement within the multicultural university environment rather than occurring immediately upon entering university. (Haryono et al., 2025)

An important finding of this study is that the adaptation process was neither linear nor identical for all participants. Although most participants gradually developed confidence through regular interaction with classmates, three participants (P2, P5, and P10) described a slower adaptation process due to persistent feelings of nervousness, limited social initiative, and unfamiliarity with the new social environment. Rather than contradicting the dominant pattern, these variations demonstrate that intercultural adaptation occurs at different rates depending on individuals' previous social experiences and personal readiness to engage with cultural diversity. The presence of these contrasting experiences strengthens the credibility of the findings by illustrating that successful adaptation was achieved through different adjustment trajectories rather than through a single uniform process.

These findings are consistent with Kim's (2012) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory, which conceptualizes adaptation as a gradual, dynamic process in which individuals develop functional fitness and psychological comfort through continuous interaction with a new cultural environment. Rather than viewing adaptation as an immediate outcome of entering a multicultural setting, Kim argues that repeated communication experiences enable individuals to reduce uncertainty, acquire intercultural competence, and establish more effective social relationships over time. The present findings support this perspective by demonstrating that participants gradually became more confident through sustained participation in lectures, collaborative assignments, student organizations, and informal friendships, all of which provided opportunities to expand their social networks and strengthen interpersonal trust.

The findings also support Gudykunst's (1995) Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Theory,

which suggests that effective intercultural communication depends on individuals' ability to manage uncertainty and communication anxiety during interactions with culturally different others. Participants who initially experienced nervousness and communication difficulties gradually reported feeling more comfortable as repeated interactions increased their familiarity with the multicultural campus environment. This process indicates that intercultural competence was developed not only through exposure to cultural diversity but also through ongoing interpersonal communication, thereby reducing uncertainty and strengthening mutual understanding. Similar observations have been reported in previous studies, which emphasize that frequent intercultural contact and communication competence facilitate social adaptation within multicultural educational settings. However, the present study extends these findings by demonstrating that everyday academic collaboration and informal social relationships functioned as the primary mechanisms through which participants negotiated differences, developed confidence, and established meaningful relationships across ethnic and religious boundaries. Consequently, social adaptation should be understood as an ongoing relational process shaped by continuous social interaction rather than as a single stage of cultural adjustment.

John W. Berry's (2006) acculturation framework proposes that minority individuals may successfully adapt while maintaining their original cultural identity. The present findings support this proposition by demonstrating that participants consistently preserved family-based cultural values while actively participating in multicultural campus life. However, unlike Berry's framework, which primarily conceptualizes identity preservation as a single dimension of acculturation, the present findings indicate that cultural identity also served as a communicative resource, enabling participants to establish interpersonal trust, mutual respect, and reciprocal relationships with Muslim-majority peers. This difference may be explained by the multicultural university environment, where sustained academic collaboration and everyday interaction encouraged cultural preservation and social participation to develop simultaneously rather than as competing processes. Accordingly, the present study extends prior scholarship by demonstrating that cultural identity should be understood not only as an outcome of adaptation but also as an active mechanism that supports intercultural communication.

The findings also correspond with previous studies reporting that strong cultural identity can enhance intercultural communication by providing individuals with a secure sense of self during interactions with culturally different others. Rather than generating social distance, participants' commitment to family-based values encouraged openness, mutual respect, and willingness to engage in collaborative activities with classmates from diverse backgrounds. Similar observations have been reported in studies showing that minority students with a positive, secure cultural identity often demonstrate greater confidence in building intercultural relationships, as they interact from a position of cultural self-assurance rather than cultural insecurity. The present study reinforces these observations by showing that participants consistently perceived their cultural values as ethical principles supporting harmonious interaction rather than as barriers separating them from the wider university community. (Luong et al., 2025)

Accordingly, the findings suggest that cultural identity should be understood as an important social resource within multicultural higher education settings. Rather than viewing identity preservation and social participation as opposing processes, participants demonstrated that maintaining family-based cultural values strengthened their ability to establish trust, communicate respectfully, and develop inclusive relationships with peers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. This finding contributes to the growing body of intercultural communication research by

indicating that minority students' cultural identity can function as a source of interpersonal competence that supports social adaptation while preserving cultural continuity. (Tang & Calafato, 2024)

The findings indicate that Islamic social norms within public universities in Medan were generally perceived by participants as shared social values that facilitated respectful interaction rather than mechanisms of cultural domination. Participants consistently described adapting their communication and everyday behavior to demonstrate respect for the religious practices of their Muslim peers while maintaining their own ethnic and cultural identity. Everyday practices, such as being considerate during Ramadan, respecting prayer times, and observing appropriate communication etiquette, were understood as expressions of mutual respect that strengthened interpersonal relationships rather than as obligations requiring cultural conformity. These findings suggest that adaptation to Islamic social norms was primarily interpreted as a process of developing intercultural sensitivity and social awareness within a multicultural academic environment. (Shofiyuddin et al., 2024)

Previous studies have generally suggested that shared institutional norms encourage intercultural understanding by promoting dialogue, empathy, and mutual respect among students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The present findings are consistent with these observations, particularly in demonstrating that Islamic social norms facilitated respectful interaction rather than cultural exclusion. Nevertheless, unlike previous studies that primarily describe institutional norms as regulatory mechanisms, this study indicates that participants interpreted Islamic social norms as shared ethical principles that encouraged reciprocal accommodation between minority and majority students. This distinction suggests that religiously informed social values may function not merely as institutional expectations but also as communicative resources that strengthen intercultural understanding and inclusive social relationships within multicultural universities.

At the same time, the present study extends previous literature by highlighting the active role of minority students in constructing inclusive social relationships through everyday communicative practices. Rather than passively conforming to the dominant social environment, participants consciously demonstrated respect for religious differences while maintaining their own cultural values. This finding indicates that successful intercultural interaction was achieved through reciprocal accommodation, in which both minority and majority students contributed to creating a respectful and inclusive campus environment. Consequently, adaptation to Islamic social norms should be understood as a collaborative communicative process that strengthens intercultural relationships without eroding cultural identity.

These findings also contribute to intercultural communication research by demonstrating that religiously informed social norms can serve as shared ethical principles that foster social inclusion in multicultural higher education settings. Rather than creating cultural boundaries, the participants perceived these norms as practical guidelines that facilitated trust, respectful communication, and constructive engagement across ethnic and religious differences. This perspective broadens existing discussions of minority adaptation by showing that the presence of dominant religious values does not necessarily produce exclusion; rather, when supported by reciprocal respect and everyday interaction, such values can provide a common foundation for sustaining harmonious relationships in culturally diverse university communities. (Rukiyanto et al., 2025)

The findings indicate that the development of inclusive social relationships represented one of the most significant outcomes of participants' adaptation experiences within multicultural public universities. As participants became increasingly involved in academic and non-academic activities, interactions that were initially limited to formal classroom settings gradually evolved into broader

social relationships characterized by trust, reciprocity, and mutual support. Collaborative learning, student organizations, group assignments, and informal social gatherings provided opportunities for participants to engage in sustained communication with peers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Through these repeated interactions, participants gradually developed a stronger sense of belonging within the university community while maintaining their own cultural identity. (Dong et al., 2024)

The findings suggest that the emergence of a sense of belonging was not primarily determined by cultural similarity but by the quality and continuity of interpersonal relationships established throughout university life. Participants consistently described feeling more accepted and confident as opportunities for interaction increased, allowing them to develop friendships that extended beyond academic responsibilities. These experiences demonstrate that inclusive social relationships were constructed through everyday communication practices that encouraged openness, cooperation, and mutual understanding. Rather than eliminating cultural differences, participants learned to appreciate diversity as a normal aspect of campus life, thereby strengthening interpersonal trust and social connectedness within the multicultural environment. (Glass et al., 2015)

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that frequent intercultural interaction contributes to students' sense of belonging and strengthens social cohesion within multicultural universities. The present findings support these conclusions by showing that collaborative learning, extracurricular activities, and informal friendships enabled participants to establish trust and expand their intercultural social networks. However, unlike previous research that primarily attributes students' sense of belonging to repeated intercultural contact, the present study indicates that inclusive social relationships emerged through the combined influence of cultural identity preservation, respect for Islamic social norms, and continuous interpersonal communication. This finding suggests that students' sense of belonging should be understood as the cumulative outcome of multiple interconnected adaptation processes rather than the product of intercultural contact alone.

More importantly, the findings demonstrate that the formation of inclusive social relationships represented the cumulative outcome of participants' adaptation process. The preservation of cultural identity, respect for Islamic social norms, and active participation in everyday campus activities collectively contributed to the development of interpersonal relationships characterized by mutual respect and shared participation. This finding suggests that successful social adaptation extends beyond individual adjustment to encompass the construction of meaningful social connections that foster inclusion and strengthen students' attachment to the university community. Consequently, the formation of inclusive social relationships provides an important foundation for understanding how intercultural interaction generates broader patterns of social integration within multicultural higher education settings. (Dwiastuti et al., 2024)

Taken together, the four themes identified in this study suggest that the social adaptation of Ethnic Chinese students cannot be adequately understood through conventional perspectives that conceptualize adaptation as a linear movement toward assimilation or cultural adjustment. Rather than demonstrating the gradual replacement of minority cultural identity with dominant social values, the findings reveal a dynamic process in which participants simultaneously preserved their cultural identity, respected Islamic social norms, and established meaningful relationships within a multicultural university environment. These interconnected experiences indicate that social adaptation is better understood as an ongoing process of identity negotiation through everyday intercultural interaction than as a one-directional process of conformity to the dominant culture. (Schwartz et al.,

2024)

Previous applications of Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space have predominantly examined identity negotiation within postcolonial societies, migration experiences, and transnational cultural encounters. The present findings support Bhabha's central proposition that identities are continuously negotiated through interaction rather than remaining fixed or mutually exclusive. However, unlike previous studies that largely focus on macro-level cultural transformation, the present study demonstrates that the Third Space can also emerge through ordinary academic and social interactions within multicultural universities. Collaborative learning, everyday communication, and shared participation in campus life enabled students from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to negotiate differences while maintaining their respective cultural identities. These findings therefore broaden the empirical applicability of the Third Space by demonstrating its relevance to understanding minority adaptation in multicultural higher education settings characterized by religious diversity. (Aziz, 2024)

The findings further demonstrate that identity negotiation occurred through ordinary communicative practices embedded in academic and non-academic life rather than through formal institutional mechanisms. Participants consistently balanced the preservation of family-based cultural values with their willingness to respect the religious practices and social expectations of the university environment. This process did not require participants to abandon their ethnic identity or fully adopt the dominant culture. Instead, they continuously adjusted their communicative behavior according to different social contexts while maintaining a coherent sense of self. These findings suggest that intercultural adaptation should be viewed as a relational process in which identities remain flexible, contextual, and continuously reconstructed through interaction with culturally different others. (Obaid et al., 2024)

An important implication of this interpretation is that participants' adaptation extends beyond the assumptions of assimilation-oriented perspectives. Conventional approaches frequently evaluate successful adaptation according to the degree to which minority groups integrate into dominant social structures. In contrast, the present findings indicate that successful adaptation was achieved without eroding cultural identity. Participants actively maintained their cultural traditions while participating in the university's social life, demonstrating that cultural continuity and social participation are complementary rather than contradictory processes. Consequently, social adaptation is better understood as the ability to navigate multiple cultural affiliations while sustaining meaningful interpersonal relationships across ethnic and religious boundaries. (Black et al., 2024)

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the development of intercultural communication scholarship by extending the application of Bhabha's Third Space beyond its predominant use in postcolonial and migration contexts. The findings demonstrate that the concept also provides a valuable analytical framework for understanding intercultural interaction within multicultural higher education institutions characterized by religious and ethnic diversity. Rather than positioning minority students solely as individuals adapting to an established majority culture, this study shows that both minority and majority groups actively participate in constructing inclusive patterns of communication and shared social practices through reciprocal interaction. (Moya et al., 2024) The principal novelty of this study lies in its reconceptualization of minority social adaptation within Indonesian public universities. Previous studies have generally interpreted minority adaptation through the perspectives of assimilation, acculturation, communication competence, or social integration. While these approaches have generated important insights, they often emphasize individual adjustment to existing social structures. The present study demonstrates that adaptation is

better understood as a collaborative process of identity negotiation in which cultural preservation, respect for Islamic social norms, and ongoing interpersonal interaction collectively contribute to the formation of an inclusive social environment. This perspective offers a broader understanding of intercultural adaptation by illustrating that diversity is not merely accommodated but actively transformed into a shared social resource that strengthens social cohesion within multicultural higher education settings.

The findings of this study offer several important contributions to the field of intercultural communication and minority adaptation. Theoretically, this study extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that minority social adaptation should not be understood solely through the perspectives of assimilation, acculturation, or communication competence. Instead, the findings show that adaptation is a multidimensional process involving the preservation of cultural identity, the negotiation of religious and social norms, and the development of inclusive interpersonal relationships through continuous intercultural interaction. By integrating these interconnected dimensions, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how minority students experience adaptation within multicultural higher education environments.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the broader application of Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space by illustrating its relevance beyond postcolonial and migration contexts. While previous studies have primarily employed the concept to explain cultural encounters in colonial or transnational settings, the present findings demonstrate that the Third Space also offers a valuable analytical perspective for understanding everyday intercultural communication within Indonesian public universities. This contribution expands the concept's theoretical applicability by showing that identity negotiation emerges through routine academic and social interactions, enabling individuals from different ethnic and religious backgrounds to build inclusive social relationships without abandoning their respective cultural identities. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of creating university environments that promote meaningful intercultural engagement rather than merely accommodating cultural diversity. Higher education institutions should encourage collaborative learning, student organizations, intercultural dialogue, and other forms of sustained interaction that enable students from different backgrounds to build interpersonal trust and mutual understanding. Such initiatives may strengthen students' sense of belonging while reducing prejudice, social distance, and cultural misunderstanding within increasingly diverse university communities.

The findings also suggest that institutional efforts to foster multicultural inclusion should recognize cultural diversity as a social asset rather than a challenge to be managed. Policies and educational programs that encourage mutual respect, intercultural communication, and equal participation can help students maintain their cultural identities while actively participating in campus life. By promoting reciprocal interaction instead of one-sided cultural adjustment, universities can cultivate more inclusive academic communities that reinforce both social cohesion and respect for diversity. (Ward et al., 2025). Overall, this study demonstrates that the social adaptation of Ethnic Chinese students in multicultural public universities is best understood as a collaborative, dynamic process in which cultural identity, religious sensitivity, and everyday interpersonal interactions collectively shape inclusive social relationships. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of intercultural adaptation by showing that successful adaptation is achieved not through cultural assimilation but through the continuous negotiation of differences, enabling diverse individuals to participate meaningfully within a shared academic community. This perspective offers a valuable foundation for future studies examining minority adaptation and intercultural communication in

culturally diverse educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the social adaptation of Ethnic Chinese students at Universitas Sumatera Utara (USU) and Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED) is a dynamic process of identity negotiation rather than cultural assimilation. Although participants initially faced various challenges, including communication barriers, cultural differences, and uncertainty, ongoing interaction in multicultural university environments enabled them to establish meaningful relationships while maintaining the cultural values they inherited from their families. These findings indicate that successful social adaptation was achieved through mutual respect, intercultural communication, and active participation in both academic and non-academic campus activities.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates that Islamic social norms embedded in everyday campus life did not function as barriers to adaptation. Instead, participants continuously negotiated these norms through respectful interaction without abandoning their ethnic identity. As a result, a shared social space emerged in which Ethnic Chinese cultural identity and Islamic social norms coexisted through dialogue, reciprocity, and mutual understanding. This finding confirms that the social adaptation of minority students extends beyond behavioral adjustment and involves the construction of inclusive social relationships within multicultural higher education environments. Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space provides an appropriate framework for explaining how minority students negotiate identity within multicultural universities. Unlike previous studies that primarily interpreted adaptation through assimilation, acculturation, or social integration, this study shows that social adaptation is better understood as the collaborative construction of a shared social space in which cultural diversity becomes a resource for producing new meanings, identities, and inclusive social relationships.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted only at two public universities in Medan, namely Universitas Sumatera Utara and Universitas Negeri Medan. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within these institutional contexts and may not be readily transferable to other multicultural higher education settings in Indonesia. Second, the study involved only ten purposively selected Ethnic Chinese students, providing in-depth qualitative insights but limiting the diversity of perspectives represented. Third, the study was unable to incorporate lecturers' perspectives as additional sources of information. Although lecturers could have provided valuable observations on students' adaptation within the campus environment, many were reluctant to comment on issues related to a specific ethnic group for fear that their views might be misinterpreted as ethnically sensitive. Consequently, the analysis relies primarily on the experiences reported by student participants. Finally, comprehensive institutional data regarding the number of Ethnic Chinese students at the two universities was not publicly available, making it difficult to contextualize the participants within the broader student population.

Future research may address these limitations by expanding the scope of the investigation to public universities across different regions of Indonesia, enabling comparative analysis across diverse multicultural contexts. Future studies may also incorporate multiple stakeholder perspectives, including lecturers, university administrators, and student organization leaders, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of minority students' adaptation. In addition, longitudinal research following students throughout their university years would offer deeper insights into how identity negotiation evolves over time, while comparative analyses based on gender, faculty affiliation, or

organizational involvement may further enrich understanding of intercultural adaptation in higher education.

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