

NAVIGATING INTERCULTURAL SPACES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION BARRIERS, DIGITAL MEDIA UTILIZATION, AND ADAPTATION EXPERIENCES AMONG IISMA AWARDEES IN SOUTH KOREA AND MALAYSIA

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Abstract. Student mobility programs continue to expand across the globe, and this expansion inevitably places young sojourners inside dense webs of intercultural contact that shape, and are shaped by, communication. This study examines the intercultural communication and adaptation experiences of Indonesian undergraduate students participating in the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) program, comparing awardees placed in a culturally distant destination, South Korea (Hanyang University), and a culturally proximate destination, Malaysia (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia). Adopting a constructivist paradigm with a qualitative approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with seven Hanyang University awardees, focus group discussions with UKM awardees, and institutional research reports, analysed through Kim's Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation. Findings show that cultural distance shapes the character, rather than the mere presence, of communication barriers. Awardees in South Korea confronted a pronounced linguistic divide, rigid non-verbal and honorific hierarchies, discrimination linked to religious identity, and the pressures of an accelerated urban lifestyle (ppali-ppali). Awardees in Malaysia, despite historical, religious, and linguistic proximity, encountered subtler hurdles rooted in false linguistic cognates and the internal diversity of a multi-ethnic host society. Across both cohorts, digital media operated as an indispensable adaptive mediator, supplying real-time translation, logistical navigation, and psychological anchoring through co-ethnic networks, while simultaneously risking the delay of deeper host-culture engagement. The comparative, dual-context, and triangulated design of this study addresses a gap in the still-scarce IISMA-specific literature, which has so far been dominated by single-country descriptions, and offers an integrated basis for constructing destination-differentiated pre-departure orientation for a sustainable IISMA program.

Keywords: Intercultural Adaptation, IISMA, Communication Barriers, Digital Media, Cross-Cultural Mobility

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world characterized by interconnected economies, rapid technological expansion, and transnational educational networks, cross-cultural competence has emerged as an indispensable skill for twenty-first-century citizens. Within the landscape of higher education, international student mobility programs serve as vital mechanisms for nurturing global citizenship, breaking down ethnocentric paradigms, and cultivating advanced soft skills (Berry, 1997). Recognizing the profound necessity to equip its domestic graduates with these global competencies, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia introduced the Kampus Merdeka (Independent Campus) initiative. Under this initiative, the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) operates as a flagship scholarship scheme (Ridaryanthi et al., 2025). This highly competitive program funds undergraduate students to spend a semester at top-tier host universities worldwide, aiming to enhance their global exposure, broaden their academic horizons, and develop cross-cultural agility.

While the institutional benefits and individual prestige of the IISMA program are widely acknowledged, the lived experience of an awardee involves navigating a complex, deeply personal web of communicative and cultural transformation. Transitioning from a familiar domestic environment to a foreign socio-cultural landscape inevitably disrupts an individual's cognitive structures, emotional equilibrium, and routine interactional patterns (Kim, 2001). From a communication perspective, moving abroad places individuals into a continuous state of intercultural contact, where everyday survival necessitates the ongoing deciphering of novel linguistic rules, non-verbal behaviors, and deeply

embedded cultural values (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Sihabudin, 2020). Consequently, awardees frequently encounter communication barriers, cultural adjustment demands, and socio-psychological stressors, such as culture shock and homesickness, that can significantly complicate the sojourn.

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that the success of educational exchange programs rests heavily on participants' capacity to adapt to their host countries (Sheng et al., 2022). Failure to overcome intercultural friction not only threatens the academic and psychological well-being of the individual student but also compromises the long-term sustainability and strategic outcomes of the mobility program itself (Yusup & Gemiharto, 2022). Within the domestic exchange literature under Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka (MBKM), currently changed into Kampus Berdampak, similar challenges have been documented among students exchanging between provinces of Indonesia, where adversity quotient and peer support significantly influenced self-adjustment (Mufidah et al., 2022a, 2022b). However, IISMA sends students across national and linguistic borders, a qualitatively different challenge that domestic-exchange literature cannot fully anticipate, and understanding how these dynamics unfold requires empirical examination across diverse regional and structural contexts. While European and North American contexts have historically dominated student mobility research, Asian intra-regional mobility presents unique dynamics that merit deeper scholastic inquiry (Ridaryanthi et al., 2025).

This study examines the intercultural adaptation experiences of Indonesian IISMA awardees by comparing two distinct destinations within Asia: South Korea, specifically Hanyang University in Seoul, and Malaysia, specifically Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) in Bangi, Selangor. These two host nations present contrasting cultural landscapes for Indonesian students. Malaysia shares deep-seated historical, geographical, religious, and linguistic commonalities with Indonesia, often fostering an initial perception of cultural proximity (Ridaryanthi, 2021). South Korea, conversely, represents a highly industrialized, ethnically homogeneous society with a distinct linguistic structure, strict social hierarchies expressed through honorific speech, and a hyper-accelerated pace of life colloquially known as *ppali-ppali* (hurry-hurry). Contemporary digital ecosystems further complicate and enrich this picture, acting as primary vehicles for information-seeking, emotional connection, and expectation management across the pre-departure, arrival, and long-term adjustment phases (Ridaryanthi et al., 2025; Smith & Smith, 2022).

This paper is developed by integrating data from in-depth interviews with IISMA awardees at Hanyang University, South Korea and focus group discussions among IISMA awardees at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Based on the comparative data gathered, this paper highlights three research questions, i.e., (1) What communication barriers do IISMA awardees experience in a culturally distant destination compared with a culturally proximate destination? (2) How do awardees in each context pattern their use of digital media and social support to manage these barriers? (3) What destination-differentiated strategies can be proposed to strengthen the sustainability of the IISMA program's pre-departure preparation? In pursuing these questions, the study aims to elucidate how cultural distance or proximity shapes interactional challenges, how digital platforms are utilized to bridge communicative gaps, and how institutional support can be optimized, thereby providing theoretical insight for intercultural communication scholarship together with practical recommendations for policymakers, university administrators, and future mobility participants.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Intercultural Communication and Adaptation. To conceptually map the adjustments experienced by IISMA awardees, this paper integrates four foundational frameworks from communication and cross-cultural sociology.

Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation. Formulated by Young Yun Kim (2001), this theory treats adaptation as a dynamic, continuous, communication-driven process. Kim frames adaptation through the “stress-adaptation-growth” dynamic, in which psychological friction (stress) acts as a necessary catalyst that forces individuals to adjust their internal habits to the new environment (adaptation), ultimately producing personal evolution and intercultural maturity (growth). This process operates through host communication competence, host social communication (interaction with locals and local media), and ethnic social communication (ongoing contact with co-ethnic peers,

which can provide initial emotional safety but may impede long-term integration if over-relied upon).

The U-Curve Adjustment Model. Originally advanced by Lysgaard (1955) and elaborated by subsequent scholars, this model maps the chronological phases of a sojourner's psychological adjustment: a Honeymoon Phase of fascination and positive expectation upon arrival; a Culture Shock Phase, the trough of the curve, in which differences in language, norms, and daily survival routines produce frustration and alienation (Berry, 1997); an Adjustment Phase of gradually learning the host culture's subtleties; and a Mastery Phase of operational competence and emotional equilibrium (Tarasova et al., 2017).

Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory. Developed by William B. Gudykunst, AUM theory posits that when individuals encounter cultural strangers, they experience varying degrees of cognitive uncertainty, an inability to explain or predict others' behaviors, and affective anxiety, a feeling of discomfort, tension, or apprehension (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Within an international campus environment, high levels of anxiety and uncertainty can paralyze communication, leading to avoidance or misinterpretation (Cahyono, 2018). Effective intercultural communication depends on an individual's capacity to manage these states within productive thresholds through mindfulness and adaptive communication strategies.

Push and Pull Factors Theory. Everett S. Lee's (1966) framework explains mobility decisions as the interaction of push factors, domestic conditions that motivate individuals to seek opportunities abroad, such as curricular limitations or restricted avenues for global networking (Yusup & Gemiharto, 2022), and pull factors, the attractive attributes of the host country and institution, such as academic reputation, disciplinary options, or cultural familiarity (Ridaryanthi et al., 2025).

Conceptual Dimensions of Intercultural Adjustment. Linguistic divergence remains one of the most prominent hurdles in cross-cultural settings. Verbal barriers extend beyond vocabulary deficits to encompass accent, structural semantics, idiomatic phrasing, and localized slang (DeVito, 2011). Non-verbal communication, including kinesics, proxemics, oculosics, and haptics, is equally culture-bound, and misinterpreting non-verbal cues can produce unintended offense or social awkwardness because gestures often carry contradictory meanings across national boundaries (Gantiano, 2019; Abu-Arqoub & Alserhan, 2019). Culture shock represents the collective physical and emotional disorientation felt when moving from a familiar cultural environment to an unfamiliar one (Berry, 1997; Oberg, 1960), and it is often intensified by preconceived stereotypes, rigid and oversimplified cognitive generalizations about a group of people, and by underlying prejudice (Budiarti et al., 2021; Bahry et al., 2024).

In some instances, international students face structural or interpersonal discrimination, encountering exclusionary behavior or verbal slurs that remind them of their status as cultural outsiders (Yulinar et al., 2021). Homesickness, meanwhile, is a recognized psychological correlate of relocation stress that can affect both mental well-being and academic functioning if left unmanaged (Thurber et al., 2012; Afrilia & Siregar, 2024). Yet, contemporary digital media has been shown to reshape every stage of the sojourn, from pre-departure information-seeking to on-the-ground translation and emotional support through co-ethnic networks (Smith & Smith, 2022; Ridaryanthi et al., 2025), a dimension that classic adaptation models developed before the smartphone era could not anticipate.

Literature review: Previous studies. A growing body of Indonesian communication scholarship has examined intercultural friction among sojourning or migrating students, though largely outside the specific IISMA context. Studies on domestic exchange under Merdeka Belajar–Kampus Merdeka program document culture shock and self-adjustment among students moving between islands and provinces within Indonesia (Mufidah et al., 2022a, 2022b), while others examine intercultural communication among out-of-region students on a single campus (Anwar, 2018; Moulita, 2018; Fitri & Yuliana, 2024) or between foreign lecturers and Indonesian students (Christy, 2013). Closer to the present concern, Budiarti, Cangara, and Wahid (2022) examined intercultural communication among IISMA awardees placed in Russia, offering one of the few prior IISMA-specific accounts, while Kristiana and Benito (2023) analyzed IISMA as an instrument of educational and cultural diplomacy at the policy level rather than at the level of lived student experience. Hadiniyati et al. (2023) documented

culture shock among Indonesian students studying abroad in general terms, and Henny, Rochayanti, and Isbandi (2011) examined the inverse case of Korean students adapting to Yogyakarta, providing a useful mirror for the present study's Korea-bound cohort.

This literature review reveals three gaps. First, IISMA-specific communication research remains scarce and, where it exists, is confined to single destinations, leaving cross-destination comparison largely unexplored even though IISMA by design places students across dramatically different cultural distances. Second, most cross-cultural adaptation studies analyze either communication barriers or digital media use, seldom integrating the two into a single explanatory account of how technology mediates the very barriers classic theory describes. Third, few studies triangulate primary data collected through complementary qualitative instruments, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and institutional monitoring reports, across two host contexts within one comparative frame.

The present study addresses these gaps by systematically comparing a culturally distant destination (South Korea) with a culturally proximate one (Malaysia) using triangulated data from three linked research outputs produced by the same collaborative team (Ridaryanthi *et al.*, 2024, 2025). Its novelty lies not merely in documenting barriers in two places, but in demonstrating empirically how cultural distance moderates the type rather than the presence of communication barriers, and in showing how digital media functions differently as an adaptive mediator depending on that distance, insights that together provide an evidence base for constructing a destination-differentiated pre-departure model rather than a generic one-size-fits-all orientation for the IISMA program.

METHOD

This study employs a constructivist paradigm, employing a qualitative approach with a comparative case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The constructivist paradigm operates on the ontological assumption that reality is plural, holistic, and socially constructed by individuals as they interpret their lived experiences. Centering the inquiry within this framework directs the study toward documenting the subjective meanings, emotional nuances, and personal communicative strategies articulated by student awardees themselves, rather than testing predefined quantitative hypotheses. The comparative case study design allows an investigation of the IISMA experience across two distinct sociocultural landscapes, South Korea and Malaysia, illuminating how different national contexts shape communication barriers and adaptation outcomes.

Primary data were drawn from two cohorts of Indonesian undergraduate IISMA awardees. The South Korea cohort comprised seven informants, given the pseudonyms VY, ELK, MAU, ASF, AIN, TIN, and SHD, who completed one semester of study at Hanyang University in Seoul across Batch 1 through Batch 3 (2021–2023), representing diverse home universities and academic majors. The Malaysia cohort comprised eight informants, identified by the initials DA, FV, RH, RZ, AM, FRH, KQ, and MA, who completed one semester of study at three Malaysian host universities: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), and Universiti Malaya (UM) (Ridaryanthi *et al.*, 2024). These informants represented seven different home campuses in Indonesia, namely Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (Bandung), Universitas Sam Ratulangi (Cibinong), Institut Seni Indonesia Yogyakarta (Semarang), UPN Veteran Jakarta (Bekasi), IPB University (Bogor), Universitas Islam Sultan Agung (Semarang), Universitas Padjadjaran (Tangerang Selatan), and Universitas Lampung (Bandar Lampung), reflecting a geographically and institutionally diverse sending base. Informants in both cohorts were selected through purposive sampling to ensure they possessed first-hand experience of the complete mobility trajectory, from pre-departure preparation through host-country residence to re-entry into Indonesia.

Data collection for both cohorts relied on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 and audio-recorded with informed consent before being transcribed for analysis. Interviews with the South Korea cohort were conducted between August and December 2024, each lasting 60 to 90 minutes, and were organized around five thematic clusters: pre-departure motivations and information-seeking; initial impressions and interactional friction upon arrival; verbal, non-verbal, and socio-behavioral barriers in academic and social domains; the use of digital platforms for logistical navigation and psychological support; and reflections on personal transformation upon return to Indonesia. Interviews with the Malaysia cohort were conducted in August 2024 and organized around four main

categories identified during the collaborative research project between the Faculty of Communication Science, Universitas Mercu Buana, and the Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, i.e., pre-departure experience, departure experience, intercultural communication experience, and culture shock experience (Ridaryanthi et al., 2024). Secondary data across both cohorts included institutional progress reports, the implementation arrangement between the collaborating universities, pre-departure orientation curriculum briefs, and draft manuscript materials produced under the respective research schemes (Ridaryanthi et al., 2024).

Transcripts and documents were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis following the framework of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For the South Korea cohort, open coding was applied to isolate recurrent statements regarding communication friction, emotional states, application usage, and adjustment milestones, which were then clustered into broader axial categories. For the Malaysia cohort, coding, categorizing, and data-clustering similarly produced the four main categories noted above, which this paper further cross-references against the South Korea cohort's axial categories to build the comparative structure of the discussion that follows. To secure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, data source triangulation was employed by cross-verifying individual interview narratives against institutional final reports, the synthesizing manuscript, and program documentation for each cohort. Member checking was performed with key informants to confirm that the derived themes accurately reflected their lived intercultural experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Motivations and Pre-Departure Preparedness: The Push-Pull Dynamic. Consistent with Lee's (1966) push-pull framework, awardees' decisions to pursue IISMA were shaped by a combination of domestic push factors, principally a perceived shortage of internationalized curricula and multicultural peer exposure at home, and destination-specific pull factors. VY explained that her decision was rooted in a childhood ambition combined with dissatisfaction toward the limited exposure offered by her home campus,

"I've had a dream of studying abroad since I was a kid, and I also feel that the exposure I've gotten at my own campus isn't enough" (VY, interview, August 2024).

For ELK, IISMA functioned as a "*bridge*" that let her simulate what studying abroad would actually feel like, while MAU framed the decision around the belief that a developed country would give her access to knowledge unavailable in Indonesia, a developing country.

Pull factors for Hanyang University were closely tied to the global reach of Korean popular culture, the *Hallyu* wave, and to specific academic offerings unavailable at home. ASF, MAU, and SHD cited exposure to K-pop and Korean drama as an initial attraction, while VY and ELK emphasized academic pull which ELK deliberately stepped outside her home discipline of English Literature to study digital marketing, noting that "*Hanyang offers so many courses in the marketing field,*" and ASF, a communication student, was drawn by the opportunity to study psychology. VY further noted her curiosity about the internal diversity of an ostensibly homogeneous society, observing that transit behavior differs between Seoul and Busan despite Korea's reputation for cultural uniformity, while SHD was motivated by wanting to understand how the Korean entertainment industry achieved global scale. For the Malaysia cohort, pull factors centered on different structural advantages, while push factors were expressed in more explicitly achievement-oriented and emotional terms. FV described being accepted into IISMA through Malaysia's co-funding scheme, after an earlier unsuccessful application to the fully funded regular scheme, as "*overwhelming joy*" and "*a second chance,*" reflecting the resilience-driven motivation that often accompanies overcoming an initial setback (FV, interview, August 2024). FV also articulated a specific pull factor rooted in perceived cultural affinity,

"Malaysia feels like home to me... because the people in Malaysia are very friendly and open, just like Indonesians. Furthermore, with a similar language, I feel not far from Indonesia" (FV, interview, August 2024).

This sense of cultural proximity, echoed across the cohort, offered a psychological cushion that Korea-bound awardees did not describe. Beyond affinity, Malaysia's multicultural composition,

comprising Malay, Chinese, Indian, and indigenous communities, offered awardees a chance to study intercultural dynamics within a single national setting, while the widespread use of English as a medium of instruction lowered the immediate linguistic barrier to academic participation (Ridaryanthi et al., 2024). Notably, several Korea-bound informants explicitly sought out a non-English-speaking destination as a deliberate challenge to build cross-cultural problem-solving skills, a motivation with no clear parallel in the Malaysia cohort, suggesting that destination choice itself already reflects differing risk appetites for cultural distance among IISMA applicants.

Pre-Departure Preparation, Emotional Terrain, and Digital Interventions. The findings from both cohorts confirm that contemporary intercultural adaptation begins well before physical departure, and that this pre-departure phase is emotionally as well as logistically demanding. In the Malaysia cohort, DA described “*an unavoidable afraid feeling... this is my very first experience going abroad and live by myself*” (DA, interview, August 2024), a statement that squarely illustrates the affective anxiety identified by AUM theory (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003) even before any actual intercultural contact had occurred. Consistent with Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2002) observation that the anticipation of a new cultural setting generates unease alongside excitement, DA’s anxiety coexisted with active preparation: attending sixteen compulsory pre-departure briefing sessions covering general information as well as psychological and financial preparation, and packing Indonesian food for a program cultural-exchange activity (DA, interview, August 2024). FV’s preparation was similarly thorough but oriented toward anticipated physical discomfort, packing multiple pairs of shoes to avoid “*the drama of wet shoes getting caught in the rain*” together with instant herbal drinks and Indonesian souvenirs for exchange, while RH focused on required documentation, including visas, medical checks, and dormitory arrangements, alongside ministry-run webinars (RH, interview, August 2024).

Both cohorts relied heavily on digital media and peer networks to manage this pre-departure uncertainty. Malaysia-bound informants sought guidance directly from IISMA alumni:

DA “*asked the former IISMA awardee to get information regarding their experience*” in addition to attending the compulsory pre-departure series (DA, interview, August 2024),

a pattern also reported by RZ and FRH. The Korea-bound cohort engaged in comparable structured digital mentoring sessions with alumni that helped calibrate expectations against on-the-ground realities, while both cohorts consulted YouTube vlogs, TikTok videos, and Instagram accounts run by previous awardees for practical information about campus layout, housing, and administrative procedures (Ridaryanthi et al., 2024). Notably, FRH’s packing of “*my mom’s house dress*” as a pre-emptive strategy against homesickness (FRH, interview, August 2024) illustrates that pre-departure preparation was not only informational but anticipatorily emotional, students were already rehearsing coping strategies for a stressor, homesickness, that had not yet occurred.

Departure and First Impressions: The Onset of Culture Shock. The transition from pre-departure planning to physical arrival marks the onset of the honeymoon and culture shock phases described by the U-curve model (Tarasova et al., 2017). In South Korea, awardees expressed admiration for the efficiency and cleanliness of public infrastructure alongside almost immediate disorientation from the *ppali-ppali* pace of daily life. Several informants also described Hanyang’s hilly, staircase-laced terrain as physically taxing; TIN recalled arriving “*already soaked with sweat*” before classes because of the steep walk from her dormitory, while SHD walked 1.2 kilometers daily because no bus route served her route to campus. Alongside these physical demands, informants voiced surprise at the individualistic public demeanor of Seoul residents. VY observed that while Indonesians casually smile at strangers, doing so in Korea “*is considered strange*,” even when intended as a friendly greeting. This initial perception of social distance often intensified early homesickness. Counterbalancing these frictions, several informants highlighted Korea’s exceptional public safety: VY’s friend recovered a lost wallet within two days despite losing it out of town, MAU’s forgotten wallet was safely held by a convenience-store cashier, and AIN, as a woman, felt safe walking home from the library late at night, an experience she contrasted with Indonesia.

For the Malaysia cohort, the departure and arrival experience was dominated less by environmental shock than by the physical toll of travel layered onto emotional intensity. FV described

a night flight, departing at 4 a.m. after gathering with fellow awardees since midnight, followed by a long immigration queue, “*so it was pretty exhausting for us*” (FV, interview, August 2024), while also recalling her heart “*palpitating*” upon landing at KLIA, a nervousness she attributed not to fear but to excitement over “*the new life-changing journey*” (FV, interview, August 2024).

RH reported a parallel experience of arriving in Penang “*very tiring after a long journey*” yet still “*enthusiastic about participating in the first day of orientation*” (RH, interview, August 2024), underscoring how positive anticipatory motivation can offset acute physical fatigue during the earliest hours of the sojourn (Zhai & Qiu, 2020).

Unlike the Korea cohort, whose early shock centered on an unfamiliar pace of life and public demeanor, shared historical, climatic, and linguistic familiarity meant that Malaysia-bound awardees described comparatively little spatial or environmental disorientation; FV explicitly noted feeling that Malaysia was “*similar yet different*” rather than foreign (Ridaryanthi, 2021; Berry, 1997). In short, where the South Korean cohort’s initial shock was primarily environmental and behavioral, the Malaysian cohort’s initial shock was primarily physical and logistical at the point of arrival, giving way rapidly to a social and structural adjustment challenge as the semester began, an early illustration of how cultural distance changes the character rather than the intensity of adjustment demands.

Verbal Barriers: The Linguistic Divide versus the Trap of False Proximity

Table 1 summarizes the comparative pattern of barriers identified across both cohorts.

Table 1. Comparative Communication Barriers Between the South Korea and Malaysia Cohorts

Dimension	South Korea Cohort (Hanyang University)	Malaysia Cohort (UKM, USM, UM)
Primary verbal barriers	Deep linguistic divide; limited local English proficiency; complex honorific structures (<i>jondaemal</i>)	High English literacy; false cognates and semantic shifts despite shared linguistic roots with <i>Bahasa Melayu</i>
Non-verbal / social forms	Restricted public smiling and eye contact; hierarchical bowing protocol	Different forms of address for elders and lecturers (<i>Akak/Abang</i> versus <i>Bapak/Ibu</i>); lower classroom formality
Socio-behavioral friction	Accelerated <i>ppali-ppali</i> lifestyle; individualistic public demeanor	Visible ethnic segregation among Malay, Chinese, and Indian peer groups; mixed local-international classrooms
Discrimination/stereotyping	Religiously-motivated verbal harassment toward hijab-wearing students; public staring and slurs	No comparable overt hostility reported; friction embedded in everyday intra-regional social dynamics
Primary digital tools	Naver Papago, Naver Maps/KakaoMap, translation apps	WhatsApp, Zoom/Google Meet, TikTok and X for peer coordination; campus student-buddy system

For Hanyang University awardees, language stood as the most prominent barrier to adaptation. VY recalled being grouped with Korean-speaking classmates during orientation and relying on a Japanese peer’s partial English to keep up, an experience she described as leaving her feeling “*left out.*” ELK observed that Korean interlocutors would speed up once they realized she understood some Korean, forcing her to signal comprehension difficulty before they would switch to English. Beyond conversational speed, the honorific system, which adjusts vocabulary and verb endings according to the age, status, and institutional position of the interlocutor, generated persistent communicative anxiety; several informants worried that their limited Korean might inadvertently sound disrespectful toward professors, elders, or service staff, a concern squarely consistent with Gudykunst and Kim’s (2003) account of anxiety arising from uncertain cultural coding. Instructor accent compounded the difficulty, SHD described a lecturer’s English as carrying such a strong Korean accent that she had to work hard “*to figure out what he was actually saying,*” while MAU noted that even English-medium instruction

was “*not fully fluent*” and complicated by accent.

The Malaysia cohort’s verbal challenges took a markedly different shape, rooted precisely in the linguistic proximity that had initially reassured them. RH observed that

“many Indonesians think that Malay is similar to Indonesian, like in the cartoon series Upin-Ipin. In reality, the two languages have significant differences” (RH, interview, August 2024),

a finding echoed by DA that *“there were some difficulties related to language use, because even though Malay is often referred to as a twin of Indonesian, in reality, there are still many words and meanings that are significantly different”* (DA, interview, August 2024).

AM offered the most concrete illustration of this false-cognate trap that “when I wanted to order sweet iced tea... in English, we usually call it ‘ice tea,’ right? But it turns out that in Malaysia, ‘ice tea’ means ‘teh tarik.’ Meanwhile, sweet iced tea is called ‘tea o.’ So, if there’s an ‘o,’ you can be sure it’s sweet” (AM, interview, August 2024).

AM further noted the difficulty of following rapid local speech, *“it is somewhat difficult for Indonesians to understand their language, especially when they speak quickly”* (AM, interview, August 2024). Where Korean-bound awardees anticipated difficulty and consciously prepared for it, the Malaysia cohort’s verbal barriers emerged precisely because assumed similarity lowered their guard, consistent with Ting’s (2023) observation that cross-cultural competence can be harder to build in ostensibly similar settings, and with Matsumoto and Hwang’s (2013) finding that unmet expectations of linguistic ease are themselves a source of culture shock.

Non-Verbal Barriers, Address Forms, and the Multicultural Terrain. Non-verbal and relational communication norms required careful recalibration in both settings, though in different registers. In South Korea, interaction is governed by implicit rules regarding physical distance, posture, and gaze; several informants noted that sustained direct eye contact with authority figures or elders could be read as confrontational rather than engaged, and the depth of a bow had to be calibrated to the relative status of the recipient, a constant source of low-level vigilance. VY’s account of Korean public reticence toward unsolicited smiling likewise reflects considerably more restrained expressive display rules than the open, high-context warmth Indonesian students are accustomed to extending toward strangers (Sihabudin, 2020).

In Malaysia, the friction centered less on physical non-verbal cues, which awardees found broadly familiar, than on the relational register of address and formality. DA was struck by the difference in honorific address

“in Indonesia, we refer to them as Bapak/Ibu, whereas in Malaysia, it’s more appropriate to call them Akak/Abang. This surprised me because it differs from the usual way we show respect in Indonesia... in Malaysia, students are not as formal towards lecturers, and the lecturers themselves do not demand the same level of formal respect as is customary in Indonesia” (DA, interview, August 2024).

This finding is consistent with Chen’s (2018) observation that hierarchical communication norms transfer unevenly even between culturally adjacent societies, and it demonstrates that cultural proximity does not eliminate the need for relational literacy; it merely relocates the site where that literacy must be applied, from cross-national physical gesture to intra-regional social register.

Malaysia’s internal ethnic diversity added a further, distinctly Malaysian, layer of non-verbal and social-structural learning. RH observed a pronounced pattern of ethnic clustering:

“I feel that the segregation among ethnic groups in Malaysia is very pronounced. Unlike in Indonesia, where all ethnicities can blend together, in Malaysia, the Malays tend to socialize with fellow Malays, as do the Chinese and Indian ethnic groups” (RH, interview, August 2024),

later adding that “I feel that they prefer to socialize with fellow local students (Malays with Malays, Chinese with Chinese, and Indians with Indians). I also often hang out with exchange students from Indonesia from other program” (RH, interview, August 2024). FV likewise reflected on Malaysia’s tri-ethnic composition as a distinctive object of observation rather than mere backdrop:

“Malaysia is consisting of three major races, which are Malay, Chinese, and Indian, and their culture seems not entirely assimilate like ours, so it was such a unique experience to witness directly how each culture shows prominent identity and colour in their everyday life” (FV, interview, August 2024).

This pattern is consistent with Hwang’s (2016) observation that Malaysian multiculturalism, while institutionally celebrated, coexists with socially bounded interaction along ethnic lines, a structural feature with no direct equivalent in the comparatively more linguistically homogeneous but interpersonally distant environment described by the Korea cohort.

Group academic work added a related friction: RH described managing “14 different ideas” among fellow awardees on IISMA group projects as “*not easy*,” noting recurring differences of opinion (RH, interview, August 2024), while also being surprised that Malaysian universities mix local and international students in the same classroom under English-medium instruction rather than offering separate international tracks,

“there are no special international classes; local students and international students are mixed in one class with English as the medium of instruction” (RH, interview, August 2024),

an inclusive but occasionally disorienting pedagogical arrangement (Deardorff, 2006).

Culture Shock, Stereotypes, and Discrimination. Beyond language and social structure, both cohorts encountered culture shock rooted in daily-life logistics, and in South Korea this extended to serious experiences of stereotyping and discrimination. Dietary adjustment was a recurring theme for the Korea cohort: ASF and MAU described sharing meals because Korean restaurant portions were “*big enough for two or three people*,” while MAU found Korean food comparatively bland relative to Indonesian cuisine. For Muslim informants, halal assurance compounded the difficulty; AIN described the “*struggle*” of finding suitable food as a Muslim student, VY relied on a QR-scanning application to verify ingredients after encountering restaurant staff who mislabeled pork as beef, and TIA was surprised by the prevalence of pork in Korean cuisine, including restaurants advertising “*no pork, no life*.”

More seriously, several Korea-cohort informants experienced direct discrimination and verbal hostility connected to visible religious identity. ELK recounted a friend wearing a hijab being approached on the MRT by an elderly local woman who, in Korean, told her that Muslims are not accepted in Korea and should leave. MAU described an almost identical episode on a train, in which an elderly woman told her, in broken English, “you are not supposed to be in my country” after identifying her as Muslim. TIN and her sister, both wearing hijab, were stared at and shouted at incoherently by a stranger on a train platform, an episode her sister diffused by advising her simply to “ignore it.” These episodes, consistent with the broader literature on discrimination against visible religious minorities (Yulinar et al., 2021; Bahry et al., 2024), illustrate that in a culturally distant, ethnically homogeneous host society, discrimination can compound linguistic and behavioral barriers with an additional layer of identity-based hostility.

For the Malaysia cohort, food-related culture shock took a markedly gentler, curiosity-driven form. FV compared Malaysian and Indonesian curry traditions directly:

“the curries in Malaysia are so Indian-influenced, which can be quite different from the curries in Indonesia that are inspired by Padang cuisine. If you like Indian curry, you’ll definitely enjoy staying in Malaysia” (FV, interview, August 2024),

a reflection consistent with Sternberg’s (2019) observation that food operates as both a marker of cultural difference and, over time, a vehicle for positive cultural appreciation. No Malaysia-cohort informant reported an experience of discrimination or verbal hostility comparable to those described by the Korea cohort; the friction they described was embedded instead in the ordinary, low-intensity work

of navigating an internally diverse host society rather than in acute confrontation, again illustrating that cultural proximity redistributes rather than eliminates adaptation demands.

Homesickness. Homesickness manifested unevenly across both cohorts, reflecting Thurber et al.'s (2012) observation that its severity depends on individual coping style and support access. In the Korea cohort, ELK linked her homesickness to fatigue from a monotonous routine, describing moments of wanting simply “*to go home*” before recognizing the feeling as part of the adaptation process and pushing through it. ASF's homesickness centered on missing her parents and younger siblings and was managed through regular communication during the program. MAU's homesickness was narrower and food-specific, while SHD reported no homesickness at all, attributing this to daily phone contact with her parents and the modest two-hour time difference between Seoul and Indonesia.

In the Malaysia cohort, homesickness surfaced primarily through anticipatory coping and sustained family contact rather than acute distress. FRH's pre-emptive packing of “*my mom's house dress... to help ease my homesickness and to keep me more motivated during my time in Malaysia*” (FRH, interview, August 2024) exemplifies a coping strategy grounded in familiar sensory objects, consistent with research showing that keeping tangible cultural links can ease the transition to unfamiliar settings (Perrucci & Hu, 2013). DA maintained homesickness at bay through disciplined daily contact, “*I make sure to update them [family] every day and at least call once a week*” (DA, interview, August 2024), primarily via WhatsApp voice and video calls. Taken together, the two cohorts show homesickness as a genuinely individualized construct rather than a uniform stage, shaped jointly by routine, family communication patterns, cultural proximity, and pre-emptive emotional preparation, an insight with direct implications for how pre-departure counselling should be pitched for each destination.

Handling Strategies and Digital Media as an Adaptive Mediator. A central finding of this study is the pervasive role that digital media played in helping both cohorts manage intercultural adjustment, not merely as a modern convenience but as an essential cognitive and emotional tool that directly mediated the adaptation process (Ridaryanthi et al., 2024, 2025; Smith & Smith, 2022; Hernandez et al., 2021). In South Korea, where linguistic and structural distance was pronounced, digital applications functioned as a primary means of daily survival. SHD described the translation app *Naver Papago* as “a total lifesaver,” particularly its camera-scanning feature for verifying halal status on packaging, while MAU and ASF used translation apps whenever spoken English or Korean proved insufficient. For spatial navigation, awardees found that international standards such as Google Maps performed poorly under local data regulations, pushing them toward Naver Maps or KakaoMap for precise, minute-level transit tracking that let them keep pace with the demands of ppali-ppali culture. Some informants also pursued direct cultural adjustment: VY learned to move quickly through transactional encounters such as convenience-store purchases, Aini pursued basic Korean literacy as both a practical tool and a form of respect toward the host culture, and TIN used earphones as what she called “*a universal language*” signalling “*do not disturb*” in uncomfortable public situations.

For the Malaysia cohort, digital media use skewed toward maintaining dense, structured communication networks rather than raw survival translation. DA distinguished clearly between platforms and purposes:

“for indirect communication, I use common communication media, namely WhatsApp. I use this platform to exchange messages, make calls, and video calls. Additionally, I often use Zoom/Google Meet for video calls to make them more effective” (DA, interview, August 2024)

This statement noting further that communication intensity with fellow IISMA awardees was high “*due to living together and having many tasks that need to be completed as a group*” (DA, interview, August 2024), while contact with local classmates occurred mainly around group assignments, supplemented by more regular contact with designated student buddies and student-council members at campus events (DA, interview, August 2024). FV described a similarly dense WhatsApp group culture among IISMA peers,

“we often send messages, photos, voice notes, TikTok videos, and viral tweets on X, ranging from important to unimportant, just like typical friendship WhatsApp groups” (FV, interview, August 2024)

While also noting she rarely contacted friends in Indonesia during her exchange, relying instead on a tight circle of IISMA and international friends formed in Malaysia. RH highlighted the institutional dimension of this digital support:

“USM provides a buddy team for each country, so if there are any questions related to lectures, documents, activities, etc., they can be asked to their respective buddies” (RH, interview, August 2024).

This pattern indicates that, unlike the Korea cohort’s app-mediated *problem-solving* orientation (translation, navigation), the Malaysia cohort’s digital media use was oriented more toward *relationship maintenance*, sustaining dense co-national and institutional support networks that substituted, to some degree, for the deeper autonomous host-culture engagement described by Kim (2001), a pattern with the same risk of insulating students from local integration if left unbalanced.

Re-entry, Reverse Culture Shock, and the Stress-Adaptation-Growth Dynamic. When analyzed through Kim’s (2001) Integrative Theory, the experiences documented above illustrate a continuous stress-adaptation-growth dynamic. The communication barriers, cultural adjustments, and socio-behavioral friction encountered by awardees constitute the necessary stress that displaces existing cognitive habits; over time, by developing localized language skills, recalibrating non-verbal behavior, and deploying digital tools, awardees updated their interpretive frameworks to align with the host environment, the adaptation phase of Kim’s model. This shift becomes visible along the upper arc of the U-curve as the semester progressed (Tarasova et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2001): South Korea awardees gradually internalized the rhythms of *ppali-ppali* life and local standards of punctuality, while Malaysia awardees developed a more sophisticated reading of multi-ethnic social settings and cross-communal etiquette. FV’s own account of this trajectory was explicit that *“after three months of staying, everything became more stable”* (FV, interview, August 2024), a statement that closely mirrors the U-curve’s transition from crisis to adjustment.

The long-term impact of this adjustment surfaced most visibly at re-entry. Returning to Indonesia, several South Korea informants reported reverse culture shock, most concretely around punctuality: TIN recounted her frustration when an Indonesian friend arrived at 10.15 for a 9.30 appointment without prior notice, a laxity she had unlearned in Korea’s tightly scheduled culture. Beyond logistics, informants described a deeper reflective shift. ASF articulated a new appreciation for pluralism:

“growing up in different cultures, we develop different standpoints... we must be able to accept each other’s opinions and perspectives without belittling them,” while Aini emphasized that cultural difference should never be a reason to withdraw from engagement, insisting that even a short-term international student has a responsibility to actively “explore the country, explore the culture.” (ASF, interview, August 2024)

The Malaysia cohort expressed a comparable retrospective appreciation, though pitched more toward gratitude than toward reflective adjustment: RZ observed that

“all the excitement still lingers even after I return to my home country. This is because the opportunity I received this time might not come twice, and it is incredibly valuable for the course of my life” (RZ, interview, August 2024).

These reflections exemplify Kim’s (2001) growth outcome and Spitzberg and Changnon’s (2009) account of intercultural competence as an evolving, reflexive capacity rather than a fixed checklist of skills, and they confirm that the value of the IISMA sojourn, in either destination, ultimately resides less in the absence of friction than in what awardees make of the friction they encounter.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis has reconstructed and elaborated three linked research outputs, an undergraduate thesis on IISMA awardees in South Korea, a collaborative institutional report on IISMA awardees in Malaysia, and a synthesizing manuscript, into a single, theoretically integrated account of

intercultural communication and adaptation within the IISMA program. Grounded in Kim's Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation, Gudykunst's AUM Theory, the U-Curve Adjustment Model, and Lee's Push-Pull Factors Theory, the study demonstrates that international mobility offers significant opportunities for personal and professional growth while requiring awardees to navigate genuinely distinct communicative and socio-behavioral demands depending on destination.

The empirical findings show that cultural distance shapes the character, not merely the presence, of adaptation challenges. In South Korea, adjustment was defined by a pronounced linguistic divide, a rigid non-verbal and honorific hierarchy, identity-based discrimination toward visibly Muslim students, and the pressures of a fast-paced, individualistic urban environment. In Malaysia, awardees operated within greater cultural and linguistic proximity, yet this proximity introduced its own hurdles by encouraging assumptions of absolute cultural identity that had to be unlearned in favor of a more nuanced understanding of Malaysia's multi-ethnic social fabric.

Across both destinations, digital media proved indispensable, functioning as a translator, a navigator, and an emotional anchor, while simultaneously carrying the risk of insulating awardees from deeper host-culture engagement if relied upon without balance. By triangulating rich interview narratives with institutional and focus-group data across two contrasting host contexts, this study addresses the scarcity of comparative, IISMA-specific communication research and provides an evidence base directly usable for constructing a destination-differentiated pre-departure model, supporting the sustainability of the IISMA program as intended in its founding aims under Kampus Merdeka or similar program.

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