



## THE UTILIZATION OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN THE INTERCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT EXPERIENCES AMONG IISMA STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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### Abstract

*The Indonesia International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) is one of the schemes under Kampus Merdeka Program initiated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of Indonesia, designed to enhance students' global exposure by enabling them to study abroad. IISMA awardee will have pre-departure preparation that leads to different adjustment experience. Pre-departure, departure and adjustment experiences will expose students to a circumstance whereby they can utilize digital media to seek information and deal with intercultural challenges during the program. This study explores how IISMA awardees in Malaysia navigate their intercultural adjustment, with particular focus on the role of digital media. A qualitative approach was used, involving in-depth interviews with selected IISMA participants studying at universities in Malaysia. Informants reflected on their experiences across the pre-departure, arrival, and adaptation phases, highlighting digital media's role in information-seeking, expectation management, and emotional support. Findings show that digital media played a key role for students to connect with peers, access cultural knowledge, and manage sociocultural and psychological challenges. However, variations in digital media literacy and prior international exposure affected how effectively these media were used. The study concludes that digital media supports intercultural adaptation but underscores the need for structured pre-departure preparation.*

**Keywords:** Digital Media; Intercultural Communication; Interaction; Adjustment; IISMA

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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) is a noteworthy program initiated under the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia under the Kampus Merdeka Program. International student mobility programs aim to enhance the global competitiveness of bachelor graduates by providing them with valuable international experiences. These programs offer students the opportunity to study abroad, immerse themselves in different cultures and gain exposure to diverse academic and professional environments (Dewanto & Pritasari, 2023). Moreover, students will also gain more experience for their interpersonal skills. IISMA program provides university students with wide range of opportunity to experience study abroad within certain period of time which allows them to expand their academic horizon as well as immersing themselves in different cultures. The experiences gained from living and studying in a foreign country is invaluable for the awardees. When the students could enhance their intercultural competencies from their experience interacting with people from different cultural background. Taking a courage to step out of their comfort zones enable the students to challenge themselves to learn new culture and adjust to new environments which could contribute to their personal and academic developments.

Study that focusing on IISMA students indicated that the participant achieved lasting adaptation by managing emotional shifts in their experiences as exchange students in their host countries (Zidani & Sudarwati, 2023). Meanwhile Budiarti et al., (2022) suggests that conceptual filters, as outlined in Gudykunst and Kim's cultural communication model comprising culture, socio-culture, psycho-culture, and environment tend to influence the interaction process of program participants while they are in the host country i.e. Rusia. Indonesian students participating in the IISMA program who chose Russia as their destination are advised to complete a basic Russian language course in Indonesia before their departure. During involving in the IISMA program, students encounter a wide range of problems during their study abroad experience, as each person's experience is influenced by their own background, expectations, and level of preparedness. Members of this esteemed program hail from many colleges and locations throughout Indonesia. Because of this, they make rather different pre-departure preparations, which results in a variety of experiences after they get to their host countries. These variations in their preparation and personal readiness may have an impact on how well students integrate into their new settings and overcome the possible intercultural difficulties.

The benefits of this student exchange program are experienced by students in terms of enhancing their soft skills. However, the challenges of its implementation include limited information available and a short preparation period (Prakoso et al., 2021). In order to achieve the benefit of this program, pre-departure preparation is a crucial phase that significantly impacts students' ability to adjust when they live in the foreign culture. While some students may have had little exposure to the language, culture, and social mores of their host nation, others may have. How well students handle their first cultural shock and how quickly they assimilate into the community can both be influenced by their level of preparation. It is crucial to plan ahead thoroughly and carefully before leaving, as inadequate preparation can result in stress and make it harder to adjust to the new environment.

IISMA awardee must quickly adapt to a new set of challenges that they encounter upon arriving in the host nation. Students typically experience a mixture of excitement and anxiety during the departure phase as they bid farewell to familiar surroundings and set out on an uncertain journey. Students have to adjust to new cultural norms, academic expectations, and social norms during their first few days in the host nation. Although this phase of transition can be quite demanding, it also offers a chance for development and self-discovery. One of the key

aspects of the intercultural adjustment process is the use of digital media. In today's interconnected world, digital media plays a vital role in helping students manage the challenges of living abroad. Students can utilize various digital platforms to stay connected with their home country, access information about their host country, and seek support from peers who are going through similar experiences. Digital media serves as a bridge that helps students navigate the complexities of intercultural communication and adjustment.

The study explores the intercultural adjustment experiences of IISMA students in Malaysia, with a particular focus on how they use digital media to cope with the challenges they face. By employing a qualitative approach, the study delves into the personal experiences of IISMA awardees through a series of interviews. These interviews provide valuable insights into how students leverage digital media to enhance their intercultural communication skills and adapt to their new environment. The findings of this study offer a deeper understanding of the role digital media plays in the intercultural adjustment process. The IISMA program offers a unique opportunity for Indonesian students to gain invaluable intercultural experience through study abroad. However, the success of this experience largely depends on how well students are prepared for the challenges of living in a foreign country. The use of digital media is a critical component of the intercultural adjustment process, enabling students to navigate the complexities of a new culture and enhance their communication competencies. This study highlights the need for comprehensive pre-departure preparation that incorporates digital media training, ensuring that IISMA students are well-equipped to make the most of their study abroad experience.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Intercultural Communication**

Culture is defined as a system of competence that is shared in its board design and deeper principles which varies between individuals in its specificities (Keesing, 1974 as cited in Gudykunst, 1998). Intercultural communication refers to the interaction of people exchanging messages and meaning with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Liliweri, 2011). It will be difficult for individuals from diverse cultures to communicate if the source and receiver are in different cultural contexts and share different meanings of symbols in their interaction (Jandt, 2007). In communication, we exchange messages and create meaning. When we communicate, we present ourselves as we want strangers to see and understand us (Gudykunst, 1998). When the cultural background is different, we could imagine that there will be thousands of different symbols that we will refer to differently. In our interaction with strangers, we present our communication behavior based on our habits, intentions, and emotions. With diverse cultural backgrounds, communication with people from different cultural backgrounds will be challenging for individuals who may feel confused, uncertain, and even anxiety with the culture they never acknowledged before. Moreover if we are the one who becomes the guest in other people's culture. Therefore, understanding culture and intercultural communication is important to adjust in the new cultural milieu.

### **Intercultural adaptation**

Cultural adaptation is a key aspect of the international student experience. Intercultural adaptation is an evolving process that refers to the process of intentional selection and behavioral adjustment (Liu et al., 2022). Psychological adjustment refers to emotional well-being and stress management, while sociocultural adjustment pertains to the ability to effectively interact with the local culture. Moreover, co-national friendship during the adjustment process showed a significant negative correlation with psychological adaptation, whereas other forms of national friendship did not have a significant relationship with psychological adaptation (Sheng et al., 2022). Therefore, the influence

of host national friendship greatly influenced how academic adaptation affected psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation. IISMA students must navigate these dimensions as they adapt to new social norms and academic expectations in their host country.

Pre-departure preparation is critical in influencing international students' adjustment to their new environments. Studies suggest that comprehensive pre-departure orientation programs can significantly enhance students' readiness for intercultural challenges. Such programs often include cultural orientation, language training, and logistical advice (Kauffmann & Järvinen, 2020). As for IISMA students, effective pre-departure preparation can mitigate the initial culture shock and facilitate smoother transitions. Furthermore, social support plays a vital role in the adjustment process. International students benefit from support networks, including fellow students, local mentors, and institutional resources. A study by Li et al. (2021) emphasizes that peer networks, such as those formed through student exchange programs, provide emotional support and practical assistance, which are crucial for overcoming adjustment challenges.

Academic adjustment involves adapting to different educational systems and expectations. Cultural intelligence relies on personal difference suggests that certain people possess the intercultural awareness necessary for effective cross-cultural interactions (Ting, 2023). For IISMA students, adapting to these differences is crucial for their academic success and overall satisfaction with the program. Therefore, intercultural adaptation is a holistic process of individual fostering understanding through their interaction to enhance their ability to navigate the challenges faced in their unfamiliar cultural surroundings (Sawyer, 2011).

### **Digital Media in Cross-cultural Adaptation**

The role of digital media in supporting international students' adjustment is increasingly recognized. Digital tools facilitate communication with home, access to cultural information, and interaction with local communities. According to Chen and Hsu (2019), digital media can serve as a lifeline for international students, offering both emotional support and practical resources. Integrating digital media into pre-departure preparation is a promising approach for enhancing international students' readiness. A study by Smith and Smith (2022) suggests that incorporating digital media tools in orientation programs can provide students with valuable resources and support, improving their ability to navigate intercultural challenges.

Social media offers various platforms that enable individuals to communicate and interact worldwide, exchange information and knowledge, as well as engage with one to another despite their geographical barriers (Sawyer, 2011). Sojourners often use social media platforms to better integrate into the host culture during their adaptation process while simultaneously preserving connection with their home countries; engaging with friends and family, for the familiarity and coping mechanism of their adaptation process. Messaging platforms such as WhatsApp are widely used among students due to the evolving use of informal language (Manurung et al., 2022). The frequent use of slang and its variations among the youngsters reflects the growing influence of digital communication and emerging social dynamics that highlight how language adapts within the digital sphere. This becomes the tools for adaptation in the cross-cultural context to understand better the communication and create dynamic in interaction with the host culture society. This will contribute to individual's cross-cultural competence.

Cross-cultural competence plays a very important role in improving communication, fostering understanding, and supporting individual growth in the context of intercultural adaptation (Mo, 2023). Students

will navigate diverse environments, will gain the ability to understand and engage with different cultural norms and beliefs, as well as perspectives that become essential for their successful social integration in the host society. This process enhances their ability to understand, communicate well and engage with different cultural values and perspectives, which are essential for successful social integration in the respective host society (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009; Deardorff, 2006). Furthermore, this experience could lead to a beneficial complimentary skills as cross-cultural leadership (Mulyana et al., 2022), in this context is reflected through their socio-cultural life experience during the stay.

Social media platforms have emerged as critical tools in this intercultural engagement process, offering spaces where students can interact and communicate with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Lim & Pham, 2021). This sphere facilitates exposure of individuals to diverse values, beliefs, as well as worldviews gained through meaning exchange in their communication. This engagement not only broadens individual cultural awareness but also enhances meaningful cultural exchange among them. Individuals should actively participate in interaction which will support their adjustment process in a multicultural setting. Through multicultural based interaction, individual could develop their communication skills, build empathy, and enhance their capacity to adapt and thrive in culturally diverse society.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This is qualitative research with a constructivism point of view. The qualitative research design employed in this study is rooted in a constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding the meaning individuals construct from their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). In depth interviews were employed as data gathering techniques. Whilst the interviews were conducted to eight (8) IISMA awardees in semi-structured to enable the in-depth elaboration of their intercultural communication experience during their stay in Malaysia for student exchange program. Purposive sampling was applied to select individuals who met specific inclusion criteria: (1) active participation in the IISMA program, (2) a minimum of four months of residence in Malaysia, and (3) engagement in intercultural communication and digital media use. This method allows researchers to identify and select information-rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2015).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews which allow researchers to explore participants' experiences in a flexible yet well-guided way. This approach provides the opportunity to probe deeper into responses (Adams, 2020). The interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with prior consent. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses related to sociocultural and psychological adjustment, communication strategies, and digital media usage. The data analysis followed thematic analysis, using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up. This method enabled the identification of recurring patterns and meaningful insights from the qualitative data. However, during this study, ethical considerations were strictly adhered to. Informants were requested to fill up a consent form and be ensured that they understand the objectives of this study and they have the right to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, participants' anonymity was maintained through the use of pseudonyms in the research report or article to be published. Table 1 shows the list of informants involved in this study:

Table 1: List of Informants

Initial	Sex	Batch	Home	IISMA Placement
D	F	2020	Bandung	Bangi
F	M	2020	Cibinong	Bangi
R	F	2020	Semarang	Penang
RZ	M	2019	Bekasi	Penang
AM	F	2021	Bogor	Kuala Lumpur
FR	F	2019	Semarang	Penang
KA	F	2020	Tangerang	Penang
MA	F	2019	Bandar Lampung	Penang

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The foundation for a smooth transition starts long before students depart from their nation of origin. Comprehensive pre-departure preparation gives students the information and abilities they need to successfully navigate their new environment. This includes orientation sessions, cultural briefings, and logistical advice. This planning lessens the uncertainty and anxiety that come with relocating to a foreign nation and helps to set reasonable expectations. Pre-departure preparation can greatly facilitate the transition process for IISMA students by addressing possible obstacles and offering useful tools. Through comprehensive pre-departure preparation, students can mitigate the effects of initial culture shock and facilitate a more seamless transition to their new country.

One of the key findings of the study is the importance of incorporating digital media usage into pre-departure preparation programs. Incorporating digital media into pre-departure preparation is particularly beneficial for enhancing the adjustment process (Senci et al., 2022). By familiarizing students with the digital tools and platforms available to them, they can better prepare for the challenges they may face while living abroad. Other than that, by equipping students with these skills before they depart, they can approach their study abroad experience with greater confidence and resilience. For example, training on how to use digital media for language learning, cultural exploration, and maintaining connections with home can provide students with valuable skills and resources. This preparation should include training on how to use digital media for language learning, accessing cultural resources, and connecting with local communities in order to connect and reconnect with people who will support their adjustment process in the host country.

A new culture requires both psychological and sociocultural adaptations, which makes it a difficult process (Lai et al., 2023). Sociocultural adaptation is the process of learning how to communicate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, whereas psychological adaptation is the management of feelings and stress associated with being in an unfamiliar environment (Shafaei & Razak, 2018). It can be difficult for IISMA students to adapt to new social norms, beliefs, and behaviors, but it also presents chances for personal development. A seamless adjustment depends on the use of effective cultural adaptation techniques, such as interacting with locals and fostering cross-cultural relationships.

## Interaction and communication

*"I usually get in touch with my Indonesian relatives and friends quite a bit to talk and tell tales of my time spent there."*

(Informant RZ)

*"Discussion of tasks that need to be completed, leisure time, and problems currently being faced..."*

(Informant KA)

*"I interact a lot with fellow IISMA students as well as local and international students. The frequency of our interactions is very high. For example, we often hang out or chit-chat when we have free time. I also regularly make video calls with my family in the evening."*

(Informant MA)

The adaptation experience to a new culture as international students involves both psychological and sociocultural aspects. The psychological adjustment aspect focuses on managing emotions, stress, and feelings of isolation in an unfamiliar environment, meanwhile the sociocultural adjustment aspect emphasizes the practical aspect of learning how to effectively communicate and navigate social norms, beliefs, and behaviors in the host society. The adjustment process can be both challenging and rewarding whilst providing opportunities for personal growth and intercultural learning for IISMA awardees. Psychological adjustment will be related to how students adjust emotionally and mentally when they are in a completely new cultural environment which is unfamiliar for them. As for many international students, staying connected with family and friends back home can make a huge difference in managing the stress and overcoming homesickness that often come with being away from their home country (Tarasova et al., 2017, Aleshchenko, 2022). Informant RZ shares that he usually get in touch with his Indonesian relatives and friends to share his day to day activities in the host country. This is an important note that the support of loved ones, and the closest ones, could provide a sense of comfort, safety, and stability, offering a lifeline when things feel overwhelming or unfamiliar in their sojourn. Having regular phone calls or messages with family and friends help students to feel connected to their home country. This could make it easier for them to face the challenges of a new culture without losing touch with who they are and with the one they familiar with. This is supported by the study that stated the crucial role of information technology in adaptation process; facing culture shock (Handayani, 2018).

Informant RZ statement is supported by Informant MA's regarding their experience maintaining connections with family plays a crucial part in their emotional well-being. These nightly check-in routines with family, or friends, serve as a ritual that brings comfort and safety, especially after a packed day of navigating a foreign academic system and social settings. It's like a reset button, offering a chance to reflect, share experiences, and gain reassurance, which can be essential for managing any feelings of loneliness and homesickness. The process of psychological adaptation also means learning how to cope with the uncomfortable and confusion that comes from being in an unfamiliar culture in their host culture. Students may face challenges like understanding new social norms, adjusting to different ways of communicating, or meeting academic expectations that differ from what they're used to. It's about being resilient, finding ways to take care of yourself, and developing strategies to manage these difficulties. Having strong connections with family or friends can help students feel more confident and less isolated as they adapt to these new cultural experiences. They don't have to face the challenges alone, and that sense of support can make all the difference in how they navigate their journey.

On the other hand, sociocultural adaptation involves learning how to interact effectively within the host culture, understanding local behaviours, and adapting to new communication styles. As Informant KA notes that their interactions are a blend of academic and social exchanges that discussion of tasks that need to be completed, leisure time, and problems currently being faced. This highlights the necessity of adapting to new social expectations and cultural norms in daily life. Students are required to navigate both formal and informal communication styles, such as discussing schoolwork or casual topics, while learning how to manage the cultural differences in social settings.

Additionally, Sociocultural adaptation involves more than simply interacting with locals; it also requires the development of strategies to engage meaningfully with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Informant MA's experience, which includes regular interaction with both fellow IISMA students and local and international students, reflects this process to interact a lot with fellow IISMA students as well as local and international students. The frequency of our interactions is very high. For example, we often hang out or chit-chat when we have free time. Through frequent social interactions, Informant MA is not only building friendships during the stay but also learning the subtleties of social behavior in the host culture. Hanging out and chit-chatting serve as important means of cultural exchange, allowing students to better understand the local way of life and gradually incorporate these cultural practices into their daily interactions. One of the main challenges in sociocultural adaptation is navigating the differences in communication styles and understanding unspoken and unfamiliar cultural norms. International students need to be sensitive to these differences to avoid misunderstandings. The fact that Informant MA is frequently interacting with students from a variety of cultural backgrounds allows them to learn firsthand about these differences and develop intercultural communication skills.

Moreover, fostering relationships with local students and engaging in cross-cultural interaction provides a great opportunity for developing individual's intercultural competence. Sharing experiences, discussing common issues, and even exploring topics like leisure activities or problems faced in adapting to the new environment allow international students to expand their understanding of different perspectives. These interactions enrich the students' cultural knowledge and contribute to more effective communication and integration within the host society. Both psychological and sociocultural adaptation processes are deeply intertwined with social support networks. Students who have access to a broad range of supportive relationship better able to navigate the complexities of cultural adaptation.

The IISMA students' experiences reflect the importance of building both academic and personal support systems. Engaging with local students, as noted in the experiences of MA and KA, facilitates deeper understanding and integration into the host culture. Socializing during free time, sharing leisure activities, and engaging in group discussions all contribute to a more positive cultural adaptation experience. These interactions also help international students expand their social circles and develop a broader sense of belonging, both academically and socially. The interaction and communication practices of students participating in international mobility programs, such as IISMA reveal significant insights into their adjustment experiences and the roles of social interactions in their lives abroad. The statements provided by the participants highlight various dimensions of their social engagement, from maintaining connections with home to interacting with peers in the host country.

*"Since we live together and have a lot of homework to do together, we interact frequently."*

(Informant D)



*"I engaged in most frequently with my fellow IISMA awardees for we have many projects together...I also often hang out with exchange students from Indonesia who are not part of the IISMA program."*

(Informant R)

*"(I share) daily experiences, current news, IISMA activities, and sharing feelings with one another."*

(Informant FR)

The experience stated have reflected a nuanced understanding of the social dynamics and communication patterns among students participating in the IISMA program. The frequency and nature of interactions among these students play a crucial role in their overall experience and adjustment process. Their communication experiences illustrate that frequent interaction with peers and engagement in collaborative activities are fundamental to the international student experience. The close relationships formed through shared living spaces and academic projects create a supportive environment that is crucial for effective adjustment and personal growth. Additionally, the broad network of connections, including both IISMA awardees and other exchange students, provides a diverse support system that enriches students' cultural and social experiences.

The frequent communication and collaboration with fellow IISMA students, as shared by Informant D, R, and FR, underscore the role of shared living spaces and academic projects in fostering strong social bonds. For example, Informant D's statement that they interact frequently with peers due to shared academic responsibilities reflects how academic and residential contexts create an environment conducive to regular interactions. The fact that these students live together and often work on assignments and projects collectively not only makes their communication frequent but also establishes a level of comfort and trust, which is essential for overcoming the initial cultural barriers that international students often face.

However, Informant R's engagement with both IISMA peers and other exchange students from Indonesia further illustrates the extended network of support and social exchange that students create. It suggests that beyond the formal IISMA group, students form friendships and social networks with other international students, which enriches their overall experience. Interacting with students outside the IISMA cohort could give experience a diverse range of cultural perspectives, further expanding their social and cultural horizons. Moreover, Informant FR's statement about sharing daily experiences, current news, and feelings demonstrates the emotional support students gain from these frequent interactions. Their experience of exchanging personal stories not only support each other through shared challenges but also build a sense of community among them that is crucial for their emotional well-being and adjustment in the host country. This emotional bonding and sense of solidarity contribute to the feeling of belonging and provide a valuable safety net, especially in a foreign and unfamiliar environment.

The communication patterns described by students with their local peers highlight both the formal and informal ways in which international students interact with the host culture. Informant D's experience of interacting quite frequently with local students primarily occur for academic purposes such as group assignments, reflects the structured nature of many international students' engagement with the local student. This interaction serves to facilitate some level of cultural exchange and provides opportunities for understanding local academic norms and practices. The students will gain more experience and understanding from this interaction.

On the other hand, Informant F's interactions with local students go beyond academic collaborations. The discussions about cultural differences, geopolitics, and current trends reflect a deeper level of engagement that allows students to understand the host culture in more dynamic and relatable terms. This situation is not experienced

by the rest of awardees in this study. These types of conversations not only enhance students' cultural knowledge but also create opportunities for mutual learning and respect between international and local students. The experience of sharing stories about their respective regions and discussing current events, international students are able to contribute to the local student understanding of global perspectives, while also learning about the local culture from their peer students.

Additionally, interactions with local students who serve as student buddies or members of the student council, as mentioned by Informant D in the interview, serve a functional role in helping students navigate their new environment. These local peers often provide beneficial support in understanding practical and cultural aspects of life in the host country, such as navigating campus events or understanding social norms, which helps international students integrate more smoothly. Regular communication about daily life, academic matters, and personal feelings not only helps students manage the transition to a new country but also fosters a sense of community and belonging. This comprehensive support network is essential for overcoming the challenges of studying abroad and maximizing the benefits of the international mobility program.

*“My interaction with local student is quite frequent. I communicate with classmates only when necessary, such as for group assignments. However, with local students who serve as student buddies or members of the student council, communication occurs when there are events or needs on campus.”*

(Informant D)

*“We often share stories about our culture based on our respective regions and discussing geopolitics situation. Sometimes, we also like to talk about current trends happening in each of our countries.”*

(Informant F)

The frequent interactions among fellow awardees, engagement with a wider network of exchange students, and open sharing of experiences and emotions contribute significantly to a successful and enriching study abroad experience. These factors collectively support students in adapting to their new environment in their IISMA journey which enhancing their overall well-being, and achieving their academic and personal goals. Adapting to a different educational system is a significant challenge for international students, including participants in IISMA program. These students often face unfamiliar education systems which requiring them to develop flexibility and proactive learning strategies to succeed. This adjustment process is influenced by both academic and social factors, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems.

Smith and Smith (2022) emphasize the importance of pre-departure preparation through digital media in enhancing international students' readiness. Their study suggests that engaging with digital platforms before departure allows students to familiarize themselves with the host country's academic culture, educational practices, and social norms. This early exposure helps mitigate academic shock and prepares students for active participation in their new learning environment. Digital media tools, such as virtual orientation programs and academic webinars, equip students with practical strategies to adapt to diverse educational settings. Additionally, Ward et al. (2001) highlight that academic adjustment is a key component of intercultural adaptation. They state an argument that students who actively engage with support systems are better equipped to overcome cultural and educational transitions during their adjustment process. In this study, IISMA awardee utilized digital platforms that can

facilitate these connections, providing instant access to academic resources and peer communities, which ease the adaptation process.

Budiarti, Cangara, and Wahid (2022) explored intercultural communication among IISMA students in Russia, emphasizing the role of social networks and peer interactions in adapting to academic and social environments. Their study found that effective intercultural communication skills enable students to bridge academic gaps and build collaborative relationships with local peers and faculty. Digital communication tools, such as messaging apps and social media, enhance these interactions by allowing continuous engagement beyond the classroom. In this study, IISMA awardee mostly use WhatsApp as their digital communication tool which could provide not only texting facilities, but also phone call and video call. These features could facilitate their needs of proximity with their own culture and internal cultural enclave.

Furthermore, Dewanto and Pritasari (2023) discuss how the IISMA program contributes to developing students' employability skills, including adaptability and problem-solving, which are crucial for navigating new academic systems. Exposure to international academic practices fosters resilience and critical thinking, aligning with the demands of the global workforce. From an emotional adaptation perspective, Zidani and Sudarwati (2023) emphasize how IISMA students encounter emotional and cultural challenges, such as adapting to unexpected weather conditions or unfamiliar social settings. These experiences underline the importance of emotional support from family and friends in Indonesia. Digital media, such as WhatsApp, serves as a bridge for emotional connection with their home culture, enabling students to maintain supportive relationships while adapting to new academic and cultural contexts. Successfully adjusting to different educational systems involves academic flexibility, proactive learning, and effective use of digital media for both academic preparation and emotional support. Digital tools not only help IISMA students prepare academically but also provide essential social and emotional connections that ease the adaptation process.

*"Communication with my family is very frequent; I update them every day and call at least once a week."*  
(Informant D)

*"I rarely in touch with friends in Indonesia. As for my family, my parents only called occasionally, not very often."*  
(Informant F)

*"Quite often. At least twice a month, I check in on them, especially my closest friends."*  
(Informant RZ)

Overall, the communication practices of IISMA students reveal the integral role of social interactions in their adjustment experiences. Maintaining connections with home, discussing practical and personal matters, and engaging with peers are all crucial for enhancing students' well-being and successful adaptation to their new environment (Sawyer et al., 2012; Ridaryanthi, 2019). These practices not only provide emotional support but also facilitate practical problem-solving and cultural integration. Understanding these dimensions of student communication can help improve support structures and resources for international students, ensuring a more enriching and successful study abroad experience (Braslauskas, 2021).

### Digital media and communication

In today's digital age, technology plays a significant role in the adjustment process. Digital media tools such as social media, messaging apps, and video conferencing platforms facilitate communication with family and friends back home, access to information about the host country, and interaction with local communities. For IISMA students, digital media can serve as a bridge to maintain connections, seek support, and stay informed about their new environment. Effective use of digital media can help mitigate feelings of isolation and enhance students' ability to adapt.

This perspective has conjunction with Mo (2023), who emphasizes that social media greatly influences the cross-cultural abilities of international high school students by providing platforms for cultural exchange and social interaction. Mo's study reveals that social media not only facilitates communication but also enriches students' understanding of different cultural norms, practices, and perspectives, which is essential for successful adaptation in a new environment. The interactive nature of social media allows students to actively engage in cultural learning, thereby improving their intercultural competence. Similarly, Sawyer (2011) discusses the significant role of new social media in facilitating intercultural adaptation. International students often use social media to integrate into the host culture by engaging with local content and communities, while also maintaining ties with their home culture. This dual engagement could balance cultural integration and cultural maintenance, which are important for successful adaptation. Active participation in social media communities can ease the adaptation process by offering social support and reducing cultural stress. Therefore, the use of digital media can enhance intercultural communication and adaptation. Furthermore, leveraging social media to engage with both their home and host cultures fosters a smoother transition, encourages cultural learning, and helps mitigate feelings of isolation for IISMA students. This balance ultimately strengthens their cross-cultural competence and supports personal growth in a new environment.

Meanwhile, the findings from Chen and Hsu (2019) further strengthen the argument that digital media plays a pivotal role in facilitating international students' intercultural adaptation. Their study emphasizes how digital media serves as a critical tool for bridging cultural gaps, offering international students' greater access to social support, cultural knowledge, and local integration opportunities. Furthermore, Chen and Hsu (2019) found that digital media not only enables international students to maintain emotional connections with their home countries but also provides resources to help them understand and adapt to the host culture. Social media platforms, online communities, and messaging apps allow students to gather real-time information about cultural norms, social practices, and academic expectations in their new environment. This immediate access to information reduces cultural uncertainty and anxiety, making the adjustment process smoother. Moreover, that digital media encourages proactive engagement in cultural learning by offering interactive tools such as language apps, cultural exchange forums, and online events. These tools help students develop language proficiency, understand local customs, and participate in community activities, which are essential components of successful intercultural adaptation.

*"I make use of standard communication tools like WhatsApp. I make phone conversations, video calls, and message back and forth using this platform. In addition, I frequently use Zoom or Google Meet for video calls in order to maximize efficiency. I additionally utilize Instagram and Twitter for leisure. These sites allow me to share stories about my experiences in Malaysia and add images or videos."*

(Informant D)

*“In the WhatsApp group, we often send messages, photos, voice notes, TikTok videos, and viral tweets from X”*

(Informant F)

*“Generally, we use the WhatsApp application for communication because it is a very common app to use in Malaysia.”*

(Informant RZ)

*“...Instagram, WhatsApp.”*

(Informant FR)

Digital media platforms can act as facilitators for both social integration and academic success. By engaging with host country digital communities, IISMA students can expand their social networks, participate in local events, and gain cultural insights, all of which contribute to a more comprehensive adaptation process. At the same time, maintaining connections with family and friends through digital communication can provide emotional stability and prevent feelings of isolation. Chen and Hsu (2019) argue the notion that the effective and balanced use of digital media can significantly enhance intercultural competence and adaptability.

Furthermore, the findings from Manurung et al. (2022) further reinforce the argument presented by Chen and Hsu (2019) regarding the critical role of digital media in supporting intercultural adaptation. Their study on the impact of slang usage among students on WhatsApp highlights how digital communication platforms not only facilitate interaction but also reflect dynamic linguistic and cultural exchanges within peer groups. The use of slang in digital conversations demonstrates how students adapt their language to build social bonds, express identity, and foster a sense of belonging within diverse communities. Engaging in informal communication, including the use of slang, allows students to better understand to local language context, cultural references, and social norms applied. Such interactions can ease cultural barriers and encourage deeper integration into the host society. The informal nature of platforms like WhatsApp provides a comfortable space for students to experiment with language and engage in cultural learning, thus supporting their intercultural competence and adjustment.

In the context of IISMA students, the ability to participate in casual digital conversations using local slang or culturally relevant language can enhance social integration and cultural familiarity. This aligns with Chen and Hsu's (2019) findings that digital media platforms offer immediate access to cultural knowledge and social networks, helping students adapt more effectively. By combining emotional support from home networks with active participation in host culture communication styles, students can better navigate cultural transitions.

Therefore, the insights from Manurung et al. (2022) complement the argument that digital media serves not only as an information resource but also as a social and linguistic bridge that facilitates intercultural adaptation. The presence of a supportive network plays a crucial role in helping international students adjust to their new surroundings. Social support can come from various sources, including peers, mentors, and support services provided by the host institution. As for IISMA students, connecting with fellow awardees, local students, and other international students can provide emotional support and practical advice. Having a reliable support system helps students feel more comfortable and integrated, which positively impacts their overall adjustment experience.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown the fact that IISMA awardee use various mode of communication; face-to-face and digital media to communicate. Engage with their fellow awardee, local students, as well as friends and family in the home country are interaction that led by communication within the context of intercultural communication and adaptation. Future research should continue to explore these dimensions to develop targeted support strategies for international students. Thus study analysed the interplay between pre-departure preparation, cultural adaptation, social support, digital media usage, academic adjustment, and institutional support, researchers can provide insights into how to improve the overall study abroad experience. Understanding these factors in greater detail will enable institutions and policymakers to design more effective programs and resources, ultimately enhancing the success and well-being of international students embarking on study abroad programs. As a final remarks, the result of this study were thoroughly explored and discuss the sociocultural and psychological adjument within the framework of intercultural communication and adaptation. This study would recommends a more holistic approach to compliment the pre-departure preparation by integrating the effective use of digital media to support students adjustment.

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