International Journal of Business, Management & Economics
e-ISSN: 2746-1351
Vol. 7, No. 4, November 2026

A Phenomenological Study of Cross-Cultural Adaptation among Indonesian Diaspora Working in Western Countries

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Article Information:
Received: August 26, 2026; Accepted: October 23, 2026; Published: November 02, 2026

Abstract

The increasing mobility of Indonesian professionals, students, and skilled workers to Western countries highlights the need to understand their cross-cultural adaptation experiences. Despite growing research on cross-cultural adaptation, Indonesian diaspora remain underrepresented, particularly in qualitative studies spanning multiple Western countries. This study explores the lived experiences of Indonesian diaspora adapting to diverse Western cultural contexts. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed through semi-structured interviews with 15 Indonesian diaspora residing in Australia, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany. Data were analyzed using modified van Kaam method. Four interconnected themes emerged: navigating cultural differences through continuous learning, reconstructing identity while preserving Indonesian cultural and religious values, building resilience through social support and intercultural networks, and experiencing personal transformation through global mindsets and intercultural competence. The findings indicate that cross-cultural adaptation is not cultural assimilation but a dynamic process of negotiating cultural identity while engaging effectively with the host society. Social relationships, religious identity, and intercultural interactions emerged as important resources for adaptation.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Adaptation; Indonesian Diaspora; Qualitative Research; Phenomenology; Intercultural Communication

JE Codes: M14, M12, J28

1. Introduction

The increasing globalization of education, employment, and international migration has contributed to a significant rise in the number of Indonesians living in Western countries (Yayusman & Lissandhi, 2022). Indonesian students, professionals, academics, entrepreneurs, and skilled workers have established communities across countries. While international mobility offers opportunities for career advancement, education, and personal development, it also requires individuals to adapt to cultural environments (Setti et al., 2022) that differ substantially from those of Indonesia. Differences in language, communication styles, social norms, religious practices, workplace expectations, and individualistic cultural values often

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present considerable challenges during the adaptation process (Rohman et al., 2023).

Cross-cultural adaptation has therefore become an important area of inquiry in migration and intercultural communication studies (Jin & Yu, 2022; Qin & Zhong, 2026; Wu et al., 2022). However, despite the growing body of literature on cross-cultural adaptation, existing studies have predominantly focused on a single host country (Chepkirui & Thiong'o, 2024; Soto & Pérez, 2026; Takaoka, 2025), often overlooked the possibility that adaptation experiences may exhibit common patterns despite differences in national contexts. Western countries, in particular, share several broad cultural characteristics, including relatively high levels of individualism, egalitarianism, low-context communication, and institutionalized diversity (Hofstede, 2011). At the same time, each country possesses distinct historical, political, and social environments that may shape migrants' adaptation differently. Consequently, examining Indonesian diaspora across multiple Western countries provides an opportunity to identify both shared and context-specific adaptation experiences. As such, this study extends existing theoretical understanding beyond country-specific cases.

In addition, less attention has been paid to the strategies individuals employ when encountering cultural dilemmas, the role of identity reconstruction, the influence of religious beliefs and cultural values, and the ways social support networks facilitate the adaptation (Rohman et al., 2023; Noman et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2022). These dimensions are especially relevant for Indonesian diaspora, whose collectivist cultural background and strong religious identity (Himawan et al., 2022; Maulidi et al., 2024) may interact uniquely with the predominantly individualistic and secular environments of many Western societies.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a qualitative empirical approach to explore the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of Indonesian diaspora living in various Western countries. Rather than comparing countries statistically, the study seeks to understand how Indonesian diaspora perceive, interpret, and navigate cultural differences across diverse Western settings. By eliciting participants' lived experiences, this research aims to contribute richer contextual knowledge to the cross-cultural adaptation literature. The findings are expected to broaden current theoretical perspectives by incorporating the underrepresented experiences of Indonesian diaspora while offering practical implications for higher education institutions, employers, policymakers, and diaspora support organizations involved in facilitating international mobility and intercultural adjustment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cross-Cultural Adaption

Cross-cultural adaptation is conceptualized as a dynamic and continuous process through which individuals adjust their cognitive, affective, and behavioral patterns to navigate unfamiliar socio-cultural environments (Jin & Yu, 2022). In the extant literature, cross-cultural adaptation is widely recognized as a dual-dimensional construct comprising psychological adaptation and sociocultural adaptation (Han et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2022). Psychological adaptation refers to an individual's emotional well-being, psychological comfort, and internal satisfaction during intercultural transition, whereas sociocultural adaptation pertains to the practical acquisition of behavioral skills required to function effectively within host societal institutions and daily routines (Setti et al., 2022; Soto & Pérez, 2026). The intensity of cross-cultural adaptation is largely governed by cultural distance, the degree of divergence between home and host cultural dimensions, including communication styles, individualistic versus collectivist orientations,

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and social norms (Hofstede, 2011; Robbins & Judge, 2024). Greater cultural distance typically accentuates the behavioral and cognitive shifts required for successful adjustment (Devjak et al., 2023; Marathe & Egitim, 2025; Ridwan & Goshu, 2026).

With regard to this, the trajectory and success of cross-cultural adaptation are influenced by a combination of individual competencies, dispositional factors, and external interventions (Han et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2022). Research highlights that cross-cultural competencies play a critical role in mitigating adaptation stress and facilitating effective intercultural interactions (Setti et al., 2022; Wu et al., 2022). Furthermore, structural and instructional factors, including cross-cultural training and organizational facilitation, serve as pivotal antecedents that reduce situational uncertainty during the initial stages of relocation (Rohman et al., 2023; Noman et al., 2023). While existing literature has extensively examined these antecedents in organizational and single-country expatriate contexts (Chepkirui & Thiong'o, 2024; Soto & Pérez, 2026; Takaoka, 2025), there is a need to further understand how individual capabilities interact with broader socio-cultural environments when individuals adapt across heterogeneous host settings.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks of Intercultural Adaptation

Theoretical perspectives on cross-cultural adaptation primarily revolve around stress-growth models and acculturation framework dynamics. Kim's (2012) integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation posits that adaptation occurs through an iterative cycle of stress, adaptation, and growth. According to Kim (2012), exposure to cultural disfluencies induces psychological stress, which acts as a necessary mechanism driving individuals to internalize host-culture operational norms and enhance their intercultural communication competence (Han et al., 2022; Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013). Parallel to this, Berry's (2005) acculturation model delineates four fundamental orientation strategies, namely integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization, based on how individuals navigate host-culture engagement alongside home-culture retention. Despite extensive empirical applications of these theoretical frameworks, previous studies have predominantly evaluated cross-cultural adaptation within single host country settings (Chepkirui & Thiong'o, 2024; Soto & Pérez, 2026; Takaoka, 2025). As a result, comprehensive theoretical synthesis examining how cross-cultural adaptation manifests across diverse Western national contexts remains limited in migration literature (Rohman et al., 2023; Qin & Zhong, 2026).

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of Indonesian diaspora living in Western countries. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' subjective experiences, interpretations, and meaning-making processes (Creswell, 2007) regarding their adaptation to different cultural environments. Rather than measuring predefined variables, the research aimed to generate rich descriptions of how Indonesian diaspora perceived cultural differences, navigated everyday challenges, and developed adaptation strategies throughout their migration experiences.

The study adopted a phenomenological approach, which focuses on understanding the essence of individuals' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This approach enabled the researchers to examine how participants interpreted their cross-cultural encounters and constructed meaning

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from their experiences across diverse Western societies.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were Indonesian citizens who had lived in one or more Western countries for at least one year. Eligible participants included academics, professionals, entrepreneurs, and other long-term residents who had direct experience adapting to Western cultural environments.

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Participant	Host Country	Occupation	Length of Stay
P1	Australia	University Lecturer	4 years
P2	Australia	Postdoctoral Researcher	2 years
P3	United States	Administrative Staff	6 years
P4	United States	Research Scientist	2 years
P5	Canada	Administrative Staff	5 years
P6	Canada	Financial Analyst	5 years
P7	United Kingdom	University Lecturer	3 years
P8	United Kingdom	Administrative Staff	4 years
P9	Germany	Administrative Staff	2 years
P10	Germany	Postdoctoral Researcher	3 years
P11	Australia	Data Scientist	5 years
P12	Australia	Entrepreneur	2 years
P13	Australia	Administrative Staff	6 years
P14	Australia	Civil Engineer	4 years
P15	Germany	Administrative Staff	4 years

Purposive sampling was employed to identify participants who could provide rich and relevant information regarding cross-cultural adaptation. To enhance variation in experiences, the sample included participants with diverse demographic characteristics, occupations, migration purposes, lengths of residence, and host countries. Recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, that is, when no substantially new themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

The 15 participants represented diverse demographic and professional backgrounds in terms of gender, age, migration purpose, occupation, host country, and length of residence. They were Indonesian diaspora residing in Australia, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany, with length of residence ranging from two to six years. All participants identified as Muslim, and the researchers considered this religious background when interpreting the findings because religious identity emerged as a substantive dimension of cross-cultural adaptation. To maintain confidentiality, participants were identified using participant codes (P1–P15).

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between May and July 2026. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through online video conferencing platforms. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes. With participants' informed consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

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The interview data were analyzed using the modified van Kaam method, which consists of seven steps, namely horizontalization, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, validation of the themes, constructing individual textural descriptions, constructing individual structural descriptions, and constructing textural-structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994).

First, horizontalization involved treating each relevant statement from the interview transcripts as having equal value and identifying expressions related to participants' cross-cultural adaptation experiences. Second, reduction and elimination involved removing repetitive, irrelevant, or insufficiently descriptive statements while retaining significant expressions related to the phenomenon. Third, the remaining invariant constituents were clustered and thematized by grouping conceptually related statements into broader themes. Fourth, the emerging themes were validated by examining their relevance to the participants' experiences and ensuring that they were adequately supported by the interview data.

Fifth, individual textural descriptions were constructed to describe what each participant experienced. Sixth, individual structural descriptions were developed to explain how the experiences occurred and the contextual conditions surrounding them. Finally, textural-structural descriptions were integrated across participants to capture both what the participants experienced and how they experienced it, leading to a composite description of the essence of cross-cultural adaptation among Indonesian diaspora.

3.4 Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity

Several strategies enhanced the study's trustworthiness. First, member checking was conducted by sharing the researchers' interpretations of participants' accounts with the respective participants to confirm whether the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. Participants were given the opportunity to clarify or correct the researchers' interpretations where necessary. Second, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process. This documentation provided a transparent record of the analytical decisions made during the study.

Researcher reflexivity was also maintained throughout data collection and analysis. The researchers continuously reflected on their own assumptions and potential preconceptions. Reflexive consideration was particularly important in interpreting participants' accounts of religious identity and cultural values, as these issues could be influenced by the researchers' own perspectives. These procedures strengthened the credibility and transparency of the phenomenological analysis.

4. Findings and Discussions

The data analysis resulted in four overarching themes that characterize the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of Indonesian diaspora residing in Western countries, namely navigating cultural differences, reconstructing identity while preserving cultural roots, developing resilience through social support, and achieving personal growth through intercultural adaptation. Although participants lived in different Western countries, the findings reveal remarkable similarities in their adaptation journeys, while some experiences were shaped by the unique social and cultural contexts of their host countries.

3.1 Navigating Cultural Difference

The first and most prominent theme emerging from the interviews concerns participants' experiences in navigating cultural differences during their early period of settlement in Western

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countries. Regardless of the host countries nearly all described the initial months as the most psychologically demanding stage of their migration journey. Participants consistently emphasized that adaptation was not merely about learning a new language or adjusting to a different climate. For them, it involved understanding an entirely different system of values, communication patterns, workplace expectations, and social norms.

For most participants, the first realization that they were living in a fundamentally different culture occurred during everyday interactions rather than major life events. Simple situations such as greeting colleagues, participating in meetings, asking for assistance, or interacting with neighbors became moments where cultural assumptions were challenged. Many participants admitted that they initially interpreted Western behaviors through an Indonesian cultural lens, which often resulted in misunderstanding and emotional discomfort.

One participant recalled:

"During my first laboratory meeting, everyone openly criticized each other's ideas, including the professor's. I was shocked because in Indonesia we usually avoid criticizing senior people directly. I thought they were being disrespectful, but after several months I realized that they were actually discussing ideas, not attacking people." (P10)

Similarly, P7 and P1 described how differences in communication style influenced interpersonal relationships.

"At first I felt people were too cold. They rarely asked about my personal life, and conversations ended very quickly. Back home, we usually spend time building relationships before talking about work. Here it is almost the opposite." (P7)

"When I first started working at the university, I had to adjust to the way people communicated their expectations. I learned that colleagues preferred direct and clear discussions, even when they disagreed with my ideas. Over time, I became more comfortable expressing my opinions and asking questions." (P1)

These experiences illustrate that participants' initial discomfort did not stem from hostility or discrimination but from differences in culturally accepted communication norms. Participants frequently associated Indonesian communication with indirectness, harmony, and sensitivity toward others' feelings, whereas Western communication was described as direct, concise, and task-oriented. Several participants admitted that they initially perceived direct feedback from supervisors as personal criticism, only later recognizing that constructive criticism was considered a normal professional practice.

The experience of culture shock extended beyond workplace communication. Participants also described difficulties in understanding the high degree of personal independence expected in Western societies. Several participants explained that they were accustomed to receiving unsolicited assistance from family members, neighbors, or colleagues in Indonesia. In contrast, they found that people in Western countries generally expected individuals to solve problems independently unless help was explicitly requested.

A participant reflected:

"I learned that people don't interfere in your personal affairs unless invited. Initially it felt lonely, but eventually I appreciated that everyone respected personal boundaries." (P14)

Interestingly, participants reported that these cultural differences gradually shifted from sources

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of anxiety to opportunities for learning. Rather than expecting the host society to adapt to them, participants increasingly viewed themselves as active learners responsible for understanding local cultural expectations. This transition marked a significant turning point in their adaptation journey.

Several participants explained that they intentionally observed how local people behaved before participating in unfamiliar social situations. They watched how colleagues interacted during meetings, how people expressed disagreement, how friendships developed, and even how neighbors greeted one another. Such observation enabled them to develop what many participants described as "reading the culture."

A participant explained:

"For almost six months I became a careful observer. Before saying anything, I watched how others communicated. Eventually I realized that being direct did not mean being rude. It simply meant being honest and efficient." (P3)

This shift in perspective illustrates that adaptation was not characterized by abandoning one's cultural background but by developing cultural flexibility. Participants repeatedly emphasized that learning another culture required suspending immediate judgment and becoming comfortable with ambiguity. Instead of categorizing behaviors as right or wrong, they gradually interpreted them as culturally different.

An interesting finding was that adaptation occurred unevenly across different domains of life. Participants generally reported adapting relatively quickly to professional norms such as punctuality, meeting etiquette, and workplace communication. However, adapting to interpersonal relationships required considerably more time. Many participants continued to experience homesickness despite feeling professionally competent. Building genuine friendships with local residents was often perceived as more difficult than succeeding academically or professionally.

A participant summarized this experience:

"I could perform well at work within a year, but emotionally it took much longer to feel that I truly belonged." (P9)

This distinction between functional adaptation and emotional adaptation appeared consistently across interviews. Participants frequently differentiated between learning "how to function" and learning "how to feel at home."

The findings indicate that cross-cultural adaptation among Indonesian diaspora is a gradual learning process rather than an immediate adjustment to a new environment. Participants initially experienced culture shock because they interpreted unfamiliar behaviors using the cultural norms they had developed in Indonesia. As they became more familiar with the host culture, however, they gradually reframed these experiences as differences rather than deficiencies. This transition enabled participants to engage more effectively with local communities and workplace environments.

These findings support Kim's (2012) integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation, which proposes that adaptation occurs through repeated cycles of stress, learning, and growth. Participants' experiences demonstrate that cultural stress was not merely an obstacle but also a catalyst for developing intercultural competence (Han et al., 2022). Continuous interaction with members of the host society helped participants modify their interpretations of communication

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styles, social relationships, and professional expectations (Kim & McKay-Semmler, 2013).

The findings also align with the distinction between high-context and low-context communication (Ridwan & Goshu, 2026; Robbins & Judge, 2024). Participants frequently described challenges in adjusting from Indonesia's indirect communication style to the more direct communication commonly practiced in Western countries. Rather than abandoning their original communication style, participants learned to adapt their behavior according to the cultural context. This kind of behavior reflects increasing intercultural flexibility (Devjak et al., 2023; Marathe & Egitim, 2025).

An important finding of this study is that adaptation occurred unevenly across different aspects of life. Most participants adapted relatively quickly to workplace norms and daily routines, whereas developing a sense of belonging and meaningful interpersonal relationships required considerably more time. This suggests that cross-cultural adaptation is multidimensional, involving not only behavioral adjustment but also emotional and social integration.

3.2 Reconstructing Identity While Preserving Cultural Roots

Beyond learning to navigate cultural differences, participants consistently described cross-cultural adaptation as a process of reconstructing their identities. Living in Western countries prompted them to reflect more consciously on who they were as Indonesians, as members of their religious communities, and as global citizens. Rather than abandoning their original identities, participants explained that migration encouraged them to renegotiate the meaning of being Indonesian while simultaneously acquiring new cultural perspectives from their host societies.

Interestingly, many participants reported that they rarely questioned their cultural identity while living in Indonesia. Their identity became more visible only after they were surrounded by people with different languages, customs, and beliefs. Everyday interactions reminded them that many practices they had previously considered "normal" were in fact culturally specific.

One participant working in the United States explained:

"When I lived in Indonesia, I never really thought about being Indonesian. It was just normal. But after moving here, I realized that people often asked me about Indonesia, Islam, and even Asian culture. That made me think much more about who I am." (P3)

Similarly, a lecturer residing in the United Kingdom shared:

"I became aware that I represented more than myself. Sometimes I felt that my behavior shaped how people perceived Indonesians in general, so I became more careful in how I interacted with others." (P7)

Participants frequently described this awareness as both a responsibility and an opportunity. Several felt motivated to present a positive image of Indonesia through their professionalism, friendliness, and willingness to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds. Rather than perceiving themselves merely as migrants, many viewed themselves as informal cultural ambassadors.

Another participant commented:

"People often asked me questions about Indonesia because I was the only Indonesian in my office. I realized that whatever impression they formed about Indonesia came largely from their interactions with me." (P15)

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This heightened awareness encouraged participants to maintain aspects of Indonesian culture that they regarded as central to their identity. Family values, mutual assistance (*gotong royong*), politeness, respect for elders, and religious practices were repeatedly mentioned as values participants wished to preserve regardless of where they lived.

Religion emerged as one of the strongest sources of identity continuity. As Muslims, participants consistently described Islamic beliefs and practices as providing stability during periods of uncertainty. Daily prayers, attending local mosques, participating in Islamic study groups, and observing religious celebrations helped participants maintain a sense of familiarity despite living in culturally different environments.

One participant reflected:

"Living abroad actually strengthened my religious identity. Since Muslims are a minority here, I became more conscious about practicing my faith and explaining it to others." (P5)

Several participants also described religion as facilitating intercultural dialogue rather than creating social barriers. They recalled occasions when colleagues or neighbors asked questions about fasting, halal food, or Islamic celebrations. Instead of avoiding these conversations, participants viewed them as opportunities to reduce stereotypes and build mutual understanding.

At the same time, participants acknowledged that some aspects of Indonesian culture required adjustment. Many admitted becoming more independent after living abroad. They learned to manage household responsibilities without relying on extended family, make important decisions autonomously, and express opinions more confidently in academic and professional settings.

A participant in Germany stated:

"I think I have become more independent than I ever was in Indonesia. Here nobody tells you what to do. You have to solve problems yourself, and eventually you become comfortable making decisions alone." (P10)

Despite these changes, participants did not interpret adaptation as becoming "Western". Instead, they described selectively adopting practices they considered beneficial while retaining values that remained meaningful to them. This selective process was evident across multiple domains, including workplace behavior, communication style, parenting, and social relationships.

One participant explained:

"I have become more punctual and more direct in professional communication, but I still value togetherness and maintaining close family relationships. I don't think adapting means becoming someone else." (P12)

Participants repeatedly emphasized that preserving Indonesian identity did not hinder integration into the host society. On the contrary, many believed that having a strong sense of identity enabled them to interact with others more confidently because they no longer felt pressured to imitate the host culture completely.

Several participants also discussed how their understanding of Indonesia evolved while living abroad. Distance encouraged them to appreciate aspects of Indonesian society that they had previously taken for granted, including cultural diversity, hospitality, strong family ties, and religious coexistence. Simultaneously, exposure to Western societies led them to recognize

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practices that could be improved in Indonesia, such as punctuality, transparency, meritocracy, and respect for individual autonomy.

One participant reflected:

"Living abroad changed the way I see Indonesia. I appreciate many things more than before, but I also realize there are good practices here that we could adopt without losing our own culture." (P6)

Rather than creating conflicting identities, participants described these experiences as broadening their perspectives, enabling them to move between different cultural worlds while remaining connected to their Indonesian heritage. This cultural flexibility became an important source of confidence in both professional and personal contexts. Across interviews, identity reconstruction therefore appeared not as a process of replacing one identity with another, but as an ongoing, context-dependent negotiation in which participants continuously evaluated which cultural values to preserve, modify, or adopt through everyday intercultural experiences rather than deliberate cultural assimilation.

The findings indicate that identity reconstruction was a central component of cross-cultural adaptation (Liu & Gu, 2026). Rather than abandoning their heritage culture, participants actively combined Indonesian values with new perspectives acquired through living in Western societies. This pattern closely reflects Berry's (2005) integration strategy, in which migrants maintain their cultural identity while participating actively in the host society.

Religion emerged as an important resource in this process, providing continuity and emotional stability through which participants interpreted unfamiliar cultural experiences. At the same time, participants selectively adopted practices such as independence, direct communication, and merit-based interactions without perceiving these changes as threats to their cultural identity. This suggests that identity reconstruction was characterized by cultural flexibility rather than cultural replacement (Devjak et al., 2023; Marathe & Egitim, 2025).

The findings further demonstrate that adaptation strengthened participants' awareness of their Indonesian identity. Living as a minority encouraged greater reflection on personal values and motivated participants to represent Indonesia positively in intercultural settings. These findings contribute to the cross-cultural adaptation literature by illustrating that migration can reinforce, rather than diminish, attachment to one's cultural roots (Kleinhempel et al., 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2020) while simultaneously fostering the development of bicultural or multicultural identities.

3.3 Building Resilience through Social Support

Another major theme emerging from the interviews concerns the role of social support in facilitating cross-cultural adaptation. While participants consistently acknowledged that adapting to a new cultural environment required individual effort, they equally emphasized that successful adaptation was rarely achieved alone. Instead, resilience developed through interactions with various support systems, including family members in Indonesia, Indonesian diaspora communities, colleagues, supervisors, neighbors, religious organizations, universities, and local communities.

Participants described social support as evolving throughout different stages of their adaptation journey. During the early months after arrival, emotional security was primarily obtained from fellow Indonesians who had experienced similar challenges. As participants became more

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familiar with the host society, however, they gradually expanded their social networks to include local residents and individuals from other nationalities. This progression from culturally familiar relationships to more diverse intercultural networks appeared consistently across participants regardless of their host country.

Many participants admitted that upon arriving in their host countries, they intentionally sought Indonesian communities because these communities provided practical information and emotional reassurance. Fellow Indonesians often assisted newcomers in finding accommodation, understanding public transportation systems, opening bank accounts, registering for healthcare services, and navigating immigration procedures. Such assistance significantly reduced the uncertainty associated with relocation.

A participant explained:

"Everything felt unfamiliar during the first weeks. Having someone who spoke the same language and understood my concerns made me feel less overwhelmed." (P6)

Similarly, a participant staying in Australia shared:

"The Indonesian student association became my first family here. They picked me up from the airport, helped me find temporary accommodation, and even explained simple things like where to buy halal food. Without them, the first few months would have been much more difficult." (P2)

Beyond practical assistance, participants highlighted the emotional value of interacting with people who shared similar cultural backgrounds. Informal gatherings, celebrating Indonesian Independence Day, breaking the fast together during Ramadan, or simply sharing Indonesian meals created a sense of continuity with life back home. These activities temporarily reduced homesickness and strengthened participants' emotional well-being.

One participant remarked:

"Sometimes we didn't even discuss serious problems. Just eating Indonesian food together or speaking Bahasa Indonesia for a few hours was enough to recharge emotionally." (P11)

Despite these benefits, participants also acknowledged that relying exclusively on Indonesian communities could unintentionally limit broader cultural adaptation. Several participants realized that spending most of their free time with fellow Indonesians reduced opportunities to improve their language proficiency, understand local customs, and establish relationships with members of the host society.

One participant in the United States reflected on this realization:

"During my first year, almost all my friends were Indonesians. It felt comfortable because I didn't have to explain myself or struggle with English. But after a while I realized I wasn't really learning the local culture." (P3)

This awareness encouraged many participants to deliberately broaden their social interactions. Rather than abandoning their Indonesian networks, they sought a balance between maintaining cultural familiarity and engaging with people from different cultural backgrounds. Participants joined workplace social events, university clubs, neighborhood associations, volunteer activities, sports clubs, and professional organizations to increase opportunities for intercultural interaction.

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One participant shared:

"I volunteered at community events. That was when I realized people were actually very welcoming once you took the initiative to participate." (P13)

Participants repeatedly emphasized that developing relationships with local residents significantly accelerated their understanding of unwritten cultural norms. Unlike formal orientation programs, friendships provided insights into everyday behaviors, humor, workplace expectations, and social etiquette that could only be learned through experience.

A participant explained:

"Books can teach you about culture, but real understanding comes from having coffee with local people and listening to their stories." (P14)

In addition to local friendships, participants highlighted the important role played by supportive supervisors, mentors, and colleagues. Several recalled occasions when supervisors patiently explained workplace expectations, encouraged open communication, or provided constructive feedback that facilitated both professional and personal adaptation.

One participant reflected:

"My supervisor understood that I came from a different educational culture. Instead of criticizing me, he explained why independent thinking was important here. That conversation completely changed how I approached my work." (P4)

For many participants, such interactions increased confidence and reduced anxiety about making cultural mistakes.

Technology also emerged as an important source of resilience. Participants maintained regular communication with family members in Indonesia through video calls, messaging applications, and social media. These digital connections helped alleviate homesickness while enabling participants to remain involved in important family events despite geographical distance.

A participant stated:

"Every Sunday I have a video call with my parents. Even though we live thousands of kilometers apart, those conversations remind me that I still belong somewhere." (P3)

Nevertheless, participants generally agreed that emotional support from family could not completely replace the need to establish meaningful relationships within the host country. Several explained that adaptation truly began when they developed a sense of belonging in their local communities rather than depending exclusively on relationships maintained from Indonesia.

An interesting finding concerns participants' evolving understanding of resilience. Initially, many believed resilience meant enduring difficulties independently. However, after living abroad, participants increasingly viewed resilience as the willingness to seek help, learn from others, and remain open to unfamiliar experiences. Asking questions, acknowledging mistakes, and accepting support were no longer perceived as signs of weakness but as essential components of successful adaptation.

One participant summarized this transformation:

"At first I thought I had to prove that I could handle everything myself. Eventually I realized

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that resilient people are actually those who know when to ask for help and when to learn from others." (P8)

Across participants, resilience therefore emerged not as an individual personality trait but as a socially constructed process strengthened through supportive relationships. The quality and diversity of participants' social networks significantly influenced how quickly they adapted to both professional and everyday life in their host countries.

The findings demonstrate that social support plays a pivotal role in strengthening resilience throughout the cross-cultural adaptation process. Emotional and practical assistance from Indonesian diaspora communities reduced uncertainty during the initial stages of migration, while relationships with local residents and international peers facilitated deeper sociocultural learning. These findings reinforce previous studies emphasizing that adaptation is enhanced by access to supportive interpersonal networks rather than individual effort alone (Akhimien & Adekunle, 2023; Chanveasna et al., 2024; Karunarathne, 2024; Xie et al., 2024).

An important contribution of this study is the identification of a developmental pattern in participants' social relationships. Rather than choosing between maintaining ethnic networks or integrating into the host society, participants gradually combined both forms of support. Indonesian communities provided emotional security and cultural continuity, whereas intercultural friendships promoted language development, cultural understanding, and a stronger sense of belonging. This suggests that successful adaptation depends on achieving a balance between bonding social capital within one's ethnic community and bridging social capital across cultural groups (Mathey et al., 2024; Thomas et al., 2020).

Furthermore, participants' narratives indicate that resilience should be understood as a relational process rather than merely an individual characteristic. Confidence, adaptability, and intercultural competence developed through repeated interactions with supportive people who provided guidance, feedback, and opportunities for learning. These findings highlight that social relationships are not simply outcomes of successful adaptation but important mechanisms through which adaptation itself occurs (Kuki et al., 2021; Qomariyah et al., 2022).

3.4 Cross-Cultural Adaptation as Personal Transformation

The final theme emerging from the interviews highlights that cross-cultural adaptation extended beyond successful adjustment to everyday life. While participants initially viewed migration as an opportunity to pursue education or career advancement, they gradually came to recognize that the most significant changes occurred within themselves. Living in Western countries transformed not only their behaviors but also their perspectives, values, decision-making processes, and understanding of cultural diversity. Participants consistently described adaptation as an ongoing journey of personal transformation that reshaped how they viewed themselves, other people, and the world.

Rather than identifying a single life-changing event, participants described transformation as the cumulative result of countless everyday experiences. Small interactions—working with multicultural teams, navigating unfamiliar situations, resolving misunderstandings, and observing different ways of living—gradually influenced how they interpreted social issues and approached interpersonal relationships. Many participants admitted that they had become more reflective and less judgmental than before migrating.

One participant explained:

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"The biggest change is probably not my language or my job. It is the way I think. I have become much more open to perspectives that are different from my own." (P9)

Participants frequently described this openness as one of the most valuable outcomes of living abroad. Exposure to multicultural environments encouraged them to recognize that behaviors previously perceived as unusual were often shaped by different historical, cultural, or institutional contexts rather than by personal characteristics. This awareness reduced stereotypes and increased empathy toward individuals from diverse backgrounds.

Another participant observed:

"Now when I meet someone from another culture, I don't immediately compare them with Indonesians. Instead, I become curious about why they do things differently." (P6)

Many participants associated this shift with improvements in critical thinking. Living independently required them to make decisions without relying on familiar social structures or advice from extended family members. Consequently, they became more confident in evaluating situations, solving problems, and accepting responsibility for their choices.

A participant explained:

"I learned that uncertainty is part of life. You cannot prepare for everything, but you can learn how to adapt." (P10)

Participants also emphasized that cross-cultural experiences strengthened their ability to communicate with individuals from different backgrounds. Many explained that they had become more patient listeners, more aware of cultural sensitivities, and more capable of adjusting their communication according to the needs of different audiences. These competencies were regarded as valuable not only in professional environments but also in everyday social interactions.

One participant working in the United States reflected:

"I have become much more careful when communicating. Instead of assuming that everyone understands things the same way, I try to explain my ideas more clearly and also listen more carefully." (P3)

Several participants noted that working in multicultural teams improved their collaboration skills. They became accustomed to managing disagreements constructively, appreciating diverse viewpoints, and focusing on shared objectives despite cultural differences.

Beyond professional competencies, participants repeatedly described a greater appreciation for diversity itself. Many admitted that prior to migration, their understanding of cultural diversity had been relatively limited because most of their interactions occurred within Indonesian society. Living abroad exposed them to people of different nationalities, ethnicities, religions, and lifestyles on a daily basis.

A participant commented:

"Before moving here, diversity was just a concept I learned at university. Now it is part of my everyday life. My closest friends come from countries that I had never even visited before." (P14)

This exposure encouraged participants to become more tolerant of ambiguity and more accepting of differences. Rather than expecting consensus, they increasingly viewed diversity

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as a source of creativity and learning.

Interestingly, participants consistently rejected the notion that becoming more globally minded required abandoning their Indonesian identity. Instead, they perceived global competence and cultural identity as mutually reinforcing. Several participants explained that understanding other cultures enabled them to appreciate Indonesian culture more deeply.

One participant explained:

"Ironically, I became more proud of being Indonesian after living abroad. When people ask about Indonesia, I realize how unique our culture really is." (P5)

Participants also described returning to Indonesia, whether temporarily for holidays or permanently after completing their assignments, as moments that revealed how much they had changed. Many noticed differences in their expectations regarding punctuality, workplace professionalism, public services, and communication styles. At the same time, they consciously avoided imposing Western practices uncritically, recognizing that cultural solutions must be adapted to local contexts.

One participant explained:

"When I return to Indonesia, some friends say I have changed because I am more direct and more punctual. Maybe that is true, but I don't think I have become less Indonesian. I have simply learned additional ways of thinking." (P12)

Across interviews, participants consistently viewed personal transformation as an ongoing rather than completed process, regardless of their length of residence abroad. Adaptation therefore did not have a clear endpoint. Instead, participants described it as continuous personal development driven by curiosity, reflection, and repeated intercultural engagement.

Ultimately, participants regarded their migration experiences as investments that extended far beyond educational qualifications or professional achievements. The most enduring outcomes were increased self-confidence, broader worldviews, stronger intercultural competence, greater emotional maturity, and a deeper appreciation of both their host societies and their Indonesian heritage. These qualities were frequently described as resources that would continue to influence their personal and professional lives regardless of where they eventually chose to live.

The findings demonstrate that cross-cultural adaptation culminated not only in successful adjustment but also in meaningful personal transformation (Mushaathoni, 2025; Pidduck, 2022). Participants consistently described becoming more open-minded, independent, reflective, and culturally sensitive through sustained interaction with diverse social environments. These outcomes support Kim's (2012) proposition that adaptation is ultimately a process of growth, in which repeated intercultural experiences contribute to the development of broader perspectives and enhanced intercultural competence.

A notable contribution of this study is the finding that participants viewed global-mindedness and Indonesian identity as complementary rather than contradictory. Exposure to different cultures strengthened participants' appreciation of their own cultural heritage while encouraging them to adopt practices that enhanced their personal and professional effectiveness. This suggests that successful adaptation is characterized by identity enrichment (Afota et al., 2024; Tomo, 2025) rather than cultural assimilation.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that personal transformation remained an ongoing process

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regardless of participants' length of residence abroad. Cross-cultural adaptation therefore should be understood not as a destination but as a lifelong developmental journey (Harris & O'Donoghue, 2019) that continually shapes individuals' attitudes, competencies, and ways of engaging with culturally diverse societies.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the cross-cultural adaptation experiences of Indonesian diaspora living in Western countries through a qualitative phenomenological approach. The findings demonstrate that cross-cultural adaptation is a dynamic and multidimensional experience encompassing four interconnected themes, namely navigating cultural differences, reconstructing identity while preserving cultural roots, building resilience through social support, and experiencing personal transformation through intercultural adaptation. Rather than cultural assimilation, adaptation involved developing the ability to function effectively across different cultural contexts while maintaining Indonesian identity and core values. Social relationships, intercultural interaction, religious identity, and continuous self-reflection emerged as important resources in this process.

The findings offer practical implications for business administration and workplace management. Organizations employing international employees can facilitate adaptation through culturally sensitive onboarding, clear communication of workplace norms, supportive supervision, and opportunities for intercultural interaction. At the same time, organizations can recognize employees' cultural and religious identities while leveraging the intercultural competence, broader perspectives, and global mindsets developed through international experiences. Future research could examine how cross-cultural adaptation varies across demographic groups, professional sectors, and host-country contexts through comparative or longitudinal designs.

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