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Mitigating Culture Shock Through Intercultural Communication: A Case Study of Expatriates in South Jakarta

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates how expatriates in South Jakarta employ intercultural communication strategies to mitigate culture shock and adapt to a new cultural environment. As global mobility increases, understanding the psychological and social challenges faced by expatriates in multicultural urban settings becomes crucial. Using a qualitative case study approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven expatriates of diverse cultural backgrounds. The findings reveal that expatriates experience significant culture shock in the form of language barriers, unfamiliar social norms, and emotional disorientation during their initial adaptation phase. To address these challenges, they employ various strategies such as learning the local language, adjusting communication styles, building social support networks, and participating in community activities. These strategies facilitate gradual adaptation and foster intercultural competence, leading to a sense of belonging and bicultural identity. The study highlights that cultural adaptation is a reciprocal process, where both expatriates and local communities engage in mutual exchange and learning. The results provide practical insights for organizations and policymakers to support expatriate adjustment and promote inclusive multicultural environments.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Culture Shock, Expatriate Adaptation.

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INTRODUCTION

During the era of gloalization, cultural diversity in South Jakarta and other cities has increased and become more apparent, which makes it possible for cross-cultural interaction among individuals from differing cultures and makes expatriate groups a normal part of the socio-cultural life of the metropolitan region. Despite this, acclimatization in an unfamiliar environment typically involves the issue of culture shock, which is an emotional and psychological discomfort that impeded an individual's ability to communicate as well as successfully cope. This cultural diversity also increases social capital, ethnic and national community resilience, and strong social bonding through cultural collaboration (Supriatna et al., 2023). Conversely, expatriates face adaptation challenges, including

family ties, anxiety, language variations, and unfamiliar social norms, which might hinder integration and communication (Shi & Wang, 2014; Zahra & Umar, 2024). Approaches such as emotional support and the utilization of indigenous resources have proved effective in reducing the impact of culture shock (Lee et al., 2022). Resilience from expatriates in coping with such issues generally leads to experiences that strengthen and enrich their sense of identification with the host culture (Lejeune et al., 2021).

In the era of globalization, the presence of expatriates has become a common phenomenon in many metropolitan areas, including South Jakarta. As a rapidly developing urban district, South Jakarta hosts a growing expatriate population, particularly professionals, entrepreneurs, and diplomats. According to the Directorate General of Immigration (2023), over 120,000 expatriates were residing in Jakarta, with a significant concentration in South Jakarta due to its international schools, business centers, and lifestyle facilities. This trend reflects a broader global pattern of increased cross-border mobility, which brings diverse cultures into daily interaction.

Intercultural communication is an important instrument in the overcoming of culture shock since it allows the exchange of messages that foster mutual understanding, tolerance and cooperation among diverse cultural groups. In cosmopolitan South Jakarta, a city of expatriate professionals, businessmen and families, the expatriate community must deal with cultural, language and social problems that require adaptive measures to ward off culture shock. While many studies have made passing reference to culture shock in general, few have looked at the intercultural communication approaches expatriates use to manage such experiences in urban Indonesian environments. This research attempts to fill this gap by exploring South Jakarta expatriates' coping mechanisms for dealing with culture shock. To develop intercultural competence in communication, expatriates should be aware of cross-cultural differences, i.e., Eastern cultures' predominant high-context communication paradigm and the Western cultures' low-context paradigm (Tanaka, 2025). Culture dimensions, such as individualism versus collectivism, create a sense of sensitivity in adapting communications in accordance with local traditions (Hwang, 2024). The development of intercultural competence via cross-cultural training and education provides the necessary skills for effective interaction (Ігнатова, 2024), while language learning can reduce misunderstandings and refine the quality of interaction (Azhari et al., 2024). Furthermore, developing relationships through active participation in community events and local activities has the potential to enhance cultural exchange, and empathy and openness enable less conflictual interaction and reduce cultural friction (Azhari et al., 2024; Ігнатова, 2024).

Despite the opportunities for cultural exchange, expatriates often face challenges in adjusting to unfamiliar environments. One of the most critical issues is culture shock, a psychological and emotional reaction to new cultural contexts. This phenomenon, characterized by anxiety, disorientation, and communication breakdowns, can hinder effective interaction and well-being. In particular, language barriers, unfamiliar social norms, and differences in communication styles can lead to isolation and difficulty integrating into local society (Zahra & Umar, 2024; Shi & Wang, 2014).

Intercultural communication plays a vital role in facilitating adaptation. It involves the exchange of messages across cultural boundaries, requiring individuals to navigate differences in values, behavior, and communication patterns. In multicultural cities like South Jakarta, expatriates must engage in adaptive strategies to reduce misunderstandings, build social connections, and function effectively. The contrast between high-context cultures (common in Indonesia) and low-context cultures (typical of Western countries) demands heightened cultural sensitivity and communication flexibility (Tanaka, 2025; Hwang, 2024).

Although many studies discuss intercultural communication or culture shock separately, few focus on how expatriates in urban Indonesian environments actively use communication strategies to cope with these challenges. Moreover, existing research tends to generalize expatriate experiences or emphasize organizational policies, leaving a gap in understanding individual-level adaptation processes.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the intercultural communication strategies employed by expatriates in South Jakarta to manage culture shock. Through a qualitative approach, the research highlights not only the personal experiences of expatriates but also the implications for intercultural competence and community integration.

The main objective of this research is to explore and analyze the intercultural communication strategies used by expatriates in South Jakarta to reduce culture shock. Specifically, this research aims to:

1. Identify the issues of expatriates during the adaptation process.
2. Explain how intercultural communication assists in mitigating these issues.
3. Provide recommendations and practical suggestions to expatriates, policymakers, and organizations in order to make adaptation easier and promote inclusive multicultural interaction.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is the psychological disorientation and stress resulting from exposure to a new cultural environment, originally explained as a process of phases of euphoria, frustration, adjustment, and adaptation by (Oberg, 1960). Culture shock is a multifaceted phenomenon of psychological disorientation when individuals encounter new cultural environments. Originally explained by Oberg, it is marked by definite phases, including euphoria, frustration, adjustment, and adaptation. Although culture shock is bound to cause issues, such as language problems and cultural confusion (Li, 2025), it is also a source of stimulus for cross-cultural learning and self-growth. The honeymoon phase entails the early excitement about the new culture, followed by the shock phase with the attendant problems (Shi & Wang, 2014). Gradual adaptation is felt during the adjustment stage (Li, 2025), culminating in the adaptation stage, where individuals achieve comfort and integration in the host culture (Jambo, 2024). To effectively manage these transitions, coping strategies such as enhancing cultural awareness (Setiawan et al., 2024), developing social support systems to combat isolation (Nguyen, 2024), and

developing adaptive communication abilities to facilitate intercultural communication (Jambo, 2024) play a crucial role in easing the adaptation process.

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication, as defined by (Gudykunst, 2003) as the successful handling of cultural differences, is necessary in reducing misunderstandings, building trust, and fostering cooperation in multicultural settings. Theories such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and (Gudykunst et al., 1988) face negotiation theory provide insight into how cultural values shape communication and conflict resolution. In multinational contexts, cross-cultural training enhances employees' interactions and performance (Hwang, 2024; Yustika & Aisyah, n.d.), while in educational contexts, developing intercultural competency helps students traverse varying communication patterns and build confidence (Tanaka, 2025). Evermore, as the pace of globalization accelerates, developing intercultural competencies—the base of which rests upon knowledge, compassion, and versatility—remains central to effective communication (Nemouchi & Byram, 2025; Игнатова, 2024).

Expatriate Adaptation

Expatriate adaptation is a dynamic process that involves adjusting to the cultural, social, and professional demands of a foreign environment. (Black et al., 1991) three-dimensional framework outlines work adjustment, interaction adjustment, and general adjustment, with interaction adjustment focusing on building effective relationships with host-country nationals through intercultural communication. Cultural intelligence, as emphasized by (Selmer, 2006), plays a critical role in navigating cultural differences and mitigating the negative effects of culture shock. Studies by (Harrison et al., 2004)and others indicate that active engagement in local customs significantly enhances adaptation success (Setiawan et al., 2024; Shi & Wang, 2014). Social support networks further alleviate relocation stress (Hammadeen et al., 2024), while immersion in local traditions fosters smoother adjustment (Engle et al., 2024). Nonetheless, challenges such as language barriers and the influence of family dynamics can complicate the process, affecting both social integration and professional effectiveness (Engle et al., 2024; Shi & Wang, 2014).

Research Gap

Although significant progress has been made in understanding culture shock and intercultural communication, limited research focuses on the specific strategies used by expatriates in urban Indonesian settings, such as South Jakarta. Most existing studies either generalize expatriate experiences across regions or emphasize organizational support rather than individual communication

strategies. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the unique intercultural communication strategies employed by expatriates in South Jakarta

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the lived experiences of expatriates in adapting to a new cultural environment in South Jakarta. A case study method was chosen to enable in-depth examination of individual adaptation journeys and the communication strategies they used to manage culture shock. This design allows for the identification of rich, nuanced insights that may be overlooked in quantitative or survey-based research.

The participants in this study consisted of seven expatriates currently residing in South Jakarta. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that the informants represented a variety of cultural backgrounds, occupations, and countries of origin (including Europe, East Asia, and North America), as well as different lengths of stay in Indonesia (ranging from 6 months to over 5 years). The rationale for selecting seven participants lies in the qualitative aim of reaching depth over breadth, where the richness of personal narratives was prioritized. All participants met the inclusion criteria: (1) currently living in South Jakarta; (2) residing in Indonesia for a minimum of six months to ensure adequate cultural exposure; and (3) willingness to participate in a 60–90-minute interview and share honest reflections.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews to allow participants to freely express their experiences while still guiding the discussion toward relevant themes. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via video calls, depending on participants' availability and comfort. The interview guide covered themes such as initial reactions to culture shock, strategies used in daily communication, experiences with locals, and reflections on their adaptation journey. All interviews were conducted in English and recorded with participants' consent, then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview data were analyzed using manual thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach: (1) familiarization with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Each transcript was read multiple times to ensure accuracy and depth of interpretation. Coding was done manually to stay close to the data, allowing the researchers to identify key patterns and recurrent ideas regarding intercultural communication strategies and the process of cultural adaptation.

To ensure trustworthiness, the researchers engaged in peer debriefing and member checking by summarizing interview content and seeking confirmation from participants about the accuracy of interpretations. The research also adhered to ethical standards, including informed consent and anonymity of participants.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Initial Experiences with Culture Shock

The initial experiences of culture shock reported by the expatriates in South Jakarta highlighted significant emotional and practical challenges. These experiences are consistent with the early stages of culture shock described in (Oberg, 1960) framework, where individuals encounter unfamiliar cultural environments and struggle to adapt. The findings are categorized into three main sub-themes: language barriers, cultural differences, and urban dynamics.

Language barriers emerged as one of the most significant challenges faced by expatriates upon their arrival in South Jakarta, with many participants reporting feelings of isolation and frustration due to their inability to effectively communicate with locals. This difficulty was especially evident in daily activities such as shopping, navigating transportation, and seeking services. One participant shared, *"When I first arrived, I couldn't even ask for directions properly because I didn't know the language. It made me feel helpless."* The lack of proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia limited their ability to engage with local residents and integrate into the community. While some relied on translation apps or English-speaking locals to bridge the communication gap, these solutions often proved insufficient in more nuanced interactions.

Adjusting to the cultural norms and practices of Indonesia posed another common challenge for expatriates, as differences in social etiquette, communication styles, and daily routines often led to misunderstandings or discomfort. The indirect communication style prevalent in Indonesian culture was particularly confusing for expatriates accustomed to more direct interactions. One expatriate shared, *"I realized that people here rarely say 'no' outright. It took me a while to understand the subtleties of their responses and adapt my expectations."* Additionally, adapting to local customs such as communal dining, traditional attire during formal events, and the significance of religious practices required considerable effort. These cultural differences frequently caused stress during the initial stages of adaptation.

South Jakarta's bustling urban environment presented unique challenges for expatriates, with traffic congestion, high population density, and differences in infrastructure compared to their home countries often causing feelings of disorientation and frustration. One participant commented, *"The traffic here is unlike anything I've ever seen. It took me weeks to figure out the best times to travel and the routes to take."* For many, the fast-paced lifestyle of Jakarta was overwhelming, especially when coupled with the city's noise and pollution. Adapting to these urban dynamics required time, patience, and often guidance from locals or fellow expatriates.

The challenges of language barriers, cultural differences, and urban dynamics often triggered emotional responses such as anxiety, frustration, and homesickness among expatriates. Many participants described feeling out of place and disconnected from their surroundings during their initial weeks in South Jakarta. As one participant reflected, *"I felt a constant sense of unease in the beginning. Everything was different, and I didn't know how to fit in."* These emotional responses highlight the

psychological impact of culture shock and emphasize the importance of effective coping strategies to navigate this transitional phase.

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Intercultural Communication Strategies

Expatriates in South Jakarta employed various intercultural communication strategies to navigate and overcome culture shock. These strategies, developed through experience and interactions with locals, were categorized into five main themes: learning the local language, building social support networks, adapting communication styles, engaging with local customs, and seeking professional guidance. These approaches enabled expatriates to adapt to their new environment and foster meaningful connections.

One of the most commonly used strategies was learning Bahasa Indonesia to reduce communication barriers and enhance engagement with the local community. Many participants recognized that even a basic understanding of the language significantly improved their interactions and helped them feel more integrated. Participants utilized various methods, such as attending formal language classes, using mobile apps, and practicing with locals informally. Improved language skills not only facilitated smoother daily interactions but also helped expatriates build rapport and gain acceptance among locals. As one participant noted, *"Learning basic Indonesian words and phrases made a huge difference. I could finally communicate with the people around me and feel more confident."*

Building social support networks was another vital strategy for overcoming culture shock. Expatriates actively sought to connect with both local and expatriate communities to receive emotional support, practical advice, and opportunities for socializing. Many joined expatriate groups or associations, providing a safe space to share experiences and navigate challenges. Others formed friendships with local residents, which deepened their understanding of Indonesian culture and created a sense of belonging. One participant shared, *"Joining a community group was the best decision I made. I met people who guided me through the cultural nuances and made me feel at home."*

Active engagement in local cultural practices and events also helped expatriates adapt and integrate into the community. Participation in festivals such as Ramadan celebrations, traditional dance performances, and Independence Day events allowed expatriates to gain a deeper appreciation for Indonesian culture. Additionally, respecting cultural etiquette, such as removing shoes before entering homes or dressing modestly, fostered mutual respect and understanding. As one expatriate explained,

"Participating in cultural festivals was not just fun but also gave me a sense of connection and belonging." For others, professional guidance through cross-cultural training or counseling provided valuable insights and coping strategies. As one participant stated, *"My company arranged a cross-cultural workshop, which was extremely helpful in understanding the nuances of Indonesian culture and communication."* These combined efforts facilitated smoother adaptation and enriched their overall experience in South Jakarta.

Table 1. Intercultural Communication Strategies Used by Expatriates

Strategy	Description	Positive Impact	Potential Limitations
Learning the local language	Attending Bahasa Indonesia classes or self-study	Increases confidence, fosters local rapport	May take time and create frustration during learning process
Building social support networks	Joining expatriate groups or befriending locals	Provides emotional support, reduces isolation	Risk of staying within expatriate circles and limiting deeper cultural exposure
Adapting communication styles	Adjusting to indirect communication and politeness norms	Reduces misunderstandings, enhances workplace harmony	May feel insincere or overly cautious for low-context communicators
Participating in local customs	Engaging in festivals, religious events, and traditional etiquette	Builds empathy and inclusion, encourages mutual respect	Cultural missteps may cause unintentional offense
Seeking professional guidance	Attending cross-cultural workshops or counseling sessions	Helps gain structured insight into cultural dynamics	May not be accessible to all expatriates (due to cost or awareness)

Gradual Adaptation and Integration

The process of adaptation and integration among expatriates in South Jakarta was described as gradual and multifaceted. Over time, participants developed coping mechanisms, embraced local practices, and found ways to blend their cultural identities with the Indonesian environment. Achieving cultural competence was a key aspect, defined as the ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures. This competence grew through continuous learning and immersion, as expatriates transitioned from feeling like outsiders to confidently navigating the cultural and social landscape. They emphasized understanding Indonesian social norms, such as showing respect to elders, adhering to local religious practices, and navigating hierarchical relationships. Adjustments in daily routines, including embracing local food, using public transportation, and engaging in community activities, further contributed to their cultural competence. One participant shared, *"At first, I struggled with the formalities in work interactions, but over time, I learned how to navigate them, and it became second nature."*

A growing sense of belonging was reported as expatriates built meaningful relationships and actively engaged with their surroundings. Positive social interactions and deeper integration into the local community played a significant role in this process. Community engagement, such as volunteering and participating in neighborhood events, helped expatriates form connections and foster a sense of purpose. As one participant reflected, "*Volunteering at a local school was a turning point for me. It made me feel like I was part of something bigger and gave me a purpose here."* Additionally, mutual cultural exchange, where expatriates shared their own traditions with locals, created opportunities for reciprocity and strengthened bonds. This exchange allowed expatriates to contribute to their communities while learning and appreciating Indonesian customs.

Integration also involved balancing their native cultural identity with the local culture, leading to the development of a bicultural identity. Expatriates selectively integrated aspects of Indonesian culture that resonated with their values while maintaining elements of their own heritage. One participant explained, *"I love the community-oriented mindset here, but I also cherish my independence, so I try to find a balance."* This experience enhanced their cultural awareness and sensitivity, which they considered valuable both personally and professionally. However, ongoing challenges, such as navigating bureaucratic systems and managing stereotypes, persisted despite their progress. Support systems, including expatriate communities and professional networks, played a crucial role in mitigating these obstacles. As one participant noted, *"Even after years here, I still face hurdles like renewing my visa. Having a support system makes it much easier to deal with these issues."*

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay of intercultural communication strategies, individual resilience, and community dynamics in overcoming culture shock among expatriates in South Jakarta.

Cultural Shock and Adaptation: A Multistage Process

The initial experience of culture shock among expatriates is in line with (Oberg, 1960) theory, which describes culture shock as a process of disorientation caused by an unfamiliar cultural environment. The participants in this study reported anxiety, frustration, and feelings of isolation, especially in the early days of their stay in South Jakarta. These findings are consistent with the U-curve model of adjustment, which states that expatriates experience an initial "honeymoon" phase, followed by a period of cultural disillusionment before gradually adapting (Ayub et al., 2024; Corlăteanu, 2024; Zahra & Umar, 2024).

The gradual adaptation and integration observed among the participants further corroborates this model, especially during the recovery and adjustment phases. Over time, expatriates demonstrated increasing cultural competence, indicating a transition from cultural disorientation to acceptance and assimilation. This process highlights the importance of proactive strategies and support systems in promoting successful adaptation, in line with (Aldi et al., 2024; Wahyuni & Afrida, 2024).

Role of Intercultural Communication Strategies

Intercultural communication strategies are essential for expatriates in navigating cultural differences and promoting adaptation in South Jakarta. Participants used a variety of approaches, including learning the local language, building social networks, adapting communication styles, and engaging with local customs. These strategies are in line with Gudykunst's (2005) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory and research (Dubinko et al., 2021; Hwang, 2024), which emphasizes reducing uncertainty and anxiety through effective communication in intercultural interactions. Language acquisition, for example, is highlighted as an important tool for breaking cultural barriers and enhancing social integration. Consistent with research (Gulivets, 2013; Patawari, 2020), expatriates found that learning the local language not only facilitated practical communication but also demonstrated respect for the local culture, fostering trust and positive relationships.

The establishment of social support networks is another important strategy, which reinforces the importance of emotional and practical support during the adjustment process. Building connections within the expatriate community and among locals helps participants face challenges and gain insight into the cultural environment. This approach reflects the principles of Social Support Theory, which emphasizes the role of supportive relationships in reducing stress and enhancing well-being. Together, these intercultural communication strategies provide expatriates with the tools needed to manage the cultural transition, foster meaningful relationships, and build a sense of belonging in their new environment.

Cultural Adaptation as a Reciprocal Process

This finding underscores the reciprocal nature of cultural adaptation, where expatriates not only adjust to Indonesian culture, but also introduce elements of their own culture to the local community. This two-way exchange is in line with (Berry, 1997) acculturation framework, which emphasizes integration as a two-way process involving mutual adaptation by expatriates and local communities, and is in line with research (Hariyanto, 2024; Rendi et al., 2024; Sofyan, 2024). Through sharing cultural practices and traditions, expatriates and locals foster mutual respect and understanding, contributing to a more inclusive and harmonious environment. This dynamic is particularly evident in urban areas such as South Jakarta, where diverse cultural interactions are part of everyday life, consistent with research (Mariyono, 2024; Supriadin & Pababari, 2024).

Challenges in Adaptation and Their Implications

Despite successful adaptation, expatriates continued to face challenges such as bureaucratic obstacles, stereotypes, and the complexities of balancing cultural identities. These persistent difficulties highlight the need for robust structural support mechanisms, including cross-cultural training and institutional policies that foster inclusivity. Organizations employing expatriates could enhance adaptation by

offering comprehensive cultural orientation programs and ongoing support to ease transitions. Additionally, policymakers in host countries could contribute by streamlining administrative processes and promoting intercultural initiatives, creating a more supportive environment for expatriates and fostering mutual understanding.

Broader Implications for Intercultural Competence

The study's findings contribute to the understanding of intercultural competence as a dynamic and evolving skill set. Participants reported growth in cultural awareness, empathy, and adaptability, highlighting the transformative impact of intercultural experiences. These insights support Deardorff's (2006) model of intercultural competence, which emphasizes the importance of attitudes, knowledge, and skills in fostering effective intercultural interactions.

Practical and Theoretical Contributions

This study adds to the growing body of literature on expatriate adaptation by providing a nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of expatriates in South Jakarta. The use of qualitative methods analysis enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' strategies and outcomes, offering practical insights for individuals and organizations navigating similar intercultural contexts. From a theoretical perspective, the findings validate and extend existing models of cultural adaptation and intercultural communication, emphasizing the importance of dynamic, context-specific strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the lived experiences of expatriates in South Jakarta in navigating culture shock and adapting to a multicultural environment. Initial stages of adaptation were marked by confusion, isolation, and frustration due to language barriers, unfamiliar norms, and urban dynamics. However, through the use of intercultural communication strategies—such as learning the local language, adjusting communication styles, building social support, and participating in cultural activities—expatriates gradually built resilience and intercultural competence. These strategies facilitated smoother daily functioning, improved psychological well-being, and fostered a sense of belonging.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that cultural adaptation is not a one-sided process. It involves reciprocal interaction between expatriates and the host community, where mutual respect and cultural exchange contribute to social cohesion in diverse urban settings. The process also enables the development of bicultural identities, where expatriates integrate elements of the host culture while maintaining their own values.

From a practical standpoint, organizations and institutions that host or employ expatriates should consider offering comprehensive cultural orientation programs, ongoing support systems, and language assistance to ease the transition process. On a policy level, local governments can support multicultural integration by creating inclusive public spaces, simplifying bureaucratic procedures, and facilitating community-based cultural exchange programs.

Finally, the findings invite broader reflection on the significance of intercultural connection in an increasingly mobile and globalized world. Strengthening intercultural communication not only supports the well-being of individuals but also enhances the social fabric and collaborative potential of multicultural cities like South Jakarta.

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