

# Cultural Adaptation of Indonesian Muslim Women Students in Europe

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## Article

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## Abstract

Cultural adaptability in the context of international students' intercultural communication has affected how communication works. Indonesian students, especially those who display their identity as Muslim women, have their challenges in adapting to both academic and social-cultural contexts. This study discusses the cultural adaptation of Indonesian Muslim women students to societies in Europe. All informants who are scholarship awardee students have obstacles in adapting, especially when communicating with the societies. This study aims to discover how Gudykunst's Anxiety and Uncertainty Management theory interprets the experience phenomena around individuals in adapting to Societies in Europe through intercultural communication. The study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Five informants in this research have gone through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The results of the study show that the experiences are related to academic and social experiences adapting to the local community's culture (cultural), adapting to individual personality (sociocultural), and adapting to interpersonal perceptions (psycho-cultural). Indonesian Muslim women students need to be familiar with the local community, open to accepting differences in society, and able to interpret the meaning of accepted in intercultural communication context.

**Keywords:** International Students; Indonesian Muslim Women; Intercultural Communication; Cultural Adaptation

## Abstrak

Kemampuan beradaptasi budaya dalam konteks komunikasi antarbudaya mahasiswa internasional telah mempengaruhi cara kerja komunikasi. Pelajar Indonesia, khususnya yang menunjukkan identitasnya sebagai muslimah, mempunyai tantangan tersendiri dalam beradaptasi baik dari aspek akademik maupun sosial budaya. Penelitian ini mengangkat diskusi adaptasi budaya mahasiswa muslimah Indonesia terhadap masyarakat di Eropa. Seluruh informan merupakan mahasiswa muslimah Indonesia penerima beasiswa mempunyai kendala dalam beradaptasi, terutama dalam berkomunikasi dengan masyarakat. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana teori Manajemen Kecemasan dan Ketidakpastian Gudykunst memaknai fenomena pengalaman di sekitar individu dalam beradaptasi dengan Masyarakat di Eropa melalui komunikasi antarbudaya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologi. Lima informan dalam penelitian ini telah melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman tersebut berkaitan dengan pengalaman akademis dan sosial dalam beradaptasi dengan budaya masyarakat setempat (kultural), beradaptasi dengan kepribadian individu (sosiokultural), dan beradaptasi dengan persepsi interpersonal (psikokultural). Mahasiswa muslimah Indonesia perlu mengenal masyarakat setempat, terbuka menerima perbedaan yang ada di masyarakat, dan mampu memaknai makna diterima dalam konteks komunikasi antar budaya.

**Kata Kunci:** Mahasiswa Internasional; Muslimah Indonesia; Komunikasi Antarbudaya; Adaptasi Budaya

## INTRODUCTION

Opportunities for overseas studies scholarships sponsored by national and international institutions for Indonesian students are wide open. Naturally, that scholarship awardee is the representative image of their country. In this case, Indonesian Muslim women students represented Islam and Indonesia in the eyes of the international community.

Indonesia is known as a country with a dense population. 231.06 million or about 86.7% of them are Muslim (Kusnandar, 2021). This percentage is equivalent to 11.92% of the total world population. From these data, Indonesia is known to be the largest Muslim country in the world. As a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, Indonesian Muslims are expected to be more actively involved in international forum discussions. The presence of a Muslim in countries with a non-Muslim majority population is expected to raise Islamic discussions with a wider perspective. Various parties are also interested in Islamic studies since in recent decades Islam has been known as the fastest-growing religion in the world (Lipka, 2017).

The challenge that Indonesian Muslim Women Students awardees in Europe need to face is to finish their studies on time with satisfactory grades and fit into the environment. One of the factors in achieving these expectations is the ability to communicate in society. (DeVito, 2015) explains individuals who do intercultural communication as a newcomer, will have a smaller cultural position than the position of the local culture. In the end, both parties, communicators and communicants will try to fit into the local cultural communication process to adapt. (Liliweri, 2013) revealed that intercultural communication is determined by the individual's communication skills. The more individuals can interpret, the less miscommunication will be. Thus, individuals who have good communication skills will be able to adapt more easily.

Intercultural communication has various challenges, but the main goal is how individuals can develop their interpersonal communication skill that is acceptable to the community, making it easier for them to adapt both academically and socially. In the context of interpersonal relationships, adaptation consists of two categories, namely cultural adaptation and social adaptation. Cultural adaptation is a process of personal cultural change, so none of the elements work well for the individual and the surrounding community. Inside the cultural adaptation, there are many factors including language-based, lifestyle, and academic challenges as well as sociocultural and psychological conditions. (Gong et al., 2021). Meanwhile, social adaptation is a process of changing individual culture in a new social group, so that the individual can communicate better in that environment. (Simanjuntak & Fitriana, 2020).

Mardolina in (Maghfirah, 2018) stated that individuals who are involved in new situations and communicate with different individuals or groups will experience a high level of uncertainty and high anxiety, which can cause various issues in developing a relationship. According to (Gudykunst & Kim, 2005) when dealing with strangers, effective communication can be done by how individuals can manage their anxiety and uncertainty feeling. This management is also known as mindfulness. Mindfulness or "awareness" is a cognitive condition that exists within the individual to moderate anxiety and uncertainty feelings when facing strangers (strangers).

Indonesian Muslim Women Students who have just arrived in Europe mostly feel anxious and uncertain about the foreign things they face. Each individual does not understand how things work and how to respond to them. The adaptation process can be successful if individuals can analyze their surroundings. Individuals need to understand the effective forms of communication on how to deal with certain individuals or groups. This is explained by (Gudykunst & Kim, 2005), that the adaptation process can depend on the individual's ability to communicate local cultural norms and values. However, (Novinger, 2013) revealed that Indonesians tend to have Eastern communication which has high context, while most country in the West (including Europe) are more Western which tends to have low context. (Sutarjo et al., 2023) stated that High Context culture is a context where a message is implicit and not to the point. Meanwhile, Low Context is a cultural context where a message is simply conveyed explicitly without any additional forms so that the message can be conveyed directly.

The challenge added by the identity shown by Indonesian Muslim women students in dealing with European society which the majority are non-Muslims. Negative stereotypes are frequently embedded in the hijab. The issue of hijab amid non-Muslim communities has always been believed by some circles of society, as a form of oppression that must be abolished and has its sentiments. (Alexander, 2016) In addition, what has developed in several European media has built a perception that Muslim women are difficult to accept by the public because they represent something much different (outsider) and not compatible with modern society. (van Es, 2019) From Blomfield in (Piela et al., 2010) it is not uncommon for Muslim women to wear hijab to be concluded as part of terrorism and patriarchal harassment through articles listed next to or under the hijab article. From Abu Lughod, Wing & Smith, Afshar, Sahfii, in (Piela et al., 2010), such a view is very worrying because the authors of the article come from influential academics who supposed to be the ones who respect cultural diversity. Conflicts arise from meeting people with cultural and religious backgrounds unexpectedly build their perceptions. This reinforces doubts about the compatibility of Islam with European identity. Therefore, (Brzozowski, 2018) stated that sentiments towards the hijab and Islam influence the self-adaptation of Muslim women in Europe.

All countries in Europe claim that they are parties that uphold democracy. They argue that they have respected the basic principles of religious freedom. Countries in Europe recognize that there are differences between the relationship between religion and the state, which are enshrined in their respective constitutions. This constitution must be shown in daily life and apply to all citizens in Europe, including Muslims. (Berutu, 2017) In its development, various discussions and writings related to Islam are increasingly being carried out (Piela et al., 2010) . At the end, understanding of intercultural communication and religions is always shown in people's lives.

Several previous studies have shown that issues are often found in Indonesian international students are academically difficult to adapt to the education system in scholarship country. Communication with different verbal and non-verbal create misunderstanding (Samanhudi, 2021). Not fluent in communicating with English as an international language. Apart from that, the heavy academic load is also the biggest challenge for Indonesian international students (Aisha & Mulyana, 2019). The challenge is added for muslim women who wear visual identity in the form of a headscarf has more or less an effect on the effectiveness of completing studies (Arifin, 2021). The anxiety of not being accepted and getting bad treatment because of being a Muslim will rise to new issues. This condition will have implications for the ineffectiveness of Muslim students completing their studies abroad, communicating with European societies, and psychologically feeling uncomfortable with their Islamic identity.

Based on the cultural background differences and possible issues between Indonesian Muslim women students and societies in Europe described earlier, it is interesting to dive into the experiences and how the students solve intercultural communication to adapt. The aim of this research is to identify the experiences phenomenon of Indonesian Muslim women students in adapting to non-Muslim societies in Europe using Gudykunst's Anxiety and Uncertainty Management theory. It This research is expected to be a reference for other Muslim international students who study in majority non-Muslim countries. This research is also expected to be a trigger for public awareness and the authorities that this matter requires serious attention so that Muslim women can more easily adapt and contribute to society while still having a sense of security with their Islamic identity.

## METHOD

Social scientist Alfred Schutz is one of the experts who developed phenomenology. Schutz developed phenomenology to observe various phenomena in the social world. This makes the phenomenological theory he initiated an idea that social phenomena can be an object of formal study (focus of interest). Schutz nuances phenomenology is closely related to the social and psychological fields. The analysis used is that all social phenomena must refer to the behavior of the individuals involved in the phenomenon. (Engkus Kuswarno, 2013) stated that Individuals are subjective actors

who are the subject of study. They interpret phenomena around them. This meaning is closely related to the knowledge (frame of reference) and experience (field of experience) experienced by each individual. In understanding human behavior as an individual, researchers are required to understand the level of thought of the informant. Researchers must be able to interpret the collected information to a meaning. The criteria used to determine the informants are Indonesian Muslim Women Students who use hijab in their daily lives. The informants received a full study scholarship from Indonesia or abroad. They have lived at least two years or more in Europe. The informants are in the final process or have completed their studies. There are five informants chosen, they studied in Bonn, Germany (1 informant), Poland and Pisa, Italy (1 informant) Wageningen, Netherlands (1 informant), Bristol, England (1 informant), Le Mans, France (1 informant). The informants used pseudonyms regarding to research code of ethics.

In finding and determining informants, researchers used purposive procedures as a strategy. This procedure is one of the most common informant-determining strategies in qualitative research. The purposive procedure determines the group of participants who become informants according to selected criteria relevant to the research problem (Bungin, 2017). The purposive sampling technique determines respondents who meet the category of Indonesian Muslim Women Students who get scholarships in Europe and who are academically and socially active in the local community. This technique explores the dynamics of individual exposure related to the experience of informants during their study in Europe. In this study, the researcher used semi-structured in-depth interviews. According to (Sugiyono, 2021), semi-structured in-depth interview is freer in its implementation than structured interviews. The goal is that informants can express their problems more, because most of the interviews are the direction of the informants to express their opinions and real experiences. In conducting interviews, researchers prepared interview guidelines designed to conduct interviews that were directed and did not deviate from the research objectives. In addition to interviews, the researcher also collected data through documentation and observation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In humanistic psychology, experience is one of the significant individual constructs. From (Creswell, 2014) experience consists of things based on memory, image, and meaning. Memory about Europe and European society, image of how it looks and acts, and how informants interpret them as well as adapt to it can be considered as an extraordinary experience. This experience will determine the process of cultural adaptation that will be carried out. From a psychological perspective, a very memorable experience is called a peak experience. (Wardhani, 2016) revealed that Individuals will achieve their optimal performance when they can align their peak experience with their peak performance. From (Hammer et al., 1998) individuals who experience peak experiences and peak performance in their lives will be vulnerable to anxiety and uncertainty. Indonesian Muslim women students need to be familiar with the local community, open to accepting differences in society, and able to interpret the meaning of accepted in intercultural communication context. after informants arrived that the most interesting experiences are those that related to what is inside of the individuals, their surroundings, and how both parties interact and influence each other.

In this research, it was identified that the experiences of informants, Indonesian Muslim Women Students in adapting to non-Muslim societies in Europe were very diverse, but it has a pattern. It is divided into experiences in academic and social contexts. It can be revealed in this research that there are three things informants did to manage their anxiety and uncertainty feelings in communication to European society, which are 1) adapt to the local community's culture (cultural), 2) adapt to individual personality (sociocultural), and 3) adapt to interpersonal perceptions (psycho-cultural).

### **Adapt to Local Community's Culture (Cultural)**

In this research, the concepts of anxiety and uncertainty management theory were used. It is stated that the higher the desire to adapt, the higher the individual's perception of paying attention to what is liked or disliked by people around them (Griffin et al., 2014). In adapting to the local community there are two ways, which are self-help and institutional- help which informants ask for help from a trusted institution. It's related to the situational process (Gudykunst, 2005) mentioned that individuals need information and the institution's support to read the situation and predict the people accurately.

Informants revealed that the adaptation time to the stage of acceptance was approximately six months, and some even reached one year. Informants admitted that Europe was completely different from Indonesia, both in academic and social contexts of intercultural communication. All informants stated that at the beginning of departure, language is the highest priority that needs to be adapted. It was followed by adapting to learn about the religion, education system, and facilities. All informants felt high uncertainty and anxiety because they felt their knowledge gap with locals was huge. Moreover, educational achievement standard was considered high. It is also added that muslim are considered as a minority.

All informants agreed that is important to learn again about the English language used with various accents, pronunciations, and dictions which not familiar to Indonesians. Having more courage to involve in discussions or daily conversations with classmates and locals is also helping. Finding more information about local religion, local mother tongue, education system, and facilities from mass media and seniors are also needed. It revealed that increasing motivation to interact with strangers both locals and other international students is a must. Individuals will look for alternative explanations of the stranger's behavior and increase feelings of interest in interacting with strangers (Gudykunst, 2005). Increased trust in ourselves in our ability to predict the behavior a stranger will produce decreases our anxiety. A decrease in our anxiety will increase our confidence in predicting strangers (Diana & Lukman, 2018).

All informants agreed that institutional-help plays a big role. Student affairs in Europe universities have good facilities for international students. Not only trusted institution in Europe, but also in Indonesia. Two of the informants admitted that they were assigned by their scholarship institution as a monitor-leaders to report to the institution about Indonesian students in their respective universities.

Keeping in touch with universities in the respective countries and scholarship providers will also be given help in adapting. By searching for institutional help, international students will also give an easy access to discussion with lecturers and many supported facilities to learn such as a library, places for praying, searching for halal food, Islamic and Indonesian communities. Institutional help will also help international students to get more information regarding the academic system and internship opportunities.

### **Adapt to Individual Personality (Sociocultural)**

All informants stated that experiencing culture shock is common, especially in communicating with locals and other international students, however, learning to adapt as soon as possible is needed. All informants agreed in having difficulties in interpreting both verbal and non-verbal communication such as gestures which many times leads to misunderstanding. Three informants admitted the pressure of adapting to academic and social contexts makes their mental health suffer. Informants also witnessed other Indonesian Students experience the same thing, even worse than their condition. Informants agree if culture shock is not handled properly, it will lead to serious mental health issues.

Besides that, European and international students tend to not familiar with Indonesian muslim who wears jilbab, unless countries have a lot of muslim immigrants. Not only the physics, but also their Islamic values. It is believed that communicating their Islamic values properly has a lot of strategies both verbal and non-verbal communication. The most important thing is to be assertive, while being thoughtful to their culture.

The research showed that personality is another thing Muslim women students need to pay attention to when adapting. The lack of ability to understand culture has an impact on academic skills and social skill of diplomacy in explaining individual's Islamic values. It is related to self-concept of the informants, according to (Gudykunst, 2005) self-concept is the willingness to see self-worth when individuals interact with other people from different cultures. It will show the progress in regulating anxiety and individual's self-esteem when interacting with strangers to accurately predict people's behaviors as follows in one of the informants:

" At first, I was surprised, right? At first I was hugged and kissed on the cheek (by boys), because I'm small, it's really easy to hug. I believe that's a sign of their true friendship here, so it's like a greeting. Well, I have to tell them that you can't be like that with girls, muslim women. So I told them, that we have to approach them first. We have to be firm with our Islamic values and individual principles. At first I (demonstrate movements to avoid hugging with both hands, pushing a little), which meant that hopefully they wouldn't be offended. Finally, I told them one on one. I didn't want to talk in front of many people because it might make them offended. So I chose, which one was the closest and often did that, I told him that I'm Muslim, I wear hijab, you can't hug or kiss me on the cheek like that. If we meet, just give me a high-five or fist bump (showing fists bumping together), no need to hug or kiss". The other day I met him, I deliberately show my fist bump, he understood and said, "Yeah, sometimes I forget" and we smiled and ok with that. So you have to understand their position too. So we have to tell each other what we want, what boundaries we have".

The existence of Muslim communities and Indonesian students communities is helping to facilitate the adaptation process. The opportunity to exchange thoughts and feelings with friends of the "same fate". The experience added to meeting people from many Islamic countries who are refugees or immigrants in Europe. It makes Europe a place where Muslims are becoming more familiar.

Regarding to mental health doing sports and do hobbies will helps recovers it. Other than that, it is important to ask for institutional help and keep in touch with people from community, university, and scholarship provider. (Gudykunst, 2005) stated that Social categorization of strangers is also one of the ways to keep individual's support system. It is important to do social categorization of strangers by grouping people into categories that have the same frequency with individual. It will be categorized as members of the group or outside the group. This makes Indonesian Muslim Women Students feel not alone.

### **Adapt to interpersonal Perceptions (Psychocultural).**

Informants stated that being a minority and showing Islamic identity and Islamic rituals are not perceived as an advantage in adapting to European societies. Therefore, all informants perceive this as an opportunity that leads to a deeper discussion about Islam. Certain communities in a country have certain stereotypes about hijab. One of the informants got unpleasant treatment from Europeans who identified hijab as a refugee or immigrant when traveling during summer break. He shouted at her to go back to her country. The informant contemplated that perhaps communication is the key. If we don't know each other, Muslims will get unpleasant treatment, if they know us, we will try to understand, accept, and respect each other. Most informants stated at first, they experienced facing people who were curious about how they looked. Some of the informants felt that people gave intimidating looks and showed unwelcome attitudes toward them. Informants admitted that they often find out how media and people around them (books, newspapers, articles on the internet, social media, word of mouth) portray Europe influence the way they perceive. Most of the information highlighted that Europe is a very liberal country and not too welcome to Muslims. The information causes high anxiety and uncertainty, which is implicated to the main failures of accepting and understanding the people. Stereotypes, which a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical

judgment (Merriam-Webster,2023)on European society and how the world views Muslim women in hijab are recognized by informants as what makes them anxious.

Regarding interpersonal perceptions, individuals who have the desire to adapt to strangers will continue to try to reduce anxiety and uncertainty (Hammer et al., 1998) Efforts to control feelings with conscious perception (mindfulness) will also affect persons's efforts to represent themselves in front of foreign people. The higher the desire to be accepted in a group, the more anxious the individuals will be. The higher the desire to adapt, the higher the individuals' perception to care about what is liked or disliked by the foreign people around them (Thorne, 1963)

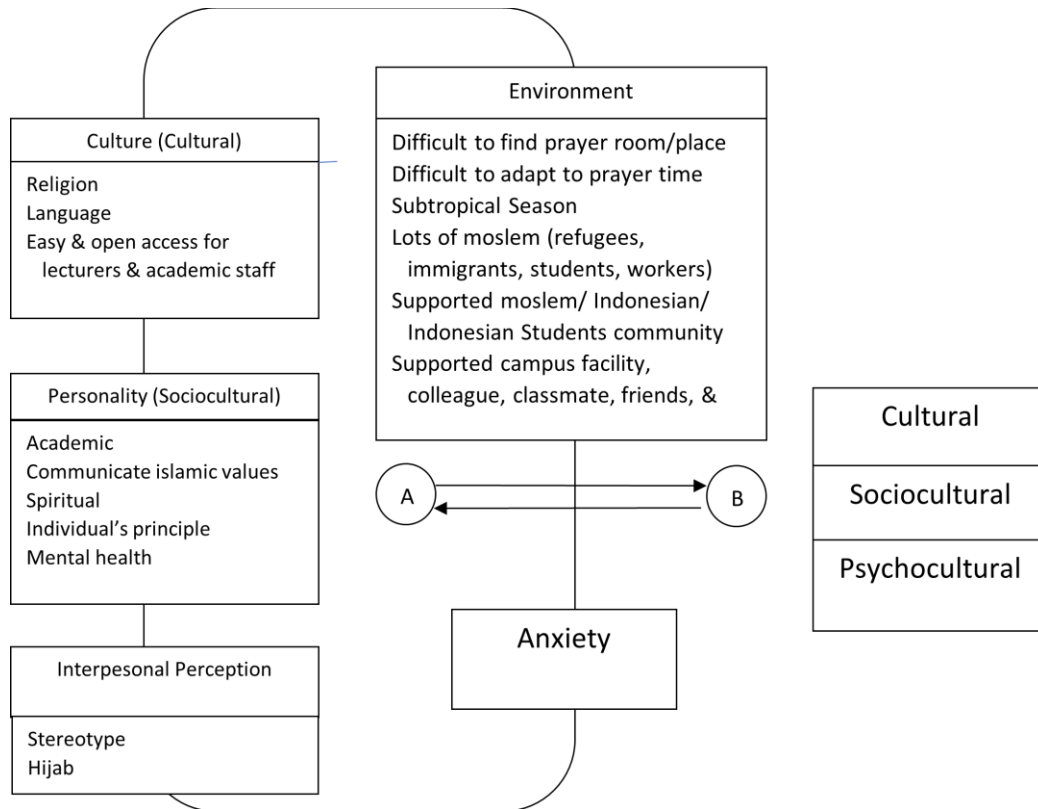
Regarding to hijab, in Europe, there is a different concept about hijab as jilbab and hijab as burqa. Hijab jilbab (headscarf) is mostly perceived as more accepted than hijab burqa (not only covers women's heads but also women's faces). Ironically, the unpleasant experience could be coming from the internal community. one of the informants gets unpleasant treatment from the Muslim community. The difference in hijab style, profession, and frequency of joining Islamic activity in the community potentially become an internal conflict.

On the other hand, informants stated that different concept of hijab style in academic context is also related to informants' major. Informants who take science majors will have different adaptations to social majors. One of the informants who took a science major is not allowed to wear Hijab that cannot cover the face and chest because of the danger of chemical substances. The reason is more likely about safety standards, while other informants who took social majors stated they need to adapt to more frequent discussions with their peers.

More than half of the informants knew their Indonesian Muslim women student fellows decided to stop wearing hijab. The reason is more likely to be accepted by the community. However, wearing a hijab and showing Islamic values in Europe as a part of identity are agreed will make Muslim connections closer and spiritually stronger. This can open an opportunity for a broader discussion about Islam and Muslims. Ethical interaction (Gudykunst, 2005) is the key to every intercultural communication. Communicating with respecting each other's culture will reduce anxiety and uncertainty. Informants feel like ambassadors of Muslims who need to prepare themselves to speak up about their religion and lead the Islamic discussion. It's an example to show that Islam is open to differences and makes a stronger connection with people who respect them.

### **Adapt to Environments in Culture, Personality, and Interpersonal Perception**

Referring to the theory of anxiety and uncertainty management (Gudykunst, 2002), cultural adaptation will begin when individuals are able to reduce this feeling of anxiety and uncertainty. From Gudykunst and Kim in the communication model that is often used in intercultural contexts, it is explained that cultural, socio-cultural, and psycho-cultural are conceptual filters that affect the encoding of messages and the encoding of messages behind communication as shown in figure 1:



**Figure 1.** Experiences of Indonesian Muslim Women Students in Europe  
(Source: Research Processed Results, 2022)

Figure 1 explains the experiences of Indonesian Muslim Women Students in Europe regarding three components of culture, personality, and interpersonal perception which influence surrounding environment. It affects the adaptation process. In theory, the management of anxiety and uncertainty, communication carried out by both parties, both Indonesian Muslim women students and societies in Europe will always experience anxiety and uncertainty because they feel foreign to each other. It reveals that culture is all forms of encoded communication processes. Each party, especially the informant in this research, party A, predicts the differences and similarities between party B. These predictions will influence the intercultural communication process. Later, the captured message will be encoded by each party as acceptance and rejection.

Having a firm principle that makes Indonesian Muslim women students meet with the same frequency of people who respect them as Muslims. Failure has been considered a normal thing because the adjustment requires time and effort. In the early days of adaptation, it was acknowledged by informants as the toughest period. Some of them have serious mental health issues that must be treated professionally. A supportive environment becomes a booster system for Indonesian Muslim women students. In addition to culture and socio-culture, psycho-culture also becomes important in this process. Psychoculture is a process that occurs within the individual self. This process is an intrapersonal communication of how to perceive the other party. Starting from Indonesian Muslim women students receive messages from their environment, perceive the meaning of the message, and respond according to the information and experience they have. Stereotypes are things that usually occur because the information they have has been collected in themselves without any real experience interacting deeply with non-Muslim societies in Europe. The hijab as Muslim identity also plays a part in the intercultural communication process.



## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research, it can be concluded from this research that the experiences of Indonesian Muslim students in adapting to non-Muslim societies in Europe are related to academic and social contexts. Each context influences each other. The cultural adaptation of Indonesian Muslim women students can be divided into three components, cultural, sociocultural, and psychocultural. In cultural components, Indonesian Muslim students are individuals who interpret the culture they experience. Sociocultural components is individual's personality factors which influence acceptance of culture socio-culturally. In psychocultural the form of interpersonal perceptions of non-Muslim societies in Europe is something that must be prepared. Last but not least, all of components influenced by environmental factors. It influences the cultural adaptation through intercultural communication that takes place. Each context influences how intercultural communication works. All informants try to accept differences by how they perceive all the components.

The acceptance and rejection from non-Muslim communities in Europe often occur in both social and academic aspects. Indonesian Muslim students felt that rejection occurred at the beginning of the adaptation process because they felt culture shock. Gradually, rejection turns into mutually respectful acceptance of each other as long as they try to speak up about their beliefs while being thoughtful of the respective culture.

Future researchers are expected to be able to examine research that raises the context of Muslim women's intercultural communication with different approaches such as ethnography. The country preference refers to countries with a non-Muslim majority. As a follow-up research, it is recommended to conduct research by discussing Indonesian Muslims as international students with more diverse levels of education.

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