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Sociocultural Strategies in Sustaining Self-Identity and Spirit of Nationalism among Indonesian Migrant Workers in Penang, Malaysia: An Intercultural Communication Perspective

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ABSTRACT

One of the major challenges faced by migrant workers is the influence of foreign cultures transmitted through social media and other forms of mass media. This influence can contribute to the erosion of their identities and nationalism. Maintaining both identity and nationalism is important so that Indonesian migrant workers can work and live abroad without neglecting or forgetting their origins. This study aims to identify the sociocultural strategies Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, use to maintain their self-identity and nationalism. A case study method was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews with 14 informants, comprising members of the Indonesian Community Organization (PERMAI), the Secretary General of PERMAI, and an Indonesian professional worker in Penang, Malaysia. The results show that the Indonesian migrant workers who participated in this study navigated identity and nationalism through cultural adaptation, symbolic preservation and intercultural communication. These strategies helped them overcome barriers, reinforce their national identity, and build resilient and inclusive diaspora communities grounded in shared values and transnational experiences. Within intercultural contexts, the participants demonstrated the ability to negotiate their identities, enabling them to live in new cultural spaces while maintaining their national origins. These findings reinforce and extend the identity negotiation and acculturation theories. In practical terms, the findings support the improvement of effective communication, workplace harmony, and overall well-being of migrant workers.

Keywords: Indonesian migrant workers, intercultural adaptation, identity negotiation, acculturation, nationalism

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1.0 Introduction

The number of Indonesian migrant workers abroad, especially in Malaysia, is significant and increasing. As cited by Nouvan (2025), the Ministry of Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection recorded 23,373 Indonesian citizens as migrant workers in February 2025. They work in both informal and formal sectors and come from various educational backgrounds with different skills.

Meanwhile, as cited by Putri (2023), data from the Ministry of Human Resources (KSM) of Malaysia indicate that there are currently 1.3 million foreign workers in Malaysia, working in sectors permitted to employ them, including the informal sector. Malaysia is also one of Indonesia's closest neighbouring countries, separated only by the Straits of Malacca in the West Malaysia region, while Sabah and Sarawak share land borders with Kalimantan. This geographical proximity is one of the factors that encourage many Indonesian migrant workers to seek employment in Malaysia.

One of the major challenges faced by migrant workers is the influence of foreign culture through social interaction and media, including social media and other forms of mass media. Social media facilitates intercultural exchange through numerous groups, forums and online communities. Intercultural interactions on social media often involve exchanging information about food, music, art, and cultural traditions. People can share recipes and music videos or host virtual events to introduce others to their culture. Social media also provides opportunities for individuals to connect with others who share similar interests and cultural identities, even when they are geographically distant (Wibowo et al. 2023). Along with the development of information technology, digital media have become one of the main communication channels. However, it can cause various problems if not used wisely (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009).

Among the important aspects for Indonesian migrant workers are self-identity and nationalism. Migrant workers can serve as ambassadors of Indonesian culture in their destination country. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that prospective migrant workers have a strong understanding of nationalism and patriotism and are prepared to promote these values while they are abroad (Wartoyo et al., 2024). With a strong spirit of nationalism, Indonesian migrant workers can remain independent and work hard to support their family. At the same time, they are able to engage with Indonesian diplomatic representatives with dignity and national pride, even though some may not receive excellent services.

Therefore, it is important to examine the dynamics of nationalism among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. In the era of social media, Indonesian migrant workers actively voice their aspirations, including nationalist sentiments (Maksun, 2023). Ernest Renan stated that nationalism is a key element in the formation of a nation's identity and strength (Chaniago et al., 2020). In Indonesia, nationalism has played a significant role in the struggle for independence from colonialism (Ranubaya et al. 2024). In the digital era, social media has become a platform for the development of exclusive and intolerant counter-narratives (Hidayat, 2025). As stated by Rahmani et al. (2024), social media platforms such as Instagram can be used productively to disseminate national identity narratives, but they can also give rise to new dynamics, such as the popularisation of national symbols that tend to be separated from their ideological substance.

The development of information and communication technology (ICT) has created an era in which communication is no longer limited by space or time. ICT facilitates relationships between people who are geographically distant and enables easy communication. This era is commonly known as the era of globalisation (Barbosa 2024). Globalisation has become familiar in contemporary societies. Globalisation requires countries to embrace technological advances across various fields, including science, politics, economics, society, and culture (Heather, 2023). While globalisation brings many conveniences through technological development, it also raises concerns and creates negative impacts for individuals and nations. The wave of global democracy is supported by sophisticated technological developments that have made the world resemble a borderless village (Hilmi & Pati, 2015).

This situation is also reflected in increasingly dynamic human mobility, as people move from one place to another, and even from one country to another, for reasons related to safety and welfare. Many Indonesian citizens migrate to other countries to improve their economic conditions by becoming

migrant workers. Sukhodolska et al. (2024) stated that migration worldwide has a significant impact on national identity, nation-building, and society. Some people migrate in search of work or economic opportunities, to join family members, or for educational reasons. Others move to avoid conflicts, persecution, or large-scale human rights violations. Others migrate in response to the adverse effects of climate change, natural disasters, or other environmental factors (United Nations, n.d.).

Based on the research background above, the objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To explore how Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, interpret their cultural identity and spirit of nationalism in a cross-cultural setting.
2. To identify and analyse the sociocultural factors that significantly contribute to the formation and preservation of self-identity and nationalism among Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia.
3. This study examines the common intercultural communication barriers faced by Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, and investigates the coping mechanisms they employ to navigate these challenges.
4. This study investigates the intercultural communication strategies utilised by Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, to adapt to the Malaysian work and social environment while preserving their cultural identity and spirit of nationalism.

2.0 Literature Review

National identity is closely related to the shared values, history, and ideals that unite individuals as members of a nation (Aulia et al., 2021). In the context of globalisation, national identity may be influenced by the movement of ideas, technologies, values, and cultural practices across societies (Ariely, 2021). While globalisation can support social and technological development, it may also expose local cultures to external influences that raise concerns about cultural erosion and the weakening of national identity (Heather, 2023).

Several challenges to maintaining Indonesian national identity in the era of globalisation have been identified, including hedonism, the decline of mutual cooperation, weakening nationalism and patriotism, and reduced politeness in society. To address these challenges, national identity can be strengthened through the implementation of Pancasila values, the cultivation of love for the homeland, unity, togetherness, and the constructive use of social networking sites (Aulia et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Sakdiyah et al. (2024) stated that national identity serves as a marker of a nation's distinctiveness and differentiates it from other nations. National identity plays an important role in the survival and future of a nation because it contains cultural values, shared characteristics, ideals and goals. Therefore, national identity is fundamental and must be instilled in the younger generation, as it is closely linked to the nation's future.

In the current era of globalisation, many changes have occurred in various aspects of life. These changes have both positive and negative effects on society. The entry and development of foreign cultures can threaten national identity, particularly among the younger generation, who may be easily influenced by globalisation forces. Awareness of the importance of maintaining cultural values as part of national identity is also fading. Therefore, efforts must be made to strengthen public awareness of national identity using methods aligned with current developments in science and technology.

Previous studies on national cultural identity and nationalism have largely focused on younger generations and the challenges they face in maintaining national values in the era of globalisation. However, limited attention has been given to Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia, particularly in relation to how they sustain self-identity and nationalism while adapting to a different sociocultural and intercultural environment. This gap provides the basis for the present study, which examines the sociocultural strategies used by Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, to maintain their cultural identity and spirit of nationalism.

2.1 National Identity, Nationalism, and Cultural Preservation

National identity and nationalism are fundamental concepts for understanding how individuals develop a sense of belonging, loyalty, and commitment to their nation. National identity encompasses the shared history, culture, language, values, and symbols that distinguish one nation from another, whereas nationalism refers to the collective awareness, pride, and commitment of citizens to preserve and advance the interests of their nation. In the Indonesian context, these concepts are closely linked to the values of Pancasila, national unity, and cultural diversity. They play a vital role in strengthening social cohesion and maintaining the integrity of the nation in the face of globalisation and cultural change.

However, rapid globalisation, technological advancement, and increasing intercultural interaction have created challenges in maintaining national identity, particularly among younger generations and Indonesians living abroad. Exposure to foreign cultures may weaken attachment to national values if it is not accompanied by strong civic awareness and cultural understanding. Consequently, preserving national identity and fostering nationalism require continuous efforts in education, cultural preservation, civic participation, and the practice of Pancasila values. These concepts provide a theoretical foundation for understanding how Indonesian migrant workers negotiate their identities while adapting to different cultural environments.

2.1.1 National Identity and Nationalism in the Indonesian Context

Efforts to preserve Indonesian national identity are often linked to civic education, the cultivation of nationalism and patriotism, cultural preservation, and civic responsibility. Civic education is viewed as an important means of strengthening citizens' understanding of national values and developing a sense of responsibility toward the nation. Similarly, nationalism and patriotism are associated with love for the homeland and commitment to preserving Indonesia's cultural and ideological foundations. In the contemporary digital era, technology also provides opportunities for promoting national culture and sustaining collective identity, particularly through online platforms and digital cultural content. In addition, national identity is closely connected to civic responsibility, including the obligation to contribute to the defence and security of the country, as stated in Article 30, Paragraph 1 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (Hasan et al., 2024).

2.1.2 Implementing Pancasila Values Wherever One Is

The values contained in Pancasila should be implemented wherever one is, whether at home, in society, on campus, or in national and civic life. The values and principles of Pancasila should serve as guidelines for social and national life in Indonesia. The implementation of Pancasila values is important because they can unite Indonesia's diverse communities (Izza Nur Fadhila & Ulfatun Najicha, 2021).

Firman Noor (2007) defines nationalism as a sense of nationhood, or "the willingness to unite voluntarily on the basis of historical dialectics, a shared vision, and future interests, with the spirit of humanity as the foundation." More specifically, in the Indonesian context, nationalism is associated with the values of equality, justice, and democracy, which exist alongside divinity and unity (as cited in Agung, 2017).

National identity is typically based on shared culture, religion, history, language, or ethnicity. The idea that "the nation creates national identity" suggests that national identity gives people a sense of belonging to a nation (Agung, 2017). Meanwhile, Billig (1995), in *Banal Nationalism*, stated that identity can be found in social habits, including ways of thinking and language use. He also argued that having a national identity involves physical, legal, social, and emotional conditions connected to one's homeland.

Hereyah (2018) stated that nationalism can be understood not only as an ideology but also as a social movement and symbolic language. Therefore, a discussion of nationalism inevitably involves related concepts such as nation, national identity, and the nation-state. Smith (2008) defines the nation as "a named and self-defining human community whose members cultivate shared memories, symbols, myths, traditions and values, inhabit and are attached to historic territories or 'homelands,' create and disseminate a distinctive public culture, and observe shared customs and standardised laws" (Smith,

2008, p. 19). He understands national identity in a similar way, as the continuous reproduction and reinterpretation of values, symbols, memories, myths, and traditions that form a nation's distinctive heritage, as well as individuals' identification with that heritage and its cultural elements (Smith, 2008, p. 19).

Billig describes "banal" or everyday nationalism as a form of national identity that is embedded in everyday life and politics, although it often goes unnoticed, much like a familiar national flag that people rarely consciously observe (as cited in Hereyah, 2018). This perspective suggests that nationalism is deeply rooted culturally and psychologically because it is present in everyday practices and social consciousness. It also helps explain why nationalism continues to influence millions of people across continents and why it can inspire emotional commitment in ways once associated with religion. Therefore, greater attention should be paid to the symbolic elements of nationalist language and ideology, as well as to the moral, ritual, and emotional dimensions of nationalist discourse.

Smith (2002) further explains that nationalism has its own rules, rhythms, and memories, which shape the interests of its adherents and direct them toward national goals. These characteristics give nationalist politics a recognisable form and help guide collective action. Therefore, cultivating nationality and nationalness, understood as national spirit or national individuality, is central to nationalism. In contemporary usage, nationalism may refer to several meanings, including:

- a. The process of formation or growth of a nation.
- b. A sentiment or awareness of belonging to a particular nation.
- c. The language and symbols of the nation.
- d. A social and political movement for the nation.
- e. A doctrine or ideology of the nation, either general or specific.

In the context of migration, national identity and nationalism are shaped not only by inherited cultural values but also by everyday experiences in the host society. Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia encounter different linguistic practices, workplace expectations, social norms, and intercultural relationships. These experiences may challenge their attachment to homeland values, but they may also strengthen identity through symbolic practices, community participation, and continued engagement with Indonesian cultural traditions. Therefore, the study of nationalism among migrant workers requires attention to how identity is negotiated, preserved, and expressed in daily intercultural encounters.

2.2 Intercultural Communication Approach

This study situates Indonesian migrant workers within the framework of intercultural communication, where identity and nationalism are continuously negotiated through interactions with host and co-ethnic communities. Through both face-to-face and ICT-mediated communication, migrant workers engage in cultural adaptation while simultaneously maintaining their national identity, reflecting the dynamic interplay between globalisation and cultural preservation. The main theme in discussions of intercultural communication is the degree of difference in the backgrounds of communication participants caused by cultural differences (Sendjaja, 2014). Intercultural communication can serve as a bridge between people from different backgrounds.

The function of communication as social communication suggests that communication is important in building self-concept, supporting self-actualisation, ensuring survival, achieving happiness, avoiding stress and tension, and fostering relationships with others. Through communication, individuals work together in teams, organisations and companies. Implicit in this social communication function is the cultural function. Social scientists argue that culture and communication have a reciprocal relationship, like two sides of the same coin. Culture becomes part of communication behaviour, while communication also determines, maintains, develops and transmits culture. Edward T. Hall stated that "culture is communication" and "communication is culture." On the one hand, communication is a mechanism for socialising the cultural norms of society, both horizontally, from one society to another,

and vertically, from one generation to the next. In contrast, culture determines communication norms, including what is considered appropriate for a particular group (Hall & Hall, 1990).

Therefore, the same communication facts or stimuli may be perceived differently by different cultural groups and subcultures. Communication and culture are essentially inseparable phenomena. Communication and culture focus on the varied ways in which humans communicate across communities and social groups. Studies of communication and culture also examine how social groups articulate meanings and patterns of action through human interaction. In the context of this research, cultural identity theory is considered relevant to strengthen the theoretical framework. This theory is a framework in communication studies that explains how individuals negotiate and express their cultural identities during intercultural interactions. Developed primarily by Mary Jane Collier in the late 1980s and the 1990s, it emphasises the role of communication in constructing, maintaining, and transforming identity across intercultural contexts (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009).

According to Liliweri (2002, pp. 5–6), views on communication include the following:

1. Communication as a symbolic activity: Communication involves the use of meaningful symbols that may be expressed verbally through spoken or written words or non-verbally through gestures, signs, and other forms of symbolic expression.
2. Communication as a process: Communication is a dynamic and continuous activity that develops over time and involves continuous change.
3. Communication as an exchange of meaning: Meaning refers to the message intended by the sender and is expected to be understood by the recipient.

Several definitions of intercultural communication have been proposed. First, intercultural communication refers to communication between people from different cultures, such as ethnic groups, races, and social classes (Rich & Ogawa, 1971). Second, it refers to communication that occurs between message producers and message recipients with different cultural backgrounds (Samovar & Porter, 1994). Third, intercultural communication involves communication participants, whether individuals or groups, with an emphasis on how differences in cultural backgrounds influence their communication behaviours (Dodd, 1991).

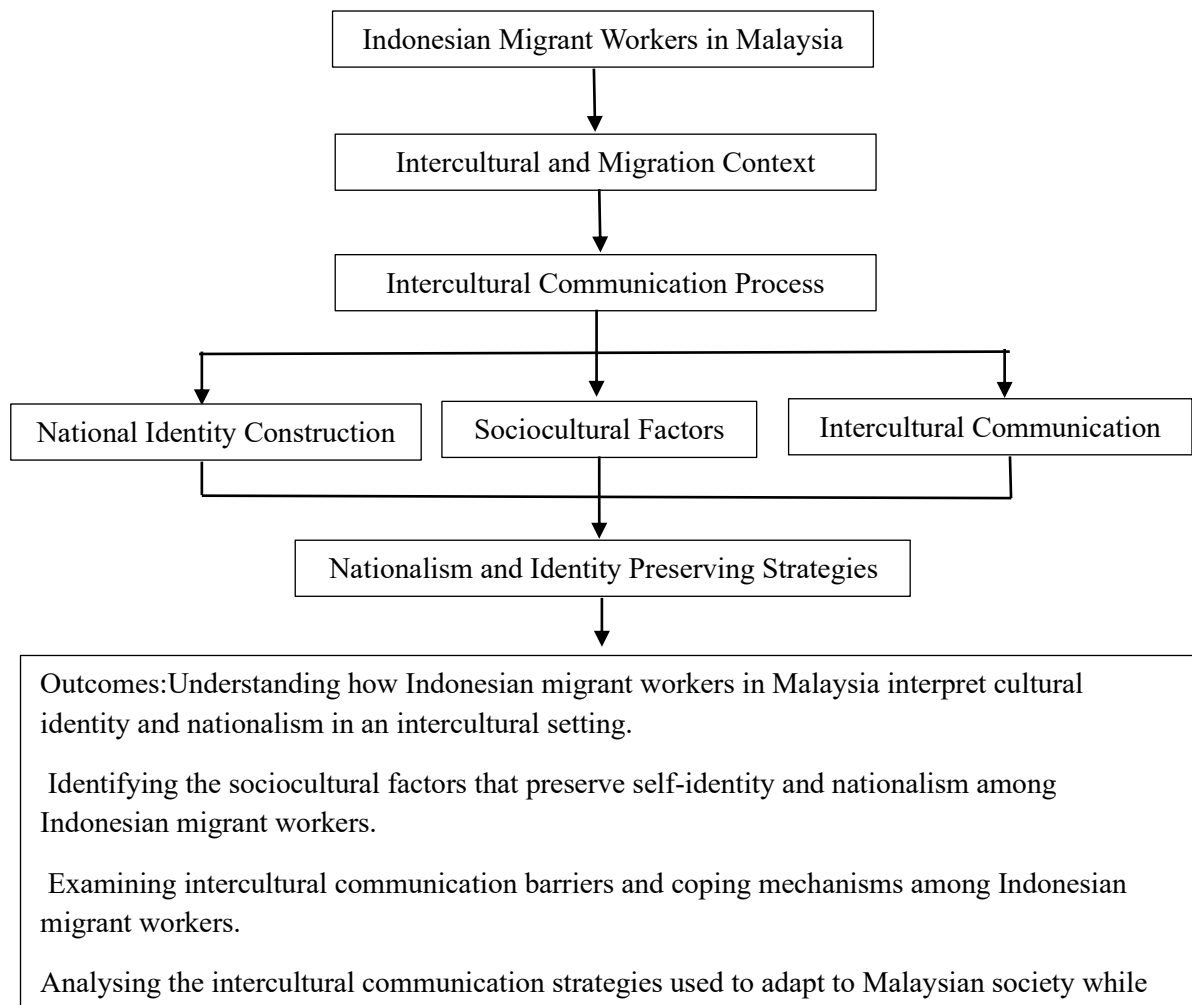
Based on these definitions, intercultural communication can be understood as the process of exchanging ideas and meanings between people from different cultures. Communication between people of different nationalities, racial groups, language communities, or socio-economic backgrounds can be regarded as intercultural communication. Intercultural communication examines how culture influences communication activities, including the meanings of verbal and nonverbal messages, what is considered appropriate to communicate, how communication should take place, when communication should occur, and other related aspects. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study. It illustrates how Indonesian migrant workers negotiate self-identity and nationalism through intercultural communication, highlighting the relationships among the intercultural migrant context, communication barriers, adaptation strategies, identity preservation, and the maintenance of nationalism.

The framework begins with the intercultural migrant context in which migrant workers experience cultural differences, minority status, and physical distance from Indonesia. This condition can create challenges in maintaining a sense of national belonging and identity. In this context, intercultural communication is the central process through which identity and nationalism are negotiated. Through interactions with Malaysians, fellow Indonesian workers, and families in Indonesia, migrant workers continuously interpret their cultural position and national identity.

Simultaneously, Indonesian migrant workers encounter intercultural communication barriers such as language difficulties, stereotypes, discrimination, and cultural misunderstandings. These barriers may threaten identity stability and a sense of national belonging. Therefore, strategies are needed, especially in the context of intercultural communication, to overcome these barriers and ensure the preservation of nationalism among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Preserving Self-Identity and Spirit of Nationalism in the Intercultural Communication Perspective



3.0 Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study examines the meanings, lived experiences, and communication practices of Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia. A qualitative case study approach was therefore considered suitable, as it enables an in-depth exploration of human experiences, behaviours, and social practices within their real-life contexts. Qualitative research emphasises careful observation and detailed documentation of phenomena rather than numerical measurement or statistical analysis. Mulyana (2018) stated that qualitative research does not rely on mathematical logic, numerical principles, or statistical methods. Instead, it seeks to preserve the form and content of human behaviour and analyse its qualities.

A qualitative case study approach allows researchers to investigate complex phenomena within their specific contexts. It also enables the exploration of individuals, communities, organisations, relationships, and social processes through multiple sources of data (Yin, 2003). This approach was

appropriate for understanding how Indonesian migrant workers negotiate identity, nationalism, and intercultural communication in Penang.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich and relevant information on the sociocultural strategies used to maintain identity and nationalism among Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia. The inclusion criteria required participants to be Indonesian citizens residing in Penang, have experience as migrant workers or be actively involved in organisations that support Indonesian migrant workers, and be willing to participate voluntarily in the study.

Participants were recruited through the Indonesian Community Organization (PERMAI) in Penang. Initial contact was made through PERMAI, which facilitated access to eligible participants. The final sample consisted of 14 informants, including 11 Indonesian migrant workers employed in the restaurant and domestic service sectors, the Secretary General of PERMAI Penang, and an Indonesian professional consultant with extensive knowledge of the Indonesian migrant worker community in Penang.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, allowing emerging themes to guide subsequent interviews. Interviews continued until data saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or substantial information emerged in later interviews. Saturation was considered to have been reached after 14 interviews, as the data consistently reflected recurring patterns related to identity maintenance, nationalism, and intercultural communication experiences. Table 1 presents the informants' details.

Table 1

Research Informants

Informants	Gender	Age Range (years old)	Length of Stay in Malaysia	Employment Sector	Occupation	Participant Category
Informant 1	Male	26 – 30	3 years	Hospitality	Restaurant worker	Migrant worker
Informant 2	Female	45 – 50	20 years	Hospitality	Cook	Migrant worker
Informant 3	Male	25 – 30	4 years	Hospitality	Restaurant worker	Migrant worker
Informant 4	Female	31 – 35	6 years	Hospitality	Restaurant worker	Migrant worker
Informant 5	Female	36 – 40	8 years	Household	Domestic worker	Migrant worker
Informant 6	Female	41 – 45	10 years	Household	Domestic worker	Migrant worker
Informant 7	Female	50 – 55	20 years	Household	Domestic worker	Migrant worker
Informant 8	Female	46 – 50	15 years	Household	Domestic worker	Migrant worker
Informant 9	Female	41 – 45	12 years	Household	Domestic worker	Migrant worker
Informant 10	Female	36 – 40	7 years	Household	Domestic worker	Migrant worker

Informants	Gender	Age Range (years old)	Length of Stay in Malaysia	Employment Sector	Occupation	Participant Category
Informant 11	Male	31 – 35	5 years	Hospitality	Restaurant worker	Migrant worker
Informant 12	Male	26 – 30	3 years	Hospitality	Restaurant worker	Migrant worker
Informant 13	Male	45 – 50	18 years	Community Organization	Secretary General of PERMAI	Migrant worker Community Leader
Informant 14	Male	45 – 50	22 years	Professional	Consultant	Professional informant

Interviews were conducted in Indonesian by the first and second authors, and the third author conducted interviews in Malay. All three authors were experienced in qualitative interviews. The interviews took place sequentially over five days at locations agreed upon with the participants, including the PERMAI office in Penang and a café considered a neutral public space. Each interview lasted approximately 45–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants’ permission.

3.4 Transcription and Translation

After data collection, all interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interviews conducted in Indonesian were transcribed in Indonesian, while interviews conducted in Malay were transcribed in Malay. To facilitate manuscript preparation, selected excerpts were translated into English for publication. To preserve the original meaning, the translations were carefully reviewed and compared with the original transcripts. Participant quotations are presented using informant codes, such as Informant 1 and Informant 2, to protect confidentiality while illustrating key themes emerging from the analysis.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Before the interviews, all informants received clear and complete information about the study’s purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and permission was sought to audio-record the interviews for research purposes.

3.6 Data Analysis

The coding procedures followed the principles of qualitative thematic analysis integrated with Miles and Huberman’s interactive model. According to Miles et al. (2014), qualitative data analysis involves three interconnected activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

Data reduction involved selecting, focusing, organising, and simplifying the interview data so that meaningful conclusions could be drawn. This process was carried out continuously throughout the study, from data collection to the preparation of the final report. It included summarising interview responses, identifying preliminary themes, clustering related ideas, categorising data, and writing analytical memos.

Data display involved organising the data in a systematic form to support interpretation and analysis. In this study, the data were mainly displayed through narrative descriptions, thematic groupings, and supporting participant quotations.

Conclusion drawing and verification were conducted gradually throughout the analysis. Emerging conclusions were continuously checked by revisiting the interview transcripts, comparing responses across participants, examining the consistency of themes, and referring to field notes and analytical memos.

Within this analytical framework, the interview data were analysed using a systematic coding process involving open, axial, and selective coding. After transcription, each interview was read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data. During open coding, key statements, phrases, and experiences expressed by the participants were identified and assigned descriptive codes. During axial coding, codes with similar meanings or conceptual relationships were grouped into broader categories. These categories were then continuously compared and refined through repeated review and interpretation. Finally, selective coding was used to integrate the categories into overarching themes that addressed the research objectives. These themes reflected the key sociocultural strategies used by Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, to maintain their identity and express their nationalism in an intercultural environment.

3.7 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was established using the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the participants, source triangulation, and the concurrent process of data collection and analysis. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the results to other contexts. Dependability was ensured through systematic documentation of the research procedures, coding process, and analytical decisions. Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining analytical memos, revisiting the interview transcripts throughout the analysis, and grounding the findings in participants' narratives to minimise researcher bias.

4.0 Results

The results of this study are organised into several analytical topics. These include how Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia interpret the meaning of cultural identity and nationalism in an intercultural context, as well as the sociocultural factors that influence the formation and maintenance of their self-identity and nationalism. Other findings concern the obstacles commonly encountered in the process of intercultural communication and the strategies used to overcome these obstacles. Finally, the results discuss the intercultural communication strategies employed by Indonesian migrant workers to adapt to the work and social environments in Malaysia while preserving their self-identity and nationalism. The following sections present the research findings sequentially, in accordance with the research objectives described earlier.

4.1 The Meaning of Cultural Identity and Nationalism in a Cross-Cultural Context

In the realm of international migration, the interpretation of cultural identity and nationalism is a crucial issue for Indonesian migrant workers. This study reveals that Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia exhibit diverse strategies and experiences in understanding their cultural identity and spirit of nationalism while navigating life and work in a cross-cultural environment.

4.1.1 Cultural Identity: Between Preservation and Adaptation

Most respondents indicated that their Indonesian cultural identity remains an inseparable aspect of their lives, despite living in Malaysia for extended periods. This identity is reflected in several forms.

- a. Cultural symbols: These include the Indonesian national flag (Sang Saka Merah Putih), national anthem (Indonesia Raya), Indonesian passports, and traditional cuisine. Informants 5, 6, 7, and 9 emphasised that these symbols play a vital role in preserving their emotional connection to Indonesia. These practices highlight how such symbols serve as anchors of identity in different cultural landscapes.
- b. Everyday practices: These include speech, dress, and patterns of social interaction that reflect Indonesian values and norms. For instance, Informants 1 and 3 continue to uphold distinctively Indonesian social behaviours, even as they adapt to workplace cultures that align more closely with Malaysian norms.

- c. Language and communication: These are key markers of cultural identity. Although some respondents, such as Informants 2 and 4, have adjusted to local dialects, they still firmly identify as Indonesians, recognising these linguistic differences as integral to their identity.

Nonetheless, high levels of cultural adaptation were also evident. Respondents such as Informants 2 and 4 described substantial cultural adaptation, to the extent that they felt more aligned with local values. Informant 2 explicitly noted that she feels “more like a Malaysian” after two decades of residence, illustrating the flexible and evolving nature of cultural identity in the diaspora.

4.1.2 Nationalism: Between Memory, Attachment, and Emotional Resilience

The expressions of nationalism among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia vary. Some demonstrate strong patriotic sentiments, whereas others experience a gradual decline over time. Interview analysis suggests three primary patterns in understanding nationalism.

- a. Symbolic nationalism: A number of informants, including Informants 7, 8, and 9, expressed nationalism through participation in Indonesian Independence Day celebrations, listening to national and folk songs, and celebrating Indonesian culture in daily life. Although largely ceremonial, this form of nationalism plays an important role in maintaining emotional ties to the homeland.
- b. Pragmatic nationalism: Respondents such as Informants 3 and 4 associated nationalism with professional conduct and behaviour. Rather than through overt expressions, they conveyed national pride through a strong work ethic, rule compliance, and courteous demeanour, thereby representing the image of Indonesian workers abroad. This interpretation centres more on actions than on symbols.
- c. Fading nationalism: Informants 2 and 4 also reflected a contrasting view, describing weakening national sentiments. Difficult life circumstances, separation from family, and increasing emotional distance from Indonesia contributed to a diminished sense of national connection. This illustrates that nationalism is deeply shaped by individual psychosocial conditions and the lived reality of migrant life.

In general, nationalism among Indonesian migrant workers is not monolithic but is shaped by variables such as length of stay, degree of cultural adaptation, personal experience, and the social environment in the host country.

4.1.3 Balancing Two Cultures

Most participants did not perceive their cross-cultural experiences as conflicts but rather as a process of identity negotiation. They demonstrated the ability to integrate into Malaysian culture without relinquishing their Indonesian cultural roots. This balance was manifested through various practices.

- a. Incorporating Malaysian work values, including discipline, punctuality, and efficiency.
- b. Maintaining social ties: This involves sustaining relationships with fellow Indonesians residing in Malaysia.
- c. Participating in community organisations: These include organisations such as the Indonesian Community Organization (PERMAI) in Penang, Malaysia, which provides a collective space for expressing national identity.

Informant 14, a professional worker, and Informant 13, Secretary-General of PERMAI, highlighted the vital role of community organisations in reinforcing identity and nationalism among migrant workers. Activities such as Republic of Indonesia Independence Day celebrations and Indonesian cultural events offer symbolic and emotional spaces that strengthen national identity amid globalisation and acculturation processes.

4.1.4 The Cross-Cultural Context as a Determining Factor

Malaysia's intercultural setting, characterised by historical and linguistic proximity to Indonesia, appears to ease the adaptation process, although identity challenges continue to arise. Some workers, such as Informants 1 and 10, noted that local accents and customs differed enough to require conscious adjustment. Informant 1, a restaurant worker in Penang, underscored the significance of preserving Indonesian cultural identity through daily practices. I continue to use the Indonesian language when communicating with my friends. Although the Malay accent is different, I remain proud to be Indonesian."

Nevertheless, shared Malay cultural roots seem to support the retention of Indonesian identity without fostering isolation. The relatively inclusive nature of Malaysian society towards Indonesian workers creates room for sustaining national identity without extreme pressure to assimilate into the host society.

4.2 Sociocultural Factors Influencing the Formation and Maintenance of Self-Identity and Nationalism

Within the framework of intercultural communication, the self-identity and spirit of nationalism among Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia are shaped not only by individual experiences but also by the ongoing interplay of sociocultural influences. Based on interviews with 14 respondents employed in various sectors, including domestic work and services in Penang, Malaysia, several key factors emerged as consistently contributing to the formation and maintenance of both identity and national consciousness. The following section presents a thematic analysis of these factors.

4.2.1 Religious Values and Social Norms

Religious principles and social norms rooted in Indonesian culture serve as moral anchors for many migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. Informants 2, 3, and 4 emphasised that discipline, politeness, and respect for religious teachings remained guiding principles in their daily lives, despite their immersion in a different cultural environment. These values function as a moral compass, shaping workplace conduct and reinforcing Indonesian identity. Upholding these norms allowed migrant workers to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and the host society without leading to social isolation among them.

4.2.2 Community Solidarity and Migrant Associations

Solidarity among Indonesian workers emerged as a powerful force sustaining a shared cultural identity. Organisations such as the Indonesian Community Organization (PERMAI) were frequently cited by respondents, including Informants 5, 6, and 7, as essential spaces for nurturing the national spirit. These communities serve as venues for celebrating national events, such as Indonesian Independence Day, advocating for rights, and fostering social cohesion. Such collective solidarity cultivated a sense of "we-ness" that underpinned the psychological foundation of migrant nationalism.

4.2.3 Experiences of Discrimination and Social Challenges

Unfair treatment in the workplace, such as that experienced by Informant 1, often gave rise to strengthened pride in Indonesian heritage. Discrimination, particularly when compared with the treatment of workers from other countries, tends to generate a collective resolve to demonstrate the work ethic and quality associated with Indonesian workers. From an intercultural communication perspective, this process of "othering" may have served to consolidate internal group cohesion among Indonesian migrant workers.

4.2.4 Cultural and Linguistic Adaptation

Adjusting to local culture and dialects is considered a crucial intercultural skill. Respondents such as Informants 5 and 6 highlighted the importance of learning the Malay language and local speech patterns to function socially and professionally. However, this adaptation did not equate to full assimilation of the new culture. In contrast, their ability to navigate intercultural communication enhanced the positive image of Indonesians as adaptable while remaining rooted in core cultural values.

4.2.5 Work Culture and Professionalism

Most informants identified discipline, vocational competence, and a strong work ethic as integral to their identity as Indonesian workers. For example, Informants 2 and 3 emphasised the importance of skills training: The more structured and demanding work environment in Malaysia encouraged them to operate with higher professionalism, which, in turn, fostered a sense of national pride. By demonstrating excellence in the workplace, these workers contributed to a positive perception of Indonesians as being competitive and capable.

4.2.6 Family Influence and Social Background

Family values are frequently cited as foundational to identity formation. Informant 1 noted the role of familial bonds in shaping social interactions with fellow Indonesians. For many respondents, family was not only the primary reason for migration but also a constant reminder of their cultural roots and national identity. In the context of intercultural communication, the family serves as the first agent of cultural socialisation and remains relevant even when individuals are embedded in a different cultural setting.

4.2.7 Preservation of Indonesian Cultural Symbols

The continued use of physical symbols, such as the Indonesian national flag, national anthem, traditional food, and clothing such as batik, plays an important role in preserving national identity. Respondents such as Informants 8 and 9 mentioned that despite years of residence in Malaysia, they actively upheld Indonesian cultural traditions. In the context of symbolic communication, these practices were not only affirmations of identity but also expressions of emotional and ritualised forms of nationalism.

Informant 7, who had resided in Malaysia for the past 20 years, emphasised her continued commitment to her national identity by participating in official Indonesian Independence Day celebrations at the office of the Consulate General of the Republic of Indonesia in Penang. “I still take part in the Independence Day events at the Consulate. I remain dedicated to preserving the national anthem and Indonesian cultural traditions.”

Similarly, Informants 5 and 8 articulated their sense of nationalism through routine practices such as listening to the national anthem and keeping national symbols close at hand. As Informant 8 explained, “I listen to the Indonesian national anthem, Indonesia Raya, mostly on Sundays, and sometimes I also listen to Javanese traditional music, *campur sari*. It serves as a reminder of my origins.”

4.2.8 Education and Skills as Expressions of National Identity

According to Informants 13 and 14, education and professional competencies were vital for strengthening both personal identity and national pride. When Indonesian workers were able to demonstrate their expertise in either the informal or professional sectors, they represented not only themselves but also their country. In this sense, nationalism is conceptualised as a form of representational awareness embedded in occupational performance.

4.3 Common Intercultural Communication Barriers and Strategies for Overcoming Them

This study identified that the intercultural communication challenges faced by Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia were closely related to linguistic differences, including language and accent, as well as differences in cultural values and social norms, particularly within the spheres of work and daily life. Interviews with 14 participants, comprising both migrant workers and community leaders, revealed recurring patterns of communication barriers while also highlighting variations in how individuals responded and adapted to them.

4.3.1 Language and Accent Differences as Primary Barriers

Nearly all respondents reported that linguistic differences, especially in accent and vocabulary, were among the first and most significant challenges they encountered. Although Malay and Indonesian share linguistic roots, variations in pronunciation, idiomatic expressions, and vocabulary often lead to misunderstandings and, at times, interpersonal tensions.

Informant 1, for instance, found it difficult to follow instructions from superiors or communicate with customers because of their unfamiliarity with the Malaysian accent. Similarly, Informants 2 and 4 reported confusion when encountering words that had different meanings in the two languages. Respondents such as Informants 5, 6, and 8 noted that while such barriers became less problematic over time, they remained a considerable challenge during their early adjustment period. Community leaders, such as Informant 13, and a professional worker, Informant 14, stressed that despite the structural similarities between Indonesian and Malay, pragmatic and cultural differences in usage frequently led to miscommunication. This underscores that language is not only linguistic but also deeply contextual and cultural.

To address these language-related barriers, most respondents adopted the following strategies:

- a. Engaging in intensive learning of the local language, both informally through social interactions and formally through language courses and community-based training, is crucial.
- b. Imitating the local manner of speech, including accent and common expressions.
- c. Practising communication directly in the workplace often serves as a practical setting for cross-cultural learning.

Informant 7, who had lived in Malaysia for more than 20 years, emphasised the critical role of time and frequent social interactions in achieving linguistic adaptation.

4.3.2 Differences in Work Culture and Social Values

Beyond linguistic challenges, most participants highlighted significant contrasts between Indonesian and Malaysian work cultures and social norms. In Malaysia, the work environment is perceived as more structured, time-disciplined, and rule-oriented, in contrast to the more flexible and informal work relations commonly experienced in Indonesia.

Informants 1 and 4 expressed surprise at the brevity of the designated break times, which were far shorter than anticipated. Informants 3 and 9 commented on a rigid “command culture” among employers, which was sometimes perceived as symbolic domination. Informant 2 raised concerns regarding certain social expectations, such as interpersonal boundaries, that, if misunderstood, could negatively affect the reputation of Indonesian workers.

In response to these value-based and cultural differences, migrant workers employed several adaptive strategies.

- a. Internalising local cultural norms, particularly regarding perceptions of time, responsibility, and workplace etiquette.
- b. Developing cultural awareness through observation, first-hand experience, and peer discussions with more experienced migrants.
- c. Adjusting behaviour, such as maintaining respectful body language and adopting more formal and culturally appropriate communication styles.

As Informants 6 and 8 noted, a willingness to conform to local work ethics proved essential for maintaining harmonious relationships with supervisors and colleagues. Informant 6, a domestic worker in Penang, added, “In Indonesia, being 15 minutes late is still acceptable. Here, however, punctuality is strictly required.”

4.3.3 The Social Role of Migrant Communities in Adaptation

In addition to individual efforts, migrant communities play a vital role in helping Indonesian workers navigate intercultural barriers. Organisations such as PERMAI offer language training, legal literacy, and forums for collective learning and mutual support.

Informant 13 highlighted that these community-based initiatives addressed not only language but also the broader cultural landscape of Malaysia, which encompasses Malay, Chinese, and Indian influences,

making cultural navigation complex and multidimensional. Such networks help migrant workers develop the linguistic, cultural, and practical knowledge needed to adapt more effectively to their host environment.

4.4 Intercultural Communication Strategies for Adapting to the Malaysian Work and Social Environment While Preserving Self-Identity and Nationalism

Further data analysis indicated that Indonesian migrant workers applied a range of nuanced, dynamic, and adaptive intercultural communication strategies. These approaches served not only to facilitate social and professional interaction in the host society but also to preserve self-identity and express a continuing sense of national pride in the home society.

4.4.1 Language Adaptation as a Bridge across Cultures

Mastery of the local language, particularly Malaysian Malay and its regional accents, was identified as a key strategy for success. More than a practical communication tool, language proficiency is viewed as a gesture of respect and a means of building cultural understanding. Respondents such as Informants 9 and 10 explicitly mentioned that speaking with a local accent helped them gain social acceptance and avoid being perceived as outsiders in the community. This reflects an integrative approach to acculturation, balancing the retention of the original culture with openness to the host culture.

4.4.2 Adapting to Local Work Norms and Ethics

Most respondents, including Informants 2, 4, and 7, underscored the importance of aligning with the prevailing Malaysian work culture, which emphasises punctuality, diligence, and structural discipline. Adaptation extends beyond language or symbolic gestures to encompass professional conduct. However, they were careful to clarify that this did not entail abandoning their cultural values but rather harmonising them with the expectations of the host society.

4.4.3 Respecting Local Culture without Losing One's Own

Most informants demonstrated an intentional effort to show respect for the local customs and traditions. Informant 3, for example, highlighted the importance of respecting local religious and social norms as part of inclusive communication. However, this cultural respect was neither total nor uncritical; it was exercised selectively in ways that allowed for the continued practice of Indonesian cultural values. This is reflected in their polite demeanour, sociable attitude, and respectful engagement with the host community, while upholding core Indonesian principles such as family, faith, and solidarity.

4.4.4 Sustaining Cultural and National Identity through Symbols and Cultural Practices

The informants actively maintained their cultural identity through national symbols such as the Indonesian national flag, national anthem, and traditional garments. Informants 5, 6, and 7 emphasised that, despite being far from home, these symbols served as emotional anchors for them. Cultural celebrations, such as Indonesian Independence Day, also provide opportunities to reinforce national consciousness. This underscores that cultural identity is not static but is actively performed and collectively reaffirmed through symbolic and ritualistic practices within the migrant community.

4.4.5 Communities as Strategic Spaces for Cultural Exchange and Social Support

Migrant organisations such as PERMAI play a pivotal role in fostering social cohesion and sustaining a sense of nationalism. Respondents, such as Informants 8 and 13, noted that these communities offered spaces for solidarity, advocacy, and cultural preservation. PERMAI also provides practical support, such as legal assistance and education for migrant children, while serving as a venue for cultural dialogue among diverse identities within the Indonesian diaspora.

4.4.6 Solidarity among Migrants as an Extension of Collective Identity

Strong interpersonal bonds among Indonesian workers serve as emotional and cultural safety nets. Practices such as sharing experiences, mutual support, and social gatherings created a sense of a “second home.” Informants 1, 2, and 4 described these relationships as vital for preserving their cultural roots.

Moreover, this solidarity facilitates the sharing of effective adaptation strategies and reinforces collective resilience.

4.4.7 Religious Values as Foundations of Personal Identity

Several respondents, including Informants 4 and 6, emphasised that maintaining religious principles was integral to preserving their personal identity. While adapting to Malaysia's religiously influenced social norms, they continued to uphold the moral and ethical values associated with their Indonesian religious life. This not only shaped their personal spiritual identity but also contributed to the positive public image of Indonesian workers as principled and orderly individuals.

In summary, the intercultural communication strategies employed by Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia reflect a multi-layered and integrative approach. These include linguistic adaptation, behavioural adjustment, cultural appreciation, and identity preservation through community engagement and symbolic practices. Rather than fully assimilating, most respondents practiced a form of selective integration, absorbing relevant aspects of the host culture while remaining anchored in their cultural heritage.

These strategies revealed that intercultural communication was not merely a technical exercise in message exchange but also involved symbolic resistance, identity negotiation, and expressions of nationalism in the context of migration. Indonesian migrant workers have demonstrated the capacity to maintain cultural equilibrium by adapting to new environments without compromising the integrity of their national and cultural identities.

Informant 13, the PERMAI Secretary General, stated, "At PERMAI, we not only address the rights of Indonesian migrant workers but also organise cultural events, commemorate Indonesian Independence Day, hold discussions on nationalism, and more. These activities are important for sustaining the spirit of love for Indonesia among those living abroad."

5.0 Discussion

This study explored how Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, perceive, maintain, and negotiate their cultural identity and nationalism in a cross-cultural context. Their experiences provide valuable insights into how national identity is shaped, preserved, and challenged in the diaspora.

5.1 Cultural Identity: Dynamic Between Preservation and Adaptation

The stories of the informants in this study revealed that cultural identity is not static but adaptive. Most participants emphasised their deep-rooted connection to their Indonesian identity through cultural symbols, language, and everyday practices. This aligns with Billig's concept of banal nationalism (1995), in which seemingly mundane acts, such as displaying a national flag, cooking traditional food, and speaking the native language, carry powerful symbolic significance. Although these practices may seem ordinary, they collectively serve to maintain emotional and social attachment to the nation (Billig, 1995, as cited in Agung, 2017).

Billig's theory also helps explain why respondents such as Informants 5 and 9 continued to hold on to these symbols even after years abroad. Their attachment to the Indonesian national flag and the Indonesian national anthem exemplifies how everyday practices reinforce national consciousness. These are not merely ritualistic acts; they are performative acts of inclusion.

This is also consistent with Mary Jane Collier's theory of cultural identity, which conceptualises it as a dynamic and communicative process rather than merely a set of attributes. According to Collier (2005), cultural identity is shaped by social interaction and influences an individual's participation in various groups and cultural contexts. Therefore, cultural identity is constructed, maintained, and transformed

through communication. The experiences of Indonesian migrant workers in Penang illustrate this dynamic. Informants who displayed Indonesian symbols, used the Indonesian language, participated in cultural celebrations, and maintained relationships with other Indonesians actively communicated and reinforced their cultural identity. From Collier's perspective, these practices represent the continuous manifestation and affirmation of group identity in communication.

Simultaneously, workers such as Informants 2 and 4 demonstrated that cultural identity was susceptible to transformation, especially under prolonged exposure to a different cultural context. Their increasing alignment with Malaysian values and dialects suggests that national identity is fluid and can evolve with experience. This is consistent with Zhu (2019) and Baker (2022), who argue that intercultural communication is inherently tied to identity negotiation, where adaptation does not necessarily mean assimilation but rather a strategic integration.

5.2 Nationalism: From Symbolic to Pragmatic to Fading

The expressions of nationalism among Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, exhibit clear diversity, moving across symbolic, pragmatic, and even fading dimensions. Some participants, such as Informants 7 and 8, actively expressed their national pride through ritual celebrations and cultural practices. This symbolic nationalism operates on emotional and performative levels, evoking Hereyah's (2018) understanding of nationalism as both ideology and symbolic language. These practices enacted and reaffirmed identity in a foreign space.

Others, such as Informants 3 and 4, represented nationalism through professional behaviour, which this study identifies as pragmatic nationalism. This aligns with Noor's (2007) view of nationalism as being rooted in ethical conduct, justice, and shared responsibility (as cited in Agung, 2017). For these workers, nationalism was not loudly expressed but quietly embodied in work ethic, discipline, and conduct, thereby reframing patriotism as dignity through professionalisation.

However, as the experiences of Informants 2 and 4 show, nationalism can also weaken over time, particularly under emotional strain, social isolation, or a lack of institutional support. This "fading nationalism" reflects the fragile nature of national identity in the diaspora, particularly in the absence of reinforcing mechanisms such as the media. Hasan et al. (2024) warned of such a national identity crisis, in which prolonged detachment from homeland values can diminish the sense of belonging. Without strategies to counter this erosion, such as civic education or cultural engagement, there is a risk of national detachment, especially among younger and more assimilated generations.

5.3 Balancing Two New Cultures

The ability of the Indonesian migrant workers who participated in this study to balance two cultural identities reflects not only intercultural competence at a functional level but also a reflexive and strategic communication perspective. In intercultural communication, competence is not simply about adapting behaviour; it also involves the capacity to interpret, negotiate, and selectively internalise cultural meanings. As Romano (2008) argues, intercultural encounters require individuals to continuously negotiate differing value systems. In this research, such negotiation is evident in how the Indonesian migrant workers who participated in this study adopted Malaysian workplace norms, not as a form of passive assimilation but as a context-sensitive adaptation that enhanced their social and economic positioning within the Malaysian society.

Importantly, this negotiation did not result in a cultural loss. Instead, it produced what can be understood as a hybrid identity, in which elements of both Indonesian and Malaysian cultures were selectively combined. This supports Bhabha's (2012) argument that intercultural interaction can generate new cultural formations rather than simply replacing one identity with another. In this sense, hybridity became a resource, enabling Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia to move fluidly between cultural contexts while maintaining a coherent sense of self.

The findings further deepen the concept of selective integration by showing that adoption is intentional and bounded. The Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, who were interviewed in this study did not indiscriminately absorb host country values; instead, they filtered and prioritised practices that were compatible with their existing beliefs and identities. This selective process reflects a form of cultural agency in which individuals actively determine the terms of their integration into the host society. Within this framework, nationalism emerges not as a rigid ideology but as a lived and emotionally grounded attachment to the nation. This is consistent with Smith's (2002) view of nationalism as a set of moral and emotional commitments.

These commitments were not sustained in isolation but were socially reproduced through collective practices, particularly within migrant communities, such as PERMAI. Such communities functioned as what can be conceptualised as intercultural anchor spaces, or sites where shared languages, symbols, and cultural rituals were reaffirmed. Through activities such as cultural celebrations, religious gatherings, and mutual aid, these spaces enabled the Indonesian migrant workers who participated in this study to rearticulate their national identity in a foreign context, transforming nationalism into an everyday practice rather than an abstract concept.

The account of Informant 13 highlights the centrality of social networks in sustaining a collective identity. These networks facilitated not only emotional support but also the circulation of cultural knowledge, norms and values. In this regard, migrant communities act as mediating structures between the individual and the nation, ensuring that national identity remains salient despite geographic displacement. From the perspective of Anthony D. Smith (2002), this can be interpreted as "grassroots nationalism", in which national belonging is continuously reproduced through routine interaction, shared experiences, and collective memory.

Moreover, these findings suggest that nationalism among Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia is dynamic and context dependent. Rather than weakening in a transnational setting, national identity may become more pronounced as individuals seek stability and meaning in an unfamiliar environment. This indicates that intercultural communication does not dilute nationalism; instead, it can intensify and reshape it, embedding it within everyday communication practices and social relationships.

5.4 Sociocultural Factors in Identity Formation

The research revealed that sociocultural influences, such as religion, community solidarity, discrimination, family, and education, were foundational in shaping cultural identity and nationalism. For example, religious values cited by respondents such as Informants 4 and 6 provided a moral anchor for navigating cross-cultural life, reinforcing national identity through spiritual consistency.

Discrimination also plays a paradoxical role. As Informant 1's experiences suggest, feeling "othered" in the workplace can strengthen group identity among Indonesian workers. This aligns with the idea of nationalism as a social movement responding to exclusion (Hereyah, 2018), fostering solidarity and pride as a counterforce.

Family and education have been repeatedly highlighted as core cultural transmission mechanisms. According to Hasan et al. (2024), efforts such as civic education are crucial for preserving the national identity of the younger generation. These findings confirm that familial and educational values serve as internalised codes, guiding behaviour and fostering a sense of cultural continuity.

5.5 Overcoming Intercultural Communication Barriers

Linguistic differences, particularly in accent and vocabulary, were the primary obstacles, even between two linguistically related nations. This finding highlights that language is not merely a system of words but also a carrier of cultural meaning, social norms and identity markers. Subtle variations in

pronunciation and usage can signal belonging or difference, potentially affecting how the Indonesian migrant workers who participated in this study were perceived in their everyday interactions. This supports the view that language is deeply embedded in cultural context, while meaning is shaped not only by lexical content, but also by social and cultural cues. In this sense, Koesomowidjojo (2020) rightly emphasises that intercultural communication goes beyond message exchange and involves negotiating identities, interpretations, and shared meanings.

To cope with these challenges, the Indonesian migrant workers in Penang, Malaysia, who participated in this study employed strategies such as immersive learning and participation in informal community-based training programs. These practices reflect both instrumental adaptation for workplace effectiveness and symbolic alignment with the host culture, indicating an effort to gain social acceptance while maintaining communicative competence. This is consistent with Baker (2022), who views language as both a cultural bridge and identity marker in cultural interaction.

Beyond language, differences in workplace values require broader behavioural adjustments. Informants 2 and 9 demonstrated that successful integration depended on developing cultural awareness, especially regarding local workplace norms and expectations. This is consistent with Ting-Toomey's (2010) view that cultural value systems shape individuals' communication patterns and interpersonal interactions across cultures.

In terms of theoretical implications, this study offers context-specific support for intercultural communication by showing that intercultural competence involves strategic negotiation and selective integration, leading to hybrid identities rather than simple adaptation. In terms of practical implications, the findings highlight the importance of migrant community networks, such as PERMAI, in sustaining identity and well-being. Relevant government institutions, such as the Ministry of Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection (*Kementerian Perlindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia*), should support these communities and promote intercultural communication training programs. Employers should foster inclusive and culturally aware work environments.

6.0 Conclusion

Within intercultural contexts, the Indonesian migrant workers in this study demonstrated an ability to negotiate their identities, enabling them to live in new cultural spaces while maintaining their national roots. Their self-identity and spirit of nationalism were forged through the interaction between their native cultural values and the demands of a new cultural environment in the United States. From an intercultural communication perspective, they were not merely economic agents but also cultural actors who actively shaped their identities in transnational spaces. The most common intercultural communication barriers they encountered were concentrated in two main dimensions: language or dialect differences and discrepancies in sociocultural values, especially within workplace settings. In confronting the social and occupational realities in Malaysia, they exhibited adaptive intercultural communication skills that remained firmly grounded in their national identity.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author Contribution Statement

AA: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – Original Draft Preparation. PBS: Project Administration, Writing – Review & Editing AAA: Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing; IZA: Supervision & Review.

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This research consisted of field data collection from human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the audio-recorded interviews began. To maintain participant confidentiality, all interview data was anonymized during transcription and analysis.

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