

Social Adjustment of First-Year Students from East Nusa Tenggara in Surabaya: A Study of Adaptation in the Academic Environment

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Abstract

Student mobility to major cities requires a high level of social adjustment, particularly for first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) who pursue higher education in Surabaya. Differences in culture, language, and patterns of social interaction often generate psychosocial challenges during the early phase of university life. This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the social adjustment experiences of first-year students from NTT within a multicultural academic environment in Surabaya. This study employs a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. The participants consisted of four students from NTT selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation, and were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings indicate that students gradually shift from avoidance strategies to more adaptive coping strategies through social relationships and peer support. This process strengthens social adjustment and enhances students' psychological well-being.

Keywords : Social Adjustment, NTT Students, Stress Coping, Phenomenology

Abstrak

Mobilitas mahasiswa ke kota besar menuntut tingkat penyesuaian sosial yang tinggi, khususnya bagi mahasiswa tahun pertama asal Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) yang menempuh pendidikan tinggi di Surabaya. Perbedaan budaya, bahasa, dan pola interaksi sosial sering kali menimbulkan tantangan psikososial pada fase awal kehidupan perkuliahan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memperoleh pemahaman mendalam mengenai pengalaman penyesuaian sosial mahasiswa tahun pertama asal NTT dalam lingkungan akademik multikultural di Surabaya. Penelitian menggunakan desain kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologis. Partisipan terdiri dari empat mahasiswa asal NTT yang dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi nonpartisipan, dan dokumentasi, serta dianalisis menggunakan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa secara bertahap beralih dari strategi penghindaran menuju strategi coping yang lebih adaptif melalui hubungan sosial dan dukungan teman sebaya. Proses ini memperkuat penyesuaian sosial serta meningkatkan kesejahteraan psikologis mahasiswa.

Kata kunci : Penyesuaian Sosial, Mahasiswa NTT, Coping Stres, Fenomenologi.

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Introduction

Strengthening innovation in the delivery of high-quality education for university students constitutes one of the primary objectives of higher education development and plays a strategic role in supporting national development. (Li, 2018) Through education, individuals not only acquire academic knowledge and skills but also develop values, attitudes, and critical thinking abilities essential for effective participation in society. (Al et al., 2021). Within the context of sustainable development, the function of education is no longer confined to the transmission of conventional knowledge; rather, it has evolved into a means of fostering critical thinking capacities, strengthening innovation, and enhancing learners' social engagement. (Jacobs, 2023) Therefore, education cannot be understood merely as a process of knowledge transmission; rather, it constitutes a holistic process that supports the sustainable intellectual, social, and emotional development of learners.

The development of higher education in Indonesia has expanded access for students from diverse regions to pursue their studies in major cities, including Surabaya. This academic mobility reflects the progress of the national education system in becoming increasingly inclusive and adaptive to diverse social, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. The presence of students from various regions enriches academic dynamics, broadens the exchange of perspectives, and fosters the creation of a multicultural campus environment that requires sustained social adaptation and cross-cultural interaction competencies. (Amrullah, 2025)

One group of students who frequently migrate to pursue higher education in major cities comprises those originating from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT). They arrive with strong motivation to acquire knowledge, broaden their horizons, and carry aspirations to contribute to the development of their home regions. (Anugrahani et al., 2025) However, relocating to major cities is not merely an academic journey but also a social and psychological transition that demands the ability to adapt to new environments differing in culture, language, and social values. In this context, students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) encounter particularly complex situations, as they are required to adjust to a majority culture that differs from their own cultural backgrounds.

Social and psychological adaptation gaps are often experienced by students when entering campus environments in major cities. Differences in culture, communication styles, social values, and academic demands frequently pose challenges in the adjustment process. These conditions may trigger the emergence of social stereotypes, feelings of inferiority, and low self-confidence. (Anugrahani et al., 2025)

Not all students are able to adapt quickly, as the adjustment process is strongly influenced by both internal and external factors. Consequently, some students are at risk of experiencing acculturative stress or culture shock, which may adversely affect their psychological well-being and social interactions. (Aliyyah, 2025) The process of self-esteem formation constitutes a crucial factor in determining students' success in coping with these challenges.

Based on field observations of first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara within Surabaya's multicultural campus environment, the process of social adjustment appears to unfold gradually and is shaped by everyday interactions.

During the initial phase of university life, some students tend to withdraw socially, speak softly, and interact more frequently with peers who share similar cultural backgrounds. Differences in language, accent, and communication styles often trigger feelings of awkwardness and inferiority. However, as the frequency of engagement increases through academic activities, group discussions, and organizational involvement, students begin to demonstrate greater openness in their interactions.

Student A stated, "At first, I felt awkward interacting because of differences in speech accent, so I tended to remain silent and socialize more with friends from the same region." Meanwhile, Student B expressed, "I felt less confident speaking in class because I was afraid of making mistakes, so I avoided conversations with new peers." These experiences indicate difficulties in social adjustment during the initial phase of university life. These findings are consistent with field observations showing that students tend to withdraw socially, limit interactions, and prefer social environments perceived as safe and familiar.

Based on previous studies, research on the social adjustment of migrant students from eastern regions of Indonesia has been conducted; however, it remains largely general in nature and has not yet sufficiently explored students' subjective experiences in depth. (Andani, 2017) and (Mufidah & Fadilah, 2022) Such studies have predominantly focused on the phenomena of culture shock, as well as linguistic adaptation and adjustment to new environments. (Elsa Hutabarat, 2009) Meanwhile, other research has concentrated on the coping strategies of Batak students in Surabaya rather than on the dynamics of social adjustment itself. (Prastiwi & Imanti, 2022) First-year students demonstrate personal responsibility, effective emotion regulation, positive social adjustment through interpersonal relationships and organizational involvement, as well as continuity in their studies supported by family. (Kristina et al., 2019). Emotional maturity contributes significantly, accounting for 42.7% of the variance in social adjustment among first-year accounting students.

Accordingly, the novelty of this study lies in its analytical focus on specifically examining the social adjustment of first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) in Surabaya during the initial transition phase of university life, which represents a critical period in the formation of social identity. Although previous studies have explored the adaptation of migrant students, these investigations tend to be general in nature, primarily focusing on the phenomenon of culture shock and offering limited attention to individuals' subjective experiences within cross-cultural contexts. Furthermore, the approaches commonly employed have not sufficiently explored the meaning of students' lived experiences in the process of social adjustment. To date, no study has explicitly examined students from NTT using a phenomenological approach within an urban academic environment. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by providing a more contextual, in-depth, and experience-based understanding.

When facing adjustment difficulties, individuals essentially strive to find ways to manage and cope with the pressures they experience. (Lazarus, 1976) It explains that stress management can be carried out through several strategies, such as avoiding the source of the problem (avoidance), reappraising the situation from a more positive perspective (distancing), regulating emotions and behavior

(self-control), and taking direct action to confront stressors (active coping). Based on this framework, the present study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the adjustment experiences of students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) pursuing their studies in Surabaya within the academic environment.

This study provides a theoretical contribution to the development of social psychology and educational psychology, particularly concerning the social adjustment of first-year students in multicultural academic environments. The findings enrich the understanding of the social adaptation processes experienced by students from East Nusa Tenggara in Surabaya, including emotional dynamics, the formation of social identity, and the role of social support and interpersonal relationships in the adjustment process. Furthermore, this study also extends the application of theory (Lazarus, 1976) including avoidance, distancing, self-control, and active coping. This theory is expanded to explain how migrant students utilize interpersonal communication as a coping resource in the face of cross-cultural adaptation pressures.

Practically, the findings of this study can be utilized by higher education institutions as a foundation for designing more inclusive and culturally sensitive policies and support programs for first-year students. The results may serve as a reference for developing orientation programs, peer mentoring, counseling services, and community-strengthening activities, enabling students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) to achieve better and more sustainable social and academic adaptation.

This study is important because the transition process of first-year students from their home environments to multicultural academic contexts is often overlooked, despite its crucial role in shaping identity development, social relationships, and academic continuity. Students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) face cultural, linguistic, and social challenges that may hinder their adaptation. By examining social adjustment experiences phenomenologically, this research provides the contextual understanding necessary to strengthen student support policies, prevent psychosocial problems, and foster a fair and inclusive campus climate.

Research methods

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach (Nasir et al., 2023). This approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) in the process of social adjustment in Surabaya. Phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of human experience through processes such as epoche, phenomenological reduction, and textural-structural description. Through this approach, the researcher is able to explore deeper meanings related to adaptation experiences, social interactions, and psychological dynamics directly from the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2013).

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, as the study required informants who had direct and relevant experiences with the social adjustment process of NTT students in Surabaya (Creswell, 2013). The study involved four informants who are active university students from East Nusa Tenggara currently studying in Surabaya. The number of participants was determined based on the

principle of data saturation, meaning that the data obtained had shown recurring patterns and no new significant themes emerged. These four informants were chosen because they have direct experience as migrant students in a multicultural academic and social environment.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and document analysis (Smith et al., 2021). The interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to explore participants' personal meanings flexibly. Non-participant observation was conducted to understand the natural context of social interactions within the campus environment, while document analysis served as supporting data to enrich the research findings.

During the research process, the researcher applied epoche by bracketing personal assumptions and biases through continuous self-reflection, ensuring that interpretations remained focused on participants' lived experiences. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Alase, 2017). The analysis stages included repeated reading of interview transcripts, initial coding, identification of emergent themes, clustering of themes into broader categories, and in-depth interpretation of participants' experiences.

Data validity was ensured through prolonged engagement in the field, triangulation of sources and techniques, and member checking to confirm findings with participants. These procedures aimed to ensure the credibility, consistency, and reliability of the findings while minimizing potential interpretative bias (Soendari, 2012).

Results

The research findings indicate that the adaptation process is dynamic and context-dependent, influenced by diverse social and cultural experiences. Participants gradually developed various ways of responding to adaptive pressures, depending on the situations they encountered.

The social adjustment process of first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) is understood through the subjective experiences shared by the four informants. In the initial stage, the informants described a sense of insecurity in social interactions influenced by cultural differences. Informant 1 stated, "At the beginning of my studies, I felt insecure because my accent is different, so I remained silent more often and observed the environment." Informant 2 also revealed, "I felt anxious when I had to speak in class, fearing I might make a mistake, so I preferred to avoid conversations with new friends." This phase indicates an initial response in the form of withdrawal as a means of psychological protection when facing a new environment.

In the subsequent stage, participants began to interpret their adaptation experiences more positively as part of a learning process. Informant 3 conveyed, "It was difficult at first, but over time I viewed this as a learning process to be able to adjust." Meanwhile, Informant 4 added, "I tried to regulate my feelings, withhold my awkwardness, and adjust my way of speaking so that I could be accepted without having to lose my true identity." This stage reflects development in

emotional regulation capacities and a shift in perspective toward cross-cultural experiences.

Table 1. Emerging Themes of Social Adjustment Experiences

Theory Indicators	Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4
A sense of insecurity in initial interactions	Limiting social interactions and being more alone at the beginning of college	Avoiding speaking in class due to anxiety	Avoiding cross-cultural social situations that feel stressful	Choosing to be silent and withdrawn when feeling insecure
Interpreting adaptation as a learning process	Start to see difficulties as a learning process	Assess adaptation experiences more positively	Consider challenges as part of self-maturation	Reduce stress by looking at problems more rationally
Managing emotions in social interactions	Holding back feelings of inferiority in social interactions	Controlling anxiety when dealing with new environments	Adapting attitudes without losing cultural identity	Controlling emotional expression to remain socially acceptable
Efforts to build social relations	Start building social relationships gradually	Joining student organizations to expand your network	Seeking peer support	Improve communication skills and social engagement

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Furthermore, the informants demonstrated active efforts in building social relationships within the campus environment. Informant 1 stated, "Now I am starting to have the courage to greet others first, even if it is still gradual." Informant 2 expressed, "I have started trying to be active during class discussions." Informant 3 said, "I share stories with friends more often to feel more comfortable." Meanwhile, Informant 4 added, "I participate in campus activities so that I can get to know more people." These findings indicate that the adaptation

process develops gradually through increasingly open social interactions, supported by the ability to manage emotions and build broader interpersonal relationships.

Discussion

Based on the research findings, avoidance strategies emerged as an initial form of adjustment adopted by first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) when they first entered the academic environment in Surabaya. During this transitional phase, informants tended to limit social interactions, avoid situations that triggered anxiety, and prefer solitude. Such behaviors should not be interpreted as an inability to adapt, but rather as temporary self-protective mechanisms. From the perspective of theory, (Lazarus, 1976) Avoidance constitutes a common and reasonable strategy when individuals perceive stressors as overwhelming and their emotional capacity as not yet fully prepared to cope with them.

This strategy provides individuals with space to stabilize their emotions, observe the new environment, and reduce psychological pressure arising from differences in culture, language, and patterns of social interaction. However, if prolonged without being accompanied by other coping strategies, avoidance may hinder the process of social adjustment. Therefore, these findings indicate that avoidance functions as a temporary and contextual initial stage of adaptation in the adjustment trajectory of migrant students. (Handriani, 2019) These findings support the present study, particularly regarding the process of developing a sense of belonging through social communication. The study indicates that greater cultural differences are associated with higher potential adaptation challenges. However, through sustained interactions, community support, and spaces for sharing experiences, students gradually build self-acceptance and social connections, transforming feelings of alienation into a sense of belonging within the new environment. While the findings strengthen the research, a significant positive relationship was found, indicating that higher friendship quality is associated with greater psychological well-being among students (Salsabila et al., 2024).

Based on the research findings, distancing strategies emerged after students progressed beyond the initial anxiety-laden phase of adaptation. This strategy was reflected in the participants' ability to cognitively reappraise challenging experiences in a more positive and rational manner. Situations that were initially perceived as threatening gradually came to be understood as integral components of the learning process and personal development as migrant students. Within the coping theory framework proposed by Lazarus (1976), distancing functions as an emotion-focused coping strategy that reduces psychological distress by modifying individuals' perceptions of stressors rather than directly addressing or eliminating them. These findings suggest that students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) no longer concentrated on feelings of alienation; instead, they increasingly accepted the demands of the new environment as normative challenges associated with the adaptation process. This cognitive process helps reduce anxiety, enhance self-acceptance, and strengthen self-confidence in fulfilling their roles as university students. Distancing thus serves as a critical bridge from passive strategies toward more adaptive forms of adjustment. By positively reframing their experiences, the informants were able to develop psychological resilience and readiness to engage

more openly in social interactions within a multicultural campus environment. Study (Sholichatun, 2014) The findings indicate that positive psychology-based self-help methods are effective in enhancing students' competence and academic readiness.

Based on the research findings, distancing strategies emerged as a subsequent form of adjustment after students were able to move beyond the initial, pressure-laden phase of adaptation. This strategy was characterized by a shift in the informants' cognitive appraisal of the difficult experiences they encountered within academic and social environments. Challenges that were previously perceived as emotional burdens gradually came to be interpreted as learning processes and integral parts of the journey toward becoming independent university students. From a theoretical perspective (Lazarus, 1976) Distancing functions as a cognitive coping strategy to reduce stress by creating psychological distance from stressors through more positive reappraisal.

These findings indicate that students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) begin to develop reflective capacities in understanding themselves and their environments. By reframing their perspectives, psychological pressures such as anxiety, feelings of inferiority, and a sense of alienation are significantly reduced. This process also strengthens self-acceptance and helps informants adjust their expectations to the realities of a multicultural campus life. Distancing plays a crucial role as a transitional stage from defensive adjustment strategies toward more adaptive ones. Through the reappraisal of experiences, informants are able to build psychological resilience, strengthen their self-identity, and prepare themselves to establish healthier and more open social relationships. Research (Soesanto, 2025) Previous research has emphasized that culturally grounded self-identity strengthens adaptation, resilience, moral development, and the capacity to build positive social relationships.

Based on the research findings, active coping emerged as a more mature stage of adjustment after the informants were able to manage emotional pressures internally. Active coping is characterized by conscious and concrete efforts to confront stressors rather than avoid them. In the context of first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) in Surabaya, this strategy was evident in their willingness to actively build social relationships, engage in student organizations, and seek support from peers. According to (Lazarus, 1976) Active coping is considered the most adaptive form of stress management because individuals actively attempt to modify situations that generate stress.

The findings indicate that the informants developed more stable self-confidence and greater psychosocial readiness to interact within a multicultural campus environment. Engagement in organizational activities and social interactions provided tangible learning opportunities to develop communication skills, empathy, and collaboration. Moreover, peer support played a crucial role as a source of emotional strength that helped the informants feel accepted and valued. Active coping not only strengthened social adjustment but also contributed to the formation of a more positive self-identity and a stronger sense of belonging to the academic environment. Accordingly, active coping serves as a key indicator of successful social adaptation among first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) in Surabaya. (Qonitah, 2025) The findings indicate that adolescents'

expressions of self-regulation encompass emotional, social, and academic dimensions. Several factors including family support, peer relationships, emotional intelligence, and the influence of social media contribute significantly to the development of self-regulation strategies. That social support has a crucial role in improving psychological well-being and provides practical implications for institutions, particularly universities, to develop and strengthen support systems in security work environments. (Khakim & Azis, 2025).

During the initial phase of university life, first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) generally employed avoidance strategies by limiting social interactions as a form of self-protection from the pressures of a new and unfamiliar environment. This tendency to withdraw was influenced by anxiety, feelings of being different, and uncertainty in interacting within a multicultural campus culture. Over time, students began to adopt distancing strategies, reappraising their adaptation experiences more positively and viewing the challenges they encountered as part of a learning process and personal maturation as university students.

Subsequently, self-control strategies became evident in students' ability to manage emotions, regulate anxiety, and adjust their attitudes in social interactions without relinquishing their cultural identity. At a more advanced stage, active coping strategies emerged, characterized by proactive efforts to build social relationships, seek support from peers, and enhance communication skills. These strategies play a crucial role in strengthening social adjustment and fostering a sense of acceptance within the campus environment

it can be asserted that the research findings consistently support the importance of adaptive coping strategies. (Izzah, 2025) They emphasize the effectiveness of combining problem-focused and emotion-focused coping in facilitating optimal adaptation among working migrant students. These findings are consistent with (Malkoç & Yalçın, 2015) The mediation analysis revealed that social support and problem-solving skills partially mediate the relationship between resilience and psychological well-being. Meanwhile, (Lo, 2002) Students manage stress by employing coping strategies oriented toward both problem solving and emotion regulation. Therefore, a re-evaluation of the nursing curriculum is necessary, along with an assessment of its impact on students' stress levels, accompanied by the introduction of various strategic interventions aimed at reducing stress among nursing students.

The theoretical implications of this study enrich our understanding of social adaptation as a dynamic, gradual, and contextual process, particularly in a cross-cultural context. These findings suggest that adaptation does not occur instantaneously, but rather through a series of experiences that begin with a sense of insecurity, progress to the reinterpretation of those experiences, and culminate in more adaptive social engagement. Thus, the concept of social adjustment is no longer understood merely as an end result (outcome), but as a psychological process that develops through the interaction between emotional regulation and social experience. Furthermore, this study expands adjustment theory by emphasizing that interpersonal factors, such as communication and social support, serve as key mechanisms in shaping the success of individual adaptation in multicultural environments.

The practical implications of this research emphasize the crucial role of universities in providing adaptation support programs for students living away from home, such as peer mentoring and counseling services. Furthermore, campus environments need to foster inclusive social interactions so students can develop self-confidence, manage their emotions, and adapt optimally.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study indicates that the social adjustment process of first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) is dynamic, gradual, and contextual, beginning with a sense of insecurity in social interactions, progressing through the reinterpretation of experiences as a learning process, and ultimately leading to more adaptive social engagement. These findings enrich the literature on social adjustment by emphasizing that adaptation is not merely an end result but a psychological process involving the interaction between emotional regulation and social experience. Furthermore, this study contributes to the context of Eastern Indonesian students by highlighting the significant role of interpersonal communication and social support as key mechanisms in shaping successful adaptation within multicultural environments.

Practically, these findings have important implications for higher education policy development, particularly in creating inclusive and supportive campus environments. Universities are encouraged to design systematic adaptation programs, such as peer mentoring, culturally sensitive counseling services, and activities that promote cross-cultural interaction. Institutional policies should also focus on strengthening social support systems and enhancing cultural sensitivity among academic communities. Therefore, this study can serve as a foundation for developing strategies that not only improve the psychological well-being of migrant students but also support their academic success and sustainable social integration.

Recommendations

Based on the study's conclusions, higher education institutions are recommended to develop social adaptation support programs for first-year students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), such as mentoring initiatives, intercultural communication training, and psychosocial counseling services. This institutional support is crucial in helping students navigate the early stages of adjustment, which are particularly vulnerable to stress. In addition, student organizations are expected to function as inclusive and safe spaces through cross-cultural interaction activities and peer support, enabling students to transition from avoidance strategies toward more active forms of adjustment.

Future research is recommended to employ mixed-method approaches so that qualitative findings can be strengthened by measurable quantitative data. Comparative cross-regional studies and longitudinal research are also important to gain a broader and more sustainable understanding of the dynamics of social adjustment among migrant students.

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