

Students' Perceptions of National Identity at a University While Studying Abroad

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe how Indonesian students interpret their national identity while also introducing Indonesian culture during their studies abroad. The study is motivated by the phenomenon that cross-cultural experiences can strengthen, change, or challenge students' understanding of their Indonesian identity. The method used is descriptive qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. The study involved five students from a university participating in student exchange and international internship programs in South Korea, Germany, and Thailand. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive model. The results indicate that national identity is shaped through reflection, social interaction, and cultural exposure in daily life. The students promoted Indonesian culture through moral values, good manners, and professionalism to counter negative stereotypes; by consistently upholding their principles amid cultural differences; and by introducing the Indonesian language, batik, and cuisine. International experiences were found to strengthen national identity through cultural diplomacy, moral awareness, and a sense of responsibility as representatives of the nation.

ABSTRAK

Persepsi Mahasiswa terhadap Identitas Nasional selama Menempuh Studi di Perguruan Tinggi di Luar Negeri. Penelitian ini bertujuan mendeskripsikan bagaimana mahasiswa Indonesia memaknai identitas kebangsaan sekaligus memperkenalkan budaya Indonesia selama menjalani studi di luar negeri. Penelitian dilatarbelakangi oleh fenomena bahwa pengalaman lintas budaya dapat memperkuat, mengubah, atau menantang pemahaman mahasiswa tentang jati diri keindonesiaannya. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan fenomenologis. Penelitian melibatkan lima mahasiswa dari sebuah perguruan tinggi yang mengikuti program pertukaran pelajar dan praktik internasional di Korea Selatan, Jerman, dan Thailand. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dan dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles dan Huberman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa identitas kebangsaan terbentuk melalui refleksi, interaksi sosial, dan pengenalan budaya dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Mahasiswa memperkenalkan budaya Indonesia melalui nilai moral, sopan santun, profesionalisme dalam meluruskan stereotip negatif, konsistensi menjaga prinsip di tengah perbedaan budaya, serta pengenalan bahasa, batik, dan kuliner. Pengalaman internasional terbukti memperkuat identitas kebangsaan melalui diplomasi budaya, kesadaran moral, dan tanggung jawab sebagai representasi bangsa.

Kata-kata kunci:

Budaya Indonesia;
fenomenologi;
identitas kebangsaan;
mahasiswa;
studi luar negeri.

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Introduction

In the social sciences, understanding national identity is always linked to two important dimensions: the empirical realities individuals face in their daily lives and the ideal values that serve as moral and normative benchmarks for the nation. These two dimensions are often at odds with one another. On the one hand, real-world conditions reveal how individuals interact, adapt, and shape their identity orientations within a global context. On the other hand, there are value-based expectations that national identity must remain a guide for behavior and a unifying force for society, even amid an increasingly dynamic cultural environment. This tension between social reality and ideal values has been extensively discussed by social thinkers (Aulia et al., 2025) and serves as a crucial foundation for understanding the national identity of Indonesian students pursuing education abroad.

Globalization has become a phenomenon that not only influences economic and political dynamics but also shapes the way people construct and understand their sense of self. The rapid flow of information, increasingly sophisticated technological developments, cross-border human mobility, and intensifying cultural interactions have blurred social, cultural, and geographical boundaries (Radu, 2022). In the context of education, globalization offers immense opportunities for students to access global education systems, expand their international networks, and gain cross-cultural experiences that were previously difficult to attain (Nahouli, 2023). However, behind these opportunities lie serious challenges that cannot be ignored. The influx of global cultural values, the unstoppable flow of information, and the influence of digital media can gradually affect national identity and potentially weaken a sense of nationalism (Rahmi et al., 2024). These challenges become even more complex when students must adapt to new social environments that demand openness, flexibility, and cross-cultural understanding.

In reality, Indonesian students studying abroad often face social and cultural pressures that require them to adapt to new norms, lifestyles, and value systems. Such adaptation is essential for them to be accepted into multicultural academic and social environments. However, this process often leaves their national identity vulnerable. Some students may experience a shift in cultural preferences, a change in their way of thinking, or even a tendency to identify themselves as part of a global community rather than a national one. This situation highlights the gap between the empirical experiences they face and the ideal national values that should remain the foundation of their identity as Indonesian citizens.

At the normative level, national values continue to play a crucial role in shaping the younger generation's identity. National identity serves as a unifying force that maintains social cohesion, especially in a diverse country like Indonesia, which is characterized by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity (Candra et al., 2020). National diversity demands a collective awareness of values such as unity, diversity, and pride in national symbols. National identity is also viewed as a bulwark capable of protecting society from the penetration of a homogenizing global culture, which has the potential to erode local values (Andriani et al., 2023; Mulyadi et al., 2025). It is in this context that the younger generation, especially college students, faces a dual challenge: becoming individuals capable of participating in global trends without losing their national cultural roots, which are an essential part of their identity.

The role of students as an educated group and agents of change makes their position all the more strategic. In a global context, they often find themselves at the intersection of local and global values. Intensive interaction with foreign cultures can enrich perspectives and broaden intellectual horizons, yet it can also create tension between national and cosmopolitan values (Reimers, 2020). Several studies indicate that some students tend to emphasize a global identity in international interactions, primarily because such an identity is perceived as more relevant or more readily accepted within the global community. Normatively, however, character and citizenship education require students to uphold the fundamental principles of national life, such as Pancasila, the value of diversity, and a sense of responsibility as citizens (Khoirina et al., 2022). This alignment between real-world experiences and ideal values is the primary challenge in shaping national identity in the global era.

In the realm of higher education, institutions play a crucial role in balancing global demands and national values. Citizenship education serves as an instrument that not only imparts basic knowledge about the nation but also helps students internalize the moral, ethical, and national values they must possess (Umar, 2025). Higher education institutions foster a new generation of young people who possess strong character, academic excellence, and global competitiveness, while still maintaining a love for their homeland and a commitment to national values. These efforts are realized through the curriculum, character-building programs, and various student activities that emphasize the importance of integrity, nationalism, and social responsibility (Zulfikar et al., 2020).

Theoretically, this study is grounded in several key conceptual frameworks. First, National Identity Theory developed by Smith (1991) and Tajfel & Turner (1979) through Social Identity Theory explains how individuals construct a sense of belonging to a national group through social categorization, identification, and intergroup comparison. Second, the concept of Global Citizenship developed by Gaitán-Aguilar et al. (2024) underscores the importance of cross-cultural competence without abandoning the roots of local identity. Third, Cosmopolitanism, as viewed by Yemini et al. (2024), asserts that national loyalty and global openness are not a dichotomy but rather complementary dimensions. Fourth, Civic Identity and Citizenship Education, as conceptualized by Jerome et al. (2024), emphasize that active citizenship involves moral responsibility, social participation, and justice. Fifth, Cultural Diplomacy serves as a strategy for introducing national values through cross-national cultural exchange (Grincheva, 2024). Taken together, this conceptual framework forms the analytical foundation of this study as it examines how Indonesian students interpret and actualize their national identity in an international context.

Based on these considerations, this study seeks to examine in greater depth how Indonesian students interpret their national identity amid the currents of globalization. This study focuses on three main aspects. First, it describes how students understand national identity within an increasingly dynamic global context. Second, it analyzes the challenges of globalization that shape the construction of this identity, whether through cultural adaptation, social interaction, or expectations within the global environment. Third, it explores the strategies students develop to maintain a balance between openness to global culture and the reinforcement of national values. With this approach, the study is expected to provide not only a theoretical contribution to the study of national identity but also practical insights for

developing higher education policies that foster a strong national character amid the rapid pace of globalization.

Although numerous studies have examined the national identity of students abroad, most prior research has focused on cultural adaptation and acculturation in general, without delving deeply into how the process of constructing that identity unfolds from a personal, reflective phenomenological perspective. Research that specifically examines how students from a single university with diverse international program backgrounds interpret and actualize their national identity through concrete actions in daily life remains very limited. It is this gap that forms the basis of this study's novelty: integrating a phenomenological perspective with the study of cultural diplomacy, civic identity, and social morality within a cohesive analytical framework. Academically, this study is expected to contribute to the development of national identity theory in a global context, while also providing practical input for the development of a civic education curriculum oriented toward fostering the global-local character of Indonesian students.

Methods

This study employs a descriptive, qualitative, phenomenological approach to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences interpreting their national identity while studying abroad. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to capture how students interpret cross-cultural experiences, both personally and collectively. The research subjects consisted of five active students from a university participating in student exchange and international internship programs in South Korea, Germany, and Thailand, selected through purposive sampling (criterion sampling) based on direct experience with international programs relevant to the phenomenon under study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews designed to explore the cognitive, affective, and reflective aspects related to national identity. Data analysis was conducted using an interactive model (Miles et al., 2014), which involves iterative data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions to ensure that the findings represent the students' authentic experiences. In a phenomenological context, this analysis includes the stage of phenomenological reduction (bracketing), the identification of essential themes from each informant, and the collective construction of the meaning of their experiences. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking, so that the researcher's interpretations were verified, consistent with the informants' original perspectives, and scientifically accountable.

The profiles of the five research informants are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Profile of Research Informants

Code	Gender	Age	Study Program	Type of International Program	Host Country and Institution	Duration
NAS	Female	20	Educational Technology (Faculty of Education)	Student Exchange	South Korea (Pukyong National University)	1 Semester (4 Months)

and Psychology)						
YWD	Female	22	German Language Education (Faculty of Languages, Arts, and Culture)	Student Exchange	Germany (Institute of Political Science/Institut für Politikwissenschaft, University of Münster)	1 Semester (4 Months)
HC	Male	20	English Language Education (Faculty of Languages, Arts, and Culture)	Student Exchange	South Korea (Pukyong National University)	1 Semester (4 Months)
ERL	Male	21	Information Technology (Faculty of Engineering)	Student Exchange and Internship	Germany (Duale Hochschule Baden-Württemberg Karlsruhe)	6 Months
NAR	Female	21	English Language Education (Faculty of Languages, Arts, and Culture)	International Community Service Program (PK-KKN)	Thailand (Indonesian School Bangkok, Phetchaburi)	2 Months

Results and Discussion

1. Interpretations of National Identity

Based on interviews with five informants, students' interpretations of national identity while studying abroad vary significantly. Each informant defines it through personal experience, social interaction, and the cultural setting of the host country. However, all agree that national identity remains central in self-reflection during global engagement.

These findings show that national identity is not static but dynamically constructed through ongoing negotiation between internal values and external adaptation. This aligns with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which explains identity as situationally activated through intergroup comparison and self-categorization. For students abroad, interaction with "outgroups" strengthens awareness of the national "ingroup," making identity more salient.

National Identity as a Sense of Pride and Love for the Homeland

Most informants define national identity as pride and love for Indonesia, strengthened through exposure to foreign cultures. NAR, a participant in the International PK-KKN program in Thailand, explains:

“I understand Indonesia’s national identity as that of a nation with many different cultures and languages. After my time in Thailand, I became even prouder because Indonesian culture turned out to be richer and more diverse than Thailand’s.” — NAR.

This reflects increased awareness of cultural diversity through cross-cultural experience. For NAR, national identity becomes both a source of pride and a comparative value in the global context. Interaction abroad enhances recognition of Indonesia’s cultural richness as part of collective identity.

A similar view is expressed by YWD, a student in Germany, who connects nationalism with behavior and responsibility.

“Nationalism isn’t just about singing the national anthem or memorizing the Pancasila; it’s about how we keep our country clean and comfortable, just as I’ve seen in Germany. I feel ashamed when many foreigners perceive Indonesia as dirty and disorderly. That’s when I realized that loving one’s country also requires concrete actions.” — YWD.

This shows nationalism as an ethical and behavioral practice rather than a symbolic expression. YWD emphasizes active nationalism through real actions that reflect civic responsibility.

National Identity as a Reflection and a Crisis of Values

HC, a student in South Korea, experiences identity questioning due to cultural differences.

“I’ve actually started questioning whether I belong in Indonesia because in Korea I feel freer and more comfortable. The system there is orderly, efficient, and the people are disciplined. Sometimes I wonder, why does everything feel so slow in Indonesia?” — HC.

This reflects an identity crisis shaped by comparison between national systems and global standards. HC experiences a “modern identity crisis” ([Simbolon et al., 2024](#)), yet this reflection also deepens awareness of national conditions. Rather than rejection, it becomes an evaluative mirror for national improvement.

National Identity as a Foundation of Moral and Religious Values

NAS links national identity with moral and religious principles rooted in Indonesian culture.

“The culture in Korea is very liberal, especially regarding alcohol consumption and socializing. But I try to respect them without following their lead because my religion and Indonesian culture teach me manners and boundaries.” — NAS.

NAS views identity as behavioral guidance in cross-cultural settings. He represents Indonesia through tolerance, ethics, and responsibility, reflecting the values of Pancasila in daily conduct.

National Identity as Responsibility and Contribution

ERL, studying in Germany, interprets nationalism as a contribution rather than a ceremony.

“Nationalism isn’t measured by how often we attend ceremonies or sing the national anthem, but by what we can do for Indonesia. I’m learning discipline and responsibility in Germany so I can apply them when I return to my homeland.” — ERL.

He sees national identity as a practical responsibility to improve national capacity. Overseas experience is viewed as preparation for contributing to national progress.

Overall, national identity is understood as more than symbols such as language or flags, extending to moral awareness and responsibility. NAR and YWD highlight cultural pride and the transmission of values in global interactions, reflecting affirmative nationalism (Susilawati et al., 2024).

HC illustrates critical reflection through comparison with developed systems, forming a “liquid identity” in transition. Nationalism isn’t measured by how often we attend ceremonies or sing the national anthem, but by what we can do for Indonesia. I’m learning discipline and responsibility in Germany so I can apply them when I return to my homeland.” — ERL. cooperation, discipline, and respect. Thus, national identity among overseas students evolves from symbolic attachment into moral consciousness and concrete action.

2. Cultural Awareness in Relation to National Identity

Indonesian students abroad demonstrate national identity through cultural awareness in global contexts. During exchange programs or internships, they interact with foreign cultures while carrying Indonesian values, norms, and ethics. They represent Indonesia through their behavior, communication, dress, and responses to cultural differences, thereby engaging in informal cultural diplomacy. Interviews indicate cultural promotion occurs through moral values, etiquette, stereotype correction, identity maintenance, and cultural pride.

Promoting Indonesian Moral Values Through Daily Behavior

Promotion of Indonesian culture is reflected in daily moral behavior rather than formal cultural displays. Values such as politeness, tolerance, respect, and modesty become key representations of national identity in international settings. These values are expressed through consistent behavior in social interactions abroad.

NAS, a student in South Korea, demonstrates this through his response to alcohol culture in academic environments. He chooses not to participate while maintaining respect for others.

“The drinking culture in Korea is commonplace, even among faculty members. At first, I was surprised, but I tried to remain respectful without participating because I am Muslim, and in Indonesia, such things are still taboo.” —NAS.

This decision reflects Indonesian moral boundaries and ethical values. His respectful and non-judgmental attitude shows that national identity is expressed through behavior, not symbols alone. Through tolerance and consistency, he effectively communicates Indonesian cultural values. His peers understand his stance because of his calm communication, fostering natural cultural dialogue. Thus, everyday actions become a medium of informal representation of national identity.

Introducing Indonesian Etiquette and Polite Communication

Indonesian culture is strongly rooted in politeness, reflected in speech, tone, and interaction style. These communication traits often distinguish Indonesian students abroad and function as cultural markers in social interaction. A student in Thailand experienced challenges adapting due to differences in communication styles.

“When I first arrived, I had a bit of trouble adjusting because the language and the way Thais interact are different. They’re more reserved and polite in their speech. But I learned to respect that, because in Indonesia we also have values of politeness and etiquette.” – NAR.

Rather than seeing differences as barriers, he identified shared cultural values of courtesy. Through daily interaction, he demonstrated Indonesian politeness in greetings, responses, and body language. His communication style reflected friendliness, respect, and adaptability. This created mutual understanding and cultural exchange between Indonesians and Thais. He also recognized similarities with local values such as *tepa selira* and respect for others. Thus, communication becomes a key channel for cultural representation. Simple acts such as smiling, speaking gently, and respecting others reflect Indonesian identity. National identity is therefore expressed not only through symbols but also through everyday interpersonal behavior.

Correcting Stereotypes and Building a Positive Image of Indonesia

Several interviewees addressed Indonesian culture by challenging negative stereotypes encountered abroad. YWD, a student in Germany, reported recurring assumptions about corruption, low discipline, and lack of seriousness. Although initially uncomfortable, he used these perceptions as motivation to improve Indonesia’s image through personal conduct. He demonstrated discipline, integrity, and a strong work ethic to counter these stereotypes.

“Company staff in Germany said they’ve struggled to collaborate with Indonesia because of high levels of corruption. I felt embarrassed hearing that, but it made me realize that the younger generation like us needs to change that image through hard work.” – YWD.

ERL expressed a similar view, noting stereotypes about Indonesians being less punctual and less efficient. Instead of internalizing his sense of inferiority, he used it as motivation to demonstrate professionalism and discipline in practice.

“Germans are very disciplined and efficient; they sometimes view Indonesians as being less punctual and less serious. That spurred me on to show that we, too, can work professionally and on time.” – ERL.

Both informants promote Indonesian culture through behavior rather than symbols. Professionalism, honesty, and responsibility function as cultural representations in global contexts. Simple actions such as punctuality and task commitment serve as effective cultural diplomacy, reshaping international perceptions of Indonesia.

Preserving One’s Identity as a Form of Promoting Indonesian Culture

HC highlights that some Indonesian students abroad gradually adopt foreign lifestyles to the point of weakening their original cultural identity. While adaptation is necessary, excessive assimilation may blur national identity and weaken cultural rootedness. He argues that maintaining identity reflects Indonesia’s strong moral and cultural values in global interaction.

“Many of my Indonesian friends have started adopting a Western lifestyle... I don’t blame them, but sometimes I feel sad because it’s as if they’ve lost their sense of self.” – HC.

NAS supports this view by emphasizing that holding firm to personal values does not reject other cultures but affirms national identity on the global stage. He views simplicity, respect, and moral commitment as essential elements of Indonesian culture that should be preserved.

“For me, national identity comes from the way we respect our own values and teachings.” – NAS.

Both informants show that maintaining identity is a form of cultural representation. It reflects harmony, morality, and sincerity while also serving as a form of cultural diplomacy through consistent behavior and example-setting in international settings.

Promoting Indonesian Culture Through Language, Clothing, and Customs

Several interviewees actively promote Indonesian culture through language use, traditional clothing, and daily customs. Cultural symbols such as batik, the Indonesian language, and etiquette are understood as expressions of national identity in international contexts. HC notes that some students feel embarrassed to display these identities in public or academic spaces, which limits cultural representation.

“Sometimes I see friends who are embarrassed to wear batik or speak Indonesian in public. But that’s actually something we should be proud of.” – HC.

YWD emphasizes balancing openness to global culture with the maintenance of Indonesian identity. He highlights that using Indonesian language, wearing batik in formal settings, and explaining local customs are simple forms of cultural introduction.

“We can be open and learn about other cultures, but we must not lose our authentic values. Because that is precisely what makes Indonesia unique.” – YWD

These practices strengthen Indonesia’s cultural presence globally and position students as informal cultural ambassadors. The findings show five forms of cultural promotion: moral values in behavior, politeness in interaction, stereotype correction through professionalism, identity preservation, and the introduction of cultural symbols.

These dimensions form a cyclical framework of national identity development: international experience, identity reflection, cultural diplomacy, active nationalism, and civic responsibility. The cycle shows that deeper global exposure strengthens identity awareness and cultural representation.

NAS and ERL in South Korea and Germany demonstrate that cultural differences can be used to highlight Indonesian values such as politeness, self-control, and respect. This supports [Adhani et al. \(2024\)](#) on the “cultural filter,” in which external influences are selectively adapted without compromising Pancasila values. Through consistent behavior, students demonstrate identity through lived example.

Cultural promotion is also evident in the correction of stereotypes. YWD and ERL use discipline, professionalism, and work ethic to challenge negative perceptions of Indonesia. These actions reflect civic responsibility, as students help shape a positive national image in global spaces.

HC adds that preserving identity is essential amid globalization, as the loss of cultural roots weakens national character. This aligns with [Eqzaputri et al. \(2025\)](#), who stress that globalization can erode identity without strong character awareness. Maintaining moral values and etiquette becomes a key form of cultural representation abroad.

Structurally, these findings are shaped by three factors: host country sociocultural context, students' educational and religious backgrounds as cultural filters, and the intensity of international exposure. Theoretically, national identity is not static or declining under globalization but is contextual and adaptive. This supports a constructivist-relational understanding of identity in global settings.

3. Strategies for Preserving and Expressing National Identity

All five interviewees actively preserve and express their national identity while studying abroad, despite the challenges of globalization. Their strategies go beyond symbolic expressions such as traditional clothing and extend to behavioral practices grounded in Pancasila values, nationalism, and responsibility. These strategies are categorized as cultural diplomacy, the application of national values, the strengthening of student communities, and moral self-reflection.

Cultural Diplomacy and the Promotion of Indonesian Identity

Cultural diplomacy is commonly used to maintain identity abroad through food, clothing, dance, and social customs. HC in South Korea stated:

"I introduced Indonesia by wearing batik during the new student orientation. Many of my Korean friends said my batik was beautiful and unique. I also often bring instant rendang for my friends to try, so they know our food is rich in spices and very distinctive." —HC.

For HC, batik represents cultural pride and soft diplomacy that reshapes perceptions of Indonesia. Similarly, NAR in Thailand shared:

"I introduced Indonesian foods like ayam geprek and seblak to local students. They liked them because they're spicy and different from Thai food. I also performed a traditional dance during a campus cultural event." —NAR.

This suggests that cultural sharing can build recognition of Indonesia through familiar, everyday interactions.

These actions show that cultural identity can be expressed through everyday interaction and cross-cultural sharing, while also shaping how others understand Indonesia.

Applying National Values in Daily Life

Beyond symbols, students apply Pancasila values such as tolerance, respect, and mutual help in daily life. NAS in South Korea stated:

"I try to remain friendly, polite, and respectful of others, because that's what we're taught in Indonesia. If my foreign friends are having a hard time, I help them as best I can. They often say that Indonesians are kind and always smiling, and that makes me proud." —NAS.

NAS demonstrates national identity through empathy and politeness in multicultural settings. Meanwhile, YWD in Germany emphasizes discipline and integrity:

"For me, nationalism isn't just about symbols or attributes, but about the way we work and behave. If I'm disciplined and honest, others will view my nation positively." —YWD.

Strengthening Community and Solidarity Among Indonesian Students

Students also maintain identity through solidarity within Indonesian student communities abroad. ERL in Germany stated:

“We often get together with members of the PPI to organize events like the August 17th celebration or break the fast together. Through these activities, our sense of nationalism actually grows stronger.” ERL

HC adds that mutual support is essential during overseas study:

“When we’re far from home, the camaraderie among fellow Indonesian students feels especially important. We help each other out when someone is facing difficulties.” — HC.

These communities reinforce collectivism and serve as a form of resistance to individualism, while preserving Indonesian solidarity in global contexts.

Self-Reflection and Moral Contribution to the Nation

In addition to demonstrating national identity externally, several interviewees also emphasized the importance of self-reflection as a form of actualizing nationalist values. They view studying abroad as entailing a moral responsibility to bring positive change to Indonesia upon their return. ERL stated:

“Nationalism isn’t just about nostalgia or taking pride in wearing batik; it’s about how we can bring back knowledge, discipline, and a strong work ethic from abroad to advance Indonesia.” —ERL.

This statement illustrates that modern nationalism is understood as a form of intellectual responsibility. For ERL, national identity is no longer merely a symbol but a spirit of contributing to the nation through knowledge and professionalism. Meanwhile, YWD adds:

“When I return home, I want to teach about cleanliness, discipline, and respect for the environment—things I’ve learned in Germany. So that Indonesia can progress further without losing its culture.” —YWD

YWD’s perspective reflects the concept of “constructive patriotism,” a love for the nation manifested through efforts toward social and ecological improvement. This is a form of reflective nationalism that grows through cross-cultural experiences. NAR even notes that international experiences have deepened his understanding of the importance of being the “face of the nation” in the eyes of the world:

“While in Thailand, I realized that every action we take represents Indonesia. If we are polite and accomplished, people will view Indonesia favorably as well.” NAR

Thus, national identity is not only an internal awareness but is also shaped by others’ perceptions of Indonesia based on the behavior of its citizens abroad.

Despite facing various challenges, the five interviewees demonstrated adaptability and smart strategies in preserving their national identity. These strategies fall into four main dimensions: (1) cultural diplomacy, (2) the application of national values, (3) strengthening solidarity among fellow Indonesian students, and (4) reflection and moral contributions to the nation.

In the realm of cultural diplomacy, students such as HC and NAR actively promote Indonesia through its cuisine, batik, and traditional arts. This constitutes a form of “soft diplomacy,” as described by [Fiamanilla et al. \(2025\)](#), that is, efforts to strengthen the nation’s image through culture that reflects a peaceful, creative, and open character.

In the dimension of national values, YWD and NAR emphasize the importance of integrity, discipline, and mutual cooperation as expressions of moral nationalism. These values

align with the spirit of the second and fifth principles of Pancasila, which emphasize humanity and social justice. They do not merely carry symbols of Indonesian culture but also apply them in their daily behavior, demonstrating that national identity can be brought to life through action.

Regarding social solidarity, ERL explained that joint activities with PPI (the Indonesian Students Association) provide a space to foster collective nationalism abroad. Activities such as Independence Day celebrations and cultural festivals strengthen the spirit of togetherness among Indonesian students. This phenomenon reflects the concept of social cohesion namely, the importance of social networks that support national identity and solidarity within a multicultural society.

Meanwhile, regarding moral reflection and contribution, all interviewees expressed awareness that international experiences must be accompanied by a responsibility to contribute to nation-building upon returning home. Nationalism in the global era is not merely about preserving cultural symbols but also about actualizing the values of Pancasila through tangible roles in national development.

The results of this study underscore the importance of civic education (PKn) in higher education in shaping students who possess both a sense of national identity and global competencies. Civic education must serve as a vehicle for internalizing the values of Pancasila within the context of globalization, rather than merely being a normative course.

From a societal moral perspective, the findings of this study indicate that Indonesian students abroad bear multi-layered moral responsibilities: first, as individuals who uphold their personal integrity and values (moral citizenship); second, as citizens who represent the nation in international forums (civic virtue); and third, as agents of change who bring positive values for Indonesia's progress (constructive patriotism). These three layers of moral responsibility do not arise by chance but result from character and citizenship education received in higher education. The ethical awareness demonstrated by the informants in cross-cultural interactions, such as respecting differences without compromising principles, or correcting stereotypes through professionalism that reflects civic virtue, is a testament to this. The values of Pancasila, particularly the second principle (Just and Civilized Humanity) and the third principle (Indonesian Unity), have proven to serve as a moral compass that remains relevant across vastly different cultural contexts.

The students who were the subjects of this study have demonstrated tangible outcomes of globally oriented citizenship education. They not only understand national values theoretically but also put them into practice through behavior, cultural diplomacy, and social reflection. This phenomenon reflects the concept of global citizenship proposed by [Gaitán-Aguilar et al. \(2024\)](#), an education that fosters globally-minded citizens who remain rooted in their national identity.

Therefore, this study emphasizes that strengthening national identity in the global era requires a holistic approach integrating knowledge, attitudes, social skills, and moral commitment. Civic education no longer serves merely to preserve traditional values but also equips students with the critical ability to select and integrate global values into their Indonesian identity.

Think globally, be rooted locally, and act nationally.

Conceptually, the relationship between national identity and global citizenship in this study is complementary rather than oppositional, forming a “rooted cosmopolitanism” in which local identity enables global openness (Yemini et al., 2024). Students expressing Indonesian culture abroad, such as through language, batik, and moral values, demonstrate how global citizenship is grounded in national identity. Although tensions may arise, as seen in HC’s reflection on systemic differences in South Korea, such experiences function as critical awareness rather than identity loss. Thus, global and national identities are integrated as a single adaptive framework of thinking globally, rooted locally, and acting nationally. Overall, national identity among students abroad is shaped through reflective and transformative processes where globalization strengthens rather than erodes nationalism, repositioning civic education to produce globally competent yet nationally grounded graduates.

Conclusion

This study concludes that studying abroad provides students with an opportunity to strengthen their national identity through direct exposure to Indonesian culture, including daily behavior, moral values, etiquette, professionalism, and cultural symbols such as language and batik. The various cross-cultural interactions they experience encourage deep reflection on their sense of self, so that their national identity is not only preserved but also displayed with greater confidence before the international community. Based on these findings, it is recommended that students planning to study abroad be equipped with a stronger understanding of Indonesian cultural values, character education, and cross-cultural communication skills so that they can serve as good representatives of the nation. Additionally, higher education institutions need to strengthen programs for fostering national identity so that students possess the moral, social, and cultural readiness to present Indonesia positively in various international settings.

Theoretically, this study contributes to understanding the process of national identity formation in a global context through a phenomenological perspective that integrates the dimensions of civic identity, social morality, and cultural diplomacy. These findings expand the conceptual framework of global citizenship education by demonstrating that national and global identities need not be mutually exclusive; rather, they can complement one another through critical reflection and the actualization of Pancasila values. In practical terms, this study recommends integrating international programs at universities into the citizenship education curriculum so that students are not only academically prepared but also equipped with the moral and cultural foundations to serve as ambassadors of the nation.

Research limitations and future research directions: This study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, the limited number of informants (five students) means the findings cannot be generalized beyond this sample. Second, the study’s scope involved students from only one university, so variations in experiences across institutions are not yet represented. Third, the vastly different cultural contexts of the three destination countries (South Korea, Germany, and Thailand) allow for variations in findings that have not yet been fully mapped. Fourth, this study is retrospective in nature, based on past experiences; therefore, the possibility of memory bias cannot be entirely avoided. Future research is recommended to expand the number of informants, involve students from various universities, and use a longitudinal design

to monitor the development of students' national identity before, during, and after international programs.

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