

Identity negotiation in student cross cultural communication in madura: A semio pragmatic approach in multiethnic social space

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Abstract

This study examines how the identities of students from various ethnicities in Indonesia are negotiated and demonstrated in the context of cross-cultural communication in the campus environment in Madura. In a social space dominated by strong Madurese cultural values—including religiousity, patriarchal social structures, and honorary symbolism—students from non-Madurese backgrounds such as Papua, Javanese, Batak, and Betawi face the need to adjust their expressions of identity to be socially accepted without losing their identity. This study uses a semio pragmatic approach that combines three levels in identity construction: prefiguration (cultural reference), configuration (situational adjustment), and figuration (actual performance in interaction). Data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observation of 15 students representing different ethnicities. The results showed that students used a variety of adaptive strategies, such as controlling communication styles, using cross-cultural symbols (e.g. Islamic greetings as social greetings), humor, and non-verbal contributions in academic forums. Each strategy reflects the dynamics of identity negotiation that are not only interpersonal but also symbolic and political. This research contributes to understanding how identity is not simply culturally inherited, but constructed situationally and pragmatically in the space of social interaction. These findings have important implications for the development of inclusive campus policies, the design of intercultural training programs, and the strengthening of intercultural dialogue spaces in multiethnic higher education environments.

Keywords: Cross Cultural Communication; Identity; Multiethnic; Students, Madura; Semiopragmatic

Introduction

Higher education in Indonesia is an intense meeting place for students from various ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. Campus interaction is not only academic but also an arena for the formation, transformation, and negotiation of students' socio-cultural identities. In the context of higher education, campuses are an important arena for the formation and transformation of students' social and cultural identities (Camelia & Suryandari, 2021; Marginson, 2014; Toriyono et al., 2022). In regions marked by strong local cultural dominance, identity negotiation often unfolds differently than in more open metropolitan areas. Madura, for example, is known for its honorary values, high religiousity, and a strong patriarchal social system (Anhary, 2023). These characteristics make Madura not only a geographical setting but also a social arena where symbolic norms shape how students interact, adapt, and express their identities.

Previous studies on student identity negotiation have tended to focus on a multicultural environment that is liberal or cosmopolitan (Holliday, 2018; Zhou et al., 2023), where identity flexibility is higher and symbolic conformity is less urgent. Meanwhile, research in conservative, religious, and culturally symbolic contexts remains limited, especially in the Indonesian higher education environment. In such contexts, identity negotiation entails not only interpersonal adaptation but also strategic efforts to secure social legitimacy within prevailing norms and values.

Previous studies have built an important foundation. Ting-Toomey (2017a) through Identity Negotiation Theory, emphasizes the communication process to achieve mutual respect and mutual affirmation between individuals from different cultures. Marginson underlined the concept of student self-formation in international education, where students form their identity through relatively free adaptation choices (Marginson, 2014). Frame and Boutaud offer a semio-pragmatic perspective that

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divides the construction of identity into three layers: prefiguration (inherited cultural values), configuration (situational adjustment), and figuration (the appearance of identity in actual interactions) (Frame & Boutaud, 2011). However, the synthesis of the literature shows that these three approaches have not been widely tested in conservative academic environments with strong pressure to conform to local norms, such as in Madura.

This research arises from the need to fill these gaps by examining how students from different ethnic backgrounds—Papuan, Javanese, Batak, Betawi, and Madura—negotiate and display their identities in their daily interactions on campus. By integrating Identity Negotiation Theory and semio-pragmatic frameworks, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of identity negotiation in multiethnic academic spaces operating under strong local cultural dominance.

The semio-pragmatic approach developed by Frame and Boutaud (Frame & Boutaud, 2011) offers an integrative perspective on this process. They divide identity construction into three levels: prefiguration (inherited cultural meaning), configuration (adjustment to the context of interaction), and figuration (the performance of identity in real actions). In Madura, non-local students not only navigate their ethnic and religious identities but also contend with unwritten yet powerful local social expectations.

Previous studies have largely focused on cultural identities in homogeneous or metropolitan spaces that tend to be liberal (Holliday, 2018; Zhou et al., 2023). Meanwhile, studies on identity interaction in religious, conservative, and symbolically charged local contexts such as Madura remain scarce. This article aims to fill this gap by exploring how cross-ethnic students in Madura manage their identities through intercultural communication, as well as the strategies they use to build social acceptance while maintaining the authenticity of their cultural identity.

In this study, the initial findings that emerged from the observation and interview stage were: (1) non-Madura students consciously modified their communication (verbal and non-verbal) when interacting with local students; (2) there is a tendency to adopt local symbols (Madurese language, Islamic greetings, Madurese batik clothing) to gain social legitimacy.

Identity is revealed gradually and selectively, depending on the level of trust and social acceptance. These initial findings were then verified and deepened through a cycle of follow-up interviews, observations, and member checking to form the final findings mapped in a prefiguration–configuration–figuration framework. This study poses the following question: How can Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 2017a) be extended to explain identity negotiation processes in conservative and normative academic environments using a semio-pragmatic framework? This indicates that Identity Negotiation Theory serves as the theoretical exit point, framing identity negotiation as a communicative process aimed at achieving mutual respect and affirmation. Identity Negotiation Theory has been tested primarily in global–cosmopolitan or interstate contexts, assuming a relatively high level of individual freedom. Employing a qualitative approach and a semio-pragmatic framework, this article not only uncovers the dynamics of identity in communicative practice but also contributes new theoretical insights relevant to identity studies, cross-cultural communication, and multicultural higher education in Indonesia.

Method

This study used an interpretive qualitative approach with a constructivist paradigm to explore the dynamics of constructing and negotiating the identities of students from various ethnic backgrounds in the context of cross-cultural communication in Madura. This design was selected because it enables researchers to grasp subjective meanings shaped through intercultural social interactions. (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) Semio-pragmatics is not a research method in the sense of a design, such as case study, ethnography, or narrative inquiry. Semio-pragmatics is a theoretical approach or analytical framework that combines semiotics (the study of signs, meanings, and symbols) and pragmatics (the study of meaning in the context of language use or communicative acts, rooted in Austin, Searle, and Grice).

In the context of communication, semio-pragmatics looks at how the meaning of identity is formed and negotiated through signs (symbols, language, appearances) in social interaction. Frame

and Boutaud developed this framework into three levels of identity construction: prefiguration (inherited cultural values and symbols), configuration (adaptation to interactional contexts), and figuration (the performance of identity in real-life situations). This study employed the semio-pragmatic framework developed by Frame and Boutaud, focusing on three levels of identity construction: prefiguration, configuration, and figuration. The research was conducted at Trunojoyo Madura University in Bangkalan, Madura, which hosts a significant number of students from outside the region. The participants were 15 active students from different ethnic backgrounds—Papuan, Madurese, Javanese, Batak, and Betawi—who were studying in Madura.

They were selected using purposive sampling with the following criteria: active UTM students, having studied for at least two semesters, and participation in organizational activities or intercultural interactions on campus. Data were collected through (1) semi-structured in-depth interviews exploring personal experiences in identity negotiations, (2) participatory observation of campus activities and student organizations, and (3) documentation such as social media uploads, transcripts, and reflective field notes.

The interview instrument was designed based on the principles of cross-cultural communication and social identity and included thematic guidance based on three semio-pragmatic levels. Data were analyzed through reflective thematic analysis, which enabled the researcher to identify narrative patterns representing the experience of identity negotiation. (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Clarke & Braun, 2017). The analysis involved four stages: (1) transcription and thorough reading, (2) open coding based on units of meaning, (3) categorization according to the semio-pragmatic levels (prefiguration, configuration, figuration), and (4) critical interpretation through triangulation of observation and documentation data. The validity of the data was maintained through triangulation of sources and methods, member checking, and reflective involvement of researchers as part of the process of constructing meaning (Tracy, 2013).

Results and Discussion

Identity Prefiguration: Cultural Heritage in Students' Cross-Ethnic Communication

Prefiguration refers to the dimensions of identity formed by cultural references that have been instilled in individuals from the beginning, including social values, cultural symbols, mother tongues, and norms of ethnic behavior. In the context of cross-ethnic students studying in Madura, this reference serves as the main basis for interacting with and responding to the new environment in a Madurese pattern. (Marginson, 2014; Wang & Teo, 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). In the context of cross-cultural interaction on Madura campuses, students from various ethnic backgrounds bring cultural values that they have internalized since childhood. These values constitute a layer of prefiguration, functioning as early cultural references that guide thinking, behavior, and communication in new environments (Frame & Boutaud, 2011). The mother tongue, for example, becomes a symbolic medium that connects individuals emotionally with their ethnic identity. One Batak student shared :

"When I am with friends from the same region, we feel more comfortable speaking Batak. That's what makes me feel at home." (Interview with Informant 1, September 2024).

In social spaces where the majority do not use the language, the use of the mother tongue functions as a mechanism for restoring identity and emotional attachment among individuals. Prefiguration is also reflected in attitudes toward authority. For example, Javanese students demonstrate deep respect for lecturers by avoiding interruptions, even in open discussions.

"We Javanese are taught not to interrupt lecturers' conversations. So, I often wait for my turn even though the discussion is open." (Interview with Informant 2, September 2024).

This value of manners is not lost in academic discussion but is reinterpreted as a communication strategy that still reflects cultural roots. On the other hand, Madurese students display family values as an important part of social interaction.

"I am from a Madurese family, I was taught not to eat unless I invite friends. So I like to invite friends to eat together," (Interview with Informant 3, September 2024)

Such simple actions illustrate how family-inherited values of togetherness and care are symbolically expressed in a cross-cultural campus environment. This value is an effective means for building inter-ethnic relations. In addition to family, religiosity is also a strong prefigurative foundation, especially for students from Madura.

"I'm from Madura. I usually pray on time, and I still keep this practice even though the lecture schedule is busy." (Interview with Informant 3).

Commitment to religious practice constitutes not only a dimension of personal identity but also shapes positive social perceptions among peers. This religious value serves as both an anchor of identity and a mechanism of social legitimacy in a multicultural campus community. Overall, these findings suggest that prefiguration not only survives in new environments but also transforms into a component of adaptive identity communication strategies. Language, ethics, family, and religiosity are expressions of cultural values that shape the way cross-ethnic students participate, interact, and build acceptance in the social space of the Madura campus.

Identity Configuration: Strategies for Adjusting Cross-Ethnic Students to Madura Campus Culture

In the context of higher education in Madura, students from various ethnic backgrounds show diverse adaptability to the dominant local norms and culture. This process is referred to as configuration, which is the effort individuals make to adjust to new social and institutional contexts. Field findings indicate that this form of adjustment includes aspects of language, appearance, interpersonal communication, and participation in religious and social activities on campus (Andiono, 2024; Toriyono et al., 2022).

One of the strategies that is widely used is to learn and use the Madurese language passively in daily interactions. A Betawi student said:

"I slowly learned the Madurese language so that I could join in discussion activities with local friends." (Interview with Informant 4, September 2024)

This shows that language is a bridge to build social relations and cultural legitimacy in a new environment. Adjustments are also seen in the physical and symbolic aspects of appearance, as conveyed by a Betawi student.

"For official events, I wear batik or Madura batik clothes. It makes me more accepted." (interview with Informant 4, September 2024)

The use of local symbols reflects accommodation to social expectations and functions as a strategy to reinforce one's position within the campus social structure. On the other hand, some students chose to avoid discussing sensitive topics, especially those related to their culture of origin. A Batak student stated:

"I avoid discussing my different culture because I am afraid of being misunderstood. So I heard more." (Interview with Informant 1, September 2024)

This strategy illustrates the communicative limitations applied to maintain harmony, although it can contribute to the invisibility of ethnic identity in campus public spaces. In addition, configuration is also reflected in participation in local religious traditions. A Betawi student said:

"I participated in recitation and religious activities even though I was not used to them at first. It helped me make many friends here." (Interview with Informant 4, September 2024)

This participation not only adjusts to the socio-religious environment in Madura but also becomes a means of effective social integration. Within a semio-pragmatic framework, these findings suggest that configuration functions as an intermediate stage between cultural references carried (prefiguration) and the actual performance of identity (figuration) (Frame & Boutaud, 2011). Students consciously modify behavior and communication in response to social expectations and as a mechanism of cultural survival under the dominance of local norms. Thus, configuration is not merely a form of passive adaptation but also an active strategy for students to navigate the campus social space, build acceptance, and maintain the integrity of their identity within socially accepted boundaries.

Figuration: Situational Strategies in Cross-Ethnic Student Interaction

In the semio-pragmatic approach, figuration is the level at which identity is staged in a real context of interaction (Frame & Boutaud, 2011). Identities are not only inherited or adapted to social norms but are also strategically chosen and displayed according to audience, purpose, and atmosphere. Field findings from the Madura campus show that students of various ethnicities actively manage their identity displays to respond to dynamic social demands. One form of figuration can be seen from the appearance of religious identity in religious forums. A Javanese student revealed:

"In the study forum, I wear a sarong and peci so that I look the same as my friends here in Madura, even though I wear jeans every day." (Interview with Informant 1, September 2024)

This religious identity is not always displayed in everyday life but is activated in situations that demand certain symbolic affiliations. Students also adjust their speech according to whether the context is formal or informal. A Betawi student, for example, stated:

"During the presentation, I deliberately used formal Indonesian because if I used the Betawi dialect, it would be considered too slangy and not formal." (Interview with Informant 4)

In this case, figuration is enacted to maintain an academic image and to avoid stereotypes related to ethnic identity. On the other hand, during campus cultural events, students express their ethnic identities openly. A Batak student said:

"I am most excited to perform when there is a campus cultural event. There I can perform in traditional clothes and share stories about my village." (Interview with Informant 1, September 2024)

This performance is a means of identity affirmation that rarely appears in formal spaces but is very important in building cultural pride. In addition, students adjust the content of the conversations according to the background of the interlocutor. Papuan students said:

"When I talk to my Madura friends, I discuss local matters. But if it's with my fellow people outside the region, I'm freer to tell my origin story." (Interview with Informant 5, September 2024)

This suggests that figuration involves not only symbolic expression but also the selection of identity narratives based on intersubjective considerations. These findings show that figuration is a flexible, reflective, and strategic communication practice. Students are not just recipients of cultural norms but active agents who choose which identities are displayed, when, and to whom. Thus,

figuration becomes a space for negotiating the meaning of identity that strengthens adaptability while maintaining authenticity in multicultural interactions.

These findings reveal that identity figuration is a form of social performance that is shaped by interactional situations. Students demonstrate the ability to manage the identities they displayed, both for the purposes of social acceptance, strengthening solidarity, and avoiding symbolic conflicts. This figurative identity is flexible and does not fully reflect a fixed identity, but rather serves as a pragmatic response to the social demands of the surroundings. In a semio-pragmatic perspective, figuration becomes a meeting point between cultural representation and communication strategies, where students construct new meanings of their identities according to the actual context they are facing.

Semiopragmatic Analysis

Referring to Frame & Boutaud (Frame & Boutaud, 2011) identity in intercultural communication of students in Madura is a simultaneous process between:

Layer	Manifestation at the Madura Campus
Prefiguration	Ethnic values, mother tongue, cultural symbols such as accent, dress, and attitudes towards authority
Configuration	Adjustment to Madura campus norms (religiosity, hierarchy, symbolic ethnocentrism)
Figuration	Adaptive or resistive identity performance as per the needs of interactions in an organization or class

Source : Author

These staged identities are not always consistent, but change depending on the context, purpose of the interaction, and the audience. In the semio pragmatic approach developed by Frame and Boutaud, identity is understood as the result of a situational, symbolic, and pragmatic process of interaction (Frame & Boutaud, 2011). Identity is no longer considered as a fixed attribute inherent in the individual, but rather as a figuration, which is a form of identity performance that is staged in the context of a certain interaction. Within this framework, the staged identity is inconsistent, as it is actively constructed and negotiated based on the social context, communication goals, and profile of the audience involved in the conversation.

The Concept is based on the assumption that each individual has many identities attached to the various social positions he or she occupies. In line with Stryker & Burke's Identity Theory, identity is seen as a multiple, hierarchical social construct (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Individuals have a "salience hierarchy", a structure of identity virtue that determines which identity to activate in a given situation. The activation of such identities depends on the social relevance, level of commitment, and strategic benefits that may be derived from displaying a particular identity in the situation. For example, a student of Javanese ethnicity studying in Madura can display different identities in various situations: as a student in a study forum, as a student in a lecture hall, as an ethnic youth in cultural events, and as an activist in cross-regional discussions. Each of these identities is chosen and displayed based on the need to gain legitimacy, build social relations, or avoid potential conflicts. This identity is flexible and transactional, not just reflecting who the individual is essentially, but how he or she wants to be interpreted in certain interactions.

Furthermore, Goffman's self-presentation theory emphasizes that in every social interaction, individuals consciously or unconsciously do facework, namely the management of impressions to maintain the harmony of interactions (Goffman, 1977). Therefore, the change in the performance of the displayed identity is not an inconsistency in a negative sense, but rather a communication strategy to meet changing intersubjective expectations. Identity, in this context, is adaptive and negotiable. Semio-pragmatic models accommodate three levels of reference in shaping identity: prefiguration (inherited cultural values and symbols), configuration (adjustment to situational norms), and figuration (the appearance of identity in actual interactions). The inconsistency of identity performance, as shown in the figuration, is not a form of deviation, but rather reflects the adaptability and sophistication of cross-cultural communication (Marginson, 2014; Wang & Teo, 2024; Zhou et al., 2023)

In the context of Madura, field findings show that students of various ethnicities actively display different identities according to their contexts. Identity as a student, activist, or member of the local community can change depending on the audience, forum atmosphere, and social expectations.

This shows that identity performance is not final, but is constantly reproduced and negotiated in dynamic interaction spaces. Thus, the understanding of identity as a performative and situational process opens up new spaces in the study of cross-cultural communication. He encourages the need for an approach that not only explores cultural essence, but also intersubjective communication practices that involve symbolic strategies, narrative adjustments, and situational expressions of identity in multicultural societies. In the context of a multicultural campus such as Madura, student identity cannot be seen as a static or singular entity. On the contrary, identity is a negotiation process that takes place continuously. Students are constantly managing their various identities—whether as students, members of ethnic groups, or religious individuals—in complex and diverse communication situations. This process reflects Stryker and Burke's view in Identity Theory, which states that each individual has multiple identities that are interrelated and activated according to the relevance of the context (Stryker & Burke, 2000). This view is also reinforced by Mead's concept of the "self" in which social identity is formed through symbolic interaction and response to changing social expectations (Mead G, 1934).

Furthermore, the figurative layer of the semio pragmatic model opens up space for identity innovation (Frame & Boutaud, 2011). Identity in figurative space is not simply the result of reproduction of inherited cultural values (prefiguration) or adaptation to local situations (configuration), but is an arena in which students create and modify new identities symbolically and strategically. Batak students, for example, can build a new identity as "Batak accepted in Madura" by combining local communication styles with cultural values of their origin. Likewise, Madura students who are active in national forums can construct an identity as a "modern and nationalist Madura" without completely abandoning their traditional roots. This process shows that figuration is not just a reflection of an existing identity, but also a creative space for cultural and social experimentation.

These findings have a number of significant social implications in the context of higher education, particularly in the management of cultural diversity in the campus environment. First, it is necessary to strengthen intercultural communication inclusion and training programs that are not only ceremonial, but substantive and sustainable. These programs must be able to equip students with a critical understanding of differences, as well as the skills to build productive dialogue in the midst of diversity of identities. Second, campuses need to provide a safe and supportive discursive space, where students from minority groups can express their identities without stigma or symbolic marginalization. Third, it is important to increase the capacity of lecturers and education staff in understanding the dynamics of students' cultural identities. Thus, understanding identity as a contextual, creative, and socio-political negotiation process makes an important contribution to the development of intercultural communication theory, as well as being the basis for the formulation of campus policies that are more equitable and reflective of the reality of diversity. (Goffman, 1959; Mead G, 1934; Stryker & Burke, 2000)

The findings of this research add to the conservative variables of the local context—where the process of identity negotiation is limited by symbolic norms, religious values, and social hierarchies. By integrating a semio-pragmatic framework, this study shows that identity negotiation is not only relational (interpersonal relationships), but also symbolic-political (seeking legitimacy in the dominant social structure). The position of this research is to extend the scope of the theory from a global context to a conservative local context, as well as to offer a cyclical model in which figuration can return to configuration if the context changes.

Theoretical Implications and Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study contribute to the development of the theory of identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 2017b) and symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1959; Mead G, 1934). Previous research has largely addressed identity negotiations in liberal-leaning metropolitan or multicultural spaces, where identity flexibility is more acceptable. The study shows that in conservative, religious, and highly symbolic contexts such as Madura, identity negotiation involves additional strategies: symbolic alignment (e.g., the use of Islamic greetings, local traditional clothing) and selective visibility (choosing when and to whom ethnic identity is displayed). This expands the understanding

of identity negotiation theory by adding the factor of "dominance of local norms" as an important variable in determining communication strategies.

This study shows that the three layers of prefiguration–configuration–figuration do not run linear, but are cyclical and situational. Identities can "jump" from figuration back to configuration when social context changes abruptly (e.g. when a sensitive issue occurs on campus social media). These findings extend the semio-pragmatic framework of Frame & Boutaud by emphasizing the dynamic and reciprocal nature of the layers.

In the Madura context, identity negotiation is not only interpersonal, but also symbolic-political, related to social legitimacy and stigma avoidance. This dimension enriches symbolic interactionism with evidence that daily interactions on campus also contain strategic calculations related to the social position of the group. Holliday and Zhou et al. show that in a more open multicultural academic environment, international students tend to use self-disclosure and mutual adaptation strategies directly (Holliday, 2018; Zhou et al., 2023). The findings of this study are different because students in Madura use more indirect negotiation and symbolic adaptation strategies, adjusting first before fully opening their identities. Marginson emphasizes the concept of student self-formation in international education, where identity is formed through the freedom to choose adaptation strategies (Marginson, 2014). The study found that such freedom is limited by strong local norms, so the process of self-formation must first pass through local social acceptance mechanisms.

Ting-Toomey & Dorjee emphasized the importance of facework in identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018). This study reinforces this concept by showing specific forms of facework in Madura, such as avoiding sensitive topics, showing excessive politeness, and following local rituals to maintain harmony in relationships. Frame & Boutaud outline the three layers of identity construction as a sequential process. These findings suggest that the process is more interactive and repetitive—layers can influence each other simultaneously depending on the dynamics of social situations (Frame & Boutaud, 2011).

Conclusion

This study confirms that the identities of cross-ethnic students in Madura are dynamic, contextual, and performative. Using a semio-pragmatic approach, identity is understood through three main layers, namely prefiguration (inherited cultural values), configuration (adjustment to the social context of the campus), and figuration (identity performance in situational interactions). The findings show that students are not only subjects of the identities they carry from the beginning but also active agents in creating new meanings of who they are within the cross-cultural spaces of the campus. The process of identity negotiation is not only a reflection of self-change, but also shows how students respond to dominant norms, build social relationships, and manage diversity strategically. Identities are not displayed consistently, but are tailored to specific interaction goals, social expectations, and communicative contexts. This finding strengthens the position of identity communication theory and symbolic interactionism in understanding the dynamics of intercultural communication in higher education spaces. From a practical perspective, this study emphasizes the importance of educational institutions providing an open and equal space for cultural dialogue. Campuses need to design cross-cultural communication training programs that are not only integrative but also transformative. For future research, semio-pragmatic approaches can be further developed in other contexts—such as multicultural work environments, digital communities, or public communication platforms—to examine how identity figurations emerge in increasingly complex fields of interaction.

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