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RE-UNDERSTANDING INDONESIAN STUDENT MOBILITY: INTRICATE ENTANGLEMENTS OF IDENTITY FORMATION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract
The impact of globalization on higher education, understood as the increasing interconnectedness of academic systems, student mobility, and the circulation of knowledge across borders, has shaped students' experiences of Studying Abroad (henceforth SA) and influenced their identity formation. This study explores the aspirations and challenges of the alumni of the student mobility program held by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) called MORA Overseas Student Mobility Awards (MOSMA), focusing on how they navigate identity in diverse cultural and linguistic settings throughout their SA journeys. Utilizing a narrative inquiry approach with a qualitative orientation, the research draws on Darvin and Norton's model of language, identity, and investment. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four Indonesian SA students from three Islamic universities in East Java, ensuring representation of diverse perspectives**.** Thematic analysis was conducted to identify their aspirations, struggles, and identity negotiations. Results indicate that SA supports the acquisition of cultural, social, and linguistic capital but requires negotiation of identities when facing insecurities related to language use and integration into foreign cultures. The interplay between language learning and identity formation is complex, often shaped by unequal power relations in these contexts. Upon return, the students also participated in additional identity negotiations as they reconciled the SA-transformed self with pre-SA roles, synthesizing global experiences not consistently valued in home settings.

Keywords: identity formation, language learning, narrative inquiry, study abroad

Introduction
The rapid advancement of globalization and the internationalization of higher education have reshaped institutional orientations, prompting adjustments in curricula, teaching methods, recruitment, and language policies (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Guo et al., 2022; Lin, 2020). A key trend in this process is the rise of mobility programs, like Erasmus, which are often commodified as neoliberal

strategies for gaining authenticity and global affiliation (O'Regan, 2021). These programs, involving the movement of students, staff, and ideas across regions, are widespread in both developed and developing contexts, with China, the USA, India, and Western countries as major senders and hosts (Institute for International Education, 2019). In Indonesia, the government promotes mobility to strengthen human resources, collaboration, and cultural exchange while enhancing exposure to English and international networks (Kinginger, 2008; Kubota, 2009; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009).

As stated in Indonesia's vision of the "Golden Generation 2045," the government has invested in human resources through scholarship schemes such as the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) launched in 2021 and the Ministry of Religious Affairs Overseas Student Mobility Awards (MOSMA) in 2023. While IISMA mainly targets public university students who generally possess stronger English proficiency and face higher thresholds (IELTS 6.0; iBT 78; Duolingo 100), MOSMA was created to address disparities faced by Islamic higher education institutions (PTKI), many of whose students come from *pesantren* backgrounds with limited English exposure. To ensure inclusivity, MOSMA applies regionally adjusted benchmarks (TOEFL ITP 475–500, IELTS 5.0–5.5, Duolingo 80–90) (Kementerian Agama, 2023; Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2023). While both are competitive, IISMA emphasizes academic excellence. In contrast, MOSMA strategically provides equitable access for PTKI students to engage in international exchanges, with differentiated standards directly acknowledging the gap in English preparation.

Here, MOSMA not only guarantees access to foreign opportunities for students of PTKI who are usually more deprived than their public institution counterparts, but also exposes them to linguistic divergence, acculturation, and asymmetric access to symbolic and social capital barriers. MOSMA students, e.g., display slightly lower foreign language proficiency than their IISMA students' counterparts, a difference which may reinforce linguistic issues and academic mobility (Beregovaya & Kudashov, 2019; Muthuswamy & Varshika, 2023; Su, 2025). These issues are similar to larger literatures on student mobility, where students' weaknesses have been a perennial research object. For example, Calikoglu (2018) identified that non-English-speaking students faced issues of linguistic strain and isolation; and Kalocsai (2013) and Llanes et al. (2016) discovered that Erasmus students' knowledge of English was refined by English-medium instruction and lingua franca use outside the lecture. SA students' motivations and institution- and socio-economically motivated study abroad (SA), studied by Raby et al. (2021), and Benson et al. (2012), where Hong Kong students transferred gradually from identification with being "language learners" and gradually became "language users", benefiting from rising confidence.

Drawing on these observations, recent scholarship has increasingly examined the question of identity formation in study abroad contexts and underscored how exclusion and inequality often accompany growth prospects. Ye and Edwards (2017) describe agency, motivation, and reflexivity shaping the identities of PhD students from China. However, their interviewees were still exposed to essentialist views and discrimination, resonating with Kubota's (2016) critique. Analogous complications were documented by Acevedo (2024) among study abroad-based marginalized students. In Indonesian contexts, Muslim

students at Dutch institutions were found by Syafiyah et al. (in press) to face uneven power relations and linguistic exclusion that undermine the benefits of studying abroad. It confirms that cosmopolitan ideas about global citizenship (Sakhiyya, 2022; Sonntag, 2009) are never fully realized and that study abroad contexts often reinforce national rather than cosmopolitan identifications.

Even as the number of Indonesian students studying overseas continues to grow, there remains limited scholarship on their identity formation, particularly within Islamic higher education. This concern is important because PTKI students generally face distinctive challenges compared to their peers from public universities, including lower average English proficiency scores, minimal prior exposure to international academic environments, and the need to navigate dual identifications as Muslims and Indonesian students abroad (Hastowohadi & Widiantari, 2025; Thoyib et al., 2024) in largely non-Muslim contexts. Moreover, PTKI students abroad constitute a significant yet often overlooked population within Indonesia's global engagement agenda, making their study experiences crucial for understanding access, equity, and identity formation (Achruh & Sukirman, 2024), despite the steady increase in student mobility. Although the number of students going abroad continues to rise, little is known about their aspirations and expectations on the one hand, their challenges on the other, and how transnational academic and social spaces reshape their fluid positions between localism and cosmopolitanism (Kull, 2016).

Drawing from a post-structuralist perspective that views identity as multifaceted and fluid (Bourdieu, 1991; Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013; Purpuri et al., 2024), this research examines how participants engaged with diverse English varieties, navigated multiple linguistic repertoires, and negotiated religious, cultural, and academic identifications while studying abroad. The experiences of MOSMA students in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking contexts illustrate how identity is continually reshaped through interactions with local and global forces, with their status as Muslims and students of Indonesian Islamic institutions forming a key dimension of this process. Focusing on students from Islamic backgrounds outside the Arab world, this study broadens debates that often privilege Middle Eastern Muslim students (Anderson, 2020; Litvin, 2018), thereby contributing to scholarship on study abroad, identity formation, and Islamic higher education. On this basis, the study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What aspirations and struggles do MOSMA alumni have before, during, and after their study abroad?
2. How do MOSMA alumni negotiate their identity formation when entering a new space in the host country and re-entering the home country?

Theoretical Frameworks

The practices and processes of (foreign) language learning are not neutral entities. Instead, they are constructed within interconnected spectrums, including pedagogical, social, and political domains. In other words, deciding to learn or not to learn a named language is not necessarily a free choice. However, it may involve desire, imagination, and aspirations of the self and others. Learners always bring reasons, motivations, and expectations when they study a particular

language. While motivation tends to be understood as a psychological construct, Darvin and Norton (2015) argue that students may be motivated to learn a named language but may not necessarily invest in language practices. They explain that when learners decide to invest in a language, they do so with a strong commitment and understanding that their language learning practices can contribute to attaining social, cultural, and linguistic capital.

Darvin and Norton (2023) further clarify the differences between motivation and investment. Investment refers to a "sociological construct [that] focuses on how histories, lived experiences, and social practices shape language learning" (p. 29). In their Model of Investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015), investment is interconnected with identity, ideology, and capital. Norton (2013) defines identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (p. 45).

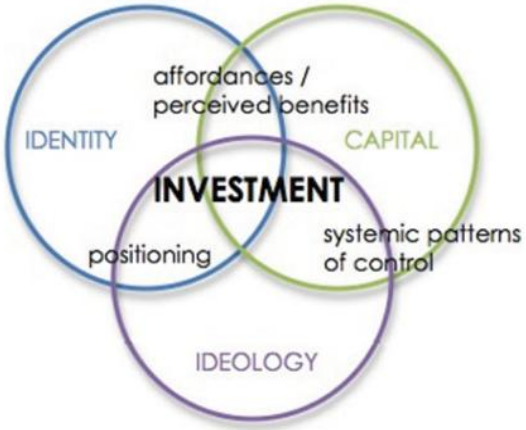

Figure 1. Model of investment (Darvin & Norton, 2015)

It is essential to emphasize that Darvin and Norton (2015, 2023) understand identity, as well as ideology, as changing and fluid rather than fixed or stable, which corroborates Block's (2007) definition of identity as "negotiating new subject positions at the crossroads of past, present, and future" (p. 27). In other words, they employ post-structuralist perspectives in examining identity formation, highlighting identity as a battlefield of struggles and renegotiation that is multiple and continually shifting across time and space. At the same time, ideologies are understood as ways of thinking that dominate particular social groups or entities and constitute their practices (Darvin & Norton, 2023, p. 36). Building on Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field and Foucault's notion of power, Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment model emphasizes that identity shapes and is shaped by ideology and capital, which influence learners' investment in language learning. Investment positions learners as social beings with complex identities reproduced through interaction, a valuable framework for understanding Indonesian SA students whose aspirations and imagined identities intertwine with language acquisition, cultural and social capital accumulation, and recognition gained through mobility programs. Their struggles to secure scholarships and opportunities abroad can thus be read as manifestations of investment, showing how power, ideology, and resource access mediate identity construction and participation in global academic communities.

Method

This study employed a narrative inquiry approach within an interpretive paradigm, aligned with a qualitative design to explore the complexities of reality, truth, and meaning as subjective constructs shaped by individual interpretations (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014). Interpretivism posits that reality is formed through experiences and social interactions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) and acknowledges the evolving nature of truth. In this case, the narrative inquiry is appropriate, where the approach intends to understand the shifting meaning through a detailed case or phenomenological study. It therefore suits the study in exploring Indonesian students' aspirations and identities through their SA experiences. Further, in this approach, both the researcher and the informants enter into a dialogical process whereby meaning is co-constituted, as explained by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which, consequently, allows the more profound comprehension of these students' complex identities as learners, Muslims, and Indonesians.

Four female graduates of the MOSMA program (Santi, Shifa, Shami, and Gita) participated in the study. As recipients of MOSMA scholarships, they received financial and institutional support for study abroad (SA). At the time of data collection, the participants were students who also engaged in part-time or campus-based professional roles, such as tutoring or organizational membership, which shaped their views of academic and cultural experiences. Three studied in the United States and one in Malaysia, each for one semester (about four months). The variation in geographic and linguistic contexts allowed exploration of how English-majority and multilingual, Muslim-dominated environments influenced identity negotiation. Recruitment was guided by two criteria: institutional backgrounds, destination variation, and program duration. Participants represented two state Islamic universities (Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang and Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya) and one private Islamic university (Universitas Kiai Abdullah Faqih, Gresik). East Java was selected as the research site because it hosts major Islamic higher education institutions and provides a diverse yet accessible pool of MOSMA alumni, ensuring feasibility and representativeness.

Table 1. Informants and their institutional affiliations

Informants	Gender	L1	Home Institution	Host Institution	Duration of SA
Santi	Female	Bahasa Indonesia	Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang	Columbia University, US	4 months
Shifa	Female	Bahasa Indonesia	Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Ampel Surabaya	Temple University, US	4 months

Informants	Gender	L1	Home Institution	Host Institution	Duration of SA
Shami	Female	Bahasa Indonesia	Universitas Kiai Abdullah Faqih	Buffalo State University, US	4 months
Gita	Female	Bahasa Indonesia	Universitas Kiai Abdullah Faqih	Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia	4 months

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews framed in narrative structure, where participants described their English learning, MOSMA experiences, life abroad, and readjustment upon return. Depending on participants' choice, interviews were conducted in Indonesian or English, lasted 60–90 minutes, audio-taped with permission, transcribed verbatim, and transformed into narratives. To enhance credibility, member checking was used through transcript and summary verification, and researcher triangulation was applied by cross-checking coding and theme development. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed through open coding (aspirations, struggles, identity), axial coding (clusters such as linguistic preparation and intercultural adaptation), and selective coding (themes of aspirations and investments, linguistic differences, identity negotiation, and religious practice). Findings are presented in a chronological narrative (before–during–after SA) while remaining grounded in themes generated through coding. Participants' stories also revealed that study abroad choices were shaped by family encouragement, scholarship opportunities, and linguistic preparation, with some coming from *pesantren* backgrounds with limited English exposure and others benefiting from university language centers. Identity negotiation further involved balancing their roles as Muslims, Indonesians, and international students, particularly in reconciling religious practices (e.g., halal food, prayer) with academic and social demands abroad.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The findings are presented chronologically, corresponding to the students' paths before, during, and after their study abroad (SA). Though the accounts are presented temporally, the analysis has strong foundations in the thematic outcomes of the thematic analysis coding procedure. In particular, four main themes were revealed: aspirations and investments, language differences, identity negotiation, and reconciliation of reshaped identities. The four main themes are interwoven through the various stages of the SA experience, so the findings do not just reflect the sequential experiences of the participants but also the structured meaning about the way in which they built and negotiated their identity.

Aspirations and struggles of MOSMA alumni prior to, during, and after study abroad

The USA and Malaysia MOSMA students' SA dilemmas and motivations will at least partially illuminate complicated intersections of second or foreign language learning and identity and investment. Following Darvin and Norton's (2015) specialist identity-investment-language learning, the paper sheds light on migration students whose motivations are not simply issues of linguistic competence but foretell individual aspirations intertwined with bigger sociocultural compulsions in accumulating social and cultural and linguistic capital. These three concise sections hold rich information about four participating students of an SA program: Gita, Shifa, Santi, and Shami. They reveal that motivations for studying abroad have never had anything to do with language learning. However, they have adopted a tighter connection with individual growth, cultural exchange, and the necessities of living on a globalized planet. They suit Darvin and Norton's (2015) narrative about language learning, investment, and identity, where linguistic practice makes sense within the terms of reference of economic, ideological, and social terms rather than things or abstract entities.

Gita spoke to this desire to be immersed in the environment that surrounds her with English-speaking individuals: "I have always wanted to gain experience of studying abroad, surrounded by foreigners or native English speakers." This echoes exposure to native speakers as part of Gita's imagined experience abroad, corroborating Darvin and Norton (2015) who argue that language learning entails not only mastering linguistic systems but also pursuing social and cultural capital. For Gita, a native-speaker environment promised access to global English and the benefits tied to linguistic and cultural capital, validating the claim that learners invest in language with hopes of gaining social mobility and global networks. Similarly, Shifa's motivation stemmed from her engagement with English-language media, as she noted: "Because I love to watch and listen to English movies and music, I was motivated to go there." Her narrative reflects Darvin and Norton (2015) who emphasize that motivations are shaped by desire as the hunger for new experiences and imagination as the construction of future roles. By envisioning herself within a global cultural sphere where English symbolizes modernity, entertainment, and status, Shifa's investment aligns with Dewey et al. (2013) who highlight the role of media and culture in bridging language development. Thus, her engagement with English media functioned as both an affective and ideologically shaped entry point into broader global networks.

Santi gave a somewhat different reason for her motivation, relating it to the opportunity of having a real-life test of her competence in English. She said: "For me, I wanted to test my English skills. When you are abroad, you have to use English, so I wanted to know if they could understand me. That would mean that I am competent." Her position now is yet another instrumental orientation of learning a foreign language, where SA is a gateway toward attaining her linguistic competence based on interaction with native speaking partners. That brings into prominence what Darvin and Norton have been positing about the investment-motivation dynamic. So far as she is motivated toward speaking English, Santi invests in the foreign language only where proficiency development and proficiency evidence are realized within real-life communicative situations. That

she wants to be correctly perceived by native speakers brings into prominence the acquisition of linguistic capital, where foreign language proficiency is a yardstick of competence and achievement within global communities.

By comparison, Shami's motivation centered on how globalization played a significant role in her choice of studying abroad: "Now, with the fast development of globalization, we need to establish connections and relationships with the outside world for not being left behind. And my personal motivation is to acquire global experience and connections." Shami's story shows how global connectedness shaped learners' aspirations, as her investment in studying abroad was tied to global networks as pathways for professional and social promotion, resonating with Darvin and Norton's (2015) argument that investment in language learning requires awareness of power and ideologies in globalized contexts. Her motivation reflects broader literature on study abroad, which highlights gains in language proficiency, intercultural competence, and social capital. For example, Santi noted that surviving in academic and social life demanded daily English use that improved her fluency and confidence, Shifa reported better listening comprehension from English media and classroom input, and Shami emphasized how Malaysia's multilingual ecology expanded her sociolinguistic awareness (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Yet, as Kinginger (2013) and Kubota (2016) stress, contradictions remain: Santi feared not being understood by native speakers, and Shami's case revealed how globalization situates study abroad within unequal power relations and asymmetrical access to capital (Syafiyah et al., in press). These struggles, including negotiating identity, building social capital, and adapting to cultural differences, affirm Darvin and Norton's (2015, 2023) view that language learning is inseparable from social, cultural, and ideological contexts, as seen in Shami's difficulty in forming local friendships despite her aspiration to establish global networks of relationships, as stated: "I found it hard to approach them. I felt more comfortable interacting with fellow Indonesian students."

Shami's failure to form local relationships marks the power and discourse relations where the identity is fluid, relational, and defined from and by contact across and by space and time. Through the experience, the uneven relations' dynamics were drawn partially from the locations of culture and language. Although Shami's mastery of English made it easier for her to perform at school, her relationships and contact with local students in Malaysia were minimal because they had a knack for switching to Malay when conversing, leaving her out of full value membership. Further, being of international status included being made an outsider and hence failed to access equal full membership within local networks. This marks the tension between the need for Shami to access social capital within a globalizing atmosphere and the need to move within the relations where the code of language, sense of cultures known, and local membership advance him toward the margins. This observation verifies Kinginger (2013) and Kubota (2016), who suggest that SA students are prone to hardly integrating within receiving communities and end up remaining within circles of known cultures, therefore minimizing the possibility of acquiring higher knowledge of the cultures.

Santi wanted to have her English tested abroad. She describes the onset of linguistic insecurity: "In the first weeks of my classes, I felt a bit worried because

I was afraid that my English wasn't good enough, what if they did not understand what I was saying. I often held myself back from speaking." Her hesitation and self-doubt show how larger social ideologies regarding linguistic competence shape her struggles. As Darvin and Norton (2023) explain, "language learners' identities are constituted in and through relations with power and capital." In this sense, Santi's fear of linguistic incompetence captures such a power dynamic whereby the native speaker is often put at the apex as guardian of legitimate language. Reluctance to engage, as manifested in his personal case of engagement by Santi, reflects findings by Dewey et al. (2013) on the role of meaningful social interactions in the target language. However, according to Kubota (2016), this might be complicated by linguistic discrimination or feelings of inferiority that could bar students from fully engaging in such interactions, hence further complicating their investment in language learning—a fact echoed by Irham (2022) and Huda and Irham (2023).

Gita, who had eagerly anticipated engaging with native English speakers, struggled with the reality of linguistic barriers, as she said:

> *Their accents were sometimes difficult to understand, especially by Afro-American speakers. Even among white native speakers, there were differences in accent or pronunciation. I felt nervous, not confident, because I felt that I wasn't as fluent as I had hoped.*

Gita's initial motivation to improve her English through immersion in an English-speaking environment reflects the idealized narrative of study abroad as a pathway to fluency and cultural competence (Irham, 2024; Irham & Wahyudi, 2023; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Yet, as Kinginger (2008, 2013) notes, the benefits of study abroad are often uneven, particularly when linguistic and cultural differences hinder fluency. For Gita, this unevenness appeared in her struggle to comprehend varied accents and in feelings of inadequacy, which shifted her experience from simple linguistic advancement toward a renegotiation of identity as an English learner and an engagement with the symbolic power of diverse Englishes. This highlights that study abroad does not automatically ensure language improvement but produces complex outcomes shaped by power relations, identity struggles, and learners' ability to cope with linguistic diversity. Such complexities are linked to the broader idealization of Western destinations as the most authentic sites of English learning, where interaction with native speakers is assumed to guarantee credibility. This perception, explained by Norton's (2013) concept of imagined community, shows how students form symbolic bonds with English-speaking nations even before departure, reinforcing the global hierarchy that positions the West as the authoritative center of English instruction despite the presence of rich linguistic resources in other contexts.

For example, Gita expressed her long-held dream of learning English directly from native speakers, stating:

> *It was always my big dream to go to America. I wanted to learn directly from native speakers and talk to them. Especially after joining the English department, I felt I would be more confident if I had been there. It would feel more authentic.*

Gita's statement reflects the common perception that native speakers hold the key to true linguistic mastery and that studying in the US would provide her with the confidence and authenticity she sought as an English language learner. This sense and view of authenticity was associated with the nativeness of English and English-speaking countries, although several studies had problematized such romanticism (Irham & Wahyudi, 2023)

Similarly, Santi, another student who studied in the US, linked her immersion experience to increased confidence. She said: "When I was in America, I had no choice but to speak English. I had to be able to survive in both social and academic life, and that was a valuable experience for me." Santi's narrative aligns with the notion that being in a native-speaking environment accelerates language acquisition and that surviving in this context validates her English skills. Gita and Santi illustrate how the West is imagined as a space where linguistic authenticity can be achieved (Huda & Irham, 2023; Kubota, 2016).

Shami's experience, however, complicates this idealization. Initially, Shami aspired to study in the UK, believing that it represented the pinnacle of English language learning. However, due to scholarship arrangements, she was placed in Malaysia, a non-Western country where English is a second language. She reflected:

> *At first, I wanted to go to the UK because that's where English is spoken. But my scholarship was redirected to Malaysia. It wasn't bad though, English is also a second language there. I noticed there are many differences in English varieties—Malay, Indian, Chinese. It's different from British or American English.*

Shami's example shows how her original idealized conception of British English was disrupted by encountering forms of English spoken within Malaysia, making her renegotiate what was proper English. Carrying forward the discussion of Darvin and Norton (2015) and Wenger's (1998) investment and identity construction concepts, both theories offer exhaustive accounts of students fulfilling their English learner identity within study abroad contexts where relations of power, ideology, and capital play a role in shaping one's experience. Wenger (1998) cites engagement, imagination, and alignment as central concepts underlying identity construction itself, while Darvin and Norton (2015), borrowing from Bourdieu's (1991) system of capital, build on this by introducing the role of cultural capital, social capital, and ideology within brokering learners' investment. Both theories apply within the context of Indonesian students such as Gita, Santi, and Shami negotiating their linguistic and social selves within their time abroad (Irham, 2022). Wenger (1998) points out engagement as taking on an active role within social practice that contributes toward membership, which was seen within the context of Santi within the US, where she was contracted to use English within academic and public contexts, where her linguistic proficiency was constantly tested and she incrementally gained greater confidence; she elaborated within an interview: "I didn't have the possibility of not speaking the language, so I had to survive both in social and academic life. That was very valuable for me."

Hence, such access to the worlds of practice of English was deserving of Santi's identity as a skilled user of English and cementing of her sense of

membership within the community. However, such engagement was not merely about exercising the practice of the language but about exercising power in determining which individuals deserve to be considered proper English speakers. For instance, Santi's attempt at engagement was subjected to the predominance of native speaker norms within the academic and social worlds of the United States. Thus, her user identity within English was always at risk of being put under the scanner and ranked. This power relation is defined by the uneven distribution of acknowledgment, legitimacy, and symbolic capital, where the native speaker is the yardstick and learners like Santi are always relegated to negotiate their space within these orders. Within Darvin and Norton's (2015) framework, Santi's engagement within the English-speaking community was an investment in her future identity as an English learner, where she gained access to cultural capital within relationships with native speakers, a form of symbolic capital affiliated with the prestige of English proficiency. At the same time, this process was framed by ideology, since her position as a learner was shaped by the global hegemony of native speaker norms, illustrating how learners must navigate such structures by striving not only for proficiency but also for recognition and legitimacy in communities where native speakers hold the most significant capital. The central role of imagination is also seen in Gita's desire to study in the United States, where she imagined the country as the ideal destination for improving her English, believing that interacting with native speakers would make her a more confident and authentic English user, which she expressed when she said: "I felt I would be more confident if I had been there. It would feel more authentic. Even after I returned, it seemed that many of my friends praised my study abroad experiences in the USA."

Her imagined identity as a fluent English speaker was closely tied to her view of the United States as a space where linguistic competence could be fully realized. Incorporating Darvin and Norton's (2015) theory, Gita's imagination of herself as an authentic English speaker is shaped by ideological constructs prioritizing native-speaker proficiency, positioning Western English as the gold standard she strives to attain by investing in her language learning abroad. Her desire to study in the United States is not only about improving her English but also about aligning with the dominant global order in which native speakers of English are seen as authoritative, reflecting Darvin and Norton's (2015) emphasis that investment in a second language is also an investment in future identity, one that learners hope will provide them with social mobility and recognition in a global context. Gita's decision to study in the United States reflects this broader understanding of identity and language learning as intertwined with the desire to gain symbolic capital in a world where English proficiency is highly valued. At the same time, Shami's experience in Malaysia highlights Wenger's (1998) concept of negotiation of meaning, where individuals must redefine their understanding of language and identity within new cultural contexts. Initially, Shami had imagined the United Kingdom as the best place to learn English and was shadowed by the idealized English of the UK. However, her scholarship placement in Malaysia exposed her to a different linguistic environment where English was influenced by various cultural and ethnic groups, including Malay, Indian, and Chinese communities, leading her to reflect critically on her earlier assumptions. Shami asserted: "At first, it seemed to be a bit funny, if not

awkward; to listen to some Indian, Malay, or Chinese. It's just different from British or American English, you know."

After repeated encounters, Shami realized that the Englishes she met daily were legitimate varieties, which increased her awareness of linguistic diversity (Huda & Irham, 2023). This shift illustrates the power relations in language learning, as both Gita and Santi, studying in the US, sought to align with global English norms to gain cultural capital, reflecting the privilege of native-speaker standards (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Their struggles highlight how recognition and legitimacy in language learning are unequally distributed, requiring non-native speakers to meet standards imposed by native speakers. Yet participants exercised agency as socioculturally mediated capacity (Darvin & Norton, 2015): Shami, redirected from the UK to Malaysia, embraced its multilingual ecology and redefined proficiency, while Gita maintained legitimacy by persisting in conversations despite self-doubt. These strategies negotiated rather than bypassed dominant ideologies, allowing them to sustain participation and investment. The broader narratives confirm that study abroad is not merely about acquiring competence but about navigating power, capital, and ideology. Encounters with native speakers, imagined identities, and multilingual contexts reveal struggles for recognition and legitimacy, while also exposing students to discrimination that positions Asians as linguistically deficient (Kubota, 2016). Gita and Shami's cases illustrate how Indonesian students actively negotiated such constraints: Gita by persisting to build confidence, and Shami by reframing English as flexible, consistent with findings by Irham (2022) and Ye and Edwards (2017) that Asian students are often marginalized abroad.

For instance, Gita had studied in the US and probably felt academically and personally disadvantaged because of her non-native status. One good example would be when one engages the native speakers in conversation owing to an accent or perceived lack of fluency, where the subtle or overt judgments may prevail. A hypothetical excerpt illustrating this might be:

> *Yeah, I remembered at one of my early classes I had there, I was talking to some of my classmates who were American. They often corrected my English and were slowing down their speech as if I couldn't understand. It made me feel embarrassed, like I didn't really belong in the conversation*.

This experience reflects findings in the literature that international students often face discrimination, from microaggressions to overt prejudice, due to their non-native English proficiency, and are thus viewed through a deficit lens (Irham, 2022; Kubota, 2016). For Gita, studying in the United States offered opportunities to improve her English but also exposed her to ideologies privileging native-speaker norms, where standardized English linked to White mainstream expectations shaped her feelings of inauthenticity and illegitimacy, illustrating the negative effects of linguistic discrimination (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Dragojevic & Goatley-Soan, 2022; Piller, 2017). In contrast, Shami's experience in Malaysia shows how a multilingual context mediated different identity outcomes, since the coexistence of English varieties normalized differences and reduced pressures to conform to a single authentic standard. English functioned as a lingua franca that

validated diverse identities, enabling her to claim legitimacy as a competent user, as reflected in her statement, "I feel competent enough," which strengthened her sense of belonging (Bakar & Hashim, 2024; Irham, 2023). Together, these cases demonstrate how study abroad outcomes depend on existing ideologies and sociolinguistic ecologies: while the American context fostered Gita's pursuit of authenticity but also deepened marginalization, Malaysia's multilingual setting gave Shami inclusivity and symbolic capital. These comparisons affirm that authenticity is better understood as a socially negotiated construct shaped by prevailing ideologies rather than as an inherent linguistic quality (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Piller, 2017).

The West as an avenue to cultivate religiosity

While the Western world, particularly the US, is often viewed as secular, students in this study discovered that their time abroad challenged their pre-existing religious views and offered opportunities to deepen their spiritual practices. The unfamiliar environment and diverse social dynamics led them to reconnect with their faith in meaningful ways. In contrast, for students studying in Malaysia, a multicultural and predominantly Muslim society, the experience provided opportunities to enhance their religious knowledge and build stronger connections with local religious communities.

For Santi, studying in the US initially brought concerns about how supportive the environment would be for her religious practices. However, her experience led to a surprising transformation in her relationship with her faith as she elaborated:

> *To be honest, at first, I was really worried that the environment in the US might not support my religious practices. You know, it was my very first time to live in a community where Muslims were a minority. But surprisingly, I felt closer to God there. In the midst of academic demands and a different environment, I prayed more and relied on spiritual strength. I became more aware of my prayer. There was space for reflection, and I even became more diligent in my religious duties than at home.*

The academic pressures and cultural differences in the US made Santi more dependent on her faith for personal and spiritual guidance. Rather than feeling alienated, her experience strengthened her religious connection, emphasizing how isolation from a religious community can sometimes deepen personal spirituality.

Similarly, Shifa found that living in a more secular society heightened her appreciation for her faith as she stated:

> *Because life, culture, and people in the US were so different from those in Indonesia, maybe in the USA it was more secular, I came to appreciate the importance of religion in my life. I found a very supportive Muslim community there, and I began to practice more regularly, even on campus. This helped me strengthen my faith, making me more aware of my identity as a Muslim in a place where the majority held different beliefs.*

Seeking to live within a context where religion was not so loudly foregrounded, Shifa actively sought out a community of Muslims. This both deepened her religion and shed light on the role of religious identity in maintaining individual resilience and rapport within culturally diverse situations. Her increased investment in religious practice demonstrates how living within a secular context can catalyze religious deliberation and spiritual growth.

Gita's experience in the US similarly shows how immersion in a non-Muslim society reinforced her religious discipline as she explained:

> *Living in a predominantly non-Muslim environment in the US gave me a new perspective on my religious practice and I think on the quality of my piety. I became more disciplined in my prayers and even found time for reflection and more frequent prayers. This strengthened my connection to my religion and made me appreciate the importance of spirituality in such a different setting.*

For Gita, the United States was a setting within which her religion was a strength and comfort. Being surrounded by others with different or no religious views did not discourage religious practice but caused her to renew and invest more seriously in religion instead. This is a sign that being a religious minority can endow persons with a stronger sense of religious orientation and religious identity.

On the other hand, Shami, when she was studying in Malaysia, found that religious diversity and a majority Muslim environment made it easier to visit non-Muslim houses of prayer and study other religions as she told:

> *In Malaysia, it was easier for me to practice my religion because the society is also religiously diverse and Muslims remain a large community there. Even though it wasn't what I had imagined when I wanted to go to the UK, here I found opportunities to learn more deeply about Islam and other "forms" of Islamic practices as well as Muslim cultures.*

For students like Shami, Shifa, Gita, and Santi, studying abroad meant not only academic growth but also deep spiritual development, as plural or secular contexts prompted a reassessment of religiosity and new ways of connecting with faith. In the United States, where religion is practiced less overtly, students such as Gita developed more individual and reflexive relationships with their religious identity through increased prayer, while Shami's experience in Muslim-majority Malaysia fostered community building and engagement with Islamic practice. Within Darvin and Norton's (2015) investment framework, these practices represent investments in religious identity shaped by local contexts: Gita's prayer in a secular setting was an investment in individual fortification as symbolic capital, while Shami's Islamic activities in Malaysia built religious knowledge and networks affirming her place in the ummah. This shows that religiosity abroad is not homogeneous but contingent on context, with investment taking the form of self-regulation and reflexive spirituality in non-religious environments (Boucher & Kucinskas, 2016; Helmiati, 2021) and group practice and knowledge

in Muslim-majority cultures (González, 2011; Ngeow & Ma, 2016). Thus, students' religious selves became symbolic capital shaping their identification and positioning in host cultures (Stavrova & Siegers, 2014), with study abroad reinforcing rather than diminishing their religiosity in both minority and majority settings.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the study abroad (SA) experiences of MOSMA alumni are situated in a complex field where aspirations, linguistic challenges, identity negotiations, and post-return reconciliation are deeply intertwined. The findings indicate that participants' motivations for going abroad were not limited to improving language proficiency but were also tied to gaining linguistic, social, and cultural capital that could enhance their standing in global contexts (Bourdieu, 1991; Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2023). In practice, they encountered linguistic insecurity, difficulty understanding accents, and limited opportunities to connect with local peers. At the same time, these experiences became spaces for religious reinforcement both as Muslim minorities in the United States and as part of a Muslim-majority context in Malaysia while also fostering awareness of the plurality of Englishes. Upon their return, the participants faced the challenge of reconciling their post-SA selves with pre-departure roles in their home environments.

This pattern can be explained through the concept of investment, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of identity, ideology, and capital. Students invested in language practices because they envisioned social mobility, prestige, and symbolic recognition attached to language competence and global networks (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2023; Norton, 2013). Yet, ideological inequalities regarding who has the authority to define legitimate English reinforced native speakerism as the standard, generating insecurity and self-restraint in communication (Kinginger, 2013; Kubota, 2016). Moreover, the sociolinguistic ecology of host countries mediated these outcomes. The United States demanded high performativity under the hegemony of native-speaker norms, while Malaysia's multilingual ecology validated plural Englishes and encouraged a reframing of competence (Bakar & Hashim, 2024; Huda & Irham, 2023; Irham, 2023). Religious positioning also shaped experiences differently. In minority contexts, participants strengthened individual discipline and community bonds, whereas in majority contexts, they expanded knowledge and communal ties (González, 2011; Helmiati, 2021; Ngeow & Ma, 2016). These findings are consistent with poststructuralist perspectives that view identity as multiple, shifting, and negotiated across time and space (Block, 2007; Darvin & Norton, 2015; Norton, 2013).

The meaning of these findings lies in several dimensions. Study abroad emerges not as a linear path to proficiency but as a symbolic battleground where linguistic and cultural capital are unevenly distributed and legitimized (Bourdieu, 1991). Accent anxiety and the pursuit of authenticity reflect ideological structures that subordinate non-native speakers (Kubota, 2016; Piller, 2017). However, exposure to Asian Englishes shifted students' understandings of authenticity from Anglo-centric ideals to pluricentric perspectives, positioning competence as the ability to participate across varieties rather than conform to Western norms (Bakar

& Hashim, 2024; Huda & Irham, 2023; Irham, 2023). Religiosity functioned as both symbolic and social capital. In minority contexts, religious practices became sources of resilience, while in majority contexts, they became resources for knowledge and community building (Helmiati, 2021; Stavrova & Siegers, 2014). From the lens of investment, such practices reflect identity investments that enhanced agency in navigating academic and sociocultural demands (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2023).

Compared with prior studies, these findings both confirm and extend the existing literature. They confirm that the benefits of SA are uneven and shaped by ideologies and power relations (Kinginger, 2008, 2013; Kubota, 2016), and those initial motivations often evolve into deeper investments once opportunities for symbolic and cultural capital become visible (Darvin & Norton, 2015; Dewey et al., 2013). They also resonate with earlier findings about the linguistic challenges and social isolation faced by non-native-speaking students (Calikoglu, 2018; Llanes et al., 2016). At the same time, this study contributes a new focus by examining PTKI students, a relatively overlooked population in Indonesia's international mobility discourse. The dimension of Islamic identity and unequal access experienced by MOSMA participants offers a more comprehensive understanding of how religious and institutional backgrounds intersect with SA experiences (Achruh & Sukirman, 2024; Hastowohadi & Widiantari, 2025; Thoyib et al., 2024). Furthermore, the reframing of authenticity through exposure to Asian Englishes and the reinforcement of religiosity in both minority and majority contexts enrich the literature on identity formation in SA (González, 2011; Helmiati, 2021; Ngeow & Ma, 2016). These results also challenge the romanticization of SA as an automatic route to cosmopolitanism, showing instead that it often reproduces hierarchies of language and identity (Kubota, 2016; Sakhiyya, 2022; Sonntag, 2009; Syafiyah et al., in press).

The implications of this study are twofold. Theoretically, it calls for broadening the investment framework beyond linguistic domains to include religious and socio-professional dimensions. The perspective of English as a Lingua Franca is particularly relevant for analyzing how legitimacy and competence are negotiated in multilingual ecologies (Huda & Irham, 2023; Irham, 2023). Methodologically, narrative inquiry proved effective in capturing shifts in identity across time and space, but future studies may benefit from longitudinal approaches that track post-return identity reconciliation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Practically, the findings suggest the need for more comprehensive pre-departure programs that integrate critical language awareness, intercultural competence, and religious preparedness. During the program, students should be supported through peer mentoring, diaspora networks, and English as a Lingua Franca-oriented spaces to avoid cultural isolation. After their return, institutions should formally recognize students accumulated capital through academic credit, professional certification, or alumni mentoring programs. For PTKI and policymakers, these findings underline the importance of maintaining equitable access while simultaneously enhancing linguistic preparation and intercultural support. In this way, SA programs can move beyond language training toward fostering symbolic, personal, and professional growth in diverse global contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored the aspirations and challenges faced by MOSMA alumni during their study abroad (SA) experiences, showing how their goals to gain cultural, social, and linguistic capital were often complicated by linguistic insecurity, integration difficulties, and struggles over legitimacy in intercultural encounters. While Gita and Shifa's aspirations extended beyond proficiency toward global cultural engagement, and Santi sought validation as an English user, their narratives illustrate how identity formation is deeply entangled with power relations and linguistic prejudice, including exclusion and judgment based on accent, perceived proficiency, or non-native English usage. To mitigate these challenges, institutional support is crucial: students must be prepared for accent variation and cultural differences, supported through mentorship networks and intercultural exchange during their stay, and guided in transforming their global exposure into meaningful capital upon return. Such measures reduce feelings of illegitimacy and strengthen students' ability to engage productively in diverse intercultural contexts.

At the same time, this research shows that study abroad is never a straightforward path to fluency or integration but a complex process of identity negotiation under unequal power relations. For Indonesian higher education institutions, especially Islamic ones, this calls for embedding intercultural competencies, critical language awareness, and reflections on power and identity into curricula so that students are equipped to navigate secular and multicultural settings abroad and reintegrate meaningfully into Indonesian society. In doing so, SA programs can move beyond language training toward holistic support that normalizes linguistic diversity, validates multiple forms of English, and fosters students' symbolic, personal, and professional growth.

In line with its contributions, this study also has several limitations. The sample was restricted to four female participants from a single program, which limited the scope of perspectives and excluded male students or younger learners. The study relied on a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, making the findings rich in detail but not easily generalizable to broader populations. In addition, the research focused only on a single time frame and did not allow for comparative analysis across different cohorts, institutions, or stages of education. Future research should therefore include more diverse cases at multiple levels of education, extend to different types of institutions, and consider comparative or longitudinal approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Indonesian students' study abroad experiences.

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