

Research article

Indonesian Cultural Representation in Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII) Virtual Exchange Programs

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ORCIDGinanjar Gailea: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5495-2483>**Abstract.**

The virtual exchange program is one of the media used to facilitate cross-cultural understanding among students in a time when physical encounters cannot take place. The program invited participants to acknowledge multiculturalism and generate respect and empathy among various collective identities. Drawing on the Stuart Hall's theory of representation, this study examines and analyzes the cultural elements displayed during a series of virtual exchange programs held in 2021. Specifically, it discusses the representation issues related to Indonesian cultures discovered during the virtual cultural exchange programs administered by the Directorate of Partnership/Office of International Affairs Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII) Yogyakarta during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that the representation of Indonesian cultures in the programs was partial and Java-centric. The depiction of Indonesian cultures through visual and audiovisual tools was dominated by the elements derived from Javanese culture and tradition. Hopefully, this study can enrich the ongoing academic conversations on Indonesian cultural representation in the age of new media.

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1. Introduction

The term virtual exchange refers to 'the engagement of groups of learners in online intercultural interactions and collaboration projects with partners from other cultural contexts or geographical locations as an integrated part of their educational programs' [1 p1]. This online collaborative activity has become a significant means to equip students with global competence, i.e., cross-cultural communication, critical thinking, global and cultural understanding, and global collaboration [2]. Compared to the mobility program which is mostly limited to a small number of students, virtual exchange opens wider opportunities for students from various backgrounds to learn about other cultures. Virtual exchange can actually attract a large number of students to participate as the program is usually free of charge. Students on a tight budget who want to experience

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international exposure can utilize this program to improve global and intercultural competence from their respective home countries.

Beside bringing positive impacts toward students, the virtual exchange also supports the internationalization of universities [2,3]. In Universitas Islam Indonesia (UII), the virtual exchange has become a prominent program within the framework of international partnership and collaboration with universities abroad. During the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia—which started in March 2020—the virtual exchange program plays a critical role in building and maintaining cooperation between UII and its partner universities. This program is also an effective collaborative work that temporarily replaces the short-term student mobility program which demands participants to travel to other countries. Therefore, the virtual exchange program serves as strategic mitigation to cope with Covid-19 travel restriction.

The present study intends to discuss the conduct of virtual exchange programs held in UII by the Directorate of Partnership/Office of International Affairs (DP/OIA) throughout 2021. Since each program selected for this study contains a series of webinars on both academic and non-academic topics, the study only focuses on the programs which facilitate webinars about cultural topics, particularly the ones that aim to introduce and promote Indonesian culture to the international audience. This study attempts to discuss the representation of Indonesian cultures in virtual programs and analyze it using Stuart Hall's theory of cultural representation.

There have been researchers who studied the effect of virtual exchange in developing students' cross-cultural awareness as part of global competence. For instance, Gareth Barkin [4], in his observation toward the online intercultural learning program in 2020 which involved American and Indonesian undergraduate students, argues that virtual medium is able to improve students' 'intercultural competence' [p112]. By studying reflective writings made by the students after the program, Barkin claims that the virtual exchange program does not only succeed to extend the knowledge on the selected topics discussed in the program, but also to grow empathy and flexibility in the face of cultural differences.

A nearly similar study was conducted by Duffy et al. [2]. Their study attempts to understand how virtual exchange facilitates undergraduate students from the U.S. and Thailand to improve cross-cultural communication and collaboration. After conducting observation and studying students' reflections and focus group data, they conclude that the U.S. students show considerable improvement in 'cross-cultural communication and critical thinking skills ... increased awareness and mindfulness of global and cultural dynamics, higher levels of perceived proficiency in global collaboration, and

experienced transformative learning as a result of participating in the virtual exchange project' [p1].

The research from Masimo Verzella [3] also demonstrates the positive impacts of virtual exchange programs. Verzella's study focuses on the role of international institutions with learning platforms they develop in enhancing pedagogy and English proficiency. In line with Barkin and Duffy, Verzella's findings suggest that virtual exchange 'fosters intercultural awareness and cosmopolitan open-mindedness' associated with global competence [p3]. The other studies from Machwate et al. [5] and Silvia Canto et al. [6] reveal how the virtual model of learning gives an impact on students' language proficiency. Further discoveries from Machwate identify the presence of self-reflection and cultural awareness after learning about other cultures.

Most studies on virtual exchange programs have only highlighted the evaluation aspects of whether the programs bring significant outcomes toward students, teachers, and pedagogy. However, the present study examines Ull virtual exchange programs as socio-cultural practices where cultural dialogues and contestations take place. This study provides an important opportunity to advance the understanding of the role of virtual exchange programs. Hopefully, this study can contribute to the ongoing debate on Indonesian cultural representation and national identity.

2. Method

The data utilized for the present study are derived from four virtual exchange programs organized by DP/OIA throughout 2021 i.e., *Cultural Exchange* in collaboration with Dicle University Turkey, *Cultural Session* for Ull International Students, *International Cultural Festival*, and *Global Outreach Program* in collaboration with Nanjing Xiaozhuang University. Each of these programs contains webinars on Indonesian cultures presented by lectures and cross-cultural experts from Ull. This study employs the recorded Zoom and Voov videos of Indonesian culture webinars owned by DP/OIA.

To understand how Indonesian cultures are represented in the selected programs, the study examines various elements of Indonesian cultures depicted through visual and audiovisual images such as food, dance, architecture, etc. This comprehensive examination is useful to identify whether one regional culture is dominantly represented compared to other regional cultures in Indonesia. Further, the study employs Stuart Hall's notion of cultural representation to shed some light on the sociopolitical construction of Indonesian cultures in the programs.

3. Discussion

3.1. Cultural elements

Indonesian national culture is the embodiment of diverse local cultures existing in the country. According to Koentjaraningrat, Indonesian culture should represent the dignity of the nation and become the identity of the nation and its people [7]. However, as Indonesia has around 1300 ethnic groups [8], the idea of national culture is problematic for it might not accommodate the rich diversity of the nation. For example, Bahasa Indonesia and Batik have been adopted as national cultures because they are accepted by the majority of Indonesians [9]. Nevertheless, there are many cultural elements (local languages, traditional houses, rituals, food, arts, etc.) from many regions in Indonesia which do not occupy the status as national culture. In this section, I discuss the kinds of local cultures presented in the virtual exchange programs which attempt to constitute the idea of Indonesian culture in general.

In all webinars on Indonesian culture, the presenters start their presentation with general knowledge about Indonesia. The presentations usually provide some information about geography, religion, ethnicity, and population of the country. The most common visual presented to the participants is the map of Indonesia which shows its topographical condition as an archipelagic or maritime country. The information related to religion, ethnicity, and population is often utilized to narrate the country's diversity which is an important value that participants should learn about Indonesia. In other words, the participants are introduced to the general information about Indonesia before they learn its cultures in detail.

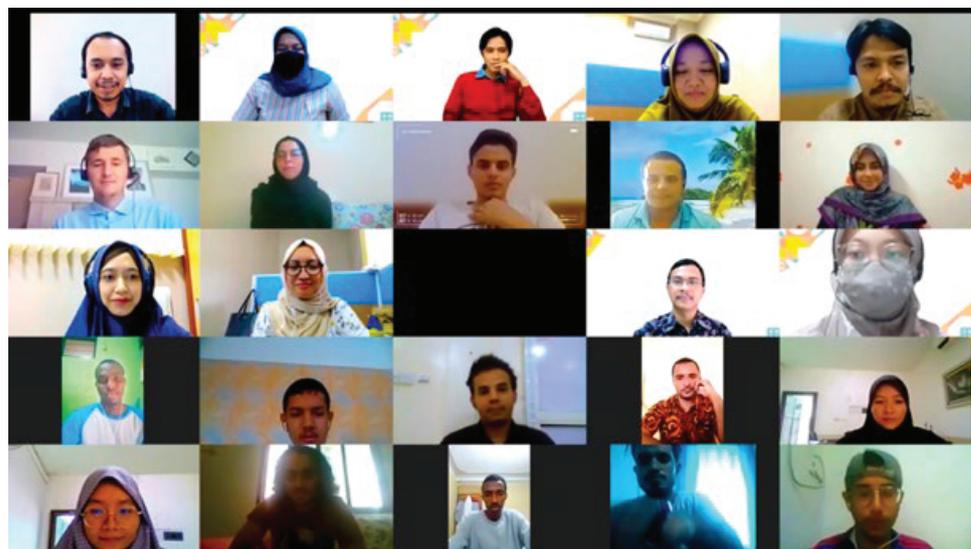


Figure 1: Cultural Session for International Students of UII Organized by DP/OIA.



Figure 2: Map of Indonesia Displayed in the Cultural Exchange Between Ull and Dicle University.

After observing the recorded videos, the study categorizes Indonesian cultures presented in the programs into several cultural elements. One of the prominent elements explained by the presenters during the programs is Indonesian gastronomy [10]. The participants are introduced to a number of Indonesian foods e.g., Beef Rendang, Gudeg, Soto, Fried Rice, Bakmi, and local beverages e.g., Wedang Jahe, Es Cendol and Es Campur. A special session related to Indonesian cuisine in *Global Outreach Program* shows a live presentation on how to prepare Gado-Gado and Lotis, two popular local dishes from Indonesia. It is an interactive online session where the participants can directly comment and ask questions regarding the culinary presentation. Another presentation on Indonesian food appears in the *Indonesian Cultural Festival*. A short video of Yogyakarta traditional food presents a young lady enjoying Gudeg, Bakmi, Wedang Ronde, and Javanese Beer. The lady in the video also invites the participants to see Bakpia home industry, one of the tourist attractions in Yogyakarta. She also explores Angkringan, a traditional way of selling food using a cart that mostly exists around the sidewalks in Yogyakarta. The presentation of Indonesian food also appears in the *Cultural Session* for Ull international students. There is footage showcasing local cuisine which the visitors can enjoy while staying in Yogyakarta, i.e., Soto, Bakso, Rawon, Gudeg, and Angkringan food.

The other cultural element displayed in the programs is performing art. In *International*

Cultural Festival, the cultural presentation highlights the diversity and uniqueness of Indonesian traditional dances from several regions in Indonesia e.g., Saman and Ratoh Jaroe from Aceh, Kancet Papatai from East Kalimantan, Kecak, Margapati, and



Figure 3: The Picture of Angkringan Food Stall in the Cultural Session for UII International Students.



Figure 4: The Picture of Margapati Dance from Bali in International Cultural Festival .

Legong from Bali, and Cakalele from Maluku. The presenter introduces the diversity of traditional dances through videos and visual presentations. The videos and the pictures describe not only the dances but also the traditional clothes as well as rituals associated with the dances. For example, one of the videos shows Ma'Badong dance from Toraja, Southeast Sulawesi. The video shows a group of men dressed in traditional clothes standing and moving in a circle while holding each other's hands, chanting words in the local language. This dance is part of the death ritual in Torajan tradition. In the *Global*

Outreach Program, the presenter highlights the Ramayana Ballet show as one of the popular performing arts people can watch in Yogyakarta. The show is a combination of dance and drama which is derived from the story of Ramayana. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Ramayana Ballet used to be a mandatory cultural show for the international mobility participants who visited Yogyakarta. Through Ramayana Ballet, the participants could learn about the influence of Hinduism to Indonesian culture while enjoying the show.

Next, buildings and architecture become the most essential elements discussed in the program. In *Cultural Exchange* with Dicle University [11], the presenter approaches Indonesian culture from the architectural point of view. Many visuals of classical and modern structures are shown such as temples, gardens, mosques, palaces, and traditional houses. Among these buildings, the images of Borobudur and Prambanan temples are frequently included. This study finds that the discussion on both temples appears not only in the *Cultural Exchange* with Dicle University, but also in the other three programs. In the *Cultural Session*, *International Cultural Festival*, and *Global Outreach Program*, both temples are introduced as the most visited destinations in Yogyakarta. The portrayal of these temples is conveyed through short videos or documentaries to emphasize the significance of the architecture [10–12]. Considered as the world heritage and remarkable religious monuments in Southeast Asia, Borobudur and Prambanan have become the national icons and popular tourist destinations in Indonesia. The presentation of both temples can shed some light on the history and diversity of the nation to the participants of the program.



Figure 5: The Visual of Borobudur Temple Displayed in the Cultural Exchange in Collaboration with Dicle University, Turkey.



Figure 6: The Visual of Prambanan Temple Displayed in the Global Outreach Program in Collaboration with Nanjing Xiaozhuang University, China.

Beside gastronomy, dance, and architecture, the virtual exchange programs also highlight other elements e.g., sculpture and batik. Yet, the exploration of these two artistic handcrafts is not much compared to the others mentioned above.

3.2. Java-Centric Representation

After examining the visuals of Indonesian cultures in the four virtual programs, I argue that the representations are mostly Java-centric. The elements of culture introduced to the participants in these programs dominantly belong to the Javanese art and cultural traditions. However, the exception can be made in the webinar about Indonesian dances in the *International Cultural Festival* where the presenter shows various kinds of traditional dances from many regions in Indonesia (not specifically from Java).

The Java-centric perspective is evident in the information about Indonesian food and beverage e.g., Gudeg, Soto, Bakmi Jawa, Es Cendol, Wedang Jahe, Wedang Ronde, and Javanese Beer. There is also footage showcasing the locals are having dinner at Angkringan—a traditional way of serving food in a cart. In addition, the depiction of buildings and architecture presents the dominance of Java-centrism. The visual and information about Borobudur and Prambanan temples appear many times in the virtual programs. These two megastructures in Java, which belong to the world heritage, might be the most well-known historical sites in Indonesia.

However, the significant portion of Javanese cultural representation in these programs, I argue, has limited the existence of other local cultures in Indonesia and obscured the diversity and plurality in Indonesia. The dominance of Javanese culture within the context of Indonesian culture might be influenced by the fact that the Javanese population constitutes about 40% of the country's population [13]. Moreover, in the era of the authoritarian New Order regime (1966-1998), Javanese culture played a crucial part in socio-political life as an essential instrument to convey the state's ideology and propaganda. The Soeharto's New Order administration deliberately ignored the cultural diversity and promoted state unity through massive exposure of Javanese cultural elements which were manipulated for the benefit of the regime [14]. Although Indonesia today has become more democratic, the hegemony of Javanese culture as a result of the New Order cultural policies still exists. Nevertheless, many attempts have been done during the Reformed era to present multiculturalism and pluralism of cultures of the nation.

3.3. Cultural Representation

Stuart Hall [15] defines culture as shared meanings that are produced and exchanged through language. These meanings drive our everyday practices and establish rules and norms which regulate both individuals and society. As a meaning-making process, culture is inherently dynamic as it always becomes subject to production and exchange.

We give meaning by how we represent them—the word we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them [p3].

The excerpt above shows the production and exchange of meaning through the act of representation. The language that is utilized to represent culture is not limited to linguistic sense (sounds, words, and sentences), but also the media incorporating either visual or audiovisual tools e.g., newspaper, magazine, TV program, online videos, etc.

The virtual exchange programs, in my opinion, have played a significant role in representing Indonesian culture to the global public, particularly during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the context of university internationalization, they are effective to replace short-term mobility programs. By utilizing Zoom and Voov applications, both Ull and its partner universities are able to facilitate their students to learn about cross-cultural understanding. These apps enable participants to learn about other foreign

cultures—in this case, Indonesian culture—through visuals, audio, audiovisuals, and live online lectures without making an actual visit to Indonesia.

Aside from its function as a medium of online learning, the virtual exchange programs also produce a narrow version of *Indonesianness*. The virtual cultural programs held by DP/OIA essentially attempt to introduce Indonesian values and cultural practices to the international participants. Yet, the cultural representation of Indonesia in these programs is still partial. Through the images and videos displayed during the programs, the emphasis on Java-centrism is dominant and tends to obscure the existence of other regional cultures. The webinars of Indonesian culture highlight Javanese cultural elements which evidently constitute the concept of national identity in the mind of the participants.

The dominant representation of Javanese culture in the DP/OIA's virtual programs might be influenced by the fact that UII is located in Yogyakarta, Central Java. However, since the programs run virtually by using online apps, a more extensive and fair representation of Indonesian culture is possible to be realized. The benefit of using virtual space is that the presenters have the autonomy to choose what aspect of cultures to be presented. The virtual program can equally accommodate cultural elements from other regions in Indonesia and prevent showcasing a single dominant culture. It is different from the student mobility program where its cultural activities depend on the location or region in which they take place. For example, if a mobility program is held in Yogyakarta, the design of its cultural activities is limited to the availability of cultural sites or objects in the area.

4. Conclusion

The virtual exchange program is an essential medium to produce and exchange cultural meanings. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the virtual exchange programs have facilitated students from UII and partner universities abroad to learn about each other's cultures. Primarily, the series of virtual exchanges on Indonesian culture organized by DP/OIA is supposed to introduce international students to the diversity and uniqueness of Indonesian culture which informs national identities. Nevertheless, the representation of Indonesian culture in the virtual exchange programs is Java-centric, and therefore, not comprehensive. The explanations about many cultural elements depicted through visuals and videos are dominated by the ones derived from the traditions and values of the Javanese. The dominant representation of Javanese culture is not intentionally

designed by the DP/OIA as the organizer, yet it appears as a result of the ongoing sociohistorical dynamic of the nation.

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