

Countering the Lens: Media Framing, Symbolic Stigma, and Identity Negotiation among NTT Sojourn Students in Malang

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Abstract

Student migration from peripheral regions to Indonesia's major education hubs generates complex intercultural encounters, particularly for students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) who study in Malang—widely recognized as the “City of Students.” A critical yet underexamined problem is how local news portal systematically privilege conflict-driven narratives over cultural nuances, constructing and circulating symbolic stigma that shapes how NTT students are perceived even before any direct interaction occurs. This study examines how such media framing intersects with everyday ethnocentrism and how NTT students actively negotiate their identities against these pressures. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and systematic analysis of online news and social media content. Findings reveal that NTT students face layered stereotypes rooted in cultural misinterpretation, yet they respond with remarkable agency. Most notably, NTT students employ digital platforms—particularly TikTok and viral eastern Indonesian music such as Gemu Famire, as instruments of informal cultural diplomacy, strategically reshaping their symbolic representation from “conflict-prone outsiders” to contributors to national youth culture. This use of digital media and music as identity counternarratives constitutes the study's most distinctive empirical contribution. Drawing on Symbolic Interactionism as the primary theoretical lens, complemented by Identity Negotiation Theory and acculturation frameworks, the study argues that prejudice is socially constructed through contested interpretations of cultural symbols and is therefore transformable through sustained interaction, cultural resilience, and institutional support.

Keywords: *NTT students; symbolic interactionism; ethnocentrism; identity negotiation; media framing*

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Menentang Lensa: Pembingkai Media, Stigma Simbolik, dan Negosiasi Identitas di Kalangan Mahasiswa NTT Sojourn di Malang

Abstrak

Migrasi pelajar dari daerah pinggiran ke pusat pendidikan utama di Indonesia menghasilkan pertemuan antar budaya yang kompleks, khususnya bagi pelajar dari Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) yang belajar di Malang—yang dikenal luas sebagai “Kota Pelajar.” Masalah penting yang belum banyak dikaji adalah bagaimana portal berita lokal secara sistematis mengistimewakan narasi konflik

dibandingkan nuansa budaya, membangun dan menyebarkan stigma simbolik yang membentuk persepsi siswa NTT bahkan sebelum interaksi langsung terjadi. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana framing media tersebut bersinggungan dengan etnosentrisme sehari-hari dan bagaimana mahasiswa NTT secara aktif menegosiasikan identitas mereka melawan tekanan-tekanan tersebut. Dengan menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan analisis sistematis terhadap konten berita online dan media sosial. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa siswa di NTT menghadapi stereotip berlapis yang berakar pada salah tafsir budaya, namun mereka menanggapi dengan sikap yang luar biasa. Yang paling menonjol adalah pelajar di NTT menggunakan platform digital—khususnya TikTok dan musik Indonesia Timur yang viral seperti Gemu Famire, sebagai instrumen diplomasi budaya informal, yang secara strategis mengubah representasi simbolis mereka dari “orang luar yang rawan konflik” menjadi kontributor budaya pemuda nasional. Penggunaan media digital dan musik sebagai kontra-narasi identitas merupakan kontribusi empiris paling khas dari penelitian ini. Dengan menggunakan Interaksionisme Simbolik sebagai lensa teoritis utama, dilengkapi dengan Teori Negosiasi Identitas dan kerangka akulturasi, penelitian ini berpendapat bahwa prasangka dibangun secara sosial melalui interpretasi simbol-simbol budaya yang diperdebatkan dan oleh karena itu dapat ditransformasikan melalui interaksi berkelanjutan, ketahanan budaya, dan dukungan institusional.

Kata Kunci: *pelajar NTT; interaksionisme simbolik; sukuisme; negosiasi identitas; pembingkai media*

Introduction

Educational migration from peripheral regions to urban centers is a global phenomenon driven by structural inequalities, a dynamic particularly pronounced in archipelagic nations like Indonesia (UNESCO, 2021; Madge et al., 2009). For students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), relocating to Javanese educational hubs like Malang, which formally hosts over 300,000 students across 62 institutions (Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Malang, 2023) is a structurally conditioned necessity rather than a free choice. Finding solidarity under the colloquial identity of *rakat*, a term of shared identity popularized among Eastern Indonesian migrants navigating life in Java (Wea, 2021), these students enrich the host city's cultural diversity. However, this urban-periphery dynamic frequently generates severe socio-cultural friction and spatial discrimination. As publicly acknowledged by local leadership following a series of social incidents, these

young people arrive carrying the weight of their families' sacrifices from afar, making the cross-cultural tensions they encounter both consequential and ethically urgent to address (MalangTimes, 2026).

At Universitas Tribhuwana Tungadewi (Unitri), for instance, 57 percent of new students in the 2024/2025 academic year came from NTT (Indah & Rifat, 2024), while Universitas Kanjuruhan Malang has enrolled more than 1,000 NTT students since the 1990s (Alex, 2017). This significant number of students is also found at Universitas Insan Budi Utomo, Universitas Merdeka Malang, and several other private universities in Malang. Their presence enriches Malang's cultural diversity and makes them an integral part of campus life, but it also heightens their visibility as a minority group, leaving them vulnerable to stereotyping and social labeling.

Cross-cultural encounters in Malang are not always harmonious. NTT students often face layered negative stereotypes,

frequently being lumped into the reductive and stigmatizing label of *orang timur* (easterners), a term with negative and racist connotations in Java, which inherently associates them with being "harsh" (*keras*), "conflict-prone," or "difficult to socialize." This localized labeling mirrors broader global dynamics of systemic stigmatization, where cultural or structural disparities are unfairly reduced to inherent personal flaws. For instance, Jones and Pitman (2025) demonstrate how precariously housed individuals are disproportionately stigmatized as simply being "lazy," effectively ignoring the structural barriers they face.

Similarly, the perceived "harshness" of NTT students is a structural misreading that stems directly from a collision with the dominant Javanese identity and culture. Perceptions of "harshness" typically arise from differences in communication style, accent, and communal orientation—traits that in NTT culture signify warmth and solidarity. However, in Malang, where Javanese norms of indirectness and soft-spokenness dictate social politeness, these traits are frequently misinterpreted by local peers as aggressiveness or exclusivity. Crucially, these misunderstandings of cultural symbols are not universal; they are bound to this specific cultural intersection. The high visibility of NTT students' contrasting expressive styles does not merely leave them "vulnerable to stereotyping", rather, it actively triggers a localized socio-cultural crisis, transforming cultural differences into a systemic basis for prejudice and spatial exclusion across campus and community spaces. Yet, rather than passively accepting these labels,

NTT students actively navigate this crisis through deliberate identity negotiation, they strategically employ code-switching to soften their intonation in local academic settings, while simultaneously leveraging cultural festivals and digital media to reframe their energetic expression from a symbol of "aggression" into one of vibrant cultural pride.

Media representation further amplifies these challenges. A Google search using the keyword "Mahasiswa NTT di Malang" (accessed on June 4, 2026) produces around 681,000 results. The first page is heavily dominated by regional outlets reporting on violent incidents and conflict, with only two neutral portrayals appearing amidst the negative coverage. Rather than framing altercations as localized interpersonal disputes, these Malang and East Java-based outlets—such as *Suryamalang.com*, *SuaraMalang.com*, and *Detik Jatim*—employ specific linguistic choices that transform student scuffles into ethnicized security threats. This is achieved by systematically juxtaposing regional labels (e.g., *Mahasiswa NTT*, *Sumba Barat Daya*, *Ambon*) with vocabulary denoting extreme violence and public disorder. For instance, headlines from these regional media frequently anchor ethnic identities to aggressive terms. A 2015 report from the Malang-centric *Suryamalang.com* reads, "BREAKING NEWS: Mahasiswa NTT dan Maluku Bentrok, Ada yang Bawa Parang", instantly associating the ethnic group with lethal weaponry. Similarly, *Detik Jatim* (2023) utilized the phrase "Picu Sweeping-Tawuran" (Triggers Sweeping-Brawl) linked to NTT students, while *SuaraMalang.com* (2025) explicitly stated, "Tawuran

Mahasiswa NTT... Tewaskan Satu Orang, Polisi Amankan Senjata Tajam" under the "NTT" regional tag.

By perpetually relying on this specific threat-based narrative, where the "easterner" is positioned by the local press as the inherent catalyst for urban chaos in Malang, this pattern of reporting contributes to what this study conceptualizes as a *media-driven symbolic stigma loop*. Mediated representations from the host city's own media shape initial perceptions, influence interpersonal interactions, and are subsequently reinforced through lived experience. Systemic negative media framing dictates public perception by elevating these conflict narratives, creating an exclusionary social climate that predisposes Malang's host communities to out-group prejudice before direct contact occurs (McCombs, 2004). This structural bias initiates what Link and Phelan (2001) define as a multi-component stigma process, where ethnic labeling directly leads to the separation and status loss of minority groups. Consequently, marginalized student populations enter this East Java educational hub facing a pre-manufactured social deficit that severely undermines their psychological safety and institutional belonging.

As Hall (1997) argues, media is not a passive mirror of reality but an active site of representation. The repeated framing of NTT students through the lens of conflict reinforces homogenization, reducing diverse eastern Indonesian groups to simplistic labels such as "*anak NTT*" or "*anak Flores*." This framing not only oversimplifies their identities but also sustains ethnocentric perceptions among

local communities. The homogenization of identity extends beyond media discourse. In everyday social interactions, students from different eastern regions are often generalized as "NTT students," meaning that conflicts involving students from Papua, Ambon, or Sulawesi can still negatively affect the image of NTT students in Malang. Within the framework of symbolic interactionism, such stereotyping reflects the misinterpretation of cultural symbols, which reinforces the social burden of minority status.

The persistence of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination underscores that ethnic-based sentiment remains a latent issue in Indonesian social life, despite the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). Research shows that stigmatization continues to affect minority students from eastern Indonesia in both academic and social contexts, with consequences for adaptation, mental health, and educational outcomes (Muhiddin et al., 2023). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, these outcomes arise not from inherent cultural traits but from the meanings constructed in daily interactions, where behaviors of NTT students are filtered through the norms of the majority and thus interpreted negatively.

In Existing scholarship addressing the stigmatization of ethnic minority students generally falls into two distinct schools of thought. The first camp is rooted in psychological and sociological theories of ethnocentrism, which posit that prejudice arises from hostile emotional orientations toward out-groups and the tendency to evaluate other cultures strictly by one's own standards (Allport, 1954; Sumner, 1906). The

second camp centers on cultural theories of media representation, emphasizing that the media acts not as a passive mirror, but as an active site of meaning-making that constructs and homogenizes minority identities (Hall, 1997). By integrating these two theoretical camps, this study provides a comprehensive framework to explain how structural media representations intersect with interpersonal ethnocentrism to sustain the negative perceptions of NTT students in Malang's multicultural environment.

Recent scholarship provides valuable empirical insights, yet a critical gap remains. While Brihandhono et al. (2024) examine classroom behavior and Sandi and Dharma (2023) explore communication accommodation, both studies focus strictly on micro-level encounters, effectively treating interpersonal communication and media representation as isolated silos. They miss the crucial pre-interaction phase, where local perceptions are already pre-produced by conflict-driven online narratives. By introducing the media-driven symbolic stigma loop framework, this study bridges these domains. It demonstrates that sentiment is a dynamic construction where digital representation and physical interaction are deeply intertwined. Specifically, it captures how NTT students exercise active digital agency, using platforms like TikTok for parasocial contact and informal cultural diplomacy to transform "aggressive" stereotypes into "cheerful" traits, creating a positive social bridge that preconditions real-world acceptance.

This study positions itself at the intersection of media discourse and interpersonal communication. By

combining the symbolic interactionist framework from Blumer (1969) with theories of media representation, it seeks to examine how stereotypes of NTT students in Malang are produced, reproduced, and contested, both through mainstream media and through everyday face-to-face interactions. The novelty lies in proposing a *media-driven symbolic stigma loop*, where media representations influence initial perceptions, shape interactions, and are subsequently reinforced through experience. The aim of this research is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of sentiment and ethnocentrism faced by NTT sojourn students in Malang. Specifically, it explores how negative representations and symbolic misinterpretations are constructed, how students negotiate their identities, and how these processes affect social integration. The findings are expected to contribute to the development of more inclusive educational and social policies that foster intercultural understanding in multicultural academic environments.

Research Method

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a case study design to explore the dynamics of sentiment, ethnocentrism, and identity negotiation among sojourn students from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) in Malang City. A qualitative design was considered most appropriate as it enables an in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena, particularly those related to stereotypes, symbolic misinterpretations, and adaptation processes experienced by minority student groups (Creswell, 2014). By focusing on both interpersonal

interactions and media representations, the case study approach effectively bridged the gap between structural media discourse at the macro-level and interpersonal identity negotiation at the micro-level within the students' everyday lives.

The research was conducted over a period of four months, allowing for in-depth engagement with participants and sustained observation of social dynamics. The study involved a total of 20 participants: 15 students from NTT and 5 local students in Malang. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on their relevance to the research objectives and their experiences in intercultural interactions within campus environments. To ensure methodological transparency, participant demographics were deliberately diversified. The 15 NTT sojourn students (8 males, 7 females) had resided in Malang for varying durations, ranging from one to four years, allowing the study to capture both initial adaptation phases and long-term integration. The 5 local students (3 males, 2 females) were native to East Java and were selected based on their regular interactions with out-of-town students.

Data collection took place across several university campuses in Malang, focusing on academic settings, student organizations, and informal interaction spaces. The study employed three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted with NTT students, local students, and campus representatives to capture multiple perspectives. Participant observation was carried out in classrooms, student organizations, and residential settings

to directly examine social encounters and symbolic negotiations. Furthermore, documentation was gathered from a range of sources spanning a ten-year timeframe (2015–2025). This included online news articles from mainstream Malang-based media, regional news portals covering NTT student-related events, social media content (particularly TikTok and Instagram posts related to eastern Indonesian student communities), and student organization records. This comprehensive longitudinal dataset demonstrated that conflict-oriented media framing of NTT students is a systematic, enduring phenomenon rather than a series of isolated incidents.

To ensure the credibility and rigor of the findings, two forms of triangulation were applied: (1) methodological triangulation, cross-checking data across interviews, observation, and documentation; and (2) data-source triangulation, comparing accounts from NTT students, local students, media texts, and social media content (Denzin, 2012). Together, these strategies allowed for the convergent validation of emerging patterns and significantly reduced the risk of single-source bias.

The collected data were analyzed using theory-driven thematic analysis anchored in Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) as the primary interpretive lens. Unlike a purely inductive thematic analysis, this study adopted a deductive-inductive hybrid approach. Initial codes were guided by key concepts from Symbolic Interactionism (meaning-making, symbolic negotiation, interpretive frames) and Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005), while remaining open to emergent sub-themes arising directly from the

data. The analytical process followed three structured stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). By grounding the thematic categories in a clearly defined theoretical framework, the analysis avoided the fragmentation that can arise when multiple competing theories—such as stereotype theory, acculturation theory, and framing theory—are applied simultaneously without a unifying logic. Each of these perspectives was treated as a complementary lens that enriched, rather than replaced, the Symbolic Interactionist core.

More specifically, the thematic analysis aligned with Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), which supports theory-informed coding without sacrificing interpretive flexibility. Under this framework, the study systematically constructed three primary themes: (1) *Media-Driven Symbolic Stigma Construction*, examining how mainstream media framing constructs symbolic stigma through conflict-oriented narratives; (2) *Identity Negotiation Strategies*, documenting NTT students' active responses including digital cultural diplomacy, code-switching, and community-based resilience; and (3) *Trajectory toward Acceptance*, tracing the gradual reinterpretation of symbolic meanings through sustained cross-cultural interaction.

Results

The findings of this study reveal that the social experiences of East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) sojourn students in Malang are shaped by three interconnected

dynamics: media-constructed stigma that precedes direct social interaction, recurring stereotyping in daily academic and social life, and active identity negotiation through cultural engagement. These dynamics do not operate in isolation but form a recognizable trajectory—from pre-arrival stigma formation, through daily encounters with prejudice, toward gradual cross-cultural acceptance. Initial perceptions of NTT students in Malang are heavily predetermined by media framing before any direct interpersonal encounter takes place.

Systematic documentation of online news coverage from 2015 to 2025 confirms the absolute dominance of conflict-oriented framing across regional Malang-based media portals. A Google search using the keyword “Mahasiswa NTT di Malang,” conducted on June 4, 2026, returned approximately 681,000 results, with the first page heavily dominated by reports on violent incidents, and only two neutral portrayals appearing among the results. Regional media portals consistently employed specific linguistic choices that transformed localized interpersonal disputes into ethnicized security threats, systematically juxtaposing regional labels with vocabulary denoting extreme violence (e.g., “Ada yang Bawa Parang,” “Picu Sweeping-Tawuran”). Rather than framing altercations as individual disputes, these outlets consistently collapsed the acts of specific individuals into attributes of an entire student population, actively constructing what this study terms a media-driven symbolic stigma loop.

Consequently, many NTT students reported arriving in Malang already aware

of the negative perceptions that awaited them before any direct encounter had taken place. This framing strongly influenced how local students and communities perceived NTT students, creating an initial social distance. The discourse in news outlets functioned as a backdrop against which everyday interactions unfolded, reinforcing caution in how people initially related to them. Yet, many students arrived with a quiet determination to represent their culture differently. As one participant noted: "I came here knowing people might have certain ideas about us. So from the beginning, I made sure to show who we really are, through our music, our dances, our way of celebrating life."

Once in Malang, NTT students encountered recurring stereotypes in their daily academic and social interactions, particularly around their communication style. Many local students described their accent as "harsh" or "loud," yet within NTT culture, the same speech style signals warmth and familiarity. This misinterpretation extended beyond language to broader social behavior, contributing to a sense of being outsiders on campus. Such distance was reinforced by jokes about accent or appearance that, while sometimes framed as harmless humor, functioned as repeated acts of symbolic exclusion.

To navigate this environment, gathering in intra-ethnic organizations such as Flobamora functioned as a survival strategy to reduce homesickness and preserve cultural practices. Local students frequently perceived NTT students as less approachable due to this clustering. Rather than withdrawing entirely into

these communities, however, many NTT students used them as launching pads for broader cultural engagement. One student described how their community organization became a bridge rather than a boundary: "Flobamora is not just for us. We open our rehearsals, our dances, our cooking sessions. When local students come and learn our tari ja'i together with us, that is when the distance disappears."

Faced with these challenges, NTT students actively engaged in identity negotiation through offline cultural visibility. Many participated in campus arts festivals, traditional dance performances, and food exhibitions specifically designed to invite local students into their world. One student described the impact: "After we performed at the campus arts festival, a local student came up to me and said he had never seen anything so energetic and beautiful. He asked me to teach him the steps. That one conversation changed our whole relationship." Sharing food and music in everyday informal settings proved equally effective. A local student reflected on how this realization gradually emerged through shared cultural spaces: "It was at the Flobamora cultural night that I first really listened to their music. After that, when a NTT friend spoke loudly and enthusiastically, I understood it differently, it is the same energy as their songs, it is passion, not aggression."

This active identity reclamation is also powerfully captured in everyday digital discourse. While social media often circulated conflict videos, it simultaneously served as a vital counter-public sphere. A search on TikTok using the keyword "NTT Malang" yields overwhelmingly

positive representations, countering the mainstream media's negative framing by highlighting traditional food, dances, and indigenous group events. Specifically, accounts such as @nagekeomalang and @KREBA_MALANG actively document the dynamic and communal lives of NTT students, with their video content being heavily dominated by vibrant traditional dance performances. In digital spaces, one of the most widely mobilized hashtags by the NTT diaspora, especially those residing in Malang, to project their cultural pride and communal solidarity is #NTTPride. The virality of Eastern Indonesian music on TikTok further created unanticipated openings for cross-cultural familiarity. Furthermore, digital platforms are actively used to combat spatial prejudice.

For instance, a viral TikTok testimony provides raw social media evidence of this resistance (The Maple Media, 2022). In the video, an Eastern Indonesian youth recounts an incident of spatial exclusion in an apartment building, where a woman avoided entering the same space as him due to his attire and physical appearance. Refusing to internalize this discrimination, he reclaims his identity online, declaring: "Hitam adalah identitas... Jangan pernah malu dengan warna kulit kalian semua. Jangan pernah malu untuk pakai logat juga." The comment sections of such content highlight genuine cross-ethnic solidarity. Netizens from dominant ethnic groups (e.g., Sundanese) express immense respect, while others commend their vibrant aesthetic and "loyalitas solidaritas" (loyalty and solidarity), even likening their cultural appeal to Latin Americans. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that

while media discourse constructs the initial barriers of ethnocentrism, sustained identity negotiation (#BeraniLawanStigma)—both through offline cultural sharing and online digital diplomacy—holds the power to successfully deconstruct them.

Discussion

Forms and Dynamics of Sentiment and Ethnocentrism toward NTT Sojourn Students

Sentiment and ethnocentrism toward NTT sojourn students in Malang manifest in three interconnected forms: verbal, symbolic, and structural. First, in its verbal form, the most visible manifestation is negative stereotyping rooted in communication style. NTT students' direct speech, strong intonation, and expressive body language differ markedly from Javanese norms, leading local students to misread warmth and solidarity as harshness or aggression. Seemingly harmless jokes about accent or lifestyle act as repeated acts of verbal exclusion that reinforce this marginalization.

Second, at the symbolic level, this misreading is further compounded by stigmatization that associates eastern Indonesian students broadly with alcohol, partying, or conflict (Fitriana, 2018; Go & Vidiadari, 2020). From within NTT culture, however, these same traits signal openness and familiarity (Sunuyeko, 2017). Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism clarifies this gap: social meanings are not intrinsic to behavior but constructed through interpretive processes. What local students code as impoliteness, NTT students experience as cultural warmth. Negative sentiment is therefore not merely

personal prejudice but the product of repeated symbolic interactions that solidify misreadings over time. These findings echo Hanaki's (2007) study of Japanese students, which illustrates how accents and symbolic cues are constantly negotiated through the lens of majority norms. This tendency to misinterpret cultural communication styles resonates with findings from other intercultural contexts. For instance, Hanaki (2007) observed that Japanese students abroad often experienced their silence as respect, yet it was misread by locals as passivity or lack of engagement. Furthermore, Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) emphasize how cultural distance in multicultural contexts exacerbates these adaptation challenges, forcing minority students into prolonged periods of friction before mutual understanding can be established.

Third, moving to the structural form, these verbal and symbolic misinterpretations crystallize into tangible exclusionary practices within both campus and community environments. Sumner's (1906) in-group/out-group theory explains this pattern: because the dominant majority evaluates minorities strictly by their own cultural standards, NTT students are permanently positioned as "out-group" members. Structurally, this results in systemic barriers, such as NTT students being less frequently included in mixed study groups or campus committees. Ethnocentrism also extends beyond the campus into everyday community interactions: students report being treated with suspicion when renting housing or shopping, as their communicative directness is read as rudeness (Arends-Tóth

& Van de Vijver, 2003; Djonu, 2023). Tondok et al. (2017) confirm that ethnocentrism does not produce discrimination directly but is mediated by prejudice; cultural differences interpreted through majority standards are converted into exclusionary practices.

Crucially, to navigate this structural exclusion, the reliance of NTT students on intra-ethnic networks is not a mere voluntary choice of self-segregation; it is a structural paradox forced upon them by the host culture. The exclusionary gaze of the dominant environment pushes these students into homogeneous circles for psychological safety. Yet, the host community simultaneously weaponizes this exact coping mechanism, routinely misreading it as an intentional refusal to integrate (Brihandhono et al., 2024; Sunuyeko, 2017). The strengthening of NTT students' ethnic identity must therefore be read in two registers simultaneously: as a forced defense mechanism to navigate this paradox, and as cultural resilience (Sen, 2006). Maintaining kinship networks, shared language, religion, and music provides emotional security (Parela et al., 2018), yet this same visibility inadvertently feeds local perceptions of exclusivity, a dynamic Liliweri (2005) attributes to dominant groups' structural tendency to impose their norms whenever minority difference becomes visible.

Cross-city comparisons sharpen this picture. In Yogyakarta, Go and Vidiadari (2020) document similar accent-based prejudice, but Yogyakarta's strongly Javanese cultural identity intensifies the perceived distance from NTT communicative styles, producing a more

pronounced "outsider" label. In Surabaya, which is more commercially heterogeneous, Sandi and Dharma (2023) found NTT students deployed overaccommodation strategies more frequently, suggesting that cultural pressure is shaped by the host city's dominant ethos, not only individual prejudice. Jakarta's demographic diversity diffuses ethnic labeling, making stigmatization less concentrated though not absent (Muhiddin et al., 2023). These comparisons indicate that the intensity of stigmatization is modulated by three structural factors: (1) the cultural dominance of the host majority, (2) the density of local media ecosystems, and (3) the availability of institutional multicultural frameworks. Compared to a diffuse megacity like Jakarta, Malang represents a unique urban ecology characterized by a high minority density concentrated in specific private universities and a hyper-local, sensationalist media ecosystem. This specific urban ecology actively accelerates the media-driven symbolic stigma loop. The hyper-local media disproportionately ethnicizes localized incidents, rapidly feeding these conflict narratives back into a culturally dominant environment with weak intercultural programming, thereby creating a unique storm that systematically reproduces and accelerates structural stigma.

Sources and Reinforcement of Negative Sentiment toward NTT Sojourn Students

Stereotypes against NTT students do not emerge solely through direct encounters; rather, they are produced through a clear two-step mechanism. The first step operates at the macro-level through historical

socialization and identity homogenization. A broader cultural script collapses diverse eastern Indonesian identities—from Papua, Ambon, Sulawesi, and NTT—into a single, transposed stigmatized category. Because of this identity transposition, a conflict involving any eastern group negatively affects how NTT students as a whole are perceived by the host majority (Parela et al., 2018; Sunuyeko, 2017). This structural homogenization permanently positions them within an "out-group" category before any face-to-face interaction even occurs.

The second step operates at the micro-level through stereotype threat and interpersonal exclusion. Upon entering the campus environment, NTT students experience stereotype threat, bearing the ongoing psychological burden of navigating these pre-existing stigmas in their everyday academic lives. This pre-established social distance actively restricts effective cross-cultural education and neutralizes the positive outcomes typically proposed by the contact hypothesis. Because initial interactions are already filtered through the majority's prejudiced cultural standards, regular contact often reinforces exclusion rather than facilitating genuine interpersonal integration.

The central amplifying force behind this mechanism is media representation, which this study conceptualizes as a *media-driven symbolic stigma loop*. This loop establishes a direct theoretical link between Entman's (1993) framing theory, reductive stereotyping, and Identity Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey, 2005). Selective media emphasis on ethnic markers in conflict narratives functions as the structural catalyst: it defines minority

identity as an inherent social problem. This framing provides the repetitive cognitive schema necessary for Hall's (1997) reductive stereotyping to homogenize diverse NTT identities into a singular, conflict-prone category. Because this media narrative predetermines how the host majority perceives these students, it fundamentally alters the conditions for interpersonal contact. NTT students do not enter social interactions from a neutral standpoint; rather, their identity negotiation is structurally forced into a defensive posture, compelling them to actively dismantle media-imposed stereotypes before genuine cross-cultural communication can be achieved. As this stigma hardens, local communities misinterpret neutral cultural traits through an ethnocentric lens of suspicion. This process is intensified by algorithmic feedback logic, whereby digital platforms prioritize sensationalized conflict stories over balanced coverage (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). Consequently, these representations solidify into social memory (Pantti, 2019), anchoring long-term prejudice that persists independently of actual behavior.

Empirically, a Google search for "Mahasiswa NTT di Malang" returns approximately 618,000 results, with the first page heavily dominated by reports of riots and violence; positive portrayals appear only from the third page onward. The killing of Keisnael Murri, a Unitri student from Sumba Barat Daya in June 2023, illustrates this mechanism precisely. Media reports foregrounded his ethnic identity rather than the individual or contextual factors of the incident. Abbas (2023) identifies this as ethnicity-

based reporting, while Eriyanto (2012) shows how it naturalizes stereotypes by reducing complex individual experiences to generalized group traits. Van Dijk's (1993) analysis is also highly relevant here: mainstream media discourses systematically reproduce dominant ethnic hierarchies by disproportionately associating minority groups with lawlessness. This validates Link and Phelan's (2001) conceptualization of stigma, demonstrating how communities weaponize mediated labels to structurally isolate marginalized students. Ultimately, the media-driven loop functions as an ideological apparatus, converting unmediated cultural differences into entrenched institutional barriers.

Said's (2010) critique of orientalist discourse further elucidates this dynamic: minority identities are reduced to simplified caricatures, with complexity erased in favor of readily consumable images of "difference" and "trouble." In Malang, such processes ensure that even students who have never interacted with NTT peers may still hold prejudiced assumptions shaped entirely by mediated representations. This is corroborated by Riyanto (2019), who found that social media in Surakarta amplified not only discourses of multicultural tolerance but also messages of intolerance, suspicion, and even open conflict between groups. This resonates strongly with the case of NTT students in Malang, where digital and mainstream media prioritize reports of violence, thereby constructing negative impressions that overshadow everyday experiences of collaboration and solidarity. Such examples underscore the symbolic interactionist claim that meanings are socially negotiated and subject to

misalignment across cultural boundaries. When interpretive frames are dominated by majority norms, minority communication styles are disproportionately judged as deviant.

The crystallization of these mediated stereotypes is deeply rooted in historical legacies. Addressing the temporal origins of this prejudice, the specific stereotyping of NTT students in Malang did not begin abruptly in 2017. While minor cultural frictions date back to the early waves of student migration in the late 1990s, the "conflict-prone" label traces directly to specific escalations in 2014 (Letek et al., 2024). In May 2014, a physical altercation triggered by a minor accident during a dance rehearsal broke out at Universitas Kanjuruhan Malang, involving students from Sumba and Kalimantan, and later expanding to include students from Ambon (Bakesbangpol Kota Malang, 2014). The following month, an individual dispute in the Tlogomas area rapidly escalated into a mass brawl. These 2014 events marked a critical turning point.

Suryadinata (2017) documents how stereotypes of eastern Indonesians as emotional or undisciplined have persisted across generations through this continuous socialization, meaning contemporary NTT students inherit these negative images before any personal interaction occurs. These dynamics are empirically supported by Musthofiyah and Isnainiyah (2020), who found that eastern Indonesian students in urban universities face academic barriers rooted in stereotypical judgments rather than intellectual capacity. Similarly, Anggraeni (2021) and Steele and Aronson (1995) demonstrate through the concept

of stereotype threat how negative group-based expectations undermine minority students' academic performance.

Beyond historical legacies and media representations, internal community dynamics paradoxically reinforce this negative sentiment. NTT student organizations such as Flobamora serve as vital mechanisms of solidarity, cultural preservation, and emotional support (Parella et al., 2018; Sunuyeko, 2017). Yet, to outside observers, this strong intra-ethnic solidarity is frequently misread as exclusivity or an unwillingness to integrate, consistent with Sumner's (1906) in-group/out-group theory. McAllester's (2024) concept of transposed identity negotiation captures this paradox precisely: protective identity practices are reinterpreted within majority frameworks as active resistance. This misinterpretation is further exacerbated by the absence of structured multicultural education. As Liliweri (2005) argues, Indonesian society remains vulnerable to ethnocentrism due to weak systemic cross-cultural education. In this context, Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis serves as a critical warning: informal, unstructured intergroup contact without equal-status conditions tends to reproduce prejudice rather than reduce it.

Taken together, negative sentiment against NTT sojourn students operates through three reinforcing effects: (1) the homogenization of identity, where diverse eastern Indonesian students are collapsed into the single category of "NTT students" (Sunuyeko, 2017); (2) the reproduction of symbolic stereotypes, where isolated traits—such as accent or localized conflicts—become defining cultural markers (Abbas, 2023; Eriyanto,

2012); and (3) the formation of social memory, where past conflicts continue to inform present-day perceptions (Pantti, 2019). These effects ensure that prejudice precedes personal interaction. Students report being immediately associated with rudeness or troublemaking upon being identified as "anak NTT"—assumptions rooted not in direct experience, but in collective narratives sustained by historical socialization, media discourse, and structural ethnocentrism.

Negotiating Identity and Building Acceptance

Against these structural pressures, NTT students exercise significant and deliberate agency. Ting-Toomey's (2005) Identity Negotiation Theory provides the analytical frame: identity negotiation is the continuous process through which individuals assert, accommodate, and redefine their identities in intercultural contexts. NTT students' adaptation strategies are not passive responses but purposive acts aimed at overcoming prejudice and building acceptance.

At the individual level, involvement in group projects, student committees, and extracurricular activities creates opportunities to demonstrate facets of identity beyond media-constructed images. This aligns with Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis: prejudice diminishes when groups interact under conditions of equal status and shared goals. Through sustained academic and organizational engagement, local students gradually reinterpret NTT students' direct communication style as warmth rather than aggression—a

reinterpretation that Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism predicts as meanings shift through ongoing interaction. Many students also employed code-switching, adjusting speech rhythm or intonation to align with Javanese or national norms. However, while Giles's (2016) Communication Accommodation Theory describes this strategic convergence as a way to bridge communicative gaps, the data reveals that this adaptation is not purely a voluntary "resource for connection." Rather, code-switching frequently functions as an exhausting form of emotional labor forced upon NTT students. It operates as a defensive accommodation—a necessary social requirement deployed to minimize the majority's discomfort and secure basic acceptance within a culturally dominant host environment.

At the community level, organizations such as Flobamora evolve from protective enclaves into proactive cultural bridges. Sunuyeko (2017) notes their role in reducing acculturative stress; Sakti Kaloeti et al. (2024) frame this as cultural resilience, the use of collective identity as a protective resource. Open cultural festivals, dance performances, and food exhibitions allow local communities to encounter NTT identity in inclusive, celebratory contexts, transforming symbols of exclusivity into bridges of engagement. Situmorang (2020) observed comparable dynamics among Indonesian students in the UK, where cultural festivals repositioned minority practices as cultural contributions in majority perception. The paradox that solidarity simultaneously provides resilience and feeds perceptions of exclusivity is resolved through this

public cultural turn. McAllester's (2024) transposed identity negotiation explains why this turn is necessary: protective practices misread as resistance can only be reframed through deliberate symbolic exposure.

Beyond physical spaces, the most distinctive finding is the use of digital platforms as informal cultural diplomacy. The viral spread of eastern Indonesian music on TikTok since 2020—featuring songs like *Gemu Famire*, *Sayang*, and *Beta Janji*—demonstrates how digital culture enables minority students to project their identity in ways that resonate across ethnic boundaries (Chen, 2020; Penney, 2015; Tiantini et al., 2023). This virality exemplifies how local expressions achieve national recognition through short video content. Ismail (2025) asserts that the interplay of lyrics, bodily movement, and rhythm in viral tracks like *Pica-Pica*, *Stecu-Stecu*, and *Nyong Timur* creates a "sonic geography"—a sound map that is rapidly legible to audiences across linguistic barriers. Furthermore, Ismail (2025) demonstrates how affirmative lyrics such as "Kulit hitam manis, senyum tipis-tipis" actively challenge mainstream beauty standards and foster immense cultural pride. For local students, these songs become entry points for appreciating NTT culture, transforming previously unfamiliar symbols into shared cultural capital. St-Amant et al. (2021) and Huang (2025) argue that digital platforms create new symbolic spaces for minorities to counteract negative stereotypes; the NTT case confirms this tendency. Kristiyono and Ida (2019) describe cyberspace as a new habitat of social interaction in which individuals construct meaning

symbolically. In this context, NTT students successfully repurpose TikTok from a site of stigma reproduction into an arena of cultural diplomacy, reflecting a broader pattern where Indonesian youth develop resilience through creativity, solidarity, and wide social networks (Dewi et al., 2024).

Despite the strength of these individual, community, and digital strategies, institutional support remains decisive. Berry's (2005) acculturation framework identifies integration—maintaining cultural identity while participating in the host society—as the most adaptive outcome, but integration requires active institutional facilitation rather than organic emergence. In Malang, multicultural initiatives such as those at Universitas Insan Budi Utomo remain largely ceremonial. Banks (2015) argues that genuine multicultural education must be structurally embedded in curriculum, pedagogy, and orientation programs. Without such embedding, Allport's (1954) warning holds: informal contact without equal-status conditions reproduces rather than reduces prejudice, and the burden of navigating bias falls disproportionately on minority students.

Ultimately, Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) ties these dynamics together, revealing how students navigate differing interpretive frames through a complementary dual-strategy approach. Individual strategies, such as code-switching, and collective strategies, such as *Flobamora* festivals, do not operate in opposition. Instead, students use both interchangeably depending on the social setting. Students who participate heavily in ethnic organizations do not code-

switch less; rather, they rely on both mechanisms. Code-switching is deployed as a situational necessity in majority-dominated academic spaces to minimize immediate friction, while collective cultural platforms provide the psychological safety and emotional replenishment required to sustain the exhausting emotional labor of that defensive accommodation. Because an NTT accent, a Flobamora gathering, or a viral folk song carry opposite meanings depending on whose interpretive frame is applied, this dual-layered engagement is critical. Initially decoded through the majority's ethnocentric lens as rudeness or exclusivity, these symbols gradually acquire new meanings of warmth, resilience, and cultural richness through sustained contact. This reinterpretation, described by Ting-Toomey (2005) as the core of intercultural interaction, demonstrates that identity is not fixed but continuously reconstructed, and that reconstruction creates real possibilities for belonging in Malang's multicultural environment.

The trajectory from stereotype to acceptance is not a static summary but a highly dynamic, branching pathway. The concept of the media-driven symbolic stigma loop explains how mainstream media outlets function not merely as mirrors of reality, but as active agents that construct stigma through repetitive, sensational media framing. Drawing on Symbolic Interactionism, the model posits that this framing drives a downward cascade: symbolic stigma construction leads to ethnocentric misinterpretation, which translates neutral cultural traits into markers of aggression or exclusivity. This downward trajectory ultimately

deposits NTT students into a state of social exclusion and marginalization. If left unaddressed, this marginalization feeds directly into a continuous "Reinforcement Loop" that supplies fresh material back into sensational media framing.

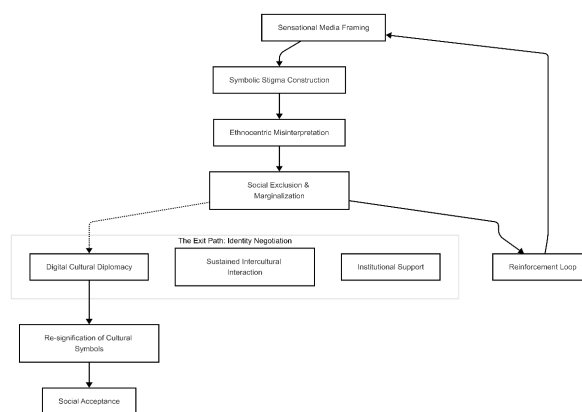


Chart 1 Conceptual Model of the Media-Driven Symbolic Stigma Loop and Identity Negotiation Trajectory

Crucially, the model identifies the exact tipping point that disrupts this destructive cycle. The dotted line extending from "Social Exclusion & Marginalization" represents a deliberate break from the loop, funneling into "The Exit Path: Identity Negotiation". According to the pathway, the primary catalyst—the initial vanguard—that triggers this shift is Digital Cultural Diplomacy. By engaging in informal cultural diplomacy on digital platforms like TikTok, NTT students bypass the biased local media ecosystem. They utilize viral music and traditional performances as initial tools to contest their marginalization.

However, the pathway demonstrates that digital diplomacy alone is insufficient to complete the journey. The "Exit Path" relies on a strategic combination of forces: the initial spark of digital cultural

diplomacy must be structurally stabilized by Sustained Intercultural Interaction and Institutional Support. Working in tandem, this tripartite mechanism acts as the engine for the "Re-signification of Cultural Symbols". This dynamic process effectively shifts their representation from "conflict-prone outsiders" to valued contributors, validating a core principle of Symbolic Interactionism: meanings are continuously reconstructed. Through this sustained effort, the host community's interpretation is guided away from prejudice, ultimately arriving at the final stage of the pathway: Social Acceptance. Prejudice, the model suggests, is a socially constructed narrative, and because it is constructed, it can be systematically deconstructed when the correct interpretive pathways are activated.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that NTT sojourn students in Malang navigate a social environment shaped by both persistent stigma and genuine possibilities for acceptance. Three forces sustain that stigma: (1) conflict-driven media framing that constructs a symbolic stigma loop before any direct encounter takes place; (2) ethnocentric misreadings of cultural symbols such as direct speech and communal solidarity; and (3) structural gaps in multicultural institutional programming that leave stereotypes unchallenged. Against these forces, NTT students exercise significant agency. Through cultural performances, code-switching, community solidarity, and most distinctively the use of TikTok and eastern Indonesian music as informal cultural diplomacy, they progressively reposition

their symbolic identity from "conflict-prone outsider" to cultural contributor. Analyzed through Symbolic Interactionism and Identity Negotiation Theory, these dynamics confirm that prejudice is socially constructed through contested interpretations of cultural symbols and is therefore transformable through sustained interaction and institutional support. The concept of the media-driven symbolic stigma loop is this study's principal theoretical contribution: it captures how media framing, ethnocentric misreading, and institutional inaction combine to reproduce stigma in a self-reinforcing cycle — and identifies precisely where intervention is most needed.

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