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Asymmetric Intimacies: Negotiating Inter-ethnic Friendship Between Migrants and Urban Hosts in Selected Javanese Cities

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Abstract. Domestic migration in Indonesia, especially from regions outside Java to urban centers on the island, has led to complex inter-ethnic interactions in which emotional closeness does not necessarily develop despite increased social contact. This study aims to explore how intimacy is experienced and negotiated in inter-ethnic friendships between migrants from outside Java and native Javanese hosts, and to examine how hosts perceive and respond to these relational dynamics in everyday interactions. This study employed an exploratory qualitative approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with ten participants, consisting of five migrants from outside Java and five native Javanese hosts. To enhance analytic rigor, dialogical cross-verification was used as an interpretive strategy to refine themes and ensure coherence across participant accounts. The findings reveal that inter-ethnic friendships are shaped by tensions between ingroup comfort and out-group awkwardness, as well as between social stability and demands for cultural adaptation. While hosts often display verbal hospitality and polite, formal interactions, these practices rarely translate into emotional openness, placing greater relational initiative on migrants. As a result, intimacy tends to develop asymmetrically, being spatially inclusive yet relationally selective, particularly when expectations of personal closeness clash with norms of formality. Collective settings, such as religious and community-based activities, however, offer more reciprocal engagement and reduce cultural exclusivity. These findings highlight the importance of social structures that support sustained cross-group interaction, contributing to theoretical understandings of asymmetric intimacy and informing efforts to foster more inclusive inter-ethnic relationships in domestic migration contexts in Indonesia.

Keywords: Domestic migration, inter-ethnic friendships, hosts, migrants, social intimacy

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is often seen as a nation rich in ethnic diversity and as one that embraces the principle of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, which means "unity in diversity." This principle encourages interactions among various ethnic groups and fosters friendships across different cultures (Harjatanaya, 2025; Tinambunan et al., 2025). This outlook aligns with (Hall, 2015) assertion that successful intercultural interactions require an awareness of the multiple "cultural worlds" we inhabit. If these diverse perspectives are ignored, it can lead to tension or conflict. In such a multicultural context, the ability to establish relationships with people from diverse cultural backgrounds is increasingly vital, particularly in a diverse nation such as Indonesia (Kymlicka, 2020). This skill extends beyond public life into personal and professional realms, where effective intercultural adaptation is essential

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for fostering harmony and mutual understanding (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018).

Ethnic and cultural diversity in Indonesia presents several challenges. Development and economic activities are primarily concentrated in Java, which has long been the country's economic center (Ariwibowo & Fibiona, 2025). This uneven growth has led to steady migration, both temporary and permanent, as people from other regions move to Java in search of education or employment opportunities (Kim & Amarasinghe, 2024). The Population Census conducted from 2017 to 2022 recorded more than 4.57 million Indonesians migrating between provinces in the previous five years, with over half relocating to Javanese provinces. Central Java, West Java, and Jakarta experienced the highest rates of immigration, with individuals aged 20 to 39 making up the majority of these moves (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023). This concentrated migration has transformed Java into a complex, multi-ethnic area where people from various cultural backgrounds interact, negotiate, and reshape social relationships in their daily lives.

Migration in Indonesia represents a key site of inter-ethnic encounter that extends beyond physical presence or administrative regulation to include affective and relational processes. Inter-ethnic interactions conducted under conditions of equal status, shared goals, and sustained cooperation have been shown to reduce prejudice and promote intergroup understanding (Lytle, 2018; Tropp & Barlow, 2018). In Indonesia's collectivistic and multi-ethnic context, these dynamics are reflected in adolescents' inter-ethnic friendships, which are shaped by self-disclosure, comfort, compatibility, support, perceived similarity, and togetherness (Anggarani et al., 2022). Importantly, ethnic-based studies in Indonesia indicate that patterns of intimacy and relational closeness are not uniform across groups but are influenced by distinct cultural norms, values, and communication styles embedded within specific ethnic communities, such as those observed in Chinese-Indonesian relations (Meyer & Waskitho, 2021) and in inter-ethnic interactions between Javanese and Bolaang Mongondow communities (Doni & Husain, 2022). These findings suggest that while inter-ethnic contact may foster intimacy, its form and depth are shaped by ethnic-specific cultural frameworks, further supported by local values emphasizing mutual respect, compassion (*welas asih*), and communal harmony (Indreswari et al., 2020; Pangalila et al., 2024).

Inter-ethnic friendship remains a complex relational process that does not continually develop into deep intimacy. Several studies indicate that although inter-ethnic contact occurs, the quality of intimacy within these relationships is often relatively limited and seldom reaches the depth observed in intra-ethnic friendships, partly due to social and cultural constraints (Damen et al., 2021; Lorenz et al., 2021). Significantly, difficulties in developing intimacy cannot be attributed solely to ethnic differences; rather, intimate friendship formation is inherently selective and shaped by a range of psychosocial factors, including shared values, interpersonal trust, emotional regulation, and the accumulation of meaningful shared experiences (Davies & Aron, 2016; Smelson-Kanwal, 2018). Research in multicultural university settings further shows that many inter-ethnic interactions are functional or situational in nature and remain relatively superficial in the absence of emotional openness and long-term relational investment (Bultseva & Lebedeva, 2021). Moreover, linguistic barriers, communication styles, and culturally embedded norms of emotional closeness may constrain the emergence of deeper intimacy, even among individuals who share the same social spaces (Meng et al., 2018; Ng et al., 2018). In migration contexts, the tendency to form intimate ties with co-migrants or others with similar lived experiences underscores that intimate friendship choices are often guided more by familiarity, perceived psychological safety, and shared life trajectories than by ethnicity alone (Berry, 2021; Pratsinakis et al., 2017; Wessendorf, 2016).

Friendships within the same ethnic group are often perceived as more emotionally secure and beneficial than inter-ethnic ones, as shared culture, language, and historical experiences tend to facilitate smoother communication, stronger emotional support, and lower risks of misunderstanding or conflict (Plummer et al., 2016; Wölfer et al., 2016). Intra-ethnic friendships are also more likely to be grounded in shared values and attitudes that reinforce mutual understanding and trust, thereby

fostering more profound emotional closeness and more reliable support networks (Rivas-Drake et al., 2019; S. Smith et al., 2016). By contrast, inter-ethnic friendships are frequently experienced as more complex or demanding, as they require individuals to navigate cultural differences, linguistic boundaries, and divergent norms of intimacy, which can render such relationships socially and emotionally "costly" (Reynolds & Crea, 2017; Schulz & Leszczensky, 2016).

At the same time, this preference for intra-ethnic closeness poses significant challenges in highly diverse societies such as Indonesia, where everyday social life increasingly unfolds across ethnic boundaries. The persistence of ethnically homogeneous friendship networks can widen social distance, reinforce stereotypes, and weaken cross-group social capital (Lessard et al., 2019; Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017), while limited intimacy in inter-ethnic relations may further undermine social cohesion and intensify implicit bias, particularly in contexts shaped by ethnic hierarchies or cultural dominance (Abascal, 2020; Kende et al., 2018). Although inter-ethnic contact has been widely examined, prior research has mainly focused on contact frequency and structural conditions, paying limited attention to the emotional and relational intimacy that develops between migrants and hosts. Despite extensive scholarship on inter-ethnic contact, there remains a limited empirical understanding of how emotional intimacy, affective burdens, and relational asymmetries are negotiated in everyday friendships between migrants and hosts in Indonesia. This gap is especially salient given that inter-ethnic friendships in Indonesia often develop gradually and are shaped not only by ethnicity but also by social preferences, shared experiences, and perceived relational safety, even as pluralistic urban contexts demand sustained inter-ethnic engagement (Repke & Benet-Martínez, 2019; Yulianto et al., 2024; Yulianto & Lestari, 2025).

This article examines how intimacy is experienced, negotiated, and constrained in inter-ethnic friendships between migrants from outside Java and native Javanese hosts. Intimacy is conceptualized not merely as emotional closeness, but as a relational process involving affective openness, reciprocity, relational initiative, and the negotiation of comfort, trust, and boundaries in everyday interactions. The analysis attends to recurring relational tensions through which intimacy is negotiated, including experiences of comfort and awkwardness, stability and adaptation, indifference and relational initiative, and differing norms of formality and expectations of personal closeness. Using an exploratory qualitative approach, the study examines how these dynamics are perceived and interpreted by migrants and hosts in selected urban settings in Java, with particular attention to affective burdens and asymmetric relational roles.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory, qualitative approach with a collective case-study orientation to examine how intimacy is experienced and negotiated in inter-ethnic friendships between migrants from outside Java and native Javanese hosts in selected urban settings in Java. The primary aim was to explore psychosocial dynamics that shape, constrain, or enable the development of emotional closeness in everyday interactions. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it enables an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and the often implicit social practices embedded in intergroup relations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

Participants

Ten participants from Indonesia took part in the study, consisting of five migrants and five members of the host community. Migrants were originally from Sulawesi, Sumatra, Kalimantan, Nusa Tenggara, and Papua, and had resided in Java for at least 1 year, with the longest duration being 8 years. They were aged 23-40, predominantly male, and represented diverse occupational

backgrounds, including students, informal workers, and teachers. The host participants were from Yogyakarta, Semarang, Surabaya, Solo, and Malang, with comparable demographic profiles and varying levels of interaction with the migrants in their respective neighborhoods.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in region of origin, length of migration, occupation, and experiences of inter-ethnic interaction. The sample size of ten participants was deemed analytically sufficient for the exploratory aims of the study, given the depth of the in-depth interviews and the focused analytic scope. Following contemporary qualitative methodological guidance, later interviews primarily reinforced existing patterns rather than generating new conceptual insights, indicating analytic sufficiency rather than numerical representativeness (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016). All participants were assigned pseudonyms and provided informed consent, in accordance with qualitative research ethics protocols (Clay, 2024; J. A. Smith, 2024). Demographic details of the participants are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1.
Demographic Profile of Migrant Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Place of Origin	Occupation	Length of Stay in Java	Current Residence
Andi	Male	32	Makassar, South Sulawesi	Restaurant worker	8 years	Yogyakarta
Rahma	Female	27	Padang, West Sumatra	Master's student	3 years	Semarang
Dodi	Male	25	Pontianak, West Kalimantan	Undergraduate student	4 years	Surabaya
Reza	Male	28	Mataram, West Nusa Tenggara	Teacher	5 years	Solo
Melki	Male	24	Sorong, West Papua	Undergraduate student	2 years	Malang

Table 2.
Demographic Profile of Host Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Place of Origin	Occupation
Eko	Male	30	Yogyakarta	Community organizer
Sari	Female	29	Malang	Small business owner
Budi	Male	34	Semarang	Teacher
Dita	Male	26	Solo	NGO field officer
Joko	Male	36	Surabaya	Civil servant

Note. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' identities.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews lasting 60-90 minutes per participant. Interviews were conducted face-to-face whenever possible, with online sessions arranged when in-person meetings were not feasible. An open-ended interview guide was developed to explore participants' experiences of inter-ethnic friendship, perceptions of migrants and hosts, and the affective dynamics within their social relationships. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed with attention to contextual meanings and differences in social positioning.

Although migrants and hosts were recruited from the exact urban locations (Yogyakarta, Malang, Solo, Semarang, and Surabaya), they were not interviewed as dyads. They did not have direct relationships with one another. Instead, the study adopts a parallel-experimental design, in which migrants and hosts independently reflect on their respective experiences of inter-ethnic friendships within comparable urban contexts. Such an approach enables the examination of

relational processes from multiple social positions without requiring direct interaction, thereby reducing social desirability pressures and power asymmetries that may constrain open expression in cross-group encounters (Frantell et al., 2019; Thompson et al., 2023).

A distinctive feature of the data collection process was the use of intersubjective cross-verification. This process involved presenting selected anonymized quotes from one group (e.g., migrants) to participants from the other group (e.g., hosts) and inviting reflective responses. This procedure functioned as a dialogical and reflexive analytic prompt rather than as evidence of direct interaction between participants, enhancing reflexivity and analytic depth in qualitative research on intergroup relations (Shamo-Nir, 2024).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed (Braun & Clarke, 2022) thematic analysis framework, comprising familiarization, initial coding, theme development, and review, culminating in the construction of final interpretative narratives. Manual coding was conducted to identify recurring patterns and tensions between migrants' and hosts' accounts, which were then organized into thematic contrasts to emphasize dialogical dimensions of intergroup experiences.

To enhance credibility, the researcher employed cross-participant triangulation, informal member checking during interviews, and peer debriefing sessions to assess the coherence and validity of interpretations. These strategies were designed to strengthen the traceability and accountability of the analysis, and they are consistent with the trustworthiness criteria in qualitative research (Thompson et al., 2023).

RESULTS

Inter-ethnic friendships in migration contexts are intricate and everchanging. Data from interviews with ten individuals, including five migrants from outside Java and five local hosts, show that forming bonds depends not only on good intentions but also on social norms, cultural preferences, and mutual perceptions. When shown parts of the other group's stories, many participants responded thoughtfully. Rather than becoming defensive, several acknowledged shared experiences and relationship patterns they had not previously noticed.

The findings are structured around five key thematic dichotomies: ingroup comfort versus outgroup awkwardness; social stability versus cultural adaptation; social indifference versus relational initiative; norms of formality versus expectations of personal closeness; and cultural exclusivity versus shared inclusive spaces. Each theme demonstrates how migrants and hosts manage social closeness in culturally diverse environments. Collectively, these insights enrich the discussion of domestic migration in Indonesia by highlighting the subtle, sometimes fragile processes through which intimacy is negotiated across ethnic lines in urban Java.

Ingroup Comfort versus Outgroup Discomfort

The findings indicate that an asymmetry between ingroup comfort and outgroup awkwardness shapes intimacy in inter-ethnic friendships. Host participants consistently described interactions with fellow Javanese as more fluid and emotionally effortless, grounded in shared cultural references and implicit social understanding. As one host noted, "*When I talk with people from my own region, everything just flows... with people from outside Java, I sometimes hesitate*" (Dita, 26, host). This hesitation was not articulated as prejudice, but as a concern about potential misunderstanding, suggesting that homogeneity functions as an affective safe zone that minimizes relational risk.

From the migrants' perspective, initial friendliness from hosts was often interpreted as openness, leading to expectations of deeper emotional engagement that did not always materialize. As one migrant reflected, "*They were kind and helpful at first, but later I realized that being friendly doesn't always mean being close*" (Andi, 32, migrant). This gap between friendliness and intimacy generated feelings of uncertainty and emotional distance, particularly when migrants struggled to identify unspoken boundaries despite prolonged residence in the same urban settings.

Cross-perspective analysis reveals that awkwardness was mutually created rather than one-sided. When hosts reflected on migrants' accounts, some admitted that their dependence on politeness and formality might have unintentionally restricted opportunities for more relaxed interactions. One host stated, "*Maybe I also haven't been open enough to start a more relaxed conversation*" (Eko, 30, host). These patterns show that although inter-ethnic interactions are sustained through courtesy norms, intimacy levels remain uneven. Hosts feel at ease within their ingroup relations, whereas migrants often face a greater emotional burden as they navigate uncertainty and seek acceptance.

Social Stability versus Cultural Adaptation

The findings highlight a persistent tension between migrants' efforts to adapt and the hosts' focus on maintaining social stability. Migrants often described their situation as one of conditional acceptance. They are engaging in everyday social routines while still feeling symbolically peripheral to established local structures. Many reported a sense of social presence but not full integration, particularly when long-term residence and consistent participation did not lead to recognition as full members of the local community. As one migrant, Reza (28), remarked, "*I join every activity, but I still feel like a guest... sometimes I think they assume I will leave eventually.*"

For migrants, adapting to the new culture required constant effort to align with local norms, speech patterns, and social expectations, often without direct confirmation of acceptance. Despite their efforts, many migrants remained uncertain whether conforming would actually lead to inclusion. This finding highlights an imbalance in which migrants are expected to adapt, yet acceptance is not guaranteed.

From the hosts' view, social stability depended heavily on maintaining established interaction patterns and shared cultural references. They often viewed cultural differences not as outright rejection but as potential threats to social harmony that required careful management. One host mentioned that newcomers frequently brought different communication styles, behaviors, or ways of organizing daily life, which could change the familiar social atmosphere and require emotional adaptation from long-term residents (Joko, 36, host). Another host expressed understanding of migrants' challenges but was cautious about becoming too involved, fearing that involvement might cross cultural boundaries and inadvertently cause discomfort (Sari, 29, host).

Overall, these accounts indicate an uneven relationship in which migrants primarily manage cultural adaptation, while hosts control the timing and boundaries of acceptance. Consequently, inter-ethnic relations tend to hover between engagement and belonging, characterized more by mutual caution than by a shared desire for closer connection.

Social Indifference versus Relational Initiative

The findings reveal a recurring asymmetry in relational initiative, where migrants are more likely to take responsibility for initiating and sustaining social interaction. At the same time, hosts tend to adopt a more reserved stance. Migrants frequently report having to initiate conversations, extend invitations, or actively create opportunities for connection. Over time, this one-sided effort often generated emotional fatigue and a growing sense of futility. As one migrant expressed, "*I*

always feel like I have to start first... over time, it is exhausting" (Dodi, 25, migrant), highlighting how repeated unreciprocated initiatives led to withdrawal rather than deeper engagement.

From the migrants' perspective, the lack of reciprocal initiative was interpreted as indifference or a subtle rejection, particularly when attempts at social closeness went unreturned. Several migrants described gradually reducing their efforts after repeated experiences of non-response, reframing their withdrawal as self-protection rather than disinterest. This pattern illustrates how intimacy can erode not through overt conflict, but through the cumulative weight of unacknowledged relational labor.

In contrast, host participants often interpreted their own restraint not as indifference, but as an expression of respect for personal boundaries and social propriety. One host explained that refraining from initiating interaction was motivated by concern about intruding or causing discomfort (Budi, 34, host). However, when hosts were invited to reflect on migrants' accounts through intersubjective cross-verification, some recognized that their silence might be experienced as exclusion rather than consideration. As one host reflected, "*We both want to be close but do not know how to start*" (Budi, host), acknowledging a mutual hesitation rooted in differing cultural expectations of initiative.

Taken together, these accounts point to a misalignment of relational norms: migrants often expect initiative to signal welcome and inclusion, whereas hosts may view restraint as a form of politeness. This perceptual gap stalls the development of intimacy, not because of explicit rejection, but because of the absence of shared expectations for how relationships should be initiated and sustained. As a result, migrants disproportionately shoulder the affective burden of maintaining inter-ethnic ties, while hosts remain unaware of how their silence may be interpreted, reinforcing asymmetric patterns of closeness.

Formal Norms versus Expectations of Personal Closeness

The findings reveal a persistent tension between migrants' expectations of personal closeness and hosts' reliance on formal social norms. Migrants commonly expressed a desire for friendships that moved beyond surface-level exchanges toward emotional sharing and mutual disclosure. However, interactions with hosts were often experienced as polite yet limited, centered on neutral topics, and marked by a reluctance to expose personal vulnerability. As one migrant noted, "*We never reach personal topics... I actually want a friend I can share deeper stories with*" (Rahma, 27, migrant), which captures the frustration with relational stagnation despite frequent contact.

From the hosts' perspective, formality and indirect communication functioned as expressions of respect and social caution rather than as indicators of emotional distance. Hosts described restraint as a culturally grounded strategy for preserving harmony, avoiding intrusion, and preventing misunderstandings. One host explained that maintaining polite distance was intended to respect personal boundaries rather than to signal disinterest (Eko, 30, host). However, when hosts were invited to reflect on migrants' interpretations, some recognized a gap between intention and perception, acknowledging that formality could be experienced as coldness rather than care. As one host reflected, "*I thought being formal was a way of showing respect, but maybe it actually makes them feel distant*" (Eko, host).

This misalignment of communicative norms creates a form of structural miscommunication in which both parties act with positive intentions but operate under different expectations of how intimacy should be expressed. Migrants tend to associate closeness with emotional openness and shared vulnerability, whereas hosts prioritize etiquette and gradual relational pacing. As a result, intimacy remains constrained not by explicit rejection, but by incompatible cultural scripts

that regulate when and how personal closeness is deemed appropriate. This tension underscores how norms of politeness, while socially stabilizing, can inadvertently limit the development of emotionally meaningful inter-ethnic friendships.

Cultural Exclusivity versus Inclusive Shared Spaces

The findings indicate that while everyday social life often remains segmented along ethnic lines, inclusive shared spaces can disrupt patterns of cultural exclusivity and enable more balanced forms of intimacy. In contrast to informal neighborhood interactions, collective settings such as campus organizations, volunteer groups, religious activities, and creative communities provided contexts in which shared goals and collaborative roles took precedence over ethnic identity. Within these spaces, participants described feeling recognized for their contributions rather than their origins, thereby softening relational boundaries.

Both migrants and hosts emphasized that collaboration toward a common purpose fostered trust, mutual reliance, and emotional openness. As one host reflected, "*It was not about where they came from—the teamwork made us connect*" (Sari, 29, host), illustrating how sustained co-operation transformed initial distance into closeness. Similarly, migrants described inclusive spaces as rare environments where interaction felt natural and reciprocal, rather than effortful or asymmetrical. One migrant noted that in volunteer work, "*the conversation flowed because it was not about origin anymore*" (Melki, 24, migrant), underscoring how shared activity reduced the affective burden of self-positioning.

Importantly, these settings also prompted hosts to reconsider assumptions about intimacy and inclusion. Participation and contribution emerged as key markers of belonging, reshaping hosts' willingness to engage more personally. As one host observed, "*When they are active and contribute, we feel closer to them more easily*" (Joko, 36, host). Overall, these accounts suggest that inclusive shared spaces function as social equalizers, temporarily suspending ethnic hierarchies and enabling intimacy to develop through collective experience rather than cultural similarity. In such contexts, cultural exclusivity gives way to relational openness, demonstrating that intimacy across ethnic lines is not only possible but situationally produced.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how intimacy in inter-ethnic friendships is experienced and negotiated through everyday interactions between migrants from outside Java and native Javanese hosts. Drawing on participants' narratives, the findings highlight the complexity of social encounters that extend beyond surface-level contact. As demonstrated in the results, intimacy is shaped not only by individual intentions but also by shared norms, group identities, and reciprocal perceptions, as reflected in participants' interpretations of their social experiences within broader cultural contexts (Berry, 2023; Durrheim & Dixon, 2018; Pettigrew, 2021). While contact between migrants and hosts does occur, it often remains functional rather than emotionally intimate, echoing recent qualitative findings from Indonesia indicating constrained relational development in multicultural urban settings (Hutabarat, 2023; Mariyono, 2024).

The presence of migrants in Javanese urban settings creates encounters that are not only spatial but also symbolic. Intimacy across groups is not merely a function of contact frequency but is also mediated by ambiguous local norms and psychosocial mechanisms such as ingroup favoritism and contact efficacy (Dovidio et al., 2017; Soler et al., 2024; Standen et al., 2024). In this regard, (Essuman et al., 2024) demonstrate that cultural symbols embody shared values and

collective identities, shaping how individuals and groups interpret the presence of others in shared social spaces. These symbolic meanings subtly guide perceptions, affiliations, and social boundaries, thereby influencing the extent to which intergroup closeness can emerge. Consequently, both migrants and hosts tend to gravitate toward culturally familiar relationships in which comfort and shared understanding have already been established (Turetsky & Shelton, 2024). This finding reflects the enduring principle of homophily in social networks (Khanam et al., 2023; Oliveira et al., 2024), whereby similarity in values and background facilitates affection and smoother communication.

The theory of outgroup homogeneity further illuminates how hosts perceive migrants as a uniform category rather than as individuals (De Coninck, 2020; Shilo et al., 2019). While hosts nominally accept migrants' presence, they often fail to individuate them, treating them instead as a generalized group of "outsiders". This situation reinforces outgroup homogeneity bias, a cognitive tendency to minimize within group differences when perceiving members of an outgroup (Dovidio et al., 2016). Such subtle stereotyping echoes (Palmer, 2020) findings on perceptions of Indonesian migrants in Hong Kong and demonstrates how stereotypes, even when implicit, can hinder the development of personal intimacy.

From the perspective of group threat theory (Blalock, 1967), migrants' growing presence in urban Java may provoke latent concerns among hosts. Although not explicitly articulated as a threat to Javanese identity, the influx of newcomers creates tension over social prestige, public space, and everyday rhythms, resulting in a normative sense of caution (Anthony & Robison, 2025; Ives & Breslawski, 2025). Urbanization attracts migrants in search of opportunity, yet for hosts, it may raise anxieties about displacement in social and economic hierarchies.

The findings also reveal that Javanese politeness functions as a cultural mechanism to conceal social tension. Echoing (Jauhari, 2024), politeness functions less as an expression of openness and more as a strategy of psychological distancing. As a result, inter-ethnic relationships in Java tend to unfold within an ambiguous spectrum that is neither fully open nor explicitly rejecting, but instead shaped by situational contexts, individual experiences, and intersubjective interpretations (Høy-Petersen, 2022). Migrants often describe themselves as "welcomed but not invited in," a metaphor that captures the paradox of being received politely yet excluded emotionally (Schaeffer & Kas, 2024; Vuolteenaho & Lyytinen, 2018). This finding resonates with (Dilger & Warstat, 2022), who noted that multicultural interactions in institutional settings tend to remain performative rather than affective. In this sense, tolerance may exist at the cultural level without translating into personal inclusion (Ferdman, 2017; Verkuyten & Kollar, 2021).

For hosts, formality often reflects a fear of communicative missteps or value conflict. This cautious stance reflects the tension between Javanese etiquette and the desire for intimacy across groups (Sumekto et al., 2022). (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018) conceptualize this as "face management", a strategy to avoid loss of face or social embarrassment. Nevertheless, this protective strategy paradoxically prolongs social distance rather than reducing it.

Migrants, on the other hand, often engage in microlevel adaptation efforts, such as adjusting their communication styles, adopting local cultural practices, and participating in community life, as part of a broader need to establish meaningful social relationships, as described in the Self-Expansion Model (Dys-Steenbergen et al., 2016). However, these adaptive efforts are not always reciprocated by members of the majority group, resulting in asymmetrical patterns of acculturation in which migrants are expected to adjust without guaranteed social acceptance (Bornstein, 2017; Killen et al., 2022). This pattern is consistent with the findings of (Ardi & Za-hra, 2024), who show that individual competence and adaptive efforts can contribute directly to sociocultural adjustment but do not necessarily translate into social closeness in the absence of relational openness from the

surrounding social environment. Consequently, barriers to social integration appear to stem less from overt conflict than from limited opportunities to develop intimacy that is mutually recognized and experienced as equitable (Zhang & Zeng, 2023).

According to Allport's contact hypothesis theory (Paluck et al., 2019), meaningful intergroup intimacy requires equal status, shared goals, interdependence, and institutional support (Tropp et al., 2022). The present study demonstrates that inclusive spaces, such as photography communities, local mosques, and campus volunteer groups, foster empathy and deeper interaction (Bernstein & Salipante, 2017; Piekut & Valentine, 2017). These superordinate contexts reduce intergroup anxiety and enable both migrants and hosts to move beyond small talk toward trust-based relationships (Sikorsk & Albrecht, 2025). This finding corroborates (Kende et al., 2018) metaanalysis, which highlighted that meaningful superordinate contact reduces prejudice and facilitates personal intimacy by leveling social hierarchies.

A notable methodological insight emerged when host participants engaged in reflective dialogue after listening to migrants' narratives. This process functioned as a form of vicarious or extended contact (Husnu et al., 2018; Tercan et al., 2021), enabling participants to recognize dynamics that had previously been invisible to them. Such reflective encounters support (Imperato & Mancini, 2021) argument that intercultural integration requires dialogical mechanisms beyond mere contact frequency. While these reflections occasionally fostered empathy, a significant gap persisted between recognition and behavioral change. Hosts often acknowledged the relational distance yet continued to conform to formal norms, reflecting the persistent discrepancy between attitude and behavior (Fan et al., 2017).

Ultimately, this study affirms that social intimacy should not be measured merely by interaction frequency but by whether such interaction enables identity penetration, self-disclosure, mutual support, and relational trust (Lu et al., 2021). The findings demonstrate that inter-ethnic distance is not primarily a function of explicit prejudice but is perpetuated by structural norms that normalize emotional detachment. Intimacy, therefore, remains a "costly" relational currency that demands time, recognition, and reciprocal openness, particularly when migrants are tacitly framed as temporary outsiders who are perceived as unworthy of long-term emotional investment (Humbracht et al., 2022; Navallo, 2022).

This study is limited to urban communities in Java, where Javanese culture is relatively dominant. Consequently, generalizing these findings to other regions should be approached with caution. Focusing exclusively on urban contexts also excludes potential dynamics in rural areas or in regions outside Java, where different social matrices may operate. The reliance on retrospective interviews and reflective dialogues makes the data particularly sensitive to social desirability bias (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Furthermore, the cross-sectional design cannot account for the longitudinal development of intimacy in inter-ethnic friendships. The predominance of male participants further constrains the analysis of gendered dynamics of intimacy. Future research should therefore adopt comparative and longitudinal designs, complemented by quantitative measures, to more fully map the evolution of inter-ethnic relational closeness.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that intimacy in inter-ethnic friendships between migrants from outside Java and native Javanese hosts is not determined solely by openness but also by navigating unevenly social expectations, cultural norms, and relationship meanings. It shows that hospitality

does not automatically foster emotional closeness, cultural adaptation does not always lead to acceptance, and spatial inclusion alone does not ensure recognition or belonging. Often, formal norms restrict the depth of inter-ethnic relationships, while inclusive, role-based communal spaces tend to promote reciprocal engagement across ethnic lines. Ultimately, intimacy in migrant–host interactions is not an automatic outcome of contact but an intersubjective, context-dependent process shaped by unequal power dynamics

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