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## Character Education and Interethnic Interaction for Social Cohesion: A Qualitative Study of Maritime Students in Aceh, Indonesia

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### Abstract

*This study aims to explore the role of interethnic social interaction in supporting character education and fostering sustainable social cohesion among maritime students. Methods: A qualitative case study was conducted at a Maritime Polytechnic in Aceh, Indonesia, involving 150 participants, including cadets, lecturers, counselors etc. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observations. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key patterns of interaction and character formation. Results: The findings indicate that interethnic interactions occurring in shared living spaces, collaborative maritime training, and community-based cultural activities significantly contribute to the development of character values, including empathy, tolerance, leadership, mutual respect, and discipline. Nevertheless, particular challenges such as regional biases and linguistic differences were occasionally found to hinder the development of social cohesion. Conclusion: The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive pedagogical approaches and character-focused curricula in strengthening inclusive citizenship and social harmony in maritime Education.*

**Keywords:** *Interethnic Interaction, Character Education, Social Cohesion, Maritime Students, Sustainable Development, Multicultural Education.*

### Introduction

Indonesia, as the world's largest archipelagic nation, relies heavily on the maritime sector not only for economic development and global trade but also for fostering national unity across its diverse regions (Pulungan, 2024). Maritime education institutions, particularly polytechnics, play a crucial role in preparing future maritime professionals who are equipped with both technical competencies and civic values (Simanjuntak et al., 2024). These institutions are microcosms of Indonesia's multicultural society, bringing together students from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious backgrounds (Hutabarat, 2023). In culturally complex and historically sensitive areas like Aceh, maritime campuses also function as social laboratories for promoting inclusive citizenship, peacebuilding, and social sustainability (Nur et al., 2023). Within this

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context, fostering meaningful interethnic interaction is essential not only for academic success or workplace readiness but also for cultivating character values that align with national identity and global sustainability efforts (Hashemi, 2025).

The significance of this study lies in its alignment with Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), which emphasizes holistic Education that fosters respect, tolerance, and social responsibility, and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), which highlights the role of Education in building peaceful and inclusive societies (Kowkas et al., 2022). Character education and social cohesion are key outcomes that should be embedded within formal education systems, especially in multiethnic environments such as maritime campuses (Redjeki et al., 2025). However, despite their strategic importance, maritime education institutions in Indonesia have received limited attention in scholarly research related to civic and character formation (Simanjuntak et al., 2024). Most existing studies tend to focus on vocational competencies, curriculum development, or graduate employability, leaving a significant research gap in understanding the social and interpersonal dimensions of student development (Karaca-Atik et al., 2023).

To address this gap, the present study aims to explore how interethnic social interactions contribute to character education and the formation of sustainable social cohesion among maritime students in Aceh. The study employs a qualitative case study approach, involving 150 participants, including maritime cadets, lecturers, counselors, and administrative staff, at a maritime polytechnic. Through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observations, this research examines the daily lived experiences of students as they navigate cultural diversity and internalize core values such as empathy, tolerance, leadership, discipline, and mutual respect.

As a qualitative inquiry, the research does not formulate a formal hypothesis in the conventional positivist framework. Instead, it is grounded in the analytical proposition that positive interethnic engagement within an educational environment serves as a significant driver of character development and social harmony. This proposition is explored through thematic analysis of narrative data and field observations, aiming to identify behavioral patterns, enabling factors, and sociocultural barriers within the campus setting that affect students' moral and civic growth.

In sum, this study offers a novel and interdisciplinary contribution by bridging maritime Education, character development, and intercultural interaction within the broader framework of educational sustainability. It addresses a critical gap in the literature by shifting the analytical focus from technical competencies to humanistic values in maritime institutions. The findings aim to provide evidence-based insights and practical recommendations for educators, institutional leaders, and policymakers to enhance the capacity of higher Education to cultivate ethical, tolerant, and socially responsible maritime professionals who can contribute to national cohesion and global sustainability goals.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theories of Character Education**

Character education is defined as the process of developing core ethical values such as responsibility, respect, empathy, and integrity through educational experiences (Ramadhani et al., 2024). One of the most prominent frameworks is Lickona's tripartite model of moral knowing (Uri & Harahap, 2025). Moral feeling and ethical action emphasize that actual character development involves cognitive understanding, emotional engagement, and behavioral

enactment (Spencer, 2024). Nucci and Narvaez (2008) further posit that character cannot be taught in isolation; it must be cultivated in real-life social contexts where students interact, reflect, and make decisions. In vocational and maritime Education, character education plays a critical role in preparing students not only for technical professions but also for ethical leadership and teamwork in high-stakes environments.

### **Social Cohesion and Sustainable Development (SDG Perspective)**

Social cohesion refers to the degree of connectedness, trust, and mutual support within a society. According to the OECD (2011), social cohesion is crucial for ensuring stability, solidarity, and equitable growth (Jemal, 2022). Within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), SDG 4 (Quality Education) promotes inclusive, equitable, and values-based Education that fosters global citizenship. At the same time, SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) underscores the importance of Education in building peaceful and inclusive societies (Burchi et al., 2022). Education that promotes social cohesion is not only about coexistence but also about creating learning spaces where students build mutual respect and shared goals, fostering sustainability through democratic and peaceful engagement.

### **Interethnic Interaction in Multicultural Education**

Interethnic interaction is a fundamental aspect of multicultural Education, playing a vital role in shaping students' intercultural competence, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills (Sobry & Fattah, 2023). Grounded in Allport's (1954) Contact Hypothesis, numerous studies have shown that meaningful interaction across ethnic lines, especially in equal-status, cooperative, and institutionally supported environments, can reduce prejudice and foster positive intergroup attitudes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). The role of schools and higher Education in promoting democratic citizenship through the integration of intercultural learning and ethnic diversity (Verdeja Muñiz, 2020). In maritime Education, where students from diverse ethnic backgrounds often live and train together, these interactions provide an organic space for the internalization of values and social learning.

### **Previous Studies in Maritime or Vocational Contexts**

Existing literature in maritime and vocational Education has predominantly focused on technical skill development, curriculum innovation, and graduate employability (Jogo & Rosmayana, 2025). While these dimensions are essential, they tend to overlook the social and ethical aspects of student development. Recent calls within vocational education research emphasize the need to integrate character and moral Education into training programs, ensuring that students are prepared for socially complex and multicultural workplaces (Tynjälä et al., 2022). However, studies specifically addressing how interethnic interactions contribute to character education in maritime institutions, particularly within Southeast Asian contexts, are scarce.

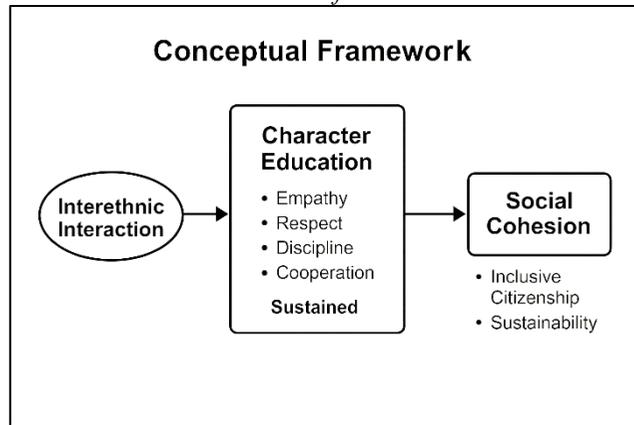


Figure 1.

Conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between interethnic interaction, character education, and social cohesion in maritime higher Education.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework linking interethnic interaction, character education, and social cohesion in the context of maritime Education. It begins with students' daily intercultural interactions, which act as a foundation for the internalization of core character values such as empathy, respect, and discipline. These values emerge not only from formal teaching but also from lived experiences within a diverse institutional environment. The framework culminates in social cohesion, reflecting inclusive citizenship and sustainable societal outcomes aligned with SDG 4 and SDG 16. The model emphasizes how structured interethnic engagement fosters character development and supports long-term educational sustainability.

## Materials and Methods

### Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate the influence of interethnic social interactions on character education and sustainable social cohesion in a maritime higher education context. The qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpersonal dynamics within a culturally diverse institutional setting. The case study method enabled a holistic examination of real-life phenomena within a bounded system, the maritime Polytechnic in Aceh, where interethnic interactions are embedded in the academic and social routines of students and staff.

### Site Description

The research was conducted at the Maritime Polytechnic in Aceh, Indonesia, a state maritime education institution that offers vocational training to students from across the Indonesian archipelago. The Polytechnic is home to cadets representing various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including students from Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and eastern Indonesia. With a residential model that places students in shared dormitories and group-based maritime training, the campus provides a rich context for examining intercultural engagement, character formation, and community cohesion.

## **Participants and Sampling Technique**

A total of 150 participants were involved in the study, comprising 120 maritime cadets, 15 lecturers, 10 student counselors, and five administrative staff. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure maximum variation in ethnicity, gender, region of origin, and institutional role. The inclusion criteria required that participants had at least one year of experience living or working within the campus environment and were actively involved in academic, training, or dormitory-based activities. This approach enabled the researchers to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives and experiences relevant to interethnic interaction and character development.

## **Data Collection**

Data collection involved three qualitative methods: in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participatory observations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 individuals (20 students, five lecturers, and five staff members), allowing for an exploration of personal reflections on interethnic relationships, challenges, and the values gained through social interaction. Additionally, five focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with groups of cadets (each consisting of six students), designed to explore group norms, social negotiation, and shared experiences. Complementing these techniques, the researchers conducted direct observations over three months in dormitories, classrooms, cafeterias, and maritime training sessions. These observations focused on documenting behavioral patterns, intercultural exchanges, and informal leadership practices. All interviews and discussions were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed in the original language (Bahasa Indonesia or local dialects) before translation and analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These phases included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming them, and producing the final report. Two researchers independently coded the transcripts to enhance reliability, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. The thematic findings were then mapped against the theoretical framework to understand how interethnic interactions facilitate character education and social cohesion in the maritime educational setting.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The study was conducted following ethical guidelines and received formal approval from the institutional ethics committee. All participants were provided with written informed consent forms that outlined the study's objectives, their rights, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their data. Names and personal identifiers were anonymized to ensure privacy and protect the identities of all participants. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study without consequence. All data were securely stored and used solely for academic and research purposes.

## **Results**

This section presents the key findings of the study, which explores the role of interethnic social interactions in shaping character education and promoting sustainable social cohesion among maritime students in Aceh, Indonesia. Drawing on data collected from 150 participants through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observations, the analysis was

conducted using the thematic approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The results reveal four central themes: (1) patterns of interethnic interaction in daily campus life, (2) internalization of core character values such as discipline, respect, and responsibility, (3) barriers to social cohesion including linguistic and cultural challenges, and (4) institutional support mechanisms that facilitate intercultural engagement and character formation. These themes are detailed in the following subsections and supported by participant narratives and field observations that reflect the lived experiences of students in a diverse maritime educational environment.

**Subject Characteristic**

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the 150 participants involved in this qualitative case study conducted at Malahayati Maritime Polytechnic in Aceh, Indonesia. The majority of participants were maritime cadets (n = 120; 80%), followed by lecturers (10%), counselors (6.7%), and administrative staff (3.3%). In terms of gender, the sample was predominantly male (85.3%), reflecting the gender profile typical of maritime institutions. However, a small number of female participants (14.7%)—primarily counselors and administrative staff—were also included.

Participants varied in age, with cadets ranging from 18 to 24 years old and institutional staff from 30 to 55 years old. Ethnic diversity was a central feature of the sample, representing major Indonesian ethnic groups, including Acehnese, Javanese, Minangkabau, Batak, Bugis/Makassarese, Papuan, Dayak, and others. This diversity reflects the institution’s role as a national training center, drawing students from across the archipelago. All participants had lived or worked on campus for a minimum of one year, fulfilling the inclusion criteria.

Bahasa Indonesia was the primary language used in academic and formal settings, while regional languages were often used in informal peer interactions. Approximately 47% of participants used local languages (e.g., Acehnese, Bugis, Javanese), occasionally leading to communication challenges. All participants reported regular engagement in interethnic interaction, particularly in shared dormitories and group-based maritime training.

Most participants were actively involved in character education and social activities, including leadership programs, flag ceremonies, and cultural or sports events. All participants provided informed consent and contributed to the study through interviews, focus group discussions, or participatory observations. This broad representation across roles, backgrounds, and experiences provided a rich foundation for the study’s exploration of interethnic dynamics and character development in a maritime education context.

Category	Subcategory	n	Percentage (%)	Remarks
Participant Role	Maritime cadets (students)	120	80.0%	Core respondents living in campus dormitories
	Lecturers	15	10.	Teach academic and maritime subjects.
	Counselors	10	6.7	Guide student character and social development

Category	Subcategory	n	Percentage (%)	Remarks
	Administrative staff	5	3.3	Manage student and campus operations
Gender	Male	128	85.3	Predominant in all categories, especially cadets
	Female	22	14.7	Mostly, counselors and administrative staff
Age Range	18–24 years	120	80.0	All cadets
	30–55 years	30	20.0	Lecturers and staff
Ethnic Background	Acehnese	30	20.0	Local ethnic group
	Javanese	28	18.7	Mostly from Java Island
	Minangkabau	18	12.0	From West Sumatra
	Batak	16	10.7	From North Sumatra
	Bugis/Makassarese	20	13.3	From Sulawesi region
	Papuan	12	8.0	From Eastern Indonesia
	Dayak/Flores/Others	26	17.3	Representing other minority ethnicities
Length of Stay/Service	≥1 year (all participants)	150	100	Inclusion criterion for both students and staff
Language Usage	Bahasa Indonesia	150	100	Used in formal and academic settings
	Regional languages (informal)	70	47	Acehnese, Javanese, Bugis, etc., used in peer contexts
Interethnic Engagement	Dormitory & group training	150	100	Daily interethnic interaction in structured environments
Character/Social Activities	Leadership & Discipline	120	80	Active in maritime leadership and flag ceremonies
	Cross-cultural/social events	85	56.7	Cultural nights, sports, and student-led initiatives
Study Participation	Interview / FGD / Observation	150	100	All participants gave informed consent and contributed

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

**Validity of Research data**

Table 2 outlines five key subthemes from the thematic analysis of interethnic interactions among maritime cadets. First, dormitory bonding served as an informal space where cadets formed friendships through daily routines. Second, team-based collaboration during maritime training fostered mutual trust and performance-based cooperation across ethnic lines. Third, cross-cultural adjustment captured the cadets' transition from social hesitation to intercultural openness. Fourth, discipline and mutual respect were shaped through shared adherence to institutional codes. Finally, cultural appreciation through events highlighted how extracurricular activities promoted solidarity and cultural exchange. Collectively, these subthemes illustrate the transformative and multidimensional impact of structured interethnic engagement in maritime Education.

<b>Validation Strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Application in This Study</b>
Triangulation	Using multiple data sources, methods, or investigators to corroborate findings	Combined in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory observations to ensure data richness
Member Checking	Verifying findings or interpretations with participants	Preliminary themes and selected quotations were shared with key participants for confirmation and clarification
Prolonged Engagement	Spending sufficient time in the field to build trust and capture in-depth data	Researchers observed participants across various contexts over a period of three months.
Peer Debriefing	Engaging independent researchers to review and challenge the analysis	Two peer researchers reviewed thematic coding to ensure consistency and minimize bias
Audit Trail	Documenting the research process systematically for transparency	Maintained records of interview transcripts, field notes, coding memos, and analysis procedures
Thick Description	Providing detailed contextual and narrative descriptions to enhance transferability	Rich narratives and direct quotes were used to convey participant experiences and cultural context.
Purposive Sampling	Selecting participants who are information-rich and relevant to the research aims.	Participants were selected based on role, length of stay, ethnic diversity, and active engagement in campus life.

Table 2.

Data validation strategies applied in the qualitative case study

Data Processing, 2024

**Thematic Findings**

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and field observations yielded four major themes that illustrate the dynamics of interethnic interaction and its relationship to character education and social cohesion in the maritime education setting. These

themes include (A) patterns of interethnic interaction, (B) internalization of character values, (C) barriers to social cohesion, and (D) institutional support mechanisms.

### ***Patterns of Interethnic Interaction***

Table 3 outlines the emergent subthemes related to interethnic interaction as experienced by the study participants. These subthemes capture the diversity of contexts and meanings that shaped intercultural engagement among cadets and institutional members. One dominant subtheme was dormitory bonding, where shared living arrangements provided informal spaces for cultural exchange and emotional support. Participants frequently mentioned how initial unfamiliarity evolved into a friendship through daily routines, such as cleaning, eating, and engaging in informal conversations.

Another key subtheme, team-based maritime collaboration, reflects how structured training activities—such as ship navigation simulations and physical drills—necessitated cooperation across ethnic lines. These high-stakes, interdependent tasks often led to mutual respect and trust, fostering a sense of equality and unity that transcended individual backgrounds. The subtheme of cross-cultural adjustment emerged from students' accounts of initial hesitation and eventual openness to learning about others' cultures. Many students described a gradual process of acceptance driven by repeated exposure and shared challenges. In addition, discipline and mutual respect were consistently reinforced through institutional norms, helping students internalize the importance of fairness and group responsibility.

Finally, cultural appreciation through events such as sports competitions and cultural nights created inclusive platforms for students to express and appreciate diverse cultural identities. These activities were not only recreational but also symbolic of institutional commitment to unity in diversity. Overall, the quotes in Table 2 demonstrate that interethnic interaction in maritime Education is both situational and transformative, contributing directly to character development and sustainable social cohesion.

<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Dormitory Bonding	Informal interactions through shared living spaces fostered familiarity and empathy.	“I learned about Batak culture from my roommate, and we now cook together on weekends.” ( <i>Cadet, Acehnese</i> )
Team-Based Maritime Collaboration	Working together in simulations and drills encouraged unity and trust	“During ship simulation, we had to function like a real crew—no time to think about ethnic origin.” ( <i>Cadet, Bugis</i> )
Cross-Cultural Adjustment	Initial social hesitation was gradually replaced by intercultural curiosity and acceptance.	“At first, I stayed quiet because I didn’t know their culture. But after drills and training, we bonded.” ( <i>Cadet, Javanese</i> )
Discipline and Mutual Respect	Shared rules and routines helped build equal treatment and peer discipline	“We all follow the same rules, and that creates fairness and unity among us.” ( <i>Cadet, Minangkabau</i> )
Cultural Appreciation	Events like cultural nights and sports encouraged	“I joined the Acehnese dance team even though I’m from Sulawesi—it

through Events	interethnic appreciation	made me feel included.” (Cadet, Makassarese)
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Table 3. Illustrative Quotes on Interethnic Interaction

Data Processing, 2024

Figure 2 presents a schematic overview of the interethnic interaction dynamics observed among maritime students at Maritime Polytechnic in Aceh, Indonesia. The diagram identifies three primary social contexts: dormitory life, training activities, and cultural events (e.g., sports and cultural nights) as key entry points for informal bonding and interpersonal engagement across ethnic boundaries. These shared experiences created the foundation for cross-group engagement and cooperation, which were reinforced through institutional routines and team-based learning structures. As shown in the figure, informal bonding arising from cohabitation and shared tasks evolved into deeper interpersonal relationships, while cultural and recreational events provided opportunities for mutual appreciation and expression of identity. The convergence of these processes contributed to the formation of interethnic friendships and a sense of collective identity despite initial differences in language, customs, or regional backgrounds. This model illustrates how structured social environments in maritime Education can actively facilitate intercultural understanding and character formation—essential pillars for achieving sustainable social cohesion in higher Education.

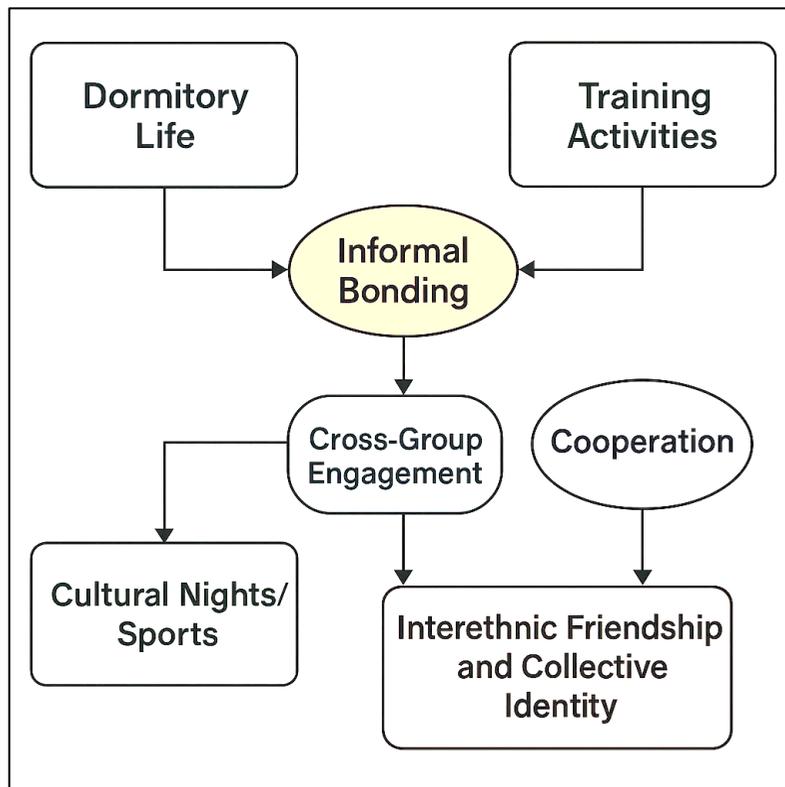


Figure 2.

Schematic representation of interethnic interaction patterns among maritime students. This

diagram illustrates how informal and formal contexts, such as dormitory life, training activities, and cultural events, foster interethnic bonding, cross-group engagement, and cooperation, leading to the development of interethnic friendships and collective identity within the maritime education environment.

Table 4 presents selected direct quotes from participants that reflect the diversity and depth of interethnic interaction among cadets and institutional staff at Malahayati Maritime Polytechnic. These quotes serve to substantiate the thematic findings and provide authentic voices that illustrate how social engagement unfolds within both formal and informal educational contexts. The first quote, from a second-year Javanese cadet, demonstrates the process of **cross-cultural** adjustment, where initial hesitation was gradually replaced by openness and cooperation. Living together in dormitories and facing shared challenges in training created a space for empathy and bonding. Similarly, a first-year Bugis cadet emphasized the importance of teamwork in structured maritime tasks, noting that ethnic background became irrelevant in high-responsibility scenarios, such as navigation drills, where trust and accountability were crucial. A third-year Minangkabau cadet highlighted how institutional discipline and shared rules functioned as equalizing mechanisms that minimized ethnocentric behavior and promoted fairness.

In contrast, a Papuan cadet reflected on his exposure to cultural diversity, describing how participating in cultural nights allowed him to connect and perform alongside students from other regions, fostering mutual appreciation and cross-group solidarity. Lastly, a female Acehnese counselor emphasized the institution's role in shaping inclusive character education, highlighting that the dormitory was not only a living place but also a site for informal learning and intercultural understanding. These quotes collectively demonstrate that meaningful interethnic interactions emerged not solely by design but through sustained daily experiences, institutional support, and the willingness of individuals to engage across cultural boundaries.

Participant Information	Quote	Theme Reflected
Cadet, Javanese, 2nd year	“At first, I stayed quiet because I didn’t know their culture. But after a few weeks of morning drills and living together, I realized we all face the same challenges. That’s how we started helping each other.”	Cross-cultural adjustment, dormitory bonding
Cadet, Bugis, 1st year	“When we worked on navigation tasks, it didn’t matter where you came from. Everyone had to trust each other because mistakes could affect the whole team.”	Formal cooperation, teamwork
Cadet, Minangkabau, 3rd year	“We follow the same rules every day. That makes us feel equal, even if we are different.”	Discipline and mutual respect
Cadet, Papuan, 2nd year	“Before coming here, I had never met someone from Aceh or Java. Now I’ve learned a lot from them—we even perform together on cultural nights.”	Cultural appreciation, cross-group engagement
Counselor,	“We encourage students to live and learn	Institutional

Acehnese, female	together, regardless of ethnicity. The dormitory is where most of the learning happens.”	support, informal bonding
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Table 4. Selected Direct Quotes on Interethnic Interaction

Data Processing, 2024

These findings suggest that interethnic interactions, occurring in both informal and formal settings, play a crucial role in fostering mutual trust, cultural understanding, and social unity among maritime cadets. Although students initially experienced uncertainty or social distance due to ethnic and linguistic differences, the structured routines of maritime training, combined with the proximity of dormitory life, served as effective mediators for interpersonal growth. Through daily cooperation, shared challenges, and cultural exchange, cadets developed strong interethnic bonds and internalized values such as empathy, discipline, and respect. These interactions not only contributed to individual character development but also fostered a sense of collective identity and inclusive citizenship, demonstrating the transformative potential of intercultural engagement within maritime Education.

### ***Internalization of Character Values***

Through continuous exposure to cultural differences in dormitory life and team-based training environments, maritime cadets gradually developed key character traits, including discipline, empathy, tolerance, and responsibility. In the dormitory setting, students from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds were required to share common spaces and routines, which often led to moments of cultural negotiation and adaptation. These daily encounters fostered a deeper awareness of others and reinforced values of respect and empathy. As one cadet shared, “*I learned to be more patient when I lived with someone from a different background. We had to adjust to each other’s habits.*” (C07, Batak, 2nd year, male).

Discipline emerged as a value consistently cultivated through collective routines, including early morning drills, uniform inspections, and strict punctuality. These experiences were perceived as equalizers across cultural lines. A cadet reflected, “*Waking up at 4:30 with everyone taught me discipline—no one cared where you’re from. We had to be ready, together.*” (C12, Javanese, 1st year, male).

Tolerance and mutual understanding were also shaped by collaborative training tasks that demanded interdependence and trust. Group assignments often led to moments of disagreement, but students learned to manage differences constructively. One participant explained, “*We had to compromise when opinions clashed, or the task wouldn’t get done. That taught me to respect others’ perspectives.*” (C23, Bugis, 3rd year, male). These experiences were key in helping cadets break down stereotypes and biases they may have carried before entering the institution.

In terms of leadership and responsibility, cadets often took turns serving as team coordinators, where they were accountable for the group’s performance. One senior cadet noted, “*If I failed to lead properly, the whole group was penalized. That’s how I learned responsibility—not just for myself, but for others too.*” (C30, Minangkabau, 3rd year, male). These opportunities were viewed not only as institutional requirements but as personal challenges that facilitated the internalization of ethical behavior. The narratives reveal that interethnic interactions were not incidental to the formation of character. They were instrumental. The lived realities of working, living, and learning together across cultures served as real-world laboratories where cadets absorbed and practiced the values necessary for social cohesion, ethical leadership, and

professional integrity within and beyond the maritime context.

Character Value	Context of Internalization	Illustrative Quote	Participant Code
Discipline	Morning drills, uniform routines, time management	“Waking up at 4:30 with everyone taught me discipline no one cared where you’re from.”	C12, Javanese, 1st year, Male
Empathy	Shared dormitory life, religious and cultural habits	“I learned to be more patient when I lived with someone from a different background.”	C07, Batak, 2nd year, Male
Tolerance	Conflict resolution during group tasks	“We had to compromise when opinions clashed, or the task wouldn’t get done.”	C23, Bugis, 3rd year, Male
Respect	Interactions during cultural or religious practices	“We waited for our roommate to finish praying before turning off the lights.”	C09, Acehese, 2nd year, Male
Responsibility	Team leadership during maritime training	“If I failed to lead properly, the whole group was penalized. That’s how I learned responsibility.”	C30, Minangkabau, 3rd year, Male

Table 5. Character Values and Contexts of Internalization

Data Processing, 2024

Table 5 illustrates the key character values internalized by cadets through various contexts of interethnic interaction within the maritime education environment. The table identifies five dominant values—discipline, empathy, tolerance, respect, and responsibility which emerged consistently across participant narratives and observational data. Discipline was primarily shaped through the regimented structure of maritime training, particularly through early morning drills, time-bound routines, and uniform inspections. Regardless of ethnic background, cadets were held to the same standards, which promoted a shared sense of accountability. As one cadet noted, punctuality and physical preparedness were not negotiable and fostered a collective identity.

Empathy and tolerance were developed through shared dormitory life, where cadets encountered diverse cultural and religious practices daily. Living closely with peers from different regions encouraged students to become more mindful and adaptable. For instance, cadets reported making intentional efforts to understand their roommates' prayer schedules, language habits, and social norms, fostering interpersonal sensitivity. Respect was often cited concerning religious and cultural customs. Many cadets expressed admiration for traditions different from their own, especially when mutual accommodations were made during communal living and training. These respectful gestures often served as starting points for deeper friendships and trust-building across ethnic lines.

Responsibility was cultivated through structured leadership roles and team assignments. Maritime training emphasized collective outcomes, where individual performance had a direct

impact on the group. Cadets learned to take ownership of tasks, guide peers, and reflect on their roles within a team. The pressures of high-stakes training simulations provided real-life experiences that reinforced ethical decision-making and group-oriented responsibility. In summary, the table highlights how the maritime institution's social and academic structures, coupled with ethnically diverse interactions, served as effective platforms for character education. These findings support the study's analytical proposition that interethnic engagement in a structured educational setting fosters meaningful character development, contributing to broader goals of sustainable social cohesion and inclusive citizenship.

<b>Character Value</b>	<b>Illustrative Quote</b>	<b>Participant Code</b>
Discipline	“Waking up at 4:30 with everyone taught me discipline—no one cared where you’re from.”	C12, Javanese, 1st year, Male
Empathy	“I learned to be more patient when I lived with someone from a different background.”	C07, Batak, 2nd year, Male
Tolerance	“We had to compromise when opinions clashed, or the task wouldn’t get done.”	C23, Bugis, 3rd year, Male
Respect	“We waited for our roommate to finish praying before turning off the lights.”	C09, Acehnese, 2nd year, Male
Responsibility	“If I failed to lead properly, the whole group was penalized. That’s how I learned responsibility.”	C30, Minangkabau, 3rd year, Male

Table 6. Direct Quotes Illustrating Character Values

Data Processing, 2024

Table 6 showcases authentic participant voices that exemplify the internalization of character values through interethnic interactions in the maritime education setting. These direct quotes provide firsthand evidence of how values such as discipline, empathy, tolerance, respect, and responsibility were shaped by cadets' lived experiences in a multicultural environment. The quote related to discipline reflects how the maritime training structure fostered a strong sense of routine and punctuality, transcending ethnic backgrounds and uniting students through shared expectations. Similarly, the quote on empathy illustrates how the daily realities of dormitory life compelled students to recognize and adapt to the emotional and cultural needs of others, encouraging patience and interpersonal sensitivity.

Tolerance was expressed through cadets' ability to navigate group disagreements constructively—an essential skill in managing cultural differences within collaborative training contexts. The quote on respect captures a moment of intercultural accommodation, as cadets consciously adjusted their actions to honor their peers' religious observances, fostering mutual regard. Ultimately, the quote on responsibility underscores the importance of leadership tasks in fostering accountability and ethical decision-making. Being responsible for a team's performance pushed cadets to act with integrity, not just for individual success but for collective achievement. The quotes in Table 6 do more than reinforce thematic findings—they bring depth, emotion, and credibility to the analysis by foregrounding the voices of the participants. These testimonies exemplify how interethnic interaction is not only a social dynamic but also a pedagogical tool for instilling the values that underpin sustainable social cohesion and inclusive citizenship within the maritime educational context.

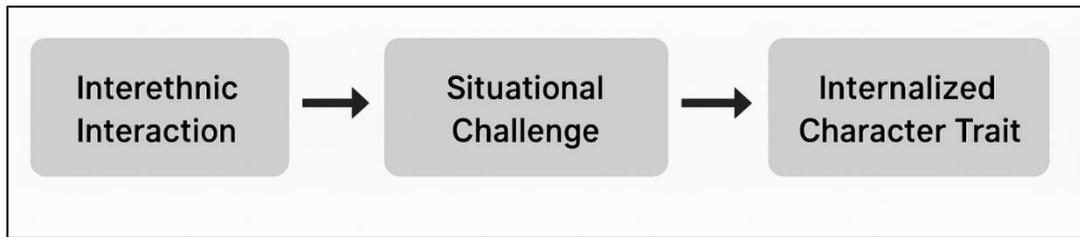


Figure 3. Pathways of Character Value Internalization.

Figure 3 illustrates the progressive stages through which character values are internalized in a maritime educational setting. The process begins with interethnic interaction, which exposes cadets to cultural diversity and social differences. This leads to situational challenges, such as communication barriers, conflict in team settings, or value-based disagreements. Through these challenges, cadets undergo a process of reflection wherein they reevaluate their assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors. The final stage results in the internalization of character traits, such as empathy, discipline, respect, or responsibility, being embedded into their personal and professional identity. The model highlights the educational value of structured intercultural engagement in shaping ethical and socially cohesive individuals.

These findings confirm that character values such as discipline, empathy, tolerance, respect, and responsibility are not merely the result of formal instruction but are deeply rooted in the cadets' lived experiences of interethnic interaction. The combination of shared dormitory life, collaborative maritime training, and everyday cultural negotiation created real-world situations that challenged students to adapt, reflect, and grow. Through these sustained and meaningful encounters, cadets internalized values that transcended cultural boundaries and became embedded in their personal and professional identities. This reinforces the notion that character education is most effective when embedded within authentic social environments, where students not only learn about values but live them. In the context of maritime Education, the internalization of such values contributes directly to the cultivation of inclusive leadership and sustainable social cohesion.

### ***Barriers to Social Cohesion***

Several cadets described the early stages of campus life as socially isolating due to unfamiliarity with dominant regional dialects or jokes rooted in local culture. Misunderstandings were widespread among students from eastern Indonesia who had limited fluency in Bahasa Indonesia. One participant shared, *"I often stayed silent during group discussions, not because I didn't want to contribute, but because I couldn't follow the Acehnese or Javanese slang they used casually"* (Cadet, Papuan, 1st year). This linguistic gap often led to passive exclusion and reduced participation in both social and academic conversations. Another recurring challenge was the persistence of regional stereotypes, which occasionally surfaced in humorous but insensitive remarks. These seemingly harmless jokes sometimes made cadets feel labeled or misrepresented. As a Bugis cadet noted, *"At first, I didn't understand why they called me 'keras kepala' [stubborn] just because of my ethnicity—it was said as a joke, but it stuck"* (Cadet, Bugis, 2nd year). Such stereotyping, while not always malicious, contributed to the formation of ethnic-based social clusters, especially during the first few months of enrollment.

These divisions were more pronounced among students who had not previously been exposed

to multicultural environments. Initial comfort zones formed along familiar linguistic or cultural lines, resulting in ethnic cliques that hindered broader social cohesion. However, as training routines became more intensive and team-based, cadets were increasingly required to collaborate beyond their comfort zones. Institutional interventions, such as rotational group assignments and mentoring from senior cadets. It played a significant role in dismantling these informal barriers. As one senior cadet shared, “*We make sure the junior teams are mixed—no one is allowed to group only with friends from their region. It’s hard at first, but they adapt*” (Cadet Mentor, Acehnese, 3rd year). Over time, these structured interethnic engagements enabled students to build trust, foster cultural understanding, and form new peer alliances grounded in shared challenges and goals.

Type of Barrier	Description	Illustrative Quote	Observed Context
Language Differences	Difficulty understanding local dialects or Bahasa Indonesia	“I couldn’t follow what others were saying in Acehnese, so I stayed quiet.” (C05, <i>Papuan</i> )	Dormitory conversations
Regional Stereotypes	Negative assumptions based on regional identity	“Some students joked about people from my area being lazy.” (C22, <i>Minangkabau</i> )	Informal social settings
Ethnic-Based Cliques	Tendency to group with those of the same background	“We mostly stuck with people from our region during the first semester.” (C16, <i>Bugis</i> )	Early months of enrollment
Exclusion from Group Tasks	Feeling overlooked or less involved in collaborative work	“They chose to discuss in Javanese. I didn’t feel like I was part of it.” (C28, <i>Dayak</i> )	Group assignments and drills

Table 7. Identified Barriers to Social Cohesion

Data Processing, 2024

Table 7 outlines four primary social barriers that challenged interethnic cohesion among maritime cadets and staff. The most commonly reported obstacle was language barriers, particularly among students from eastern Indonesia or rural backgrounds who were unfamiliar with Bahasa Indonesia or regional dialects, such as Acehnese. These communication issues often led to feelings of exclusion and limited participation in the classroom or dormitory. To address this, institutions implemented peer mentoring strategies and encouraged the use of mixed-language communication during informal activities. The second challenge involved regional stereotypes, which surfaced through casual jokes or generalizations about ethnic groups. These remarks, although sometimes unintended, resulted in emotional discomfort and reinforced perceived social boundaries. Educational staff responded by facilitating structured dialogues and diversity awareness sessions, aiming to increase sensitivity and reduce prejudicial attitudes.

A third barrier observed was the formation of ethnic-based cliques, particularly during the early months on campus. Students gravitated toward peers with shared cultural backgrounds for comfort, which hindered broader social integration and sometimes bred distrust. As a corrective measure, groupings for practical training and dormitory placements were deliberately diversified, and inclusive student leadership was promoted. Finally, cultural misunderstandings

arose from differences in religious practices, dietary habits, or personal etiquette. These misinterpretations, though often subtle, occasionally led to offense or disengagement. Through cross-cultural orientation sessions and reflective forums, participants were encouraged to build empathy and learn from one another's lived experiences. Together, these findings underscore the importance of intentional intercultural facilitation within maritime education environments to promote meaningful and sustained social cohesion across ethnic boundaries.

Figure 4 presents a linear representation of the social journey experienced by cadets as they navigated interethnic interaction within the maritime education context. The process begins with initial enrollment, where students enter a culturally diverse environment with limited exposure to other ethnic groups. During this phase, many cadets encountered cultural misunderstandings, particularly concerning religious practices, social customs, and daily communication norms. These misunderstandings often evolved into language and stereotype-based isolation, especially among cadets from minority or underrepresented regions. Social withdrawal, exclusion from peer groups, and the formation of ethnic-based cliques were common during this stage, creating a fragmented campus social structure. However, through targeted institutional strategies such as mentorship programs, rotational group assignments, and inclusive dormitory placements, students were gradually reoriented into mixed environments where interaction across cultural lines was both encouraged and required. These interventions served as turning points that facilitated mutual adjustment and promoted empathy. As a result, cadets progressed toward improved social cohesion, marked by increased interethnic collaboration, deeper understanding, and more inclusive relationships. The diagram illustrates that social cohesion in multicultural Education is not instantaneous but unfolds as a developmental process that requires institutional support, sustained engagement, and personal reflection.

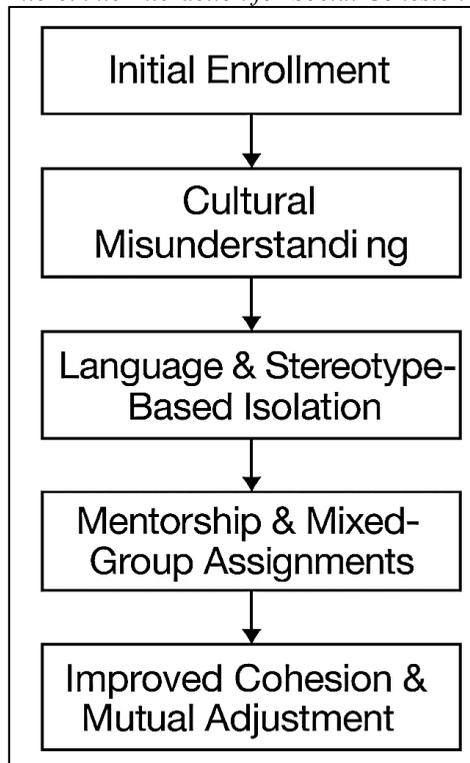


Figure 4.

Progression from Social Fragmentation to Inclusion. This diagram illustrates the transitional stages experienced by cadets in a multicultural maritime education environment—from initial enrollment, marked by cultural unfamiliarity, through episodes of misunderstanding and social exclusion, to eventual adaptation, cohesion, and inclusion, driven by structured peer mentorship and institutional interventions.

Figure 5 illustrates a sociogram that depicts the progression of social relationships among maritime cadets from initial ethnic-based clustering to integrated interethnic networks over the course of one academic semester. In the early phase of enrollment, cadets tended to associate predominantly with peers from similar ethnic backgrounds. This is represented in the sociogram by isolated clusters of nodes, each color-coded by ethnicity, where minimal cross-group connections existed. These patterns reflect the initial comfort zones formed by students due to language familiarity, shared cultural references, or regional identity. However, as cadets engaged in structured institutional activities such as rotational team assignments, shared dormitory living, and collaborative maritime training, the sociogram in the latter phase shows a marked increase in cross-ethnic linkages. The once-segregated clusters begin to dissolve into a more interconnected web of relationships characterized by bridges across different ethnic groups. This visual shift suggests a positive trajectory toward social inclusion and mutual trust. The transformation captured in the sociogram provides strong visual evidence of the impact of peer interaction, institutional design, and lived intercultural experience in reducing social fragmentation. It also affirms the study's conclusion that sustainable social cohesion is not merely a function of demographic diversity but a product of intentional engagement and guided

adaptation. As students developed shared goals and daily responsibilities, ethnic identity became less of a boundary and more of a component within a broader, inclusive peer network.

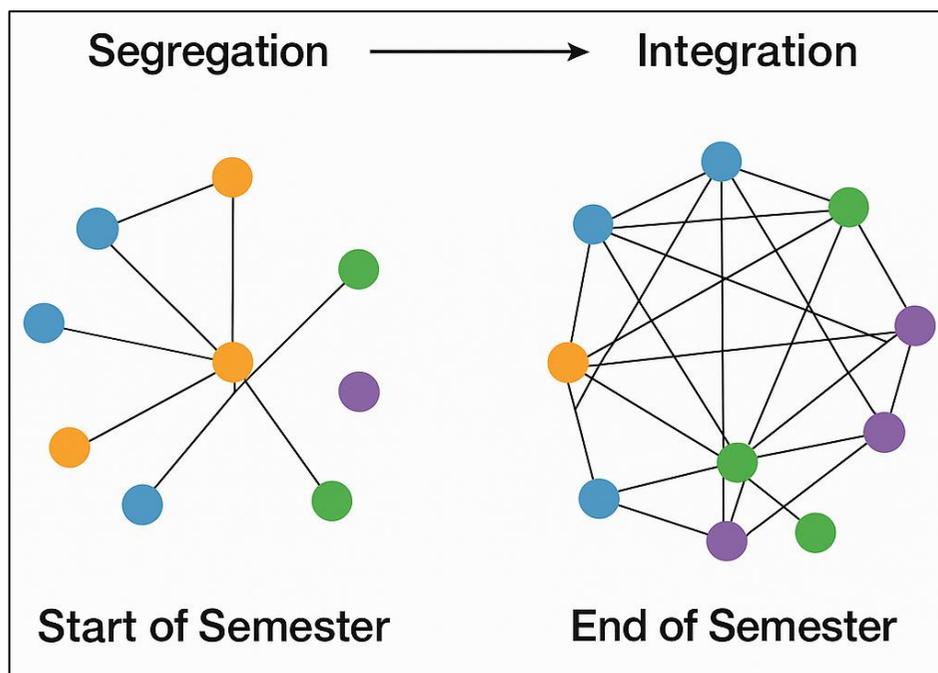


Figure 5. Sociogram of Interethnic Social Integration from Start to End of Semester.

Table 8 presents direct quotes from cadets that illustrate their lived experiences with social barriers in an interethnic educational setting. These quotes reveal real-life challenges encountered by new students, especially during their initial period of adjustment within a multicultural campus environment. For instance, a cadet from Papua expressed a sense of isolation due to being unable to understand the Acehnese language commonly used by dormitory peers. Another participant from Batak described facing negative regional stereotypes and feeling the need to disprove assumptions about people from his province. Additionally, some cadets observed a tendency among students to form exclusive ethnic-based groups during collaborative assignments. These quotes not only highlight the social challenges faced by the participants but also serve as critical evidence supporting the validity of the study's findings. They provide an authentic voice to the experiences of the cadets and reinforce the notion that despite institutional efforts toward integration, significant improvements are still needed to foster a culturally inclusive and cohesive environment. These insights are particularly valuable for informing character education strategies and designing culturally responsive institutional policies in maritime higher Education.

Barrier Type	Quote	Participant Code
Language exclusion	"They were speaking Acehnese, and I had no idea what they were saying."	C05, Papuan, 1st year, Male
Regional labeling	"They thought people from my province were rude and stubborn. I had to prove them wrong."	C17, Batak, 2nd year, Male
Group	"During group tasks, some students only wanted	C11, Javanese, 1st

favoritism	to work with their own ethnic group.”	year, Female
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Table 8. Participant Quotes Reflecting Barriers to Social Cohesion

Data Processing, 2024

Figure 6 illustrates the frequency and distribution of reported social barriers across different ethnic groups in the maritime education setting. Using a heat map format, the figure categorizes three primary types of barriers: language difficulties, regional stereotypes, and ethnic-based cliques on the Y-axis. At the same time, various ethnic groups (e.g., Acehnese, Javanese, Papuan, Batak, Bugis) are displayed along the X-axis. The intensity of color shading represents the frequency with which each group reported experiencing a specific barrier. For example, Papuan cadets showed a high frequency of language-related exclusion, as indicated by the darkest shade in the language barrier row. Batak and Minangkabau cadets reported more frequent encounters with regional stereotyping, while Javanese and Bugis cadets indicated a tendency for ethnic group favoritism in collaborative tasks. This visualization reveals how certain ethnic groups face distinct forms of social challenges more prominently than others. It underscores the need for differentiated, culturally responsive strategies to address these issues. Moreover, the heat map underscores the importance of creating inclusive dialogue spaces and mixed-ethnicity group activities as tools to mitigate fragmentation and foster sustainable social cohesion in maritime Education.

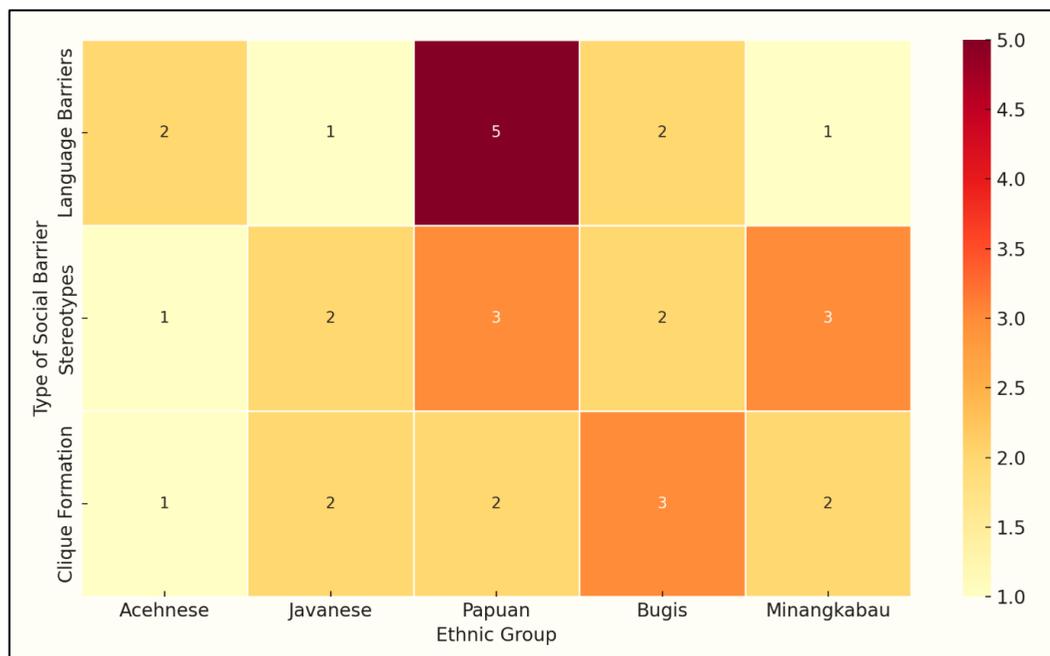


Figure 6. Heat Map of Reported Social Barriers by Ethnic Group

### ***Institutional Support Mechanisms***

At the Maritime Polytechnic in Aceh, institutional mechanisms were found to play a pivotal role in fostering interethnic engagement and cultivating core character values among cadets. One of the most prominent strategies was the assignment of students from different ethnic backgrounds to shared dormitories, which created daily opportunities for informal cultural learning and

bonding. This living arrangement enabled cadets to engage with different traditions, customs, and languages in a shared environment, gradually dissolving preconceived notions and social boundaries. *“By living with peers from other regions, I learned to listen, adapt, and understand different cultures. The campus assigned us deliberately to mixed dorms—and it helped.”* C21, Bugis, 2nd year, Male

Additionally, rotational training teams ensured that cadets worked with diverse peers on all practical tasks, including navigation drills, physical discipline routines, and ship management simulations. This approach reduced ethnic clustering and compelled students to develop mutual trust and communication across cultural lines. *“Every week, we had a new group. You couldn’t choose who to work with. At first, it felt awkward, but later, we saw that this helped us grow.”* C07, Acehnese, 1st year, Female

The character education curriculum further reinforced values such as responsibility, leadership, and mutual respect. Daily flag ceremonies, led by cadets, emphasized national unity and institutional discipline, while sessions with moral counselors addressed interpersonal conflict and cultural misunderstandings constructively. Beyond formal programming, the institution also supported student-led activities, including cultural festivals, interethnic debate competitions, and sports tournaments. These extracurricular platforms enabled cadets to celebrate their cultural identities while fostering a collective campus spirit. *“During our culture night, I danced Papua. My Javanese and Acehnese friends helped me with the rehearsal. That’s when I felt like we were one team.”* C32, Papuan, 2nd year, Male.

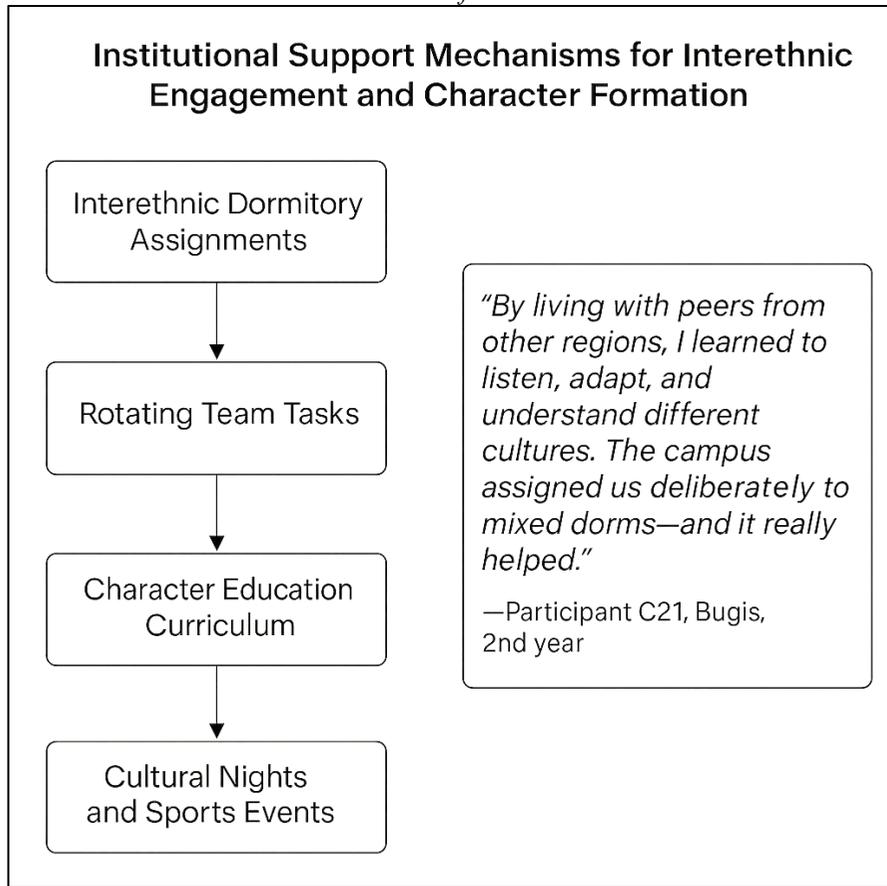


Figure 5.

Institutional Support Mechanisms for Interethnic Engagement and Character Development. This diagram illustrates the structured strategies implemented by the maritime Polytechnic to promote interethnic integration and character formation. Key mechanisms include mixed dormitory assignments, rotational team training, formal character education, and extracurricular programs, all designed to foster empathy, discipline, collaboration, and inclusive citizenship among cadets.

Figure 5 presents a conceptual framework outlining the institutional strategies that supported interethnic engagement and character development within the Maritime Polytechnic. The model begins with institutional policies that deliberately structure student experiences across four core areas: mixed dormitory assignments, rotational training teams, a character education curriculum, and extracurricular cultural and sports programs. The mixed dormitory system exposed students to cultural diversity in their daily routines, encouraging tolerance and empathy through cohabitation. Rotational team-based training ensured that cadets collaborated with peers from various ethnic backgrounds in high-responsibility contexts, reinforcing mutual trust and shared accountability. The character education curriculum, integrated into daily ceremonies and counseling sessions, emphasized values such as unity, respect, and ethical conduct. Meanwhile, student-led events such as interethnic sports, cultural nights, and collaborative performances provided informal yet powerful platforms for cultural expression and social bonding. These institutional mechanisms collectively facilitated a process of transformation from initial social

unfamiliarity to sustained interethnic collaboration and the internalization of shared character values. The diagram illustrates how coordinated structural interventions within the educational environment play a crucial role in fostering sustainable social cohesion and inclusive leadership among students.

<b>Institutional Strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Perceived Impact</b>	<b>Illustrative Quote</b>
Mixed Dormitory Assignment	Placement of students from different ethnic backgrounds in shared living quarters	Increased empathy, reduced cultural bias	“By living with peers from other regions, I learned to understand and adapt.” – C21.
Rotating Training Teams	Regular reshuffling of cadets in practical and simulation exercises	Broadened interethnic collaboration and trust	“Every week, we had a new group. It helped us work with people we didn’t know.” – C07.
Character Education Curriculum	Daily flag ceremonies, moral modules, and counselor guidance	Reinforced values of unity, respect, and shared responsibility	“The lessons apply to all of us, not just one group.” – C13
Cultural and Sports Events	Student-led cultural nights, interethnic competitions	Promoted identity expression and inclusive peer bonding	“I performed a traditional dance, and others cheered—different cultures, one campus.” – C32

Table 9. Institutional Strategies and Perceived Impact on Interethnic Engagement

Data Processing, 2024

Table 9 presents a thematic summary of institutional strategies designed to enhance interethnic engagement and character formation among cadets in the maritime education setting. One of the most impactful strategies was the deliberate mixed dormitory assignment, where students from different ethnic backgrounds were placed together to encourage daily interactions and foster empathy. Participants noted that this living arrangement allowed them to confront and overcome cultural biases through shared experiences and routines. Additionally, rotating training teams emerged as a key practice that promoted trust and collaboration. By regularly reshuffling group compositions during simulations and drills, students were required to engage with peers beyond their usual social circles, thereby expanding their intercultural competence.

The character education curriculum, implemented through structured activities such as daily flag ceremonies and moral instruction, reinforced collective values such as respect, discipline, and unity. Many cadets acknowledged that these institutional messages were effectively integrated into their behavior through consistent repetition and reinforcement by counselors and senior mentors. Furthermore, cultural and sports events, often initiated by students themselves, created informal yet powerful spaces for intercultural appreciation. Events like cultural nights and interethnic sports competitions offer cadets the opportunity to showcase their heritage, fostering mutual support and campus solidarity. These initiatives not only affirmed individual identities but also bridged cultural divides through shared celebration and competition.

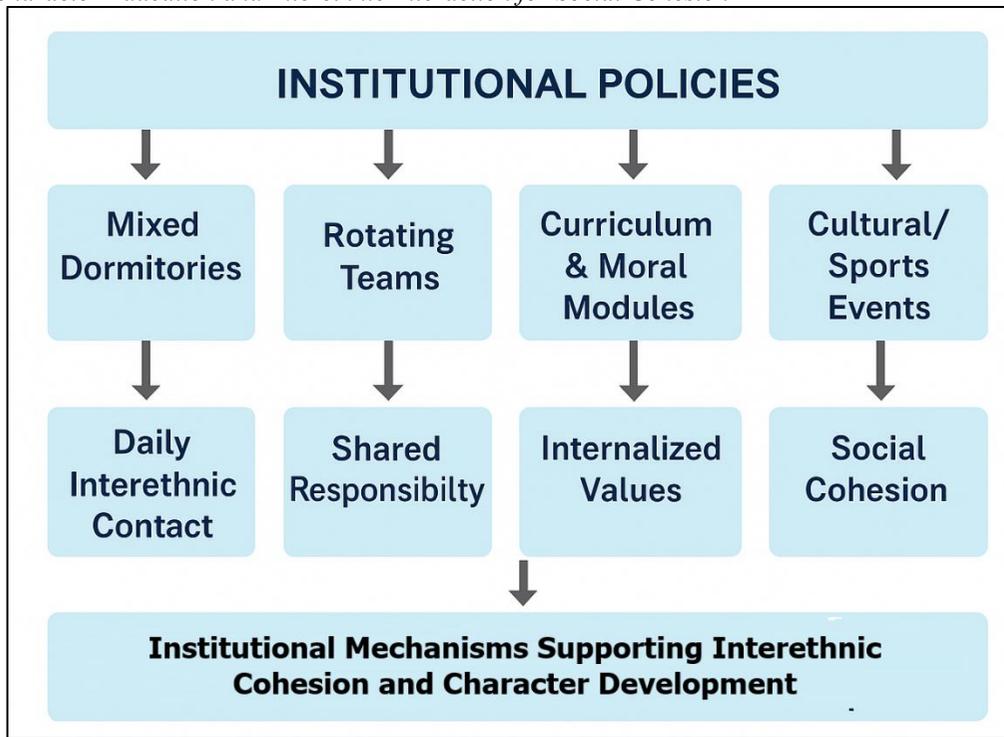


Figure 6. Institutional Mechanisms Supporting Interethnic Cohesion and Character Development.

Figure 5 illustrates the structured pathways through which institutional mechanisms shape interethnic engagement and character formation within the maritime education environment. The diagram begins with institutional policies intentionally designed to promote inclusive interaction, including the assignment of students to mixed dormitories, the formation of rotational training teams, the integration of character and moral education modules, and the organization of cultural and sports events. Each of these strategies leads to specific and interconnected social outcomes. Mixed dormitories promote daily interpersonal contact and cultural exchange while rotating teams require students to cooperate across cultural boundaries, reinforcing shared responsibility. The character curriculum, reinforced through daily ceremonies and counseling, supports the internalization of values such as respect, empathy, and discipline.

Meanwhile, extracurricular activities provide opportunities for voluntary, expressive interaction that fosters cultural appreciation and social bonding. Collectively, these mechanisms result in a cascading process: from daily interethnic contact to shared responsibility, then to the internalization of character values, and finally to the establishment of sustainable social cohesion among cadets. This model underscores the importance of designing inclusive, cross-cultural educational structures that not only meet academic and disciplinary objectives but also foster ethical leadership and promote harmonious pluralism in vocational education contexts.

Support Theme	Quote	Participant Code
Mixed Dormitories	“Sharing rooms with people from different islands opened my mind.”	C28, Javanese, 2nd year
Rotating Training Teams	“We didn’t choose our group, so we had to work with everyone.”	C12, Papuan, 1st year
Cultural Events	“We all had to perform something from our culture. It was exciting!”	C07, Minangkabau, 3rd year

Table 10. Participant Quotes Reflecting Institutional Support

## Data Processing, 2024

Table 10 presents direct quotes from student participants that illustrate their perceptions of institutional strategies supporting interethnic engagement. These authentic voices highlight the positive impact of structural mechanisms such as mixed dormitory arrangements, rotating team assignments, and inclusive cultural events. For instance, a second-year cadet from Java noted how sharing living space with peers from various islands expanded his artistic awareness. Similarly, a first-year Papuan cadet described how being assigned to mixed training teams encouraged him to collaborate beyond ethnic lines. Another participant from Minangkabau emphasized the excitement and inclusivity of cultural nights, where all students were encouraged to represent and celebrate their heritage. These quotes underscore the significance of proactive institutional planning in fostering positive social interactions and promoting unity in diversity.

## Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted nature of interethnic social interactions within maritime educational institutions and their profound influence on character development and social cohesion. Drawing on qualitative data from cadets, faculty, and staff, the analysis revealed how both informal (e.g., dormitory life, cultural events) and formal (e.g., team-based training, curriculum) contexts contributed to the internalization of key character values such as discipline, respect, and responsibility. These results not only align with established theories in character education and intergroup relations but also offer insights into how educational settings can be strategically designed to foster sustainable and inclusive learning environments. The discussion below interprets these thematic findings through theoretical lenses, compares them with previous studies in multicultural contexts, and outlines practical implications for educational policy and sustainability goals.

The findings of this study offer meaningful theoretical alignment with classic frameworks on intergroup contact and character education. In particular, the observed patterns of interethnic socialization support Allport’s Social Contact Hypothesis, which posits that positive, cooperative contact under equal-status conditions can reduce prejudice (Pehar, 2025). Within the maritime education context, the institutional arrangements, such as assigning students to ethnically diverse dormitories and rotating team-based tasks, created daily opportunities for such contact (Liu, 2023). These interactions fostered mutual understanding, reduced initial social distance, and contributed to the building of cross-cultural friendships. The cadets’ experiences reflect the hypothesis’ core mechanisms: equal status, common goals, and institutional support, which are critical in mitigating stereotypes and promoting inclusion.

In parallel, the development of character traits like empathy, discipline, and tolerance reflects the principles of experiential character education, where values are acquired through authentic

social experiences rather than mere formal instruction (Tyas et al., 2020). The cadets reported learning to respect cultural and religious differences by living and training together, demonstrating how real-life situations provided opportunities for the internalization of these values. Nevertheless, the study also revealed barriers, such as linguistic exclusion and group favoritism, that intergroup integration requires not only contact but also structured, high-quality interaction supported by institutional policies (Wilton et al., 2024). Hence, this research builds upon these theories by illustrating how maritime institutions can intentionally structure environments to foster both intercultural engagement and sustainable character development.

The implications of this study strongly align with the goals of sustainable Education, particularly as outlined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, interethnic engagement within maritime Education supports SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by fostering values of tolerance, empathy, mutual respect, and social responsibility in young learners (Salmon et al., 2024). The study reveals that structured intercultural contact not only enhances interpersonal skills but also prepares students to contribute to a more peaceful and inclusive society, aligning with UNESCO's (2017) work on global citizenship education (Enamhe et al., 2025). Such values are foundational for democratic participation and social justice, forming part of what is referred to as “education for sustainable societies” (Pavlou & Castro-Varela, 2024).

Furthermore, the integration of multicultural character education, as manifested through shared dormitory life, rotating group assignments, and events such as cultural nights, demonstrates how higher Education can serve as a site for fostering long-term social cohesion. These interactions foster an inclusive campus culture where students from diverse backgrounds work together to solve problems, manage conflicts, and celebrate their differences. In line with previous research that advocates for learner-centered, culturally responsive pedagogy, this approach positions character development not only as an outcome but also as a process embedded in everyday experiences (Ecker, 2022). Thus, maritime education institutions that actively support intercultural learning contribute to both individual transformation and broader societal resilience key pillars in achieving sustainable development through Education.

A comparative perspective reveals a structured approach to interethnic engagement at the Maritime Polytechnic, implemented through mechanisms such as rotating team assignments and mixed dormitory placements. It is more systematized than many other multicultural educational settings. Similar models in military academies or international vocational schools often rely on spontaneous peer interactions or optional intercultural programs (Li, 2021). In contrast, the maritime setting intentionally embeds cultural integration into the institutional framework, making intergroup contact an unavoidable and integral part of the learning process. The contact hypothesis emphasizes that intergroup interactions must occur under conditions of equal status, institutional support, and cooperative goals to effectively reduce prejudice (White et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, the challenges identified, such as language barriers, ethnic clustering, and initial social exclusion, are consistent with findings from other multicultural contexts. Studies in Malaysia, South Africa, and Canada also report that students tend to form groups based on shared linguistic or ethnic backgrounds during the early stages of enrolment (Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2021; Shizha et al., 2020; Wahid & Salwa, 2020). These tendencies underscore the persistence of social identity dynamics in educational environments and highlight the need for ongoing institutional interventions to promote integration (He, 2023). While the maritime Polytechnic has demonstrated effective strategies, long-term cohesion still depends on sustained

mentoring, cultural sensitivity training, and inclusive leadership to overcome latent stereotypes and foster deeper mutual understanding.

The findings underscore the critical need for inclusive institutional policies that extend beyond formal instruction to incorporate interethnic engagement as part of the hidden curriculum, encompassing the unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, and norms students acquire through campus life (Laiduc & Covarrubias, 2022). Structured dormitory assignments, rotating training teams, and culturally integrated activities exemplify how hidden curriculum elements can serve as powerful tools for character formation and social cohesion in diverse learning environments (Mau, 2024). Such policies reflect intentional design rather than incidental learning and align with educational frameworks that emphasize learning through experience and community engagement (Adams, 2020).

Furthermore, character education curricula should not solely emphasize universal moral values, such as honesty or responsibility, in abstract terms but instead be contextualized to reflect the cultural diversity of students. Culturally responsive teaching enhances student engagement and moral development by validating their lived experiences and acknowledging their unique perspectives (Anyichie et al., 2023). In this regard, the development of intercultural competence becomes vital. Faculty and mentors must be equipped with cross-cultural communication skills and sensitivity training to guide students through the complexities of interethnic dynamics. Previous studies suggest that such competence not only improves interpersonal relationships on campus but also prepares graduates to thrive in a globalized, pluralistic society (Killick, 2020). Therefore, institutional investments in intercultural training programs are crucial for fully realizing the potential of multicultural Education in shaping inclusive citizenship.

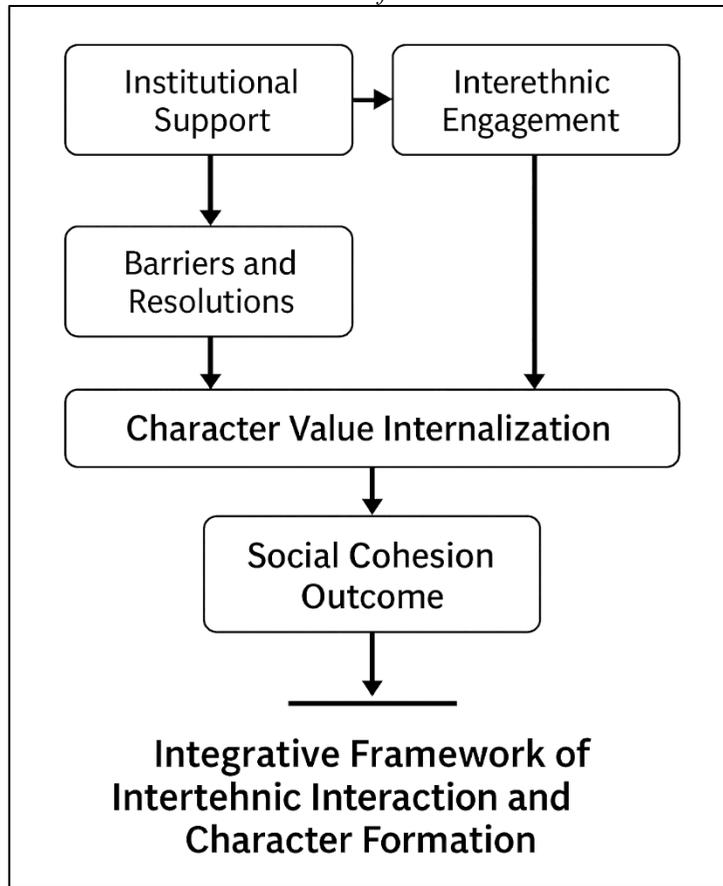


Figure 7. Integrative Conceptual Model of Interethnic Engagement and Character Development.

Figure 7 illustrates how institutional strategies such as mixed dormitories, rotating team tasks, character education, and cultural events systematically promote interethnic engagement among maritime cadets. These structured interactions, experienced through shared challenges and peer collaboration, trigger personal reflection and guided learning. This process facilitates the internalization of key character values, such as tolerance and responsibility. Ultimately, the model demonstrates how such institutional mechanisms contribute to social cohesion and align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Quality Education) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

## Conclusion

This study highlights how structured interethnic engagement in a maritime higher education institution fosters the internalization of key character values such as discipline, respect, and responsibility. Through qualitative exploration, it was found that shared living arrangements, collaborative training, and cultural exchange activities contribute significantly to mutual understanding, reduce social prejudices, and promote social cohesion. The integration of character education through both formal instruction and the hidden curriculum demonstrates the institution's strategic role in shaping inclusive civic values aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 16 (Peace,

Justice, and Strong Institutions).

The findings offer practical insights for developing inclusive educational models that actively promote diversity and character development, particularly in multiethnic and residential learning environments. Recommendations include designing multicultural training for staff, implementing curriculum modules that reflect students' cultural backgrounds, and strengthening interethnic teamwork in both academic and extracurricular settings. These approaches can be replicated or adapted by other institutions seeking to enhance social harmony and character-based Education in diverse contexts.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study offers meaningful insights, it is limited by its single-institution scope and qualitative case study design, which may restrict generalizability. The reliance on self-reported experiences and thematic interpretation may also introduce subjectivity despite the triangulation of data sources. Additionally, variations in interethnic dynamics across different regions or types of institutions were not explored. Future research could adopt a comparative multi-site approach or employ mixed methods to examine interethnic engagement and character formation in varied educational settings and cultural contexts.

### **Author Contributions:**

Conceptualization, M.S.S., B.B., and H.; methodology, M.S.S., B.B., and H.; software, M.S.S.; validation, M.S.S., B.B., and H.; formal analysis, M.S.S.; investigation, M.S.S., B.B., and H.; resources, M.S.S., B.B., and H.; data curation, M.S.S., B.B., and H.; writing—original draft preparation, M.S.S., B.B., and H.; writing—review and editing, M.S.S., B.B., H., T.M.J., N., and M.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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### **Informed Consent Statement:**

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

### **Data Availability Statement:**

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements with participants.

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### **Conflicts of Interest:**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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