

Navigating Culture Shock: The Cross-Cultural Adaptation Experiences of Balinese Employees Working on Cruise Ships

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Abstract

The study aims to explore the culture shock experienced by Balinese employees working on cruise ships and identify the strategies they employ to adapt to a culturally diverse workplace. A descriptive qualitative approach was adopted, with data collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews involving eight Balinese cruise ship employees selected using chain referral sampling. The data were analyzed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and key adaptation experiences. The findings reveal that participants experienced culture shock primarily during the early stages of employment, characterized by homesickness, language barriers, communication difficulties, unfamiliar workplace norms, and differences in cultural values and social interactions. Despite these challenges, participants gradually adapted by improving their English communication skills, developing intercultural competence, building supportive relationships with fellow crew members, and maintaining their Balinese cultural identity while embracing cultural diversity. The study highlights that successful adaptation depends not only on individual resilience but also on organizational support through orientation programs, intercultural communication training, mentoring, and psychological assistance. The findings contribute to the literature on culture shock by providing insights into the experiences of Balinese cruise ship employees, a population that has received limited scholarly attention. The study also offers practical recommendations for cruise companies to develop more effective cross-cultural management practices that enhance employee well-being, job satisfaction, and service performance.

Keywords:

culture shock, cross-cultural adaptation, Balinese employees, cruise ship industry, intercultural communication

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1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has opened numerous opportunities for employment across diverse cultural landscapes, with the cruise ship industry being one of the most prominent sectors. Among the myriad nationalities represented on cruise ships, Balinese workers have emerged as a significant presence, bringing a rich cultural heritage rooted in the traditions and customs of Bali, Indonesia. However, the transition from their familiar cultural environment to a cruise ship's multicultural and often Western-dominated atmosphere can be profound, leading to culture shock experiences.

According to Oberg (1966): "Culture shock is precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips, how to give orders to servants, how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not. Now, these cues, which may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms, are acquired by all of us growing up and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept. All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues, most of which we are not consciously aware ..." (p. 179)

Culture shock, a well-documented phenomenon, occurs when individuals are exposed to an unfamiliar cultural environment, resulting in psychological discomfort and disorientation. This study explores the specific challenges and experiences of culture shock Balinese individuals working on cruise ships encountered. By examining their narratives and coping mechanisms, this research seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how cultural dissonance manifests in this unique occupational context.

Balinese workers on cruise ships are particularly interesting to study due to their strong cultural identity and the communal nature of Balinese society, which contrasts sharply with the more individualistic cultures they encounter on board. This research investigates the various dimensions of their culture shock, including language barriers, differences in social norms and practices, and the impact of being away from their close-knit communities. Furthermore, the study will investigate how these workers adapt to their new environment, the available support systems, and the strategies they employ to mitigate the effects of culture shock.

Culture shock has been studied in various groups, including tourists, students, workers, and volunteers. Culture shock experienced by tourists has been investigated in several studies (Court & King, 1979; AlSaleh & Moufakkir, 2019; Arici, 2022). Reverse culture shock is a well-defined psychological phenomenon in which one experiences negative thoughts about one's culture after returning home. Rather, when visiting their nation of birth, these tourists often idealize and romanticize their own

culture. Psychological shocks are the product of this modern culture shock, which manifests as a reaction to their stigmatization in the nation they visit (Arici, 2022). Numerous studies on culture shock and reverse culture shock have been conducted using a Western lens. This paper presents a novel approach to studying tourist-host encounters in uncomfortable settings by utilizing stigma and meta-perception.

Understanding the experiences of Balinese cruise ship workers not only contributes to the broader discourse on culture shock and cross-cultural adaptation but also provides valuable insights for the cruise industry in enhancing support structures for their diverse workforce. By addressing Balinese employees' specific needs and challenges, cruise companies can foster a more inclusive and supportive working environment, ultimately leading to better job satisfaction and performance.

Therefore, this article aims to shed light on the cultural adjustment process of Balinese individuals in the cruise ship industry, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity and support in promoting the successful integration and well-being of international employees.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The study is in descriptive qualitative research since qualitative research can offer explanations about the cause and effect of something and serve as a foundation for experimental research. The researcher is required to view and understand phenomena from the perspective of the subjects, which is why in-depth observation and in-depth interviews are crucial in qualitative research.

In this study, two main sources of data were used: primary and secondary data. The primary data were collected from interviews with subjects, while the secondary data consisted of other references supporting the study. The subjects of this study were Balinese working on cruise ships. Eight subjects were selected: the first was a member of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI-AD) sent to Lebanon as a peacekeeper in a conflict area; the second, also a TNI-AD member, was sent to work in Australia; the third worked in Malaysia as a construction laborer; and the fourth was employed in Japan as a welder in heavy equipment manufacturing. The subjects were selected through a chain referral method, where each subject was referred to the next. All subjects provided the necessary information to address the study's questions about the culture shock they experienced while working abroad.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews. The interview comprised twelve main and additional follow-up questions and was conducted in a semi-structured format. Conducting face-to-face interviews would have required more time and money. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to avoid misunderstandings and to gather as much information as possible.

The writer used a coding technique to analyze the data, making the analysis process easier and more efficient. Bogdan & Biklen (2003) state that coding develops categories to sort data and refers to the sorting process (p.258). In other words, the writer used coding to facilitate data analysis. Data penelitian terdiri atas data primer

dan data sekunder. Data primer diperoleh melalui penyebaran kuesioner kepada seluruh responden serta didukung oleh observasi langsung terhadap aktivitas operasional restoran. Data sekunder diperoleh dari dokumen perusahaan, profil restoran, serta literatur yang relevan dengan penelitian.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Initial Culture Shock upon Boarding the Cruise Ship

The findings reveal that almost all participants experienced culture shock during the initial stage of their employment on cruise ships. The first few weeks were described as the most challenging period because they were required to adapt simultaneously to a new workplace, unfamiliar colleagues from different nationalities, and a multicultural living environment. Participants reported feelings of confusion, anxiety, homesickness, and uncertainty regarding workplace expectations. These emotional responses are consistent with Oberg's theory of culture shock, which explains that individuals entering an unfamiliar cultural setting often lose the familiar social cues that guide daily interactions.

Besides the emotional adjustment, participants also experienced difficulties adapting to the highly structured operational standards on cruise ships. Unlike the more relaxed interpersonal communication commonly practiced in Bali, cruise ship operations emphasize efficiency, punctuality, and strict adherence to international service standards. This sudden transition created psychological pressure, particularly during the first contract, when respondents were still unfamiliar with the organizational culture. These findings support previous studies indicating that the honeymoon phase of overseas employment is often quickly replaced by frustration when workers encounter substantial cultural differences.

3.2 Language Barriers and Communication Challenges

Language emerged as one of the most significant sources of culture shock among the participants. Although all respondents had basic English proficiency before joining the cruise industry, many admitted that communicating with native speakers and colleagues from different linguistic backgrounds was considerably more difficult than expected. Variations in pronunciation, speaking speed, accents, and the use of informal expressions frequently caused misunderstandings during both work-related and casual conversations.

Communication challenges were particularly evident during interactions with guests. Participants stated that they occasionally struggled to understand guest requests, especially when guests spoke rapidly or used unfamiliar idiomatic expressions. Such situations increased stress levels because cruise ship employees are expected to respond quickly and professionally. Over time, however, continuous interaction with international guests and multicultural colleagues gradually improved participants' communication skills and confidence. This finding suggests that

language competence develops not only through formal education but also through continuous immersion in an international working environment.

3.3 Differences in Cultural Values and Social Norms

Another major theme emerging from the interviews concerns differences in cultural values and social norms. Participants explained that Balinese culture emphasizes collectivism, respect for elders, harmonious interpersonal relationships, and indirect communication. In contrast, many colleagues from Western countries demonstrated more individualistic behaviors, direct communication styles, and stronger expressions of personal opinions.

Several participants initially perceived direct criticism from supervisors as impolite or offensive. However, after spending more time on board, they gradually realized that direct communication was considered normal and was intended to improve work performance rather than criticize individuals personally. Respondents also encountered different attitudes toward religion, gender equality, personal space, and work-life balance. These cultural differences required continuous learning and flexibility in order to avoid misunderstandings and maintain effective teamwork. The findings demonstrate that successful intercultural adaptation requires employees to develop intercultural competence, including cultural awareness, tolerance, and openness toward different perspectives.

3.4 Homesickness and Psychological Adaptation

Homesickness was consistently identified as one of the strongest emotional challenges experienced by the participants. Being separated from family, religious ceremonies, and community activities in Bali created feelings of loneliness, particularly during important cultural celebrations such as Galungan, Kuningan, and Nyepi. Many respondents explained that missing these traditional ceremonies affected their emotional well-being because Balinese culture places significant importance on family and communal religious practices.

The demanding work schedule on cruise ships further intensified these feelings because opportunities for communication with family members were limited during busy operational periods. Nevertheless, participants reported that emotional distress gradually diminished as they became more familiar with their work environment, developed friendships with fellow crew members, and established new daily routines. These findings indicate that psychological adaptation is a gradual process influenced by both personal resilience and social support.

3.5 Coping Strategies and Adaptation Mechanisms

The participants adopted various coping strategies to overcome culture shock and facilitate their adaptation to cruise ship life. One of the most frequently mentioned strategies was building friendships with fellow Indonesian and Balinese crew members. These social networks provided emotional support, practical advice,

and a sense of belonging during difficult periods.

In addition, respondents actively improved their English communication skills through daily interactions with international colleagues and guests. Many also reported learning about different cultures by observing workplace practices, participating in multicultural activities, and respecting diverse traditions. Some participants maintained their cultural identity by continuing religious practices whenever possible and celebrating Balinese ceremonies with other Indonesian crew members.

These adaptation strategies demonstrate that successful adjustment involves balancing cultural preservation with openness to new cultural experiences. Rather than abandoning their cultural identity, participants learned to integrate Balinese cultural values with the multicultural environment of cruise ship operations.

3.6 Implications for Cruise Ship Management

The findings have important implications for cruise ship companies employing multicultural workforces. Organizations should recognize that international employees, particularly first-time overseas workers, are vulnerable to culture shock during the early stages of employment. Comprehensive orientation programs introducing organizational culture, communication styles, workplace expectations, and intercultural awareness could facilitate smoother adaptation.

Furthermore, mentoring programs involving experienced crew members may provide practical guidance and emotional support for newly recruited employees. Language development programs, counseling services, and culturally sensitive management practices could also contribute to reducing psychological stress and improving employee well-being. By investing in intercultural support systems, cruise companies can enhance employee satisfaction, strengthen teamwork, and ultimately improve service quality and organizational performance.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the culture shock experienced by Balinese employees working on cruise ships through a descriptive qualitative approach. The findings indicate that culture shock is a dynamic and multidimensional process encompassing emotional, linguistic, social, and cultural adjustments. Participants encountered various challenges during the early stages of employment, including homesickness, communication barriers, differences in workplace culture, and adaptation to multicultural social norms. Nevertheless, these challenges gradually diminished as participants developed intercultural competence, improved their communication skills, established supportive social networks, and learned to balance their Balinese cultural identity with the demands of an international work environment. These findings demonstrate that successful adaptation is not only determined by individual resilience but also by the availability of supportive interpersonal and organizational environments.

From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the literature on culture shock and cross-cultural adaptation by providing empirical evidence from the perspective of Balinese cruise ship employees, a group that has received limited scholarly attention despite its significant presence in the global cruise industry. The findings support Oberg's theory of culture shock while highlighting that adaptation is a continuous learning process shaped by cultural identity, intercultural interaction, and workplace experiences.

Practically, the findings suggest that cruise companies should strengthen pre-departure orientation programs, intercultural communication training, mentoring systems, and employee assistance programs to facilitate smoother cultural adjustment among newly recruited international crew members. Providing psychological support and opportunities for social integration may help reduce culture shock, improve employee well-being, enhance teamwork, and ultimately contribute to higher service quality and organizational performance.

This study has several limitations. First, the research involved a relatively small number of participants, limiting the generalizability of the findings to all Balinese cruise ship employees. Second, the study focused solely on Balinese workers without comparing their experiences with employees from other cultural backgrounds. Finally, the research captured participants' experiences at a single point in time, making it difficult to observe how adaptation evolves throughout different stages of employment.

Future research is recommended to include participants from diverse nationalities and cruise departments to enable comparative analyses of cross-cultural adaptation. Longitudinal studies are also needed to examine how culture shock develops and changes throughout employees' careers at sea. Furthermore, future studies may adopt mixed-method or quantitative approaches to investigate the relationships between culture shock, psychological well-being, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, employee retention, and service performance. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of cultural adaptation in the international cruise industry and contribute to the development of more effective human resource management practices.

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