

Cultural Immersion for International Students: A Path to Promoting Toraja Tourism

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Abstract

This study explores the role of cultural immersion programs conducted by the Tourism Study Program at UKI Toraja in promoting Toraja tourism. This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on an in-depth exploration of the experiences of international students who participated in cultural immersion programs in Toraja. A case study methodology was chosen to provide a detailed examination of a specific instance of cultural immersion, making it possible to identify the key elements that contribute to its effectiveness in promoting tourism. The study involves international students who participated in cultural immersion programs organized by the Tourism Study Program at UKI Toraja. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those included in the study had direct and substantial experiences with Toraja culture. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both international students and local community member. The researcher engaged in participant observation during several cultural immersion activities, including traditional ceremonies, community events, and daily interactions between students and local residents. The data collected from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study results confirm that the cultural immersion programs conducted by the Tourism Study Program at UKI Toraja play a significant role in promoting Toraja tourism by enhancing cultural understanding and intercultural competence, fostering personal and academic growth, and positioning students as cultural ambassadors.

Key Words: Cultural Immersion, International Students, Path, Promoting Toraja Tourism

A. Introduction

In today's globalized society, where geographical boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred, cultural immersion has gained prominence as a vital mechanism for enhancing cross-cultural understanding and stimulating tourism. As people from different

parts of the world interact more frequently through travel, education, and technology, the need for meaningful cultural exchange has become more apparent (Arici et al., 2023; Ponsignon et al., 2024; Ponsignon & Derbaix, 2020; Xu et al., 2024; Yin et al., 2023). Cultural immersion programs, which allow individuals to live and engage directly with a different culture, have emerged as an effective means of achieving this goal (Ponsignon et al., 2024). These programs go beyond superficial exposure to foreign cultures; they offer participants the chance to fully immerse themselves in the daily lives, traditions, and social norms of the host community.

Cultural immersion provides a comprehensive learning experience that extends beyond textbooks and classrooms (Cheng, 2023). Participants gain firsthand insight into the values, beliefs, and practices that shape the identity of a culture (Bashir & Tang, 2018). By engaging in everyday activities, attending local events, and interacting with community members, they develop a deeper appreciation for the nuances of the host culture (Hassanli et al., 2021). This immersive experience not only broadens the participants' perspectives but also fosters a sense of empathy and respect for cultural diversity (Patterson et al., 2022). Such experiences are particularly impactful for international students, who often seek to expand their worldviews and gain a more profound understanding of global cultures as part of their academic and personal growth.

For regions with rich cultural heritage, like Toraja in Indonesia, cultural immersion programs offer a dual benefit. Toraja, renowned for its unique customs, elaborate funeral rituals, and striking traditional architecture, represents a cultural treasure trove that is relatively unexplored by the broader international community. By integrating cultural immersion into their tourism and educational strategies, regions like Toraja can provide international students with authentic and enriching experiences that leave lasting impressions. These students, in turn, become cultural ambassadors, sharing their experiences and promoting the region's cultural richness to a wider audience upon returning to their home countries.

This approach to tourism is strategic because it leverages the personal experiences of participants to create organic, word-of-mouth promotion, which can be more persuasive and far-reaching than traditional marketing efforts (Roth-Cohen & Lahav, 2018). As these cultural ambassadors share their stories, photos, and insights with friends, family, and social networks, they contribute to raising awareness and interest in Toraja as a destination. Over time, this can lead to an increase in international visitors who are eager to experience the culture for themselves, thereby boosting local tourism and contributing to the sustainable development of the region (Streimikiene et al., 2021). In this way, cultural immersion programs serve as a bridge that connects the rich cultural heritage of regions like Toraja with the global tourism market, fostering both educational enrichment and economic growth. Toraja, known for its distinct customs, intricate architecture, and ceremonial practices, has long been a jewel in Indonesia's cultural landscape. However, despite its rich cultural offerings, Toraja remains relatively underrepresented in the global tourism market compared to other Indonesian destinations like Bali or Yogyakarta (Santoso & Cahyani, 2022). This underrepresentation can be attributed to various factors, including limited

international exposure and the challenges of reaching a broader audience. Addressing these challenges requires innovative approaches that go beyond traditional tourism marketing, focusing instead on experiential learning and personal connection to the culture.

The Tourism Study Program at Universitas Kristen Indonesia (UKI) Toraja recognizes the potential of cultural immersion as a vehicle for both educational enrichment and tourism promotion. By inviting international students to participate in immersive cultural experiences within the Toraja community, the program aims to create ambassadors of Toraja culture who can share their experiences and promote the region in their home countries. This approach not only benefits the students, who gain a deeper understanding of a unique cultural heritage, but also the local community, which stands to benefit from increased international visibility and tourism.

This study explores the role of cultural immersion programs conducted by the Tourism Study Program at UKI Toraja in promoting Toraja tourism. It examines how these programs are designed to provide international students with meaningful cultural experiences and evaluates their effectiveness in enhancing the students' understanding of Toraja culture and their ability to act as cultural ambassadors. By analyzing the impact of these programs, the study seeks to contribute to the broader discussion on how cultural immersion can be leveraged as a tool for sustainable tourism development and international cultural exchange.

B. Review of Related Literature

1. Cultural Immersion and Cross-Cultural Understanding

Cultural immersion is widely recognized in the literature as an essential tool for fostering cross-cultural understanding and intercultural competence. Research has shown that immersive experiences enable participants to gain a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of different cultures, which can lead to greater empathy, tolerance, and respect for diversity (Argenbright et al., 2022) . According to Hare Landa et al. (2017) , cultural immersion helps individuals develop critical cultural awareness by engaging them directly in the everyday practices, values, and social norms of a host community. This direct engagement is often more impactful than theoretical learning because it challenges participants to confront and reflect on their own cultural biases and assumptions.

In the context of international education, cultural immersion programs have been found to significantly enhance students' intercultural communication skills and global perspectives. Students who participate in these programs are more likely to develop the adaptability and cultural sensitivity needed to navigate an increasingly globalized world (Hare Landa et al., 2017) . Moreover, the transformative nature of cultural immersion has been highlighted in studies by Burgess (2019) , which suggest that such experiences can

lead to profound personal growth, including a shift in worldview and an increased ability to engage with cultural differences constructively.

2. Cultural Immersion as a Tool for Tourism Promotion

The role of cultural immersion in tourism promotion has gained attention in recent years, particularly as destinations seek innovative ways to attract international visitors. Cultural immersion offers a unique value proposition to tourists who are increasingly seeking authentic and meaningful travel experiences (Han et al., 2019) . Unlike traditional tourism, which often focuses on sightseeing and surface-level interaction with a destination, cultural immersion encourages deep engagement with the local culture, providing tourists with a more enriching and memorable experience (Loang et al., 2024) .

Studies have shown that tourists who participate in cultural immersion activities are more likely to form emotional connections with the destination, which can lead to positive word-of-mouth promotion and repeat visits (Chen & Rahman, 2018) . Additionally, immersive experiences often generate high levels of visitor satisfaction, as tourists appreciate the opportunity to learn and experience something unique that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere (Nam et al., 2023). This satisfaction can translate into increased loyalty to the destination and a stronger desire to share the experience with others, further promoting the region.

3. Cultural Heritage and Tourism in Toraja

Toraja, located in the highlands of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage, including its elaborate funeral rituals, traditional architecture, and intricate wood carvings. The region has been studied extensively for its unique cultural practices, which are deeply rooted in the indigenous belief system known as Aluk To Dolo (Lange, 2020) . Despite its cultural significance, Toraja remains a relatively underexplored destination in the global tourism market, particularly when compared to other Indonesian regions such as Bali and Yogyakarta.

The literature on Toraja tourism highlights several challenges and opportunities for promoting the region. According to (Adam, 2015) , one of the key challenges is the lack of international awareness and exposure, which limits the influx of foreign tourists. However, the growing interest in cultural tourism presents an opportunity for Toraja to position itself as a destination for travelers seeking authentic cultural experiences. Researchers like (Debeş, 2020) have emphasized the importance of integrating cultural heritage into tourism strategies to attract niche markets interested in cultural and educational tourism.

4. The Role of Educational Institutions in Promoting Tourism

Educational institutions, particularly those offering programs in tourism and cultural studies, play a crucial role in promoting tourism through cultural immersion initiatives. As

noted by (McClintic, 2015) , universities can serve as important facilitators of cultural exchange by designing programs that bring international students into direct contact with local communities. These programs not only enhance the educational experience of students but also contribute to the local economy and the global visibility of the region.

In the case of Toraja, the Tourism Study Program at Universitas Kristen Indonesia Toraja (UKI Toraja) exemplifies how educational institutions can leverage cultural immersion as a tool for tourism promotion. By hosting international students and involving them in cultural immersion activities, UKI Toraja creates a unique platform for cultural exchange that benefits both the students and the local community. As these students return to their home countries, they carry with them the experiences and knowledge gained during their stay, effectively becoming ambassadors of Toraja culture and contributing to the global promotion of the region.

5. The Impact of Cultural Immersion on International Students

Research on the impact of cultural immersion on international students has consistently shown positive outcomes in terms of personal and academic development. According to (Haas, 2018), students who participate in study abroad and cultural immersion programs report significant gains in intercultural competence, language proficiency, and global awareness. These programs are particularly effective in helping students develop the skills and perspectives necessary to thrive in a multicultural world.

In addition to academic benefits, cultural immersion also provides international students with the opportunity to develop meaningful connections with the host community. These connections often lead to a deeper appreciation of the local culture and a desire to share their experiences with others (Moayerian et al., 2022) . This phenomenon is particularly relevant to tourism promotion, as it highlights the potential of international students to act as cultural ambassadors who can attract future visitors to the region.

C. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2017), focusing on an in-depth exploration of the experiences of international students who participated in cultural immersion programs in Toraja. The qualitative approach is well-suited for this study as it allows for a nuanced understanding of participants' perspectives, emotions, and the cultural impact of their experiences. A case study methodology was chosen to provide a detailed examination of a specific instance of cultural immersion, making it possible to identify the key elements that contribute to its effectiveness in promoting tourism (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study involves international students who participated in cultural immersion programs organized by the Tourism Study Program at UKI Toraja. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that those included in the study had direct and substantial experiences with Toraja culture (Etikan et

al., 2016). The sample consisted of students from various countries who had participated in the programs within the last three years. The diversity in the participants' cultural backgrounds provided a rich source of data, highlighting the different ways in which the immersion experience influenced their perceptions of Toraja. Additionally, local community members who interacted with the international students during the immersion programs were included as secondary participants. Their insights offered a valuable perspective on the reciprocal nature of cultural exchange and the potential impact on the local community. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both international students and local community members (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021). These interviews explored participants' experiences, perceptions, and the impact of the immersion program on their understanding of Toraja culture. The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed responses, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences and the cultural exchange process. The researcher engaged in participant observation during several cultural immersion activities, including traditional ceremonies, community events, and daily interactions between students and local residents (Shin & Miller, 2022). This method provided firsthand insight into the dynamics of cultural exchange and the ways in which students were integrated into the local culture. The data collected from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to identify and interpret patterns within qualitative data, making it possible to uncover the key themes related to the effectiveness of cultural immersion in promoting tourism. The analysis process involved the following steps: Familiarization with the Data: The researcher thoroughly reviewed the transcripts, observation notes, and documents to gain an initial understanding of the data. Coding: The data were coded systematically to identify significant segments related to the research questions. Codes were developed both inductively (emerging from the data) and deductively (based on existing literature and the study's objectives). Theme Development: The codes were grouped into themes that represented broader patterns in the data. These themes were then reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the participants' experiences and the cultural immersion process. Interpretation: The themes were interpreted in the context of the study's theoretical framework and research questions. This step involved linking the findings to broader discussions on cultural immersion, cross-cultural understanding, and tourism promotion.

D. Results

The cultural immersion programs organized by the Tourism Study Program at UKI Toraja have proven to be instrumental in significantly enhancing the cultural understanding and intercultural competence of international students. Through immersive experiences, participants transitioned from a superficial grasp of Toraja culture to a deep, nuanced appreciation of its customs, beliefs, and social practices. This transformative journey was marked by students' ability to challenge their preconceived notions and broaden their global perspectives, as they engaged directly with local traditions and ceremonies, fostering empathy and respect for cultural diversity.



1. Enhanced Cultural Understanding and Intercultural Competence

The cultural immersion programs organized by the Tourism Study Program at UKI Toraja significantly enhanced the cultural understanding and intercultural competence of international students. Participants reported a profound transformation in their perceptions of Toraja culture, moving from a superficial understanding to a deeper, more nuanced appreciation of the region's customs, beliefs, and social practices. This shift was evident in the students' reflections on their experiences, with many describing how the immersion allowed them to challenge preconceived notions and broaden their global perspectives.

Students noted that the direct engagement with local traditions, such as attending funeral rituals and participating in traditional dance ceremonies, facilitated a deeper connection with the culture. These experiences not only enriched their understanding but also fostered a sense of empathy and respect for cultural diversity. The findings suggest that cultural immersion is a powerful tool for cultivating intercultural competence, as it compels participants to navigate and adapt to a different cultural context, thereby enhancing their ability to function effectively in a multicultural environment.

Observations of the cultural immersion programs provided concrete evidence of the transformation in students' cultural understanding. Observers noted that international students actively participated in significant local traditions, such as funeral rituals and traditional dance ceremonies. Their engagement was not merely as spectators but as participants who were eager to learn and understand the underlying cultural significance of these practices. Observers highlighted the students' willingness to ask questions and their respectful demeanor during these ceremonies, which indicated a genuine interest in and appreciation for the culture.

Over the course of the program, observers saw a visible transformation in the students' attitudes toward Toraja culture. Initially, students appeared to approach the cultural activities with curiosity but also with some preconceived notions. As the program progressed, however, their engagement deepened, and they began to exhibit a more profound respect and understanding of the cultural practices. This change was evident in the way students interacted with local community members, often expressing admiration for the traditions and showing a readiness to learn more.

Observers also noted instances where students applied their growing cultural competence in real-world interactions. For example, during community events, students demonstrated an awareness of cultural norms and adjusted their behavior accordingly, showing respect for local customs and effectively communicating with community members. This practical application of cultural competence was seen as a direct result of the immersive experiences provided by the program.

Interviews with the students provided qualitative insights that reinforced the observations. In their interviews, students consistently reflected on the profound impact of the cultural immersion experience. One student remarked, "Before coming here, I thought I

knew what Toraja culture was about, but being part of it made me realize how much I didn't know. The funeral rituals were especially eye-opening—they made me see the depth and meaning behind the traditions." Another student shared, "Participating in traditional dances wasn't just about learning the steps; it was about understanding the stories and values that the dances represent. It made me rethink how I view other cultures, including my own."

Several students spoke about how the immersion experience challenged their preconceived notions. They acknowledged that they initially held stereotypes or simplistic views of the culture, which were dispelled as they engaged more deeply with the community. One student noted, "I came with certain expectations about what Toraja culture would be like, but those were completely overturned once I started living and breathing it. It was a humbling experience."

Students also reported that the immersion program had a lasting impact on their global perspectives. Many expressed that their experiences in Toraja made them more open-minded and empathetic towards other cultures. One student reflected, "This experience taught me that every culture has its own complexities and beauty. It broadened my worldview and made me more aware of the importance of cultural sensitivity in our globalized world."

The data confirms that the cultural immersion programs organized by the Tourism Study Program at UKI Toraja were highly successful in enhancing the cultural understanding and intercultural competence of international students. The combination of deep cultural engagement, the challenging of preconceived notions, and the practical application of intercultural skills contributed to a transformative learning experience that broadened students' global perspectives and prepared them for effective participation in a multicultural world.

The study's finding that cultural immersion programs at UKI Toraja were successful in enhancing cultural understanding and intercultural competence aligns with existing literature that underscores the transformative potential of such programs. For instance, research by (Nelson & Luetz, 2021) on intercultural competence suggests that immersive experiences are critical for developing deeper cultural understanding and empathy. The deep engagement with Toraja's culture, as observed in the study, supports Dearsdorff's assertion that direct interaction with a host culture allows individuals to move beyond superficial understandings and challenge preconceived notions.

Similarly, (Hunduma & Mekuria, 2024) found that immersion programs effectively broaden participants' global perspectives and enhance their ability to navigate multicultural environments. The study's observations of students challenging their stereotypes and expanding their global viewpoints reinforce this literature. The hands-on engagement described—such as participation in local traditions and ceremonies—echoes Vande Berg's findings that practical experience is crucial for developing intercultural competence.

The study's results also reflect findings from (Fong, 2020) , who reported that cultural immersion experiences contribute to personal growth, including increased self-confidence and adaptability. The observed increase in students' self-confidence and their enhanced adaptability in navigating cultural differences align with Chieffo and Griffiths'

conclusions that immersion fosters personal development by pushing individuals out of their comfort zones and requiring them to engage with and adapt to new cultural contexts.

Additionally, (Selby, 2021) highlighted that such programs often ignite a deeper interest in related academic fields and careers. The study's finding that students developed a stronger interest in cultural studies and related careers aligns with Matsumoto and Hwang's observation that immersion experiences can significantly influence academic and career trajectories.

The findings from the study are consistent with the literature on the efficacy of cultural immersion programs in enhancing intercultural competence and personal growth. The data supports the idea that immersive experiences provide a robust platform for challenging stereotypes, fostering deeper cultural understanding, and facilitating personal and academic development. This alignment with existing literature underscores the value of these programs in preparing students for effective participation in a multicultural world and highlights the broad benefits of cultural immersion beyond mere academic learning.

2. Impact on Personal and Academic Growth

Beyond cultural understanding, the immersion experience had a significant impact on the personal and academic growth of the participants. Many students reported an increase in self-confidence and adaptability as a result of navigating the challenges of living in a foreign culture. These challenges included language barriers, adjusting to different social norms, and learning to engage respectfully with cultural practices that were unfamiliar to them.

Academically, the experience deepened the students' interest in cultural studies and global issues. Several participants mentioned that their time in Toraja inspired them to pursue further studies or careers related to cultural preservation, anthropology, or international relations. This indicates that cultural immersion can be a catalyst for academic motivation and can shape students' future career trajectories.

Observations of the students during the immersion program provided evidence of their personal and academic growth. Observers noted that students initially struggled with language barriers and unfamiliar social norms. However, over time, they became more confident and adaptable. This was evident in their increased willingness to engage in conversations with local community members, even when their language skills were limited. Observers also saw students take initiative in various activities, such as leading small group discussions or organizing cultural events, which demonstrated their growing confidence.

Observations during academic debrief sessions showed that students became more engaged in discussions about cultural studies and global issues. They asked more in-depth questions and participated actively in debates, indicating a heightened interest in these subjects. The students also began to draw connections between their experiences in Toraja and broader global issues, reflecting a deeper academic engagement.

Interviews with the students provided further insights into their personal and academic development. In interviews, students frequently mentioned the personal challenges they faced during the immersion experience, such as overcoming language barriers and adapting to new social norms. Many students described how these challenges initially caused anxiety but ultimately led to increased self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment. One student remarked, "I never imagined I could navigate a culture so different from my own, but doing so made me realize I'm more capable than I thought."

Several students reported that the immersion experience had a profound impact on their academic interests. They mentioned that their time in Toraja sparked a deeper interest in cultural studies, anthropology, and global issues. Some students even expressed a desire to pursue careers related to cultural preservation or international relations, inspired by the insights they gained during the program. One student stated, "Before coming here, I was undecided about my future career. Now, I'm seriously considering a path in cultural preservation because I've seen how vital it is to protect and understand diverse cultures."

The data confirms that the cultural immersion program in Toraja significantly contributed to the personal and academic growth of the international students. The challenges of living in a foreign culture fostered self-confidence and adaptability, while the immersive experiences deepened students' academic interests and influenced their future career paths. This finding underscores the value of cultural immersion programs not only for enhancing cultural understanding but also for promoting personal development and academic engagement.

The finding that the challenges of living in a foreign culture fostered self-confidence and adaptability aligns with the literature on personal development through cultural immersion. Cervantes-Soon (2014) emphasize that immersion programs are particularly effective in promoting personal growth by placing students in unfamiliar and challenging environments. Their research highlights that overcoming these challenges—such as language barriers and social adjustments—can lead to increased self-confidence and adaptability. This mirrors the study's findings that students reported a boost in self-confidence and adaptability as a direct result of their immersive experiences in Toraja.

Similarly, Moussa (2021) explore how international students' adaptation to new cultural contexts can lead to enhanced personal development. Their study underscores that navigating and integrating into a new culture fosters personal resilience and growth, which is consistent with the observed increase in students' self-confidence and adaptability noted in the Toraja program.

The finding that immersion experiences deepened students' academic interests and influenced their career paths is supported by (Maakrun & Kearney, 2020). Their research indicates that cultural immersion can spark a profound interest in academic fields related to cultural studies and international relations. The study's observation that students developed a stronger interest in these areas and considered careers related to cultural preservation and anthropology aligns with Matsumoto and Hwang's conclusions about the impact of immersion on academic and career trajectories.

Tanaka and Kutsuki (2018) also support this finding, noting that immersion programs often lead to increased academic engagement and motivation. Their study highlights that immersive experiences provide students with real-world applications of their academic knowledge, which can enhance their enthusiasm for related fields of study and influence their future career choices. The data from the Toraja program—showing students' increased interest in cultural studies and related careers—corroborates Tanaka and Kutsuki's assertion about the academic and career benefits of cultural immersion.

The study's findings are well-supported by the existing literature, reinforcing the view that cultural immersion programs contribute significantly to both personal and academic growth. The increase in self-confidence and adaptability among students, as a result of overcoming cultural challenges, aligns with Chieffo and Griffiths' and Smith and Khawaja's observations on personal development through immersion. Furthermore, the deepened academic interests and influenced career paths of students are consistent with Matsumoto and Hwang's and Tanaka and Kutsuki's findings on the impact of immersion on academic and professional trajectories.

These insights underscore the multifaceted benefits of cultural immersion programs, extending beyond mere cultural understanding to encompass substantial personal and academic development. The study highlights the integral role of such programs in fostering well-rounded growth, preparing students for future academic pursuits and career paths in a globalized world. This alignment with previous research strengthens the case for the continued support and expansion of cultural immersion initiatives in educational settings.

3. Students as Cultural Ambassadors

One of the key findings of this study is the role of international students as cultural ambassadors for Toraja. Upon returning to their home countries, participants actively shared their experiences through social media, presentations, and informal discussions with peers and family. This sharing often included personal stories, photos, and videos that highlighted the unique aspects of Toraja culture, such as the elaborate funeral rites and the distinctive Tongkonan architecture.

These activities contributed to raising awareness and interest in Toraja as a travel destination. The students' authentic and enthusiastic portrayal of their experiences played a crucial role in generating positive word-of-mouth promotion for the region. The findings suggest that cultural immersion programs can effectively leverage the personal networks of international students to enhance global visibility and attract potential tourists to Toraja.

During the immersion program, students were observed documenting their experiences through photos, videos, and journal entries. They frequently engaged in discussions about their experiences with peers and local community members, often expressing excitement about sharing their newfound knowledge.

After returning to their home countries, observers noted that students continued to promote Toraja culture through various channels. For example, students were seen organizing presentations at their universities, sharing multimedia content on social media

platforms, and participating in cultural exchange events where they showcased elements of Toraja culture.

The content shared by students often included vivid descriptions and visual representations of Toraja's unique cultural practices, such as the intricate funeral ceremonies and the architectural beauty of Tongkonan houses. Observers noted that the enthusiasm and authenticity in the students' presentations made the cultural aspects more relatable and engaging for their audiences.

International students consistently reported a sense of responsibility and pride in representing Toraja culture. One student stated, "I feel like a bridge between Toraja and my home country. Sharing my experiences has made my friends and family more interested in visiting Toraja." Another mentioned, "Posting photos and stories about Toraja on social media has sparked conversations and curiosity among my peers about this amazing culture."

Members of the Toraja community acknowledged and appreciated the students' efforts to promote their culture abroad. A local community leader noted, "The students have done an excellent job in showcasing our traditions and architecture. Their genuine enthusiasm has certainly increased interest in Toraja among people who might not have known about us otherwise." Another community member added, "Seeing our culture represented authentically by the students helps us take pride in our heritage and encourages others to learn more about us."

Students reported receiving positive feedback and inquiries about Toraja from their networks. One student mentioned, "After sharing my experiences, several friends expressed a desire to visit Toraja. Some even started planning trips or researching more about our culture." This aligns with observations of increased interest and engagement from students' personal networks.

The data robustly supports the finding that international students serve as effective cultural ambassadors for Toraja. Through active sharing of their experiences via social media, presentations, and personal interactions, students have significantly raised awareness and interest in Toraja as a travel destination. Their authentic and enthusiastic portrayal of Toraja culture has generated positive word-of-mouth promotion, highlighting the potential of cultural immersion programs to enhance global visibility and attract tourism. This finding underscores the dual benefits of such programs in fostering student development and supporting the cultural and economic objectives of the host community.

The finding that international students effectively promote Toraja through various channels—social media, presentations, and personal interactions—aligns with the literature on students' roles as cultural ambassadors. (Tran & Pham, 2016) explore how international students act as cultural ambassadors, arguing that their personal experiences and authentic portrayals of host cultures can significantly impact the perceptions of their home communities. Their research supports the notion that students' enthusiastic sharing of their immersion experiences can enhance global visibility and generate interest in the host destination, much like the findings of the Toraja study.

(Tomasi et al., 2020) also discuss the role of students in promoting educational institutions and destinations. They suggest that international students often become informal ambassadors, using their personal networks and experiences to spread positive word-of-mouth about their host locations. This aligns with the study's finding that students' authentic portrayals of Toraja culture contributed to increased awareness and interest in the region, validating the effectiveness of such promotional efforts.

The finding that cultural immersion programs can enhance global visibility and attract tourism is supported by the research of (Kastenholz & Gronau, 2020) . They argue that cultural immersion programs not only benefit the participants but also serve as a marketing tool for the host community, as the positive experiences of international students can lead to increased tourism. Their study underscores the role of such programs in generating interest and positive word-of-mouth promotion, which is consistent with the Toraja study's observations of students raising awareness about the region.

Carvalho et al. (2022) further support this by highlighting the impact of cultural immersion on tourism. They note that immersive experiences provide students with authentic insights into local cultures, which they then share with their networks, thereby promoting the host destination. This aligns with the study's finding that students' enthusiastic and authentic sharing of their experiences significantly raised interest in Toraja, illustrating the dual benefits of cultural immersion programs for both students and the host community. This discussion emphasizes the substantial impact that cultural immersion programs can have on both promoting global visibility for host destinations and enriching the personal and professional lives of international students.

E. Conclusion

The study results confirm that the cultural immersion programs conducted by the Tourism Study Program at UKI Toraja play a significant role in promoting Toraja tourism by enhancing cultural understanding and intercultural competence, fostering personal and academic growth, and positioning students as cultural ambassadors.

Based on this conclusion, the recommendation for future researchers is to explore the long-term impact of cultural immersion programs on both the international students and the host community. Future studies could examine how these programs influence the students' career paths and global perspectives over time, as well as the sustained effects on Toraja tourism and the local community's cultural preservation efforts. Additionally, researchers could investigate the effectiveness of similar programs in other cultural contexts to determine the broader applicability of this approach to tourism promotion and intercultural competence development.

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