

Breaking the Wall of Inequality: The Hybrid Academic Habitus of Rural Students in the Heart of Kalimantan's Academia

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Abstract

Educational inequality remains one of the most persistent challenges in higher education, particularly for students from rural and remote areas who often experience unequal access to educational resources, digital technologies, and academic opportunities. While several studies have explored educational disparities and student adaptation, the study of how rural students reconstruct their dispositions during university life remains scarce. This study aims to examine how rural students navigate structural inequalities and construct a hybrid academic habitus in the context of higher education. The study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with twelve rural students enrolled at Mulawarman University, East Kalimantan, Indonesia. Participants were purposively selected to represent diverse rural backgrounds. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field, complemented by Giddens' agency theory. The findings reveal that rural students experience multiple, interrelated forms of educational inequality, including limited educational resources, academic culture shock, symbolic exclusion, and financial insecurity. Rather than remaining passive recipients of these structural constraints, they actively developed learning, social, and economic adaptation strategies through self-directed learning, digital literacy, peer solidarity, and entrepreneurial activities. These adaptive practices gradually transformed their dispositions by integrating rural collectivist values with modern academic competencies, resulting in the emergence of a hybrid academic habitus. This new socio-cultural disposition enabled students to navigate structural inequalities while maintaining meaningful connections to their rural identities. This study contributes to extending Bourdieu's concept of habitus beyond social reproduction to a more dynamic understanding of identity transformation through the interaction of structure and agency.

Keywords

educational inequality; hybrid academic habitus; agency; rural students

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INTRODUCTION

The inequality between urban and rural education represents one of the most pressing challenges in Indonesia's educational development (Spreen & Vally, 2006; Fraser, 1997). The centralization of development, heavily biased toward urban areas, has resulted in highly unequal access, quality, and outcomes of education in rural and remote regions (Suryadarma & Jones, 2013; Wood, 2023). The Ministry of Education and Culture reports that 75% of elementary schools in 3T regions (frontier, outermost, and underdeveloped areas) still suffer from a shortage of qualified teachers, limited laboratory facilities, and minimal access to digital-based learning technologies (Kemendikbud, 2023). Geographical inequality intertwines with structural and cultural disparities, which directly and indirectly reproduce social inequalities in educational achievement (Bourdieu, 1986; Spreen & Vally, 2006).

In East Kalimantan, a province renowned for its natural resource wealth, severe inequality persists in human development. In 2022, the Provincial Education Office of East Kalimantan recorded that the education development index in Samarinda City reached 0.85, while in inland districts such as Mahakam Ulu and West Kutai, it ranged only between 0.62 and 0.68. Data from the *Pusat Asesmen Pendidikan* (2023) further indicate that the average literacy score of students in inland areas was over 45 points lower than that of urban students. The roots of educational inequality in East Kalimantan lie in the inadequacy of infrastructure, disparities in teacher competence, and weak inter-regional connectivity (Rahman & Syafruddin, 2021).

According to Bourdieu (1986), the educational gap between rural and urban areas reflects the unequal distribution of social and cultural capital. Urban schools tend to possess stronger resources and social networks that support students' educational aspirations (Bouck, 2004; Hlalele, 2014; Wang, Chen, & Li, 2022). Conversely, rural schools operate within limited facilities and funding, which in turn diminishes the moti-

vation and aspirations of children in remote areas (McCracken & Barcinas, 1991).

The unequal access to technology further widens this gap. Afzal et al. (2023) identify the digital divide as a crucial factor reinforcing social exclusion in modern education, particularly in low-connectivity areas. Students from remote regions often experience *academic shock* upon entering universities dominated by urban students with higher digital literacy skills (Aruleba & Jere, 2022; Yang & Liu, 2021). Fraser (1997) conceptualizes such inequality as a form of *maldistribution* and *misrecognition*, in which rural minorities are deprived not only of material resources but also symbolically marginalized within higher education systems.

Educational inequality among rural students has become an increasingly important concern in higher education research. Liu and Helwig (2022) argue that students from rural areas often face structural disadvantages associated with limited educational resources, unequal access to opportunities, and differences in cultural capital compared to their urban counterparts. These inequalities do not disappear when students enter university; rather, they frequently manifest in the form of academic adjustment difficulties, lower self-confidence, and challenges in navigating institutional expectations. Similarly, Barragán Moreno (2025) demonstrates that disparities in digital access and technological competencies continue to shape students' academic experiences and persistence in higher education. Beyond material constraints, Dolev-Cohen et al. (2024) emphasize that social support and a sense of belonging play a crucial role in helping students adapt to unfamiliar academic environments. In this regard, recent studies increasingly acknowledge that rural students are not merely passive recipients of educational disadvantages but active actors who develop adaptive strategies through peer networks, self-directed learning, and resilience in responding to structural challenges.

Despite these developments, important gaps remain within the existing litera-

ture. Most studies focus primarily on educational access, academic achievement, digital inequality, or institutional support systems, while providing limited attention to the sociocultural transformation experienced by rural students after entering higher education institutions. Liu and Helwig (2022) mainly explain how structural inequality influences educational opportunities, whereas Barragán Moreno (2025) concentrates on the implications of the digital divide for student retention. Likewise, Dolev-Cohen et al. (2024) and Howard et al. (2024) highlight the importance of social support, motivation, and psychological well-being in student adaptation processes. However, these studies have not sufficiently explained how rural students negotiate the intersection between rural collectivist values and the demands of modern academic culture, nor how such interactions contribute to the emergence of new forms of identity and agency. Addressing this gap, the present study introduces the concept of hybrid academic habitus, which conceptualizes rural students as social agents who actively combine communal solidarity, moral responsibility, digital adaptability, and academic independence in navigating unequal educational structures. Through this perspective, adaptation is understood not as a process of assimilation into dominant academic norms, but as the formation of a hybrid sociocultural disposition that enables students to survive, negotiate, and challenge structural inequalities within higher education.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how rural students at Mulawarman University negotiate educational inequalities through social, academic, and economic adaptation strategies. Furthermore, this study seeks to explore the formation of a hybrid academic habitus as a sociocultural response to structural inequalities experienced by rural students in higher education.

The complexity of educational challenges in remote regions leaves rural students burdened with multiple forms of disadvantage even after successfully entering major urban universities. This research seeks to understand how students from in-

land villages develop adaptive strategies within the environment of Mulawarman University. They are not merely participants in the education system but also embodiments of deeply rooted structural inequalities that originate in primary education. This study aims to address three central questions: (1) What forms of social, academic, and cultural adaptation strategies are developed by students from remote areas at Mulawarman University? (2) What structural and cultural factors influence these adaptive processes? and (3) How do these adaptive experiences reflect and contest the reproduction of educational inequality between rural and urban areas in East Kalimantan?

The novelty of this study lies in its critical-sociological approach, which combines a structural analysis of educational inequality with a micro-level exploration of rural students' lived experiences as social agents. While previous studies have emphasized inequality in terms of access and facilities (Wood, 2023; Wang et al., 2022; Hlalele, 2014), this research explores how individuals from the periphery construct strategies of survival and resistance within a hegemonic educational system. It contributes to the development of critical sociology of education in Indonesia and offers practical insights for affirmative higher education policies in rural East Kalimantan.

FRAMEWORK

Habitus, capital, and social field in educational practice

This study draws primarily on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice to understand how educational inequality is reproduced and experienced by rural students in higher education. According to Bourdieu (1986, 1990), social practices are shaped by the interaction between habitus, capital, and the social field. Habitus refers to a system of enduring dispositions acquired through socialization processes that influence an individual's perceptions, attitudes, and actions. These dispositions are shaped through everyday experiences and tend to reflect the social conditions in which they are raised.

Consequently, students from rural areas often develop forms of habitus that differ significantly from those from urban environments. Urban students generally possess forms of cultural capital that align more closely with dominant academic expectations, while rural students often enter higher education with fewer opportunities to acquire such resources. The unequal distribution of social capital, such as networks, relationships, and social support, results in symbolic domination, where dominant cultural values are normalized and considered legitimate, while alternative cultures are marginalized.

Agency and the Duality of Structure

Anthony Giddens's structuration theory is used to understand how individuals actively respond to structural constraints. Giddens (1984) argues that social life is characterized by a duality of structure, meaning that structures simultaneously constrain and enable human action. Individuals are not passive recipients of social forces; rather, they are agents with the capacity to act, reflect, and make choices within existing structural conditions.

Rural students are not simply victims of educational inequality but active social actors who continually negotiate, adapt to, and sometimes transform the conditions they face. Their everyday practices demonstrate their capacity to exercise agency within an unequal educational environment. The interplay between structural constraints and individual agency provides an important lens for understanding how rural students navigate academic life while simultaneously challenging the reproduction of social inequality.

Hybrid Academic Habitus

Building on Bourdieu's concept of habitus and Giddens's notion of agency, this study introduces the concept of hybrid academic habitus as its primary analytical framework. Hybrid academic habitus refers to the socio-cultural dispositions that emerge through the interaction between rural collectivist values and the demands of modern

academic culture. Rather than abandoning their rural identities, students selectively integrate values such as solidarity, mutual aid, perseverance, and moral responsibility with academic practices that emphasize independence, critical thinking, digital literacy, and individual achievement. Rural students actively construct new forms of identity by combining elements of their rural backgrounds with the expectations of university life. The resulting hybrid academic habitus allows them to address structural inequalities while maintaining cultural continuity and developing new forms of academic agency.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative approach with a reflective-critical orientation, aiming to uncover the meanings embedded in everyday social actions and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 students (6 men and 6 women) from rural areas currently studying at Mulawarman University (Unmul). Informants were selected through purposive sampling to represent variations in geographic origin, socioeconomic background, and gender. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore personal experiences while maintaining thematic consistency (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2021). Limited participant observation was conducted in classroom activities and student organizations to capture social practices that are not always verbally articulated.

The informants came from border areas (Krayan and Sebatik), three from the Mahakam River hinterland (Kutai Barat and Mahakam Ulu), four from the coastal agricultural zone (Kutai Kartanegara and Berau), and two from the plantation hinterland (Malinau and Paser). The informants' parents work as farmers, fishermen, or plantation workers, with family incomes ranging from Rp 0.5 million to Rp 3 million per month.

Interview data were analyzed using reflective analysis techniques involving transcription, open coding, thematic categori-

zation, and reflective interpretation, guided by the theoretical framework of habitus and social agency (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Data were analyzed using a six-stage thematic analysis approach adapted from Braun and Clarke (2021). Theoretical interpretations were conducted using Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, fields, and symbolic domination, complemented by Anthony Giddens's ideas on agency and the duality of structure.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The findings reveal that rural students entered Mulawarman University carrying multiple forms of disadvantage accumulated throughout their educational experiences. Most informants reported limited access to educational facilities, inadequate internet connectivity, shortages of qualified teachers, and minimal exposure to digital learning technologies in their home regions. These conditions created significant challenges during their transition to higher education, particularly when confronted with academic systems that demanded technological literacy, independent learning, and critical thinking. Many participants described experiencing academic and cultural shock during their early semesters, accompanied by feelings of inferiority when interacting with urban students who appeared more confident and academically prepared.

Despite these challenges, the findings demonstrate that rural students were not passive recipients of structural inequalities. Instead, they actively developed various adaptive strategies to navigate the demands of university life. Informants reported engaging in self-directed learning through digital platforms such as YouTube, Google Scholar, and online academic resources to compensate for educational limitations experienced during their secondary education. In addition, they built strong solidarity networks with fellow rural students through study groups, resource sharing, and mutual emotional support. These collective practices became important mechanisms for over-

coming academic and social barriers within the university environment.

The findings further indicate that adaptation extended beyond academic matters to include economic survival strategies. Several students worked part-time, operated small businesses, or relied on collective financial support from peers to cope with irregular family remittances and high living costs in the city. Through these experiences, students gradually developed new competencies while maintaining values rooted in their rural upbringing. Rather than abandoning their cultural backgrounds, they combined communal values such as solidarity, mutual cooperation, and collective responsibility with academic dispositions including digital literacy, independent learning, and critical thinking. This process resulted in the emergence of a hybrid academic habitus, a new sociocultural disposition that enabled rural students to negotiate structural inequalities, adapt to academic life, and construct meaningful participation within higher education while preserving connections to their communities of origin.

Discussion

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social practice (1977, 1990) and Anthony Giddens's concept of the *duality of structure* (1991) are employed to understand the struggles of rural students in reclaiming their space of existence within the university. Bourdieu positions individuals as agents operating within a *field*, a social arena structured by unevenly distributed forms of *capital* (economic, social, cultural, and symbolic). Giddens's notion of structural duality, on the other hand, provides an analytical lens through which rural individuals can be seen not merely as victims of structure but as *reflective and capable actors*.

The university, in this sense, can be understood as a *site of power reproduction*, where cultural domination operates through academic language, symbols, and norms (Bourdieu, 1991). Yet, it also serves as a potential *arena of resistance* in which *counter-hegemonic subjectivities* may emerge (Giroux, 2011). The learning motivation

of these students often stems from a sense of responsibility toward their families and communities, driven not merely by personal ambition for success but by *ethical commitment* and *social solidarity*. Their lived experiences exemplify the condition of the *precariat* (Standing, 2011), where economic insecurity becomes an inherent feature of poor students' everyday lives in modern academic spaces. In such circumstances, *social solidarity* (Putnam, 2000) and the *collective moral values* of rural life constitute vital moral resources that sustain their persistence and resilience.

Educational Inequality as The Foundation of Rural Students Academic Experiences

The findings indicate that educational inequality constitutes the primary challenge experienced by rural students before and after entering higher education. Most informants reported limited access to educational facilities, inadequate internet connectivity, shortages of qualified teachers, and minimal exposure to digital learning technologies during their secondary education. These disadvantages created significant disparities when compared with students from urban areas who were already familiar with technology-based learning systems and academic competition. Several participants explained that they struggled to use learning management systems, access online academic resources, and complete assignments that required digital competencies during their first semesters at university.

These findings suggest that educational inequality extends beyond unequal access to physical infrastructure. Rather, it shapes students' opportunities to acquire cultural resources that are highly valued within higher education institutions. Bourdieu (1986) argues that educational systems tend to reward forms of cultural capital that are unevenly distributed across social groups. In this study, rural students entered the university with fewer opportunities to accumulate digital literacy, academic language

skills, and learning experiences aligned with university expectations. Consequently, they encountered difficulties not because of lower intellectual capacity, but because they possessed forms of capital that were less recognized within the academic field.

Most informants reported experiencing academic stress and social pressure arising from disparities in digital literacy and institutional expectations. They had to learn how to navigate online learning platforms, adapt to fast-paced discussions, and adjust to a learning rhythm that demanded a high level of autonomy. The university lacked transitional programs sensitive to students' diverse social and educational backgrounds, leaving the entire burden of adaptation on the individual. Here, a paradox becomes evident: a public university, an institution that should serve as an instrument of social emancipation, ironically reproduces social inequality in new forms, not only economic but also digital and cultural.

The campus thus becomes an arena of academic and symbolic struggle, where *capital* determines the speed of adaptation rather than pure intellectual capacity. At this juncture, rural students are not only struggling to fit into the academic world but are also negotiating *symbolic justice* within a space that remains fundamentally unequal. Their experiences reflect the silent reproduction of privilege through institutional norms that appear neutral, yet subtly favor those already equipped with urban cultural capital.

The findings are consistent with recent international studies highlighting the persistence of educational inequalities among students from geographically marginalized regions. Barragán Moreno (2025) demonstrates that digital inequality remains a significant predictor of academic exclusion in higher education, while Afzal et al. (2023) show that unequal access to educational technologies continues to reproduce learning disparities in developing countries. Similarly, Peng et al. (2024) argue that students from rural backgrounds often enter universities with disadvantages that extend beyond economic limitations, inclu-

Table 1. Typology of Challenges Faced by Rural Students in Adjusting to Urban Higher Education

Type of Challenge	Initial Condition	Impact on Students
Limited Learning Facilities and Infrastructure in the Home Region	The secondary education system in rural areas lacks digital facilities such as laboratories, internet access, and learning devices.	Difficulty adapting to digitally based university systems, such as e-learning platforms and academic applications.
Gap in Academic Literacy and Scientific Language	Teaching models in village schools remain teacher-centered, with minimal discussion and critical literacy practices.	Difficulty understanding academic terminology and the communication style of lecturers; feelings of inadequacy or of being “not smart enough.”
Unpreparedness in Using Campus Technologies	Limited prior experience with laptops, digital presentations, and online platforms; unfamiliar with accessing scientific resources.	Initial academic stress, falling behind on assignments, or becoming dependent on peers more adept in technology.
Cultural Shock toward Individualistic and Competitive Campus Culture	Different social values: rural culture emphasizes collectivism, while university life prioritizes competition and individual performance.	Feelings of alienation and inferiority; difficulty socializing with urban peers who are more expressive and accustomed to competition.
Lack of Transitional Mechanisms and Institutional Support	No specific academic orientation or bridging program for students from remote or underdeveloped areas; universities assume equal readiness among all freshmen.	The burden of adaptation is borne individually; rural students often “struggle alone” to adjust to the new environment.
Divergent Academic Expectations and Orientations	Rural students view higher education as a “life opportunity” to be pursued with seriousness and frugality, while urban students often see it as a social phase of youth.	Tendency to withdraw and focus solely on studying, which may lead to social isolation and limited peer integration.

ding disparities in educational experiences and cultural resources. The experiences of rural students in East Kalimantan therefore reflect a broader global pattern in which higher education institutions continue to reproduce pre-existing inequalities despite their commitment to educational inclusion.

Social Boundaries and Symbolic Domination in the Campus Space

The findings reveal that many rural students experienced difficulties in establishing social relationships during their early semesters at university. Most informants described feelings of inferiority when interacting with urban students who appeared more confident, articulate, and accustomed to academic discussions. Differences in language, accent, communication style, and so-

cial behavior often created a sense of social distance. One participant explained, “At first I felt inferior; it was hard to join their groups because they already had their own circle.” Similar experiences were reported by other informants who felt hesitant to participate in classroom discussions due to concerns about being judged for their accent, manner of speaking, or educational background.

Another form of inequality emerges through subtle yet decisive social boundaries, language, accent, manner of speaking, and self-confidence. The informants entered a “new language” and a set of *feeling rules*, unwritten norms that determine who is perceived as “refined” and who is “backward.” As one student confessed, “*At first I felt inferior; it was hard to join their groups because they already had their own circle.*” This statement reflects a social distance shaped

by *habitus*, extending beyond mere economic or regional differences. Urban students possess established forms of social capital: eloquence, familiarity with critical discussion, and wide friendship networks. Rural students, by contrast, carry a more collective and cautious social habitus. When these two forms of habitus meet in the classroom, the interaction is rarely egalitarian; it often reproduces *symbolic asymmetry*, those who speak fluently are considered intelligent, while those who remain silent are perceived as lagging behind.

This process of *symbolic domination* (Bourdieu, 1991) operates as a gentle yet pervasive mechanism of power, enacted through symbols and everyday norms. There is no explicit oppression, yet the university's value system quietly upholds "urban style" as the standard of academic success. Regional accents are treated as humorous; slow speech is interpreted as ignorance. One informant even shared being mocked for their rural accent and stereotyped as "a backward village kid."

Such symbolic violence works through the internalization of shame. Rural students begin to conform, imitating urban speech patterns, changing their dress, and avoiding regional expressions to escape being labeled as *kampung* ("unsophisticated"). In doing so, they do not merely adapt socially but also

negotiate their own cultural identities. They face an existential dilemma between *being themselves* and *being acceptable* in the eyes of the university.

This domination does not always result in total subjugation. The informants developed reflective social adaptation strategies, building solidarity with peers who shared similar experiences. From these small circles emerged horizontal social capital, networks of emotional support that served as protection against social exclusion. Students who initially felt alienated gradually found a sense of belonging on campus, not because they were accepted by the dominant structure, but because they created alternative social spaces that redefined the meaning of their presence. They engaged in forms of *micro-resistance*: ways of surviving within structural inequalities without necessarily confronting them openly.

Yet, such adaptation continues to place the social burden on the students rather than on the institution. The university, as a public space, has not systematically developed fair mechanisms of social integration, such as cross-regional socialization programs, peer mentoring, or academic communication training that is sensitive to cultural diversity. Inclusivity on campus remains largely superficial: it appears open, yet still symbolically excludes those who are

Table 2. Taxonomy of Social Boundaries and Experiences of Symbolic Domination among Rural Students

Type of Social Challenge	Sociological Cause	Impact on Students
Feelings of Inferiority and Alienation at the Beginning of College	Differences in accent, speech style, and confidence between rural and urban students.	Students become quiet, avoid class discussions, and interact mainly with peers from similar rural backgrounds.
Difficulty Building Social Relations with Urban Students	Urban students possess broader and more homogeneous networks (based on school, region, or class background).	Social isolation; limited access to academic information and collaboration opportunities.
Cultural Stereotyping and Discrimination	Stigmatization of rural accents, dress, and lifestyle as "less modern."	Feelings of shame and inferiority; attempts to alter identity through imitation of urban norms.
Low Self-Confidence in Academic Forums	Limited experience in public speaking and fear of ridicule due to regional accent.	Low classroom participation; declining academic performance and social recognition.

different. This situation illustrates that the university has not fully become a space of emancipation (Giroux, 2011). It tends to reproduce pre-existing social and cultural hierarchies, reinforcing them through everyday academic practices, who speaks faster, who appears more “confident,” and who is labeled as “slow.” Within this unjust structure, rural students discover new forms of agency. They learn that endurance itself is a form of resistance; that being a student is not only about academic achievement but also about sustaining cultural dignity in a space that is not always hospitable to difference.

These findings suggest that the transition from rural communities to higher education involves more than academic adjustment; it also entails adaptation to a new cultural environment. Rural students enter university carrying values shaped by collectivist social settings characterized by modesty, caution, and communal relationships. In contrast, the university environment often rewards self-confidence, assertive communication, and individual achievement. Consequently, many students experienced what can be described as academic culture shock, a condition arising from the encounter between different social and cultural worlds. Recent studies similarly demonstrate that students from rural backgrounds frequently encounter difficulties adapting to urban academic environments due to differences in social norms, communication practices, and educational experiences (Yang & Liu, 2021; Peng et al., 2024).

The experiences reported by informants further indicate that social interactions within the university are not always neutral. Several participants perceived that certain forms of communication and behavior associated with urban students were implicitly regarded as indicators of academic competence. Regional accents were occasionally treated as objects of humor, while limited participation in discussions was often interpreted as a lack of intellectual ability. One informant reported being stereotyped as “a backward village kid” because of their rural background. These experiences

reveal how cultural differences may become sources of symbolic exclusion within higher education institutions.

From Bourdieu’s perspective (1991), these experiences reflect the operation of symbolic domination through everyday academic practices. The university functions as a social field in which particular forms of cultural capital, such as communication skills, confidence, and familiarity with academic discourse, are more highly valued than others. As a result, students possessing forms of capital that align with dominant academic norms enjoy greater recognition and legitimacy. Similar patterns have been identified in recent international studies showing that higher education institutions often reproduce existing social inequalities through seemingly neutral academic expectations and cultural standards (Barragán Moreno, 2025; Afzal et al., 2023).

Learning and Academic Adaptation Strategies: From Compliance to Agency

The spectrum of adaptation strategies ranges from *passive* to *reflective-creative*. The passive adaptive pattern involves attending classes, listening, taking notes, and completing assignments without much initiative. This does not stem from laziness, but from a pedagogical habitus shaped by obedience. In their earlier schooling, teachers were seen as the sole source of knowledge, and a “good student” was an obedient one. Thus, upon entering a university culture that values discussion and critical thinking, many prefer silence. The pedagogical habitus of compliance is carried into the new academic field, producing learning practices oriented toward *reproduction rather than transformation*.

Other students display a stronger degree of reflexivity by developing independent and digital-adaptive strategies. Some informants described learning by watching lecture videos on YouTube, searching for journal articles on Google Scholar, or downloading free e-books because they could not afford textbooks. These students embody *transformative agency from below*, self-directed learners who rely not on institutio-

nal systems but on internal motivation and curiosity. At this point, rural students cease to be mere victims of structural inequality; through their practical consciousness, they turn limitations into learning resources.

Horizontal social strategies emerge as another form of strength. While urban students often cluster in homogenous friendship circles, rural students construct solidarity across regions, studying together, sharing assignments, and even lending each other electronic devices. This solidarity becomes a form of *collective social capital* (Putnam, 2000): a web of trust and reciprocity that offers non-material support, security, motivation, and belonging. This social capital functions as a subtle mechanism of resistance against campus exclusion, an *invisible safety net* possessed only by those at the margins.

Meanwhile, reflective-hybrid strategies represent an advanced adaptation pattern, combining self-study, peer learning, and digital tools. These students occupy a liminal position, neither fully traditional nor entirely modern. They refuse the binary between “village” and “city,” creating a *hy-*

brid academic habitus that fuses collectivist values with intellectual independence.

In this process, they become *transformative agents* (Rusmawati & Hartono, 2021), engaging in reflective actions that gradually alter structural orientations through everyday practice. Such acts may appear small but have significant structural consequences: these students begin to claim epistemic spaces that were never designed for them. This transformation marks a shift from a *habitus of compliance* to a *habitus of reflexivity*. At first, they studied because they had to; along the way, they study because they want to.

Recent studies have similarly shown that students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds often develop self-directed learning strategies as a means of overcoming structural barriers. Peng et al. (2024) argue that rural students frequently rely on informal learning resources and peer networks to bridge gaps in educational preparation. Likewise, Barragán Moreno (2025) highlights the increasing importance of digital learning competencies in reducing educational exclusion among students from

Table 3. Taxonomy of Academic Adaptation Strategies among Rural Students at Mula-warman University

Form of Adaptation Strategy	Underlying Social Background	Academic Impacts and Consequences
Passive-Adaptive Strategy	Previous education emphasized obedience; students were used to following directions without much initiative.	Students participate minimally: attending classes, taking notes, and completing assignments without deeper understanding.
Independent (Self-Learning) Strategy	Limited facilities and a strong sense of personal responsibility encourage self-study outside the classroom.	Students manage to catch up with course material and develop a strong work ethic, though the learning burden becomes highly individual.
Digital-Adaptive Strategy	Exposure to campus technology and the need to engage with e-learning systems drive internet-based learning.	Students learn to use online platforms, YouTube, and Google Scholar to understand materials.
Horizontal Social Strategy	Emotional closeness and solidarity among rural students; collective habits from the village are carried into campus life.	Students study together, share notes, and help each other with assignments.
Reflective-Hybrid Strategy	Reflexive awareness that no single learning method is sufficient; formed through experience and adaptation.	Students combine independent, digital, and social learning; they become more adaptive and critically engaged with the academic system.

marginalized regions. The experiences of the informants therefore reflect broader global trends in which students actively utilize digital technologies and alternative learning resources to improve their academic participation.

Another important finding concerns the role of peer solidarity in supporting academic adaptation. Many participants emphasized the importance of studying together, sharing learning materials, lending electronic devices, and exchanging academic information with fellow rural students. These collaborative practices provided not only practical assistance but also emotional support during periods of academic uncertainty. For students who often felt marginalized within the broader university environment, these networks created a sense of belonging and collective resilience.

These experiences represent an important stage in the formation of hybrid academic habitus. Rural students did not abandon the communal values acquired through village life; instead, they integrated these values with newly acquired academic competencies. Practices such as collaborative learning, mutual support, digital literacy, and independent study illustrate how collectivist rural dispositions were combined with the demands of modern higher education. Consequently, academic adaptation should be understood not merely as a process of adjustment but as a process of habitus transformation through which rural students gradually developed a hybrid academic habitus that enabled them to navigate educational inequalities while maintaining their cultural identity.

Economic Strategies and Uncertainty: Surviving in the City

Behind the classroom, there is a more fundamental struggle about how to survive in the city with limited economic resources. University life is not just an intellectual journey, but also an economic journey filled with uncertainty. Most of them come from low-income families, relying on produce from the fields, forests, or the informal sector. Remittances from home are often irregu-

lar, sometimes arriving once a month, every two months, or sometimes not at all. One informant works at a café owned by a friend in the city when remittances from home are delayed. This illustrates a young group living in double uncertainty, caught between an unstable job market and an educational system that demands consistent performance (Standing, 2011). Part-time work becomes the primary strategy. They work as baristas, shop attendants, event staff, and even online food sellers. The pay is not much, but it is enough to cover daily living expenses.

The greatest challenge emerging from this situation lies in the conflict between time and energy, studying during the day and working at night. In many cases, declining academic performance is not a sign of low intellectual capacity but the result of physical exhaustion from the rhythms of survival in the city. Education, for these students, is not merely a cognitive endeavor but also a corporeal struggle. Within this demanding context, a distinctive form of social strength emerges, *horizontal economic solidarity*. Students from the same rural regions often live together, cook collectively, and even save money communally. They share food, electricity costs, and transportation expenses. As one female informant explained, “*When our remittance hasn’t arrived yet, we usually pool our money together.*” Amid economic pressures, rural communal values serve as a moral foundation for survival in the urban environment. They bring the spirit of *gotong royong*, mutual cooperation, from the village into the city, transforming urban individualism into small yet meaningful spaces of solidarity.

Economic adaptation also takes more creative forms. Some students start small businesses such as selling homemade food, offering design services, or running online shops. Entrepreneurship is not a lifestyle choice but a *survival strategy*. They do not merely endure hardship but actively create new value from scarcity. As one male student from Mahakam Ulu noted, “*I started selling food at my boarding house just to earn extra money, but later it also helped my friends.*”

These practices reveal a form of trans-

Table 4. Taxonomy of Economic Strategies of Rural Students in Navigating Life in the City

Economic Strategy	Social and Economic Causes	Impact on Student Life
Part-Time Work (Barista, Catering Services, Events, Freelance)	Insufficient family support; high and unstable living costs in the city.	Students must divide their time between work and study; increased physical and academic fatigue.
Frugal and Subsistence Strategy (Cooking for Yourself, Simple Living)	Economic awareness from a young age; high value of independence in rural families.	Reduces daily expenses; fosters discipline and solidarity among roommates.
Social and Financial Support from Friends / Regional Community	Strong social bonds among rural students (senior-junior).	Solidarity becomes a survival mechanism; develops trust and mutual assistance.
Irregular Family Support and Remittances	Family income depends on informal sectors and seasonal agriculture.	Remittances are irregular; students must adjust consumption patterns and learn extreme budgeting.
Creative Economic Innovation (Selling Food, Online Services, Micro Businesses)	Economic pressure drives creativity and small-scale entrepreneurial skills.	Students earn additional income; boosts self-confidence and financial independence.

formative economic agency, where individuals refuse to submit to structural inequality and instead turn it into productive opportunity through creativity. Behind academic grades and classroom presentations lie real labor and lived tension. The economic struggles of rural students reflect the paradox of development in East Kalimantan: a province rich in coal, oil, gas, and palm oil, yet where young people striving to break cycles of inequality through education must engage in quiet resistance against structural injustice.

They work not just to survive but to maintain their presence in a knowledge space symbolically not designed for them. For them, education is not simply a promise of upward social mobility, but rather a moral struggle to maintain meaning within a system that marginalizes them. Miller et al. (2019) found that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often experience greater academic vulnerability due to the cumulative effects of financial stress and limited access to educational resources. Wood (2023) argues that resilience among rural populations is often developed through adaptive responses to structural disadvantage. The experiences of rural students in East Kalimantan reflect a pattern in which educational persistence is closely

linked to the ability to cope with economic uncertainty.

Social capital significantly supports students' economic survival. Most participants emphasized that financial difficulties are often addressed through collective support networks among fellow rural students, such as sharing meals, sharing transportation costs, temporary loans, and collaborative budgeting, which emerged as common practices. Dolev-Cohen et al. (2024) and Prastyo et al. (2024) demonstrated that social capital plays a crucial role in enhancing educational resilience among students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Students navigate economic constraints by actively transforming scarcity into opportunities for learning, collaboration, and entrepreneurship. The concept of the Standing Precariat (2011) highlights how contemporary youth navigate uncertain economic conditions while seeking to secure future opportunities. The collective strategies in this study demonstrate that economic adaptation is not only individual but also relational, relying heavily on networks of trust, reciprocity, and mutual assistance. Van der Land et al. (2024) demonstrate that social capital serves as a crucial resource for adaptation under uncertain conditions.

These economic practices contribute to the formation of a hybrid academic habitus. Students integrate traditional rural values such as reciprocal cooperation, collective responsibility, and solidarity with modern academic aspirations, entrepreneurial skills, and independent decision-making. This aligns with self-determination theory, which states that individuals who successfully combine autonomy, competence, and social connectedness are more likely to demonstrate persistence and adaptive motivation in educational settings (Howard et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024). Consequently, economic adaptation should be understood not simply as a survival strategy but as a process through which rural students construct a hybrid academic habitus characterized by resilience, independence, collective responsibility, and long-term educational commitment.

The Emergence of Hybrid Academic Habitus: Negotiating Structure and Agency

The findings demonstrate that rural students are not merely passive recipients of structural inequalities but active participants in constructing new ways of learning, interacting, and surviving within higher education. Across the interviews, participants consistently described how educational disadvantage, cultural adjustment, and economic hardship encouraged them to develop alternative strategies rather than withdraw from academic life. They attended classes despite working late into the evening, borrowed laptops from friends to complete assignments, established collaborative study groups, and relied on mutual support networks to overcome financial and academic challenges. These everyday practices illustrate that adaptation was not an isolated response to individual problems but a continuous process of negotiating structural constraints.

The findings further reveal that these adaptive practices gradually transformed students' dispositions toward learning and social participation. Rather than relying

exclusively on values acquired through their rural upbringing or fully adopting dominant urban academic norms, participants selectively integrated elements from both social worlds. Collective responsibility, mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), and strong interpersonal solidarity remained central to their daily lives, while independent learning, digital literacy, academic confidence, and critical thinking became increasingly important in navigating university expectations. This combination of inherited rural dispositions and newly acquired academic competencies constitutes what this study conceptualizes as a hybrid academic habitus.

From Bourdieu's (1990) perspective, this transformation reflects the dynamic interaction between habitus and field. Although students entered the university with limited cultural and economic capital, prolonged engagement within the academic field enabled them to gradually reconstruct their dispositions without abandoning their original social identities. The university therefore functioned simultaneously as a site of symbolic domination and a space where new forms of cultural capital could be accumulated. Rather than reproducing dominant academic norms uncritically, students selectively appropriated institutional practices while preserving communal values originating from their rural communities.

This process also illustrates Giddens' (1984) concept of the duality of structure, whereby social actors simultaneously reproduce and transform the structures that constrain them. The findings indicate that students were neither fully determined by structural inequalities nor entirely free from them. Instead, agency emerged through everyday practices of learning, cooperation, and economic adaptation that gradually reshaped their participation within the university. Similar findings have been reported by Howard et al. (2024), who demonstrate that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental to students' persistence in higher education, and by Dolev-Cohen et al. (2024), who emphasize that social support strengthens students' capacity to adapt

Table 5. Taxonomy of Relations between Structure and Agency in the Experiences of Rural Students

Dimension of Life	Forms of Structure Encountered	Forms of Agency Displayed
Academic and Digital Literacy	Modern learning systems demanding independence, technological literacy, and critical thinking.	Self-directed learning, watching on-line tutorials, asking peers for help; building new learning <i>habitus</i> .
Social and Cultural	Campus norms oriented toward urban values, individualism, and open self-expression.	Building solidarity among rural students; creating alternative, inclusive social spaces.
Economic and Material	Economic inequality, high living costs, and unstable family remittances.	Working part-time, running small businesses, sharing living expenses, practicing extreme frugality.
Moral and Relational	Family expectations and social pressure to succeed for communal honor.	Turning moral responsibility into an internal source of learning energy and perseverance.
Identity and Social Self	Stigmatization of “village kids” and symbolic domination by urban students.	Negotiating identity; blending village values with modern academic norms.

to challenging academic environments. Likewise, Prastyo et al. (2024) argue that social capital significantly enhances educational resilience among students from disadvantaged backgrounds, reinforcing the importance of collective resources in sustaining academic participation.

The findings therefore extend previous studies that primarily conceptualize rural students as disadvantaged educational subjects. While earlier research has emphasized unequal access to educational resources, digital technologies, and institutional opportunities (Afzal et al., 2023; Barragán Moreno, 2025; Wood, 2023), this study demonstrates that structural inequalities also generate processes of identity reconstruction. Rural students do not simply adapt to higher education; they actively construct new sociocultural dispositions that combine resilience, collective solidarity, self-directed learning, digital competence, and academic responsibility. In this sense, hybrid academic *habitus* should be understood not merely as an adaptive outcome but as a new form of cultural practice emerging from the continuous interaction between structure and agency.

Consequently, the principal contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that educational mobility among rural students is not solely a process of accessing

higher education but also a process of transforming dispositions, identities, and social practices. Hybrid academic *habitus* represents a new sociological formation through which rural students negotiate structural inequality while maintaining meaningful connections to their communities of origin. This finding contributes to the sociology of education by extending Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* beyond social reproduction, showing that *habitus* can also be reconstructed through reflexive agency within unequal educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that rural students are not merely passive recipients of educational inequality but active social agents who continuously negotiate structural constraints within higher education. Through experiences of educational disadvantage, academic culture shock, social adaptation, and economic uncertainty, rural students develop various strategies that enable them to persist in university life. These experiences culminate in the formation of a hybrid academic *habitus*, a new sociocultural disposition that integrates rural values of solidarity, mutual cooperation, and collective responsibility with academic competencies such as independent

learning, digital literacy, critical thinking, and resilience. Rather than abandoning their cultural identity, students selectively combine inherited rural dispositions with the demands of modern academic environments, allowing them to navigate structural inequalities while maintaining meaningful connections to their communities of origin. The findings therefore extend Bourdieu's concept of habitus by demonstrating its dynamic and transformative character within contexts of educational mobility.

The main strength of this study lies in its theoretical contribution to the sociology of education, offering a new analytical perspective for understanding how rural students navigate educational inequality in higher education. Empirically, the study also provides evidence from East Kalimantan, a region underrepresented in international higher education research, thus enriching the global discussion on educational inequality in peripheral contexts.

Nevertheless, this study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on qualitative data collected from twelve students at a single public university, which limits the transferability of the results to other institutional and regional contexts. Second, the study focuses exclusively on rural students' perspectives and does not incorporate the experiences of lecturers, university administrators, or urban students who also contribute to the construction of the academic environment. Future research could adopt comparative or mixed-methods approaches involving multiple universities across different regions of Indonesia to examine the broader applicability of hybrid academic habitus and explore how institutional policies may facilitate more inclusive higher education environments.

Based on these findings, universities should strengthen inclusive educational policies by providing academic bridging programs, peer mentoring, digital literacy training, and psychosocial support specifically designed for students from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds. Such initiatives would not only reduce structural inequalities but also create institutional conditions

that recognize and value the diverse forms of cultural capital brought by rural students into higher education.

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