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The Urban "Sugbo": A Phenomenological Study of Provincial Students' Cultural Positioning in Cebu City Universities

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Abstract:

This study examines the cultural positioning and identity negotiation of provincial students who migrate to Cebu City for tertiary education. Anchored in Ferry-Meystre's cultural positioning framework and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), the research explores how students from rural areas navigate urban "Bisaya" culture, respond to linguistic hierarchies between urban Cebuano and provincial dialects, and manage pressures associated with academically competitive university environments. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, the study draws on data from semi-structured interviews and cultural mapping journals involving five first-year students from rural provinces outside Metro Cebu. The findings reveal that students initially adopt an ethnocentric Defense orientation, wherein provincial identity and dialect function as protective mechanisms against accent-shaming, social exclusion, and perceived urban superiority. During this phase, students often withdraw into co-provincial networks and familiar linguistic spaces to preserve emotional safety. As exposure to the urban environment increases, participants gradually transition toward Instrumentalization, strategically reframing their provincial background as a source of resilience, diligence, and academic credibility. This shift allows students to gain recognition within institutional spaces while maintaining selective cultural boundaries. The study further identifies lifestyle negotiation and consumption-based social expectations as persistent sites of identity tension, underscoring that cultural adaptation extends beyond language and academic performance. By foregrounding students' lived experiences, this research contributes to Philippine higher education scholarship by demonstrating that cultural integration is a negotiated and asymmetric process shaped by linguistic hierarchy and urban normativity. The findings highlight the need for institution-level interventions that validate provincial identities rather than positioning them as deficits requiring correction.

Keywords: Cultural positioning; Provincial students; Urban–rural migration; Linguistic hierarchy

Introduction:

Cebu City functions as a major educational and economic hub in the Visayas, attracting students from surrounding islands and provinces. Despite its reputation as a regional melting pot, social life in the city is shaped by a subtle yet persistent cultural and linguistic hierarchy between the Urbano (city-born) and the Probinsyano (provincial migrant). Although both groups share the Cebuano language, differences in accent, lifestyle, consumption practices, and social expectations often mark provincial students as culturally "other," producing an invisible boundary within university spaces.

Existing scholarship on Cebu's higher education landscape has largely focused on institutional performance, policy compliance, and graduate outcomes rather than students' lived cultural experiences. Studies on school culture and disciplinary norms in Cebu universities emphasize conformity, professionalism, and institutional expectations that implicitly favor urban norms (Pecson, Giok, &

Baclayon, 2024; Quiñal Jr., Sumicad, & Geraldizo-Pabriga, 2024). Tracer and institutional studies further highlight universities' role in producing competitive graduates for urban labor markets (Sumicad et al., 2024), yet they rarely examine how provincial students negotiate identity within these environments.

Research conducted outside urban centers suggests that provincial and rural identities remain socially marked in Philippine higher education. Presillas (2023) emphasizes that access to higher education in rural municipalities is often driven by aspirations for upward mobility, reinforcing migration toward urban universities.

Meanwhile, comparative studies on Filipino stereotypes reveal persistent perceptions tied to regional origin, particularly among Cebuano and Waray students, where accent and demeanor function as social cues for competence and belonging (Liwanag et al., 2021). These findings suggest that migration to urban universities involves not only academic adjustment but also cultural repositioning.

This study adapts Murielle Ferry-Meystre's (2025) framework on cultural positioning to examine how provincial students in Cebu City universities navigate urban academic and social spaces. Ferry-Meystre's model emphasizes how individuals strategically position their cultural identity in response to perceived inclusion or exclusion. When combined with the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), the framework allows for an analysis of how students move from defensive cultural stances toward more adaptive or instrumental forms of identity negotiation within high-pressure institutional contexts.

Focusing on tertiary students from remote islands and provinces enrolled in major Cebu City universities such as the University of the Visayas (UV), Cebu Normal University (CNU), and Cebu Technological University (CTU), this study investigates how provincial identity is initially experienced, defended, and later reconfigured. By foregrounding students' lived experiences, the research addresses a critical gap in Cebu-based higher education studies, offering insight into how linguistic hierarchy, institutional culture, and urban expectations shape the cultural positioning of provincial students in the city.

Literature Review:

Cebu City has long been recognized as a regional hub for higher education, economic activity, and cultural exchange in the Visayas. Studies examining educational institutions in Cebu often highlight their role in producing globally competitive graduates and maintaining institutional standards aligned with urban professional norms (Sumicad et al., 2024; Almerez & Gonzales, 2023).

However, this urban-centered framing tends to treat students as a homogeneous population, overlooking the diverse cultural backgrounds of those who migrate from rural provinces to pursue higher education. As a result, the cultural and identity-based challenges faced by provincial students within Cebu's universities remain underexplored.

Research on school culture and governance in Cebu emphasizes discipline, professionalism, and institutional coherence. Pecson, Giok, and Baclayon (2024) demonstrate how school culture is deliberately shaped through shared norms, expectations, and behavioral regulation, often reflecting dominant cultural values. Similarly, Quiñal Jr., Sumicad, and Geraldizo-Pabriga (2024) found high levels of compliance with university policies on appearance and discipline at the University of Cebu, suggesting that conformity to institutional norms is strongly encouraged. While such policies promote order and professionalism, they may also implicitly privilege urban cultural standards, placing provincial students at a disadvantage when their accents, dress, or behaviors diverge from these norms.

The movement of students from rural areas to urban centers is closely linked to broader issues of educational access and social mobility. Presillas (2023) argues that higher education institutions serve as critical instruments for community development in rural municipalities, yet limited local opportunities often compel students to seek education in urban centers like Cebu City. This migration is not merely geographical but cultural, requiring students to navigate unfamiliar social expectations and institutional environments. Despite acknowledging these structural dynamics, existing literature rarely examines how provincial students subjectively experience and interpret this transition within urban universities.

Studies on regional identity in the Philippines reveal that linguistic variation and regional origin significantly shape social perception. Liwanag et al. (2021) found that Cebuano and Waray students hold distinct stereotypes toward one another, with accent and language use serving as key markers of competence, personality, and social status.

These findings suggest that even within shared linguistic groups, subtle differences in speech can reinforce social hierarchies. For provincial students entering Cebu City universities, such stereotypes may heighten self-consciousness and contribute to defensive identity positioning, particularly in academically competitive and socially stratified environments.

Recent studies have begun to explore cultural diversity within specific academic programs, highlighting the varied backgrounds and experiences of Filipino students. Canullas et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of recognizing cultural diversity among hospitality and tourism students, noting that cultural misunderstanding can affect participation, confidence, and academic engagement. However, much of this work frames diversity as a pedagogical concern rather than an identity negotiation process. There remains limited qualitative inquiry into how students actively position their cultural identities in response to perceived inclusion, exclusion, or hierarchy within university spaces.

Beyond the classroom, urban educational environments are shaped by leadership practices, infrastructure, and broader socio-economic forces. Arcadio et al. (2025) highlight how school leadership and supervision practices in Cebu Province aim to align institutions with Sustainable Development Goal 4, emphasizing quality and inclusivity.

Meanwhile, studies on urban design and institutional spaces underscore how physical environments reflect and reinforce urban values and lifestyles (Caparroso et al., 2025). Research on Cebu's creative and economic sectors further illustrates how urban systems often prioritize adaptability and performance (Almaden et al., 2024). Yet, these perspectives rarely account for how provincial students emotionally and culturally experience these urbanized systems.

Taken together, existing literature provides valuable insights into Cebu's institutional culture, regional identity, and educational structures but leaves a critical gap in understanding the lived experiences of provincial students in urban universities. While prior studies document policies, stereotypes, and institutional outcomes, few examine how students internally negotiate identity, belonging, and cultural positioning over time.

This study addresses this gap by adopting a phenomenological approach grounded in Ferry-Meystre's cultural positioning framework and the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity. By foregrounding students' voices, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how provincial identity is defended, reconfigured, and instrumentalized within Cebu City's higher education landscape.

Methodology:

Research Design
This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to examine the lived experiences of provincial students studying in an urban university setting. Phenomenology is particularly suited to this inquiry as it seeks to uncover the essence of a shared experience, allowing for an in-depth exploration of how students perceive, interpret, and make meaning of their transition to Cebu City. Through this approach, the study captures experiences of cultural displacement, heritage-based pride, and adaptive stress that are not readily accessible through quantitative methods.

Participants and Setting
The participants consisted of five (5) first-year university students selected through purposive sampling. All participants originated from rural municipalities outside Metro Cebu and relocated to Cebu City specifically to pursue higher education. This selection criterion ensured that participants had recently undergone the cultural transition central to the study and were actively negotiating their identities within urban academic environments.

Data Collection
Data were collected using two qualitative instruments designed to elicit rich, reflective accounts of participants' experiences.

Narrative Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred local dialect to facilitate comfort and enable the expression of nuanced emotions, perceptions, and cultural meanings.

Cultural Mapping Journals: Participants maintained reflective journals in which they identified and described spaces in Cebu City where they felt most "provincial" (e.g., high-end malls) and places where they felt a sense of familiarity or belonging (e.g., Carbon Market). These journals served to spatially ground participants' cultural experiences within the urban environment.

Data Analysis
Interview transcripts and journal entries were analyzed using thematic analysis. Recurring patterns and meanings were identified and organized into themes that reflected participants' cultural positioning. These themes were then examined through the lens of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) to determine whether participants' experiences aligned with stages such as Denial, Defense, or Acceptance in relation to urban Cebuano culture. This analytic process enabled a structured yet interpretive understanding of students' evolving intercultural orientations.

Findings and Discussion:

The "Accent Shield" (Defense Positioning)
A central finding of the study is the emergence of what may be termed the "Accent Shield," a form of linguistic defense adopted by provincial students upon entry into Cebu City universities. Participants from Leyte (Waray-speaking) and Siquijor reported heightened self-awareness of their accents, which were often met with teasing, imitation, or subtle mockery by urban peers. These early encounters produced an immediate sense of vulnerability, prompting students to retreat into familiar linguistic spaces as a protective response against perceived judgment within the urban academic environment.

This defensive positioning aligns with the Defense stage of the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), wherein cultural difference is experienced as threatening rather than enriching.

Students responded by limiting social interaction to co-provincial peers and deliberately maintaining their home dialects in private spaces.

As one participant explained, “In our boarding house, we only speak our dialect. It is our way of staying safe from the city’s judgments.” Language, in this context, functioned not merely as communication but as a symbolic boundary separating the “safe” provincial self from the evaluative urban gaze.

The need for such defensive strategies is intensified by Cebu City’s urban structure and institutional environments. Caparroso et al. (2025) note that urban school spaces in Cebu are designed to reflect efficiency, modernity, and competitiveness—values closely associated with urban middle-class norms. For provincial students, these environments can amplify feelings of cultural displacement, as linguistic difference becomes more visible within classrooms, hallways, and social spaces that implicitly reward urban fluency and confidence.

Beyond language, the Accent Shield intersects with broader socio-economic and cultural barriers experienced by individuals navigating Cebu’s urban systems. Almaden, Ocampo, and Delantar (2024) demonstrate how economic and technological structures in Cebu privilege those already familiar with urban norms, marginalizing those from rural backgrounds. Within the university context, this structural imbalance reinforces the perception that provincial accents signal incompetence or lack of sophistication, prompting students to defensively reassert their provincial identity rather than risk assimilation and rejection.

The Accent Shield also echoes deeper historical and ideological patterns in Cebuano discourse. Mongaya’s (2019) analysis of Cebuano anti-imperialist writing highlights how regional identity has long functioned as a site of resistance against dominant power structures. In a similar vein, provincial students’ insistence on speaking their dialects can be read as a quiet form of cultural resistance—an assertion of dignity in the face of linguistic hierarchies that position urban Cebuano speech as superior or more legitimate.

While higher education institutions often promote inclusivity and multicultural integration, research suggests that linguistic accommodation remains uneven. Jingyi and De Dios (2025) argue that multicultural integration efforts in Philippine education frequently emphasize surface-level diversity while overlooking deeper linguistic and identity-based tensions. The experiences of the participants reveal that, in practice, provincial students are left to manage these tensions independently, relying on peer enclaves and dialect solidarity rather than institutional support to cope with accent-based marginalization.

Taken together, the Accent Shield represents an early but critical stage in provincial students’ cultural positioning within Cebu City universities. It reflects not a rejection of urban culture, but a temporary survival mechanism employed during initial exposure to linguistic judgment and social stratification. While this defensive stance provides emotional safety, it also limits broader social engagement, reinforcing cultural silos within the university. Understanding the Accent Shield as a patterned response rather than individual insecurity highlights the need for institutions to address linguistic hierarchy as a structural issue rather than a personal deficit.

2. Instrumentalizing the "Probinsyano" Work Ethic

As students moved beyond their initial period of cultural defensiveness, a notable shift emerged in how they positioned their provincial identity. Rather than concealing their background, participants began to instrumentalize it, reframing the “probinsyano” label as a marker of diligence, perseverance, and moral discipline. This transition marked a movement away from shame and withdrawal toward strategic pride, where cultural difference was no longer merely endured but actively leveraged within academic and social

interactions. Participants described consciously aligning themselves with the widely held stereotype of the hardworking provincial student, particularly in their relationships with professors.

Narratives of long travel distances to school, limited resources, and early exposure to labor were mobilized to signal resilience and commitment to learning. Within the DMIS framework, this reflects a gradual shift toward Acceptance, where cultural difference is recognized and used productively rather than defensively. Identity, in this phase, became a performative resource rather than a liability.

This instrumentalization resonates with findings on leadership and personality traits in Philippine educational contexts. Montejo (2018) highlights perseverance, discipline, and adaptability as valued characteristics in academic and professional leadership, traits frequently associated with rural upbringing. By emphasizing these qualities, provincial students positioned themselves as aligned with institutional ideals of responsibility and work ethic, effectively translating their background into symbolic academic capital.

The strategic use of identity also mirrors broader patterns in multicultural education, where individuals learn to navigate dominant systems by selectively highlighting culturally valued traits. Jingyi and De Dios (2025) observe that successful multicultural integration often depends on learners' ability to align their identities with institutional expectations rather than on structural accommodation alone. In this study, provincial students demonstrated such alignment by foregrounding industriousness and humility—values that resonated with faculty expectations—even as linguistic and cultural differences persisted. Cultural performance played a significant role in this process of instrumentalization.

Similar to how local traditions are curated and re-presented in cultural documentation efforts such as the Raka-ib of Linambay theatrical play of Carcar City (Dela Peña et al.), students selectively presented aspects of their provincial identity that were legible and valued within urban academic spaces. This selective visibility allowed them to retain cultural authenticity while minimizing exposure to stigma.

The transformation of provincial identity into an asset also reflects broader adaptive behaviors observed in urban Philippine contexts. Studies on urban consumption and behavior in Metro Cebu suggest that individuals adjust self-presentation to align with dominant expectations in order to access opportunities and social acceptance (Abella, Rabe, & Almaden, 2021). Within the university setting, this translated into students emphasizing effort, reliability, and gratitude—qualities reinforced by educational reforms and curricular expectations emphasizing performance and resilience (Descartin et al., 2023; Anfone & Galigao, 2024).

Instrumentalizing the "probinsyano" work ethic represents a critical turning point in students' cultural positioning. While this strategy enabled academic recognition and reduced marginalization, it also required continuous self-monitoring and narrative labor. Identity was not simply reclaimed but strategically curated to fit institutional norms, revealing both the agency of provincial students and the persistent asymmetry of cultural power within urban universities. This stage illustrates how adaptation, while empowering, remains constrained by the values of the dominant academic culture.

3. Negotiating the "Lifestyle Gap"

Beyond language and work ethic, participants identified urban consumption practices as one of the most persistent and emotionally taxing dimensions of their adjustment to Cebu City life. Students repeatedly described feeling pressured to participate in leisure activities associated with urban student culture—such as visiting cafés, co-working spaces, malls, and nightlife districts like IT Park—not because of personal interest but because these spaces functioned as informal sites of social bonding. Refusing or being unable

to participate often resulted in feelings of exclusion, prompting students to question whether belonging to the Cebuano student body required a fundamental transformation of their lifestyle.

This aligns with Abella, Rabe, and Almaden's (2021) findings on metropolitan Cebu residents' consumption behavior, which demonstrate how purchasing patterns and leisure choices operate as markers of modern urban identity. For provincial students with limited financial resources, these expectations rendered everyday social participation conditional, reinforcing the perception that urban belonging is mediated through consumption rather than shared cultural or academic values.

While participants initially framed their discomfort in economic terms—citing limited allowances or prioritization of basic needs—further reflection revealed that the lifestyle gap was cultural rather than purely financial. Even when students could occasionally afford urban leisure activities, many expressed a sense of alienation within these spaces. Cafés and malls were described as places where they felt hyper-visible, unsure of behavioral norms, and constantly self-monitoring their speech, attire, and demeanor.

This experience echoes Duavis's (2020) findings on social determinants of access in Cebu City, where urban spaces subtly privilege individuals already familiar with metropolitan norms. In this context, consumption spaces become cultural filters, separating those who instinctively "fit" from those who must consciously perform belonging. For provincial students, participation often felt less like leisure and more like cultural labor.

As students navigated this lifestyle gap, many reported a prolonged phase of identity questioning, asking whether adaptation required the abandonment of provincial values such as frugality, collectivism, and simplicity. This internal tension reflects what Narciso (2023) conceptualizes as a contact zone—a social space where unequal cultural systems intersect, producing negotiation rather than seamless integration.

Within these contact zones, provincial students did not passively absorb urban norms. Instead, they engaged in selective adaptation, constantly evaluating which practices were necessary for survival and which threatened their sense of self. This dynamic underscores that integration is not linear assimilation but an ongoing process of boundary maintenance and recalibration.

The lifestyle gap extended into academic culture, particularly in group work, study habits, and participation in extracurricular activities. Participants noted that urban peers often normalized studying in cafés or holding meetings in commercial spaces, practices that were unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable for provincial students accustomed to home-based or communal study environments.

This mirrors broader educational findings that learning environments are culturally situated rather than neutral. Fidele et al. (2019) argue that educational practices often implicitly assume middle-class urban norms, disadvantaging students from rural backgrounds. Similarly, Descartin et al. (2023) emphasize that curricular reforms emphasizing global competitiveness may unintentionally widen cultural gaps if contextual realities are not considered. For provincial students, academic success required not only intellectual effort but also social adaptation to urban learning cultures.

In response to these pressures, some participants actively preserved provincial leisure practices as a form of grounding and resistance. Instead of cafés, they preferred public markets, communal boarding house meals, or informal gatherings with co-provincial peers. These practices echo cultural preservation efforts documented in works such as Raka-ib of Linambay (Dela Peña et al.), where local traditions are maintained not as nostalgic artifacts but as living practices that sustain identity within changing environments.

This resistance was not overt or confrontational. Rather, it took the form of intentional non-participation, signaling that belonging does not require full compliance with urban consumption norms. Such strategies allowed students to retain cultural coherence even while navigating urban academic demands.

Multicultural Integration and Structural Asymmetry

The findings also resonate with broader discussions on multicultural integration in educational systems. Jingyi and De Dios (2025) argue that integration initiatives often emphasize individual adaptability while leaving dominant institutional cultures unchanged. The experiences of provincial students in Cebu City reflect this imbalance: adaptation was expected of them, while urban norms remained unquestioned.

This asymmetry parallels findings from Pamoso et al. (2025), who document how ethnic minority students across Southeast Asia develop coping strategies in environments where diversity is acknowledged rhetorically but unevenly supported in practice. Provincial students' navigation of the lifestyle gap thus represents not a failure to integrate, but a rational response to structural conditions that privilege urban cultural capital.

Lifestyle negotiation cannot be disentangled from language and symbolic power. Panaligan and Curran's (2022) concept of discounted legitimacy—where individuals are valued only when they conform to dominant norms—offers a useful parallel. Just as linguistic nativeness is commodified in global English teaching, urban lifestyles in Cebu function as markers of legitimacy within student culture.

Provincial students' reluctance to fully adopt these lifestyles reflects an awareness of this conditional acceptance. Instead of pursuing legitimacy through imitation alone, they sought alternative forms of validation through academic performance, work ethic, and selective social engagement.

The persistence of the lifestyle gap raises questions about how higher education curricula and institutional cultures shape students' sense of belonging. Comparative studies on curriculum and social stability suggest that educational systems play a critical role in mediating cultural integration (Anfone & Galigao, 2024). When curricula and co-curricular activities implicitly valorize urban experiences, provincial students are positioned as perpetual outsiders, regardless of academic success.

This reinforces the need for institutional approaches that recognize lifestyle diversity as a legitimate dimension of inclusion rather than an individual adjustment problem.

Within the DMIS framework, negotiating the lifestyle gap represents a liminal stage between Defense and Acceptance. Students neither fully rejected urban culture nor fully embraced it. Instead, they practiced conditional participation, engaging strategically while maintaining cultural boundaries. This mirrors what Abdurasul et al. (2025) describe as sustainable cultural preservation, where adaptation occurs without erasure of linguistic and cultural identity

Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that cultural positioning among provincial students in Cebu City universities is not a simple process of adjustment but a dynamic journey from Isolation (Defense) to Strategic Adaptation (Instrumentalization). Upon entering the urban academic environment, students often experience cultural shock manifested through accent-related stigma, unfamiliar lifestyle expectations, and perceived social hierarchies.

These initial encounters frequently result in psychological withdrawal, where students seek safety within co-provincial networks and familiar linguistic spaces. Over time, however, students actively reframe their provincial identity, transforming it from a perceived deficit into a strategic resource associated with resilience, diligence, and adaptability.

By employing a phenomenological approach, this study highlights that the most significant challenge faced by provincial students is not linguistic difference per se, but the unequal cultural valuation attached to urban norms. Students' adaptive strategies reveal both agency and constraint: while they successfully navigate academic expectations, this navigation often requires continuous self-monitoring and selective identity performance. These findings underscore the need to reconceptualize cultural integration in higher education as a shared institutional responsibility rather than an individual burden placed on provincial students.

Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed. First, universities in Cebu should implement linguistic sensitivity training for students, faculty, and staff to actively address accent-shaming and promote respect for the linguistic diversity of the Visayas and Mindanao.

Second, the institutional support and recognition of provincial student organizations should be strengthened, not merely as social groups but as protected spaces for cultural affirmation and identity negotiation. Finally, inclusive freshman orientation programs should incorporate structured sessions on urban transition that validate provincial experiences, acknowledge cultural challenges, and normalize diverse pathways to belonging, rather than focusing solely on assimilation into urban university culture.

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