

Friendship Across Cultures: Malaysian Youths in Online and Real-Life Contexts

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ABSTRACT

The application of digital communication tools has emerged as a significant catalyst in stimulating cross-cultural friendships. Therefore, this study analyses the use of communication tools in sustaining cross-cultural friendship patterns among Malaysian youths. The primary objective of this research is to examine and compare online and real-life cross-cultural friendship patterns. Utilizing a quantitative research design, an online questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to Malaysian university students selected through stratified random sampling based on ethnicity and university type. The collected data was analysed using descriptive analysis. The findings indicate that while digital platforms actively facilitate cross-cultural interactions and support systems, youths still demonstrate a strong overall preference for face-to-face interactions to sustain these friendships. Ultimately, this research provides further evidence that for Malaysian youths prefer real-life interactions when participating in cross-cultural friendships.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication Competence, Friendship Patterns, Cross-Cultural Interaction, Malaysian Youths

INTRODUCTION

The era of modernization has transformed how Malaysian youths use communication tools such as social media, to stimulate cross-cultural friendship patterns. Active social media usage allows international students to perceive greater social support from both their host and home countries, reducing feelings of homesickness and isolation (Muhammad Abuzar et al., 2024). However, despite the advantages of these digital platforms, cross-cultural friendships often face significant psychological adaptation challenges. Language barriers, perceived discrimination, and a lack of understanding regarding new social norms frequently hinder the development of these relationships (Gaitán-Aguilar et al., 2022). For example, Japanese youths studying in Australia may struggle to integrate due to cultural gaps and English proficiency barriers.

Despite these contributions, several important gaps remain in the existing literature. First, previous research such as Xin et al. (2025) and Wong and Liu (2024) has primarily examined digital communication as a mechanism for intercultural adaptation, social support, or online networking, while comparatively less attention has been given to understanding how digital communication influences the development and maintenance of cross-cultural friendships themselves. Second, existing studies (see for instance Scott et al., 2022; Yu & Leung, 2023) tend to investigate either online or face-to-face interactions independently, with limited research directly comparing how these two communication environments contribute to cross-cultural friendship patterns (Tang & Zhang, 2023). Consequently, it remains unclear whether digital communication merely facilitates intercultural contact or whether face-to-face interaction continues to play a more significant role in sustaining meaningful intercultural relationships. Finally, although Malaysia represents one of the world's most culturally diverse societies, empirical studies examining cross-cultural friendship patterns among Malaysian university students remain relatively limited. Given Malaysia's multicultural educational environment, understanding how students navigate friendships across different ethnic and cultural groups may provide valuable insights into intercultural communication within an increasingly digital society.

Thus, it is important to comprehend what can help or hinder cross-cultural friendships, especially when it comes to the types of digital communication tools youths use and differences in how friendships work online and in real life. In the same way, Malaysia implements its low varieties and shared cultural values to make the country unique and desirable which affects students' decisions to study abroad and encourages cross-cultural friendship patterns among youths (Wong & Liu, 2024). Hence, this study aims to examine the online and real-life cross-cultural friendship patterns among Malaysian youths.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural Communication Competence

As societies become increasingly multicultural and digitally connected, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries has become an essential competence rather than merely a desirable interpersonal skill. This ability is conceptualised as Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC), which refers to an individual's capacity to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds in ways that are both effective and appropriate to the interaction (Feng et al., 2025). ICC is described as increasingly necessary in globalisation as previous studies such as links ICC to better collaboration, reduced misunderstanding, and stronger well-being in diverse groups (Balakrishnan et al., 2022).

The development of ICC improves through multicultural exposure and practice. Existing evidence (see for instance Lu, 2025; Sarwari et al., 2024) consistently suggests that ICC develops through repeated intercultural exposure and meaningful interaction. Experiences such as studying or living in multicultural environments, participating in intercultural programmes, engaging in online exchanges, and maintaining direct or indirect contact with culturally diverse individuals have all been shown to strengthen intercultural competence Dalib et al. (2023) indicate ICC consists of several variables including sensation seeking, ethnocentrism, attitude towards other cultures and motivation to engage in intercultural communication. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of ICC.

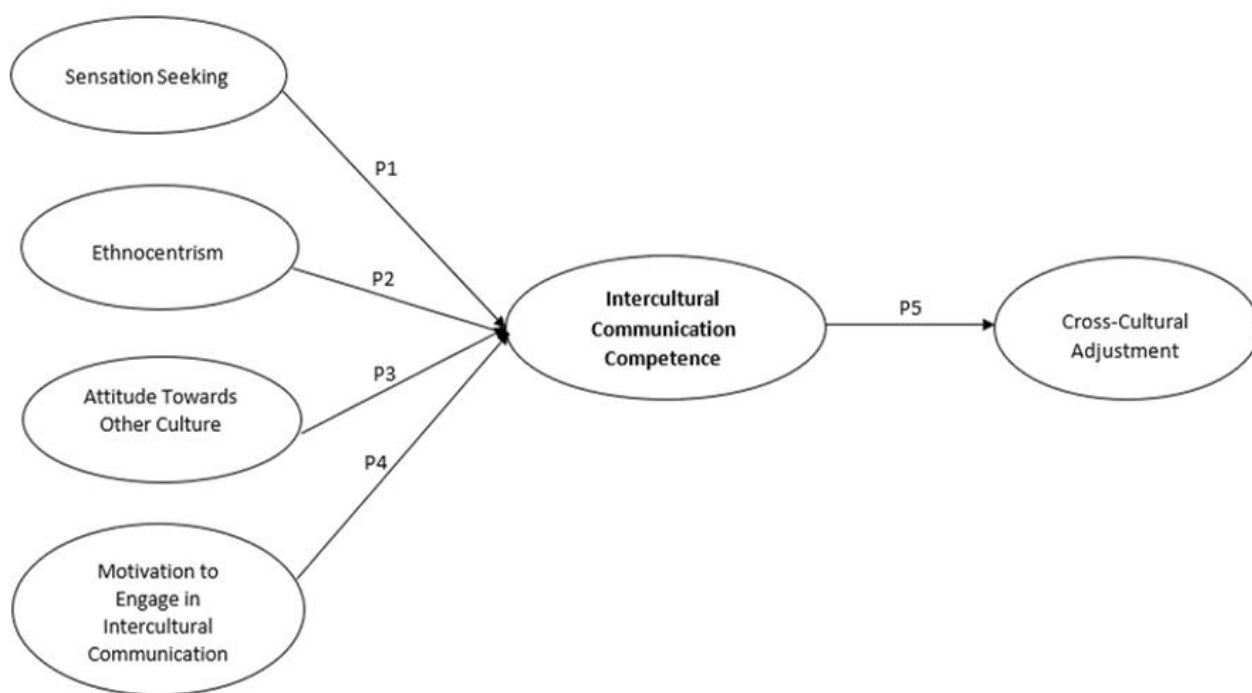


Figure 1 Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) framework (Dalib et al., 2023)

This framework is relevant to this research as ICC comprises communication competence and skills that require knowledge, motivation and adaptability in a new cultural environment to build relationships across cultural boundaries. The theory directly depicts how Malaysian youths among university students interact efficiently across different ethnic friends or cultural backgrounds through communication tools and resolve

cultural issues such as cultural norms and stereotypes, religions differences and language barriers. The role of communication tools such as social media and messaging applications acts as a platform in assisting Malaysian youths to adapt, navigate and develop shared understanding to achieve the cross-cultural friendship patterns. Overall, ICC associates well with the research focus on how Malaysian youths communicate and connect with people from other cultures and form new cross-cultural friends, making it the most appropriate framework to this study.

Friendship Patterns

Friendship is described as the state or condition of being friends and sustaining an affectionate connection. This implies that friends are regarded as individuals that we feel connected with once we feel comfortable (Krish & Idris, 2012). Friends and social media are interrelated as Miething et al. (2016) explained that friendships and social media function as vital forms of interpersonal assistance that support individuals in navigating the obstacles of adulthood and mitigating the sense of stress. This can be supported by Lane (2015) who identifies that the first-year college students appeared to adapt more successfully to college life such as roommates and classmates when support from their families switched from behaviours aligned with parental attachment to those aligned with social support. Therefore, maintaining good and healthy friendships can navigate the burden that teenagers carry along the journey as an adult through advice and moral support from friends. However, it is advisable to be mindful in choosing friends since youths are impressionable with peer pressure (Bhujbal & Verma, 2024). This is because adolescence is a critical phase in which young individuals can easily establish friendships while simultaneously participating in substance use activities, including cigarette smoking within their circle of friends (Lakon et al., 2014).

Friendships play a significant role in guiding positive pathways. According to Rubin (2004, as cited in Ciairano et al., 2007), friendships have multiple dimensions and fulfil diverse functions for individuals, including the validation of interests, aspirations and fears, as well as offering affection, support and emotional security. This is why certain youths are reluctant to speak up to their family members about their feelings or difficulties because they think that friends would help them get better mentally as they grow up (Narr et al., 2017). Besides, friendships also help to practise a healthy lifestyle by monitoring a friend struggling to lose weight which can correlate with an individual's dedication to sustaining a healthy weight (Lu et al., 2021). Friends may remind each other to stay consistent by training a healthy daily routine, preventing unhealthy dietary habits or getting involved in smoking or drug addicting. Thus, friendships function not only in emotional, but also physical health-support systems in developing ourselves for a better and productive person.

Fundamentally, friendship patterns describe the habitual methods through which individuals engage, develop, and sustain relationships. Building upon this foundational understanding, cross-cultural friendship patterns specifically examine how individuals maintain these connections across different cultural backgrounds. This requires navigating cultural shifts, overcoming stereotypes, and adapting to new languages and norms.

Cross-Cultural Friendship Patterns

Cross-cultural friendship patterns refer to how individuals shape and stay consistent with friendships although from different cultural backgrounds. There is also a connection to the concept of intercultural friendships since individuals are required to overcome remaining stereotypes and manage shifts in cultural values, languages and cultural norms (Sias et al., 2008). A study indicated that young people with limited cultural adaptability may benefit from having a friend to facilitate their experience, thereby eliminating some developmental barriers (Traylor & Caligiuri, 2019). Hu (2023) further defined cultural adaptation refers to an individual's ability to comprehend, accept, adapt and integrate into a different cultural situation. In the context of Traylor and Caligiuri (2019) research, teenagers from different cultural backgrounds may adapt to a new culture by sharing moments with friends which fosters cross-cultural friendship patterns.

Having cross-cultural friendships correspond with Malaysians since our country is a multi-ethnic society including Malay, Indian, Chinese, indigenous groups and many more. According to Yusof (2006, as cited in Ahmad et al., 2018), cross-cultural friendships are prevalent in Malaysian schools with students from many ethnic backgrounds. Ahmat et al. (2018) stated that the relationships between different ethnic groups in schools

can be managed in a favourable way to prevent prejudice against friends who come from different ethnic groups. This statement is relevant in Malaysia context since many youths are comfortable in having friends with different ethnicities such as Malay with Chinese and Indian in one circle. However, the application of close friendship maintenance behaviours would differ between cultures as cultural context influences the perception of relationships and the adherence of these behaviours to the social norms regulating the preservation of close relationships (Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen, 2018).

Moreover, MuthuRajan and Sultana (2024) found that most Malaysian university students establish close psychological and socially engaged relationships among Malaysian friends, despite the continual existence of language barriers and cultural differences. This suggests that cross-cultural friendship patterns can be achieved when individuals participate in open communication and shared experiences, indicating cultural and language obstacles do not automatically limit the establishment of significant interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, another study from Xiang (2023) reported that Chinese foreign students in Malaysia tend to be passive in classroom responses which is caused by a behaviour influenced by their cultural background. The researcher further mentioned that the students may have encountered criticism from friends or teachers in their country, resulting in reversed behaviour in Malaysian schools and a reluctance to engage actively. Therefore, the findings in both researchers portray positive effects of cross-cultural friendship patterns while also acknowledging the challenges that arise due to cultural norms.

Use of Digital Communication Tools in Cross-Cultural Friendships

While studies show that face-to-face interactions among different ethnic groups in Malaysian schools can foster cross-cultural friendships, digital tools increasingly serve as a vital bridge for teenagers to mingle across cultural divides. In Malaysia's collectivist culture, digital media heavily impacts social relationships, allowing students to form support networks and share educational experiences that strengthen intercultural bonding. Besides, digital communication tools act as a medium of translation in cross-cultural communication. Gupta et al. (2023) revealed that social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter incorporate automated machine translation to convert content into languages familiar to their users. These communication tools provide a good translation machine system to combat language barriers when interacting with individuals from different languages, reducing the risk of misinterpretation. Nevertheless, Weng et al. (2024) opposed this idea by stating that multilingual users have expressed concerns in the potential mistranslation of their postings, especially those with connotative implications, which could lead to misinterpretations and arguments. Furthermore, the employment of digital communication tools may raise problems in translation when dealing with idiomatic expressions. This can be proven from Saadany et al. (2021) who explained that Twitter encounters difficulties in translating Arabic idiomatic expressions, since the application often interprets them literally rather than comprehending the cultural nuances. Therefore, the drawbacks of communication tools in translation outweigh its advantages in cross-cultural communication context, making an urge to utilise them wisely.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The study comprised a sample of 160 public and private Malaysian university students, aged between 18 and 28 years old, who use communication tools to sustain cross-cultural friendships. Participants were selected using a stratified random sampling method, with ethnicity serving as the primary stratum to ensure culturally representative participation among the students.

Instrument

The primary instrument was an online questionnaire adapted from Butt (2020). The survey began with two screening questions to verify that participants were current Malaysian university students who had friends from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds. The questionnaire was then divided into five sections: Section 1 collected demographic information, including gender, age, ethnicity, university type, current level of study and type of academic programme. Section 2 assessed internet surfing habits, allowing multiple responses for

questions regarding hours spent online, accessibility, primary purpose, and daily activities. Section 3 measured the frequency of communication tool usage (e.g., WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Zoom) utilizing a 5-point interval scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). Sections 4 and 5 utilized a 5-point interval scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) to measure perceptions of online versus real-life cross-cultural friendships, respectively. The findings derived from these final two sections form the primary focus of this paper.

Data Collection Procedure

First, the questionnaire was developed by adapting existing research from Butt (2020). Two experts on intercultural communication then conducted face and content validity checks, and amendments were made based on their feedback to improve the instrument's clarity including refining the questionnaire wording for clarity. A pilot study was subsequently conducted as a preliminary trial before officially distributing the finalized questionnaire to the target sample of Malaysian university students.

Data Analysis

Raw data was extracted from the Google Form responses and subsequently cleaned to trace missing values and remove any outliers that could skew subsequent analyses. The data was coded and labelled to ensure all questionnaire items and demographic variables were precisely defined. Subsequently, the data was imported into SPSS. A descriptive analysis was performed first to determine frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, providing a comprehensive overview of respondent data and general trends.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Information

This section analyses the participants' experiences engaging in cross-cultural friendship patterns through online platforms, such as social media and instant messaging applications. Specifically, it examines how digital communication tools enhance and promote interaction with individuals from diverse ethnicities or cultures, thereby expanding opportunities for frequent engagement. A 5-point interval scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), was used for this subsection. Table 1 below demonstrates the mean and standard deviation values for each item based on participant responses.

The sample comprised a total of 160 participants, with a higher representation of female respondents (59.4%, $N = 95$) than male respondents (40.6%, $N = 65$). In terms of age, most participants were between 21 and 23 years old, representing the highest proportion at 46.9% ($N = 75$). This was followed by the 18–20 age group at 23.8% ($N = 38$). and the 24–26 age group at 18.1% ($N = 29$). The 27–29 age group recorded the lowest representation at just 11.3% ($N = 18$). Regarding ethnicity, Malay respondents constituted the largest segment of the population at 85.6% ($N = 137$), followed by Indigenous respondents at 8.1% ($N = 13$) and Chinese respondents at 4.4% ($N = 7$). Indian participants had the lowest representation at 1.9% ($N = 3$).

In terms of institution type, students from public universities participated at a significantly higher rate (78.1%, $N = 125$) than those from private universities (21.9%, $N = 35$). Analyses of educational levels showed that Bachelor's degree students had the highest involvement at 66.3% ($N = 106$), followed by Diploma students at 27.5% ($N = 44$). Master's students made up only 5.6% ($N = 9$) of the sample, while Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) respondents were minimal at 0.6% ($N = 1$).

Distribution across academic programs revealed that students in Social Sciences, Languages, and Communication programs contributed the most to the study at 26.9% ($N = 43$). Computer Science and Mathematics students followed closely at 23.1% ($N = 37$). The remaining participants were distributed across Business, Economy, and Marketing: 18.1% ($N = 29$), General Sciences: 12.5% ($N = 20$), Other academic programs: 8.1% ($N = 13$), Engineering: 7.5% ($N = 12$), and Law (the lowest representation): 3.8% ($N = 6$).

Table 1 Demographic Information

Variables	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	65	40.6
	Female	95	59.4
	Total	160	100
Age	18-20	38	23.8
	21-23	75	46.9
	24-26	29	18.1
	27-29	18	11.3
	Total	160	100
Ethnicity	Malay	137	85.6
	Chinese	7	4.4
	Indian	3	1.9
	Indigenous (Sabahan, Sarawakian, Orang Asli, etc)	13	8.1
	Total	160	100
University type	Public University	125	78.1
	Private University	35	21.9
	Total	160	100
Current level of study	Diploma	44	27.5
	Bachelor's	106	66.3
	Master	9	5.6
	Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D)	1	0.6
	Total	160	100
Type of academic programme	Social Science/Language/Communication	43	26.9
	Computer Science and Mathematics	37	23.1
	Business/Economy/Marketing	29	18.1
	General Science	20	12.5
	Law	6	3.8
	Engineering	12	7.5
	Others	13	8.1
	Total	160	100

Online Cross-Cultural Friendship Patterns

This section analyses the participants' experiences to engage in cross-cultural friendship patterns through online platforms such as social media and instant messaging applications. It examines how digital communication tools enhance and promote interaction with individuals from diverse ethnicities or cultures, thus expanding opportunities for frequent engagement. A 5-point interval scale is also used in this subsection, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 1 below demonstrates the mean and standard values in each of the items from the participants.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Online Cross-cultural Friendship Patterns

Code	Items	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
OCFP1	I talk on different topics more easily with my online friend(s) from other cultures.	3.99	0.872
OCFP2	I talk more freely with my online cross-cultural friend(s) about being in love.	3.61	1.110
OCFP3	I have more conflicts with my online cross-cultural friend(s).	2.81	1.370
OCFP4	I feel more connected with my online cross-cultural	3.71	0.988

	friend(s).		
OCFP5	I prefer to hang out more with online cross-cultural friend(s).	3.49	1.034
OCFP6	I rely on my online cross-cultural friend(s) for help.	3.27	1.149
OCFP7	I rely on my online cross-cultural friend(s) for advice.	3.38	1.080
OCFP8	I prefer my online cross-cultural friend(s) over real-life friend(s).	3.07	1.311
	Average	3.42	1.114

In addressing the study's objective to examine online cross-cultural friendship patterns among Malaysian youths, the findings in Table 2 reveal a moderate overall agreement ($M = 3.42$) that strongly supports foundational literature on digital relationship building. Specifically, the highest mean score, which indicates that youths easily discuss various topics with online friends from other cultures (OCFP1: $M = 3.99$), aligns with the assertion by Wong and Liu (2024) that digital platforms facilitate vital social networks and mutual understanding. This ease of communication directly reflects a positive "Attitude towards Other Cultures" within the ICC framework proposed by Dalib et al. (2023). Furthermore, although previous literature warned that digital platforms could increase arguments due to misinterpretations (Weng et al., 2024), Table 2 shows that online conflict is the lowest-scoring item (OCFP3: $M = 2.81$). This suggests that youths employ a cautious "think again before typing" strategy, effectively adapting Ciairano et al.'s (2007) conflict dimension of friendship into a protective, low-ethnocentrism approach to digital interactions. Finally, the data showing that participants actively rely on online cross-cultural friends for help (OCFP6: $M = 3.27$) and advice (OCFP7: $M = 3.38$) confirms Rubin (2004) and Miething et al.'s (2016) theories that these digital bonds successfully fulfill crucial interpersonal functions by offering emotional security and mitigating stress as young adults navigate a multicultural environment.

Real-Life Cross-Cultural Friendship Patterns

The following subsection after the online interactions is the real-life cross-cultural friendship patterns. This section will examine the respondents' experiences in engaging friends from other cultures or ethnicities via face-to-face interaction. Like the section in the online friendship patterns, this section also deploys a 5-point interval scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 3 below presents the findings from the participants.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for Real-life Cross-cultural Friendship Patterns

Code	Items	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation
RCFP1	I talk on different topics more easily with my real-life friend(s) from other cultures.	4.02	0.961
RCFP2	I talk more freely with my real-life cross-cultural friend(s) about being in love.	3.79	1.128
RCFP3	I have more conflicts with my real-life cross-cultural friend(s).	3.23	1.219
RCFP4	I feel more connected with my real-life cross-cultural friend(s).	3.91	0.921
RCFP5	I prefer to hangout more with my real-life cross-cultural friend(s).	3.90	1.035
RCFP6	I rely on my real-life cross-cultural friend(s) for help	3.73	1.062
RCFP7	I rely on my real-life cross-cultural friend(s) for advice.	3.75	1.076
RCFP8	I prefer my real-life cross-cultural friend(s) over online friend(s).	3.86	1.102
	Average	3.77	1.051

In fulfilling the study's objective to examine and compare online versus real-life cross-cultural friendship patterns among Malaysian youths, the findings in Table 3 reveal a strong overall preference for face-to-face interactions ($M = 3.77$), which quantitatively supports the assertion by Krish and Idris's (2016) that students

still prioritize physical proximity for relationships despite the prevalence of digital platforms. Specifically, the highest mean score, showing that youths easily converse on diverse topics in person (RCFP1: $M = 4.02$), directly validates the observations of Ahmad et al. (2018) and MuthuRajan and Sultana (2024) that the physical environment of Malaysian schools naturally fosters open communication and helps mitigate ethnic prejudice. Furthermore, the data indicating high feelings of connection (RCFP4: $M = 3.91$) and an active reliance on real-life friends for help and advice (RCFP6: $M = 3.73$; RCFP7: $M = 3.75$) strongly aligns with foundational literature by Rubin (2004) and Lane (2015), confirming that in-person friendships successfully fulfil crucial interpersonal functions like providing emotional security and aiding in college adaptation. Ultimately, the explicit preference for real-life over online cross-cultural friends (RCFP8: $M = 3.86$) strongly embodies the "Sensation Seeking" and "Motivation" dimensions of the ICC framework by Dalib et al. (2023), demonstrating that Malaysian youths actively seek out diverse physical environments, like university gatherings or group discussions, to experience new cultural dynamics and achieve more effective social integration.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the cross-cultural friendship patterns among Malaysian youths by comparing how these relationships are sustained through digital communication tools and face-to-face interactions. The findings reveal that digital platforms serve as a vital bridge for initiating and maintaining cross-cultural connections, face-to-face interactions remain the preferred mode for fostering deeper interpersonal support and emotional security. Importantly, both communication modes reinforce the principles of the ICC framework, demonstrating that successful cross-cultural friendships are underpinned by high motivation, positive attitudes towards cultural diversity, and low ethnocentrism. Whether utilising digital translation tools to overcome language barriers or engaging in multicultural settings such as university activities, Malaysian youths demonstrate a strong capacity to adapt to cultural differences and cultivate meaningful intercultural relationships. Collectively, these findings suggest that digital and face-to-face interactions function as complementary rather than competing modes of communication in sustaining cross-cultural friendships within an increasingly multicultural and digitally connected society.

Beyond these findings, this study makes several important contributions to the intercultural communication literature. First, it advances current understanding of cross-cultural friendship by demonstrating that digital communication should not be regarded as a replacement for face-to-face interaction but rather as a complementary mechanism that supports the development and maintenance of intercultural relationships. Second, the findings provide further empirical support for the continued relevance of the ICC framework in explaining how young adults navigate cultural diversity within both digitally mediated and physical communication environments. As digital communication becomes increasingly embedded in everyday social interactions, the study highlights that the core principles of intercultural competence remain essential for fostering meaningful cross-cultural relationships. Finally, the study offers practical implications for higher education institutions, educators, and policymakers seeking to promote intercultural engagement among university students. By integrating digital communication platforms with structured face-to-face intercultural activities, universities can create more inclusive learning environments that strengthen intercultural competence, reduce ethnic prejudice, and foster greater social cohesion among students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study focused exclusively on Malaysian university students, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other age groups, educational settings, and cultural contexts. Future research should examine whether similar patterns of cross-cultural friendship and communication emerge across different populations and national contexts. Second, the use of an online self-administered questionnaire may have introduced response bias, as participants' reported digital communication behaviours may not fully reflect their actual practices. Future studies could incorporate multiple sources of evidence, such as behavioural observations, digital communication records (where ethically appropriate), or peer assessments, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of intercultural interactions. Finally, while the quantitative design effectively identified general patterns and relationships, it was unable to capture the lived experiences, challenges, and motivations underlying cross-cultural friendships.

Future research employing qualitative or mixed-methods approaches would provide richer insights into how intercultural friendships are initiated, negotiated, and sustained across both digital and face-to-face contexts.

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