

Digital Communication Tools and Online Cross-Cultural Friendship Patterns among Malaysian Working Adults

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ABSTRACT

In the age of digital communication, internet platforms have become increasingly vital for maintaining cross-cultural connections. While numerous studies have explored intercultural interactions among youth, there has been insufficient emphasis on working adults who experience unique social dynamics. Grounded in the Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) theory, this research investigates how Malaysian working professionals utilize digital platforms to sustain their cross-cultural friendships. The primary objective is to examine the patterns of online and real-life cross-cultural friendships within this demographic. This study implemented a quantitative research methodology, employing stratified random sampling to ensure a fair representation of workers from both the public and commercial sectors. A structured online questionnaire was digitally distributed to Malaysian working adults aged 30 to 52. The collected data was analysed using SPSS, utilizing descriptive statistics to outline the prevailing trends. The findings seek to identify shared digital communication practices, preferred platforms, and the challenges or benefits associated with sustaining cross-cultural friendships. Ultimately, this research provides useful insights into how digital tools promote intercultural bonding, thereby closing a significant research gap by shifting the focus from student populations to the working demographic.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication Competence, friendship patterns, digital communication

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital communication technologies has transformed the way individuals establish and maintain interpersonal relationships. Beyond facilitating workplace communication, digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Instagram, and email have become integral to sustaining social relationships across geographical and cultural boundaries. These technologies have enabled individuals to remain connected despite physical distance, allowing them to exchange information, provide emotional support, and engage in meaningful interactions regardless of location (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009; Gupta et al., 2021). In multicultural societies such as Malaysia, where interactions among individuals from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds are commonplace, digital communication platforms have become increasingly important in facilitating intercultural interaction within both professional and personal contexts (Hashim et al., 2022; Husain et al., 2025).

Cross-cultural friendships play an important role in fostering intercultural understanding, mutual respect, and cultural learning. Such friendships expose individuals to diverse perspectives, encourage empathy, and strengthen communication across cultural boundaries (Pezirkianidis et al., 2023). However, maintaining these relationships can be particularly challenging for working adults. Unlike university students, who often interact frequently within socially dynamic environments, working adults typically balance professional responsibilities, family commitments, and limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction (Wrzus et al., 2013). Consequently, many rely on digital communication platforms to sustain friendships with individuals from different cultural backgrounds despite geographical distance and demanding work schedules.

Although digital communication platforms provide greater opportunities for intercultural interaction, maintaining meaningful online cross-cultural friendships requires more than regular communication. Differences in cultural values, communication styles, language use, and social norms may contribute to misunderstandings, particularly when online interactions lack the non-verbal cues available in face-to-face communication (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009; Boubekri & Saidi, 2022). As a result, individuals must demonstrate intercultural communication competence (ICC), including openness towards cultural diversity, empathy, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to adapt their communication behaviours appropriately (Chen & Starosta, 1996). In digitally mediated interactions, these competencies become increasingly important in promoting mutual understanding and sustaining long-term cross-cultural friendships.

Despite growing scholarly interest in digital communication and intercultural interaction, previous studies have predominantly focused on university students and young adults because these groups are among the most active users of digital communication platforms (Butt, 2020). While these studies have contributed valuable insights into online communication behaviours, considerably less attention has been given to Malaysian working adults, despite their increasing reliance on digital communication technologies within multicultural workplaces. Moreover, existing research has largely examined general intercultural communication or technology use, with relatively few studies exploring how digital communication platforms support the development and maintenance of online cross-cultural friendships among working adults. Given the distinct professional responsibilities, communication needs, and social environments experienced by this population, findings derived from student samples may not adequately reflect the experiences of working adults. This highlights the need to better understand how digital communication facilitates online cross-cultural friendships within this underexplored group.

Guided by the ICC framework, this study investigates the digital communication platforms used by Malaysian working adults and examines their perceptions towards the role of digital communication in sustaining online cross-cultural friendships. It further explores the patterns of these online friendships to provide a better understanding of how digital communication supports intercultural relationship maintenance among working adults. By shifting the focus from student populations to working professionals, this study contributes to the growing body of research on digital intercultural communication within multicultural workplace contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Communication Tools

Digital communication tools have transformed the way individuals establish and maintain interpersonal relationships by enabling communication across geographical and cultural boundaries. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Instagram, and email support both synchronous and asynchronous communication, allowing users to remain connected despite differences in location and time (Saleem et al., 2023). For working adults, these technologies are particularly valuable as they provide flexible communication channels that accommodate professional responsibilities while facilitating regular interaction with friends from diverse cultural backgrounds (Chen & Nakazawa, 2009).

Beyond facilitating communication, digital platforms support relationship maintenance by enabling users to exchange messages, voice notes, photographs, and video calls, thereby enriching online interactions and reducing the limitations associated with physical distance (Gupta et al., 2021). Previous studies (see for instance Chen & Nakazawa, 2009; Lam, 2023) have also shown that these communication tools encourage intercultural interaction by creating opportunities for cultural exchange, mutual understanding, and emotional support, making them important platforms for sustaining online cross-cultural friendships.

Given Malaysia's multicultural society and increasing reliance on digital communication, understanding how these technologies support online cross-cultural friendships among working adults is becoming increasingly important. While digital communication tools have been widely examined in organisational and educational contexts, relatively few studies have explored their role in sustaining online intercultural friendships among Malaysian working adults. This highlights the need for further research within this underexplored population.

The Use of Digital Communication Tools in Cross Cultural Friendship

Communication tools, which are digital, may assist in decreasing tensions and augment improved understanding in connections between cross-cultural individuals. According to Chen and Nakazawa (2009), these relationships are influenced by various linguistic, cultural and communicative aspects and this may complicate face-to-face relationship. According to Ab Rahman et. al (2026), such platforms as WhatsApp are asynchronous implies that individuals can consider a profound answer without the sense of urgency. Emoticons and video are also examples of digital signs that do not require the use of words, and they can assist people of various cultures to learn to understand each other more and prevent language issues (Concu & Raffo, 2024). According to Xudoyberdiyeva and Arshad (2025). it is easy to use these digital tools in connecting individuals with various backgrounds and overcome the cultural differences. The technologies allow individuals to exchange information and emotions, and in the long run, it helps build stronger bonds among individuals, despite their cultural background. These technologies apply to people with communication problems since they can combine translation technologies with visuals such as photos, emojis, and voice messages (Gupta et al., 2021). Through online communication, cross-cultural communication may be easily initiated and maintained in Malaysia where individuals in various races and cultures are forced to co-exist. In addition to the fact that these services allow people to stay connected as companies and communities grow more diverse, these services also allow people to learn more about other cultures, which is becoming increasingly necessary today.

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is the competency that allows people to approach persons of various cultures interestingly and being polite. However, Chen and Starosta (1996) provide a division of ICC into three elements, in which they include cognitive (knowledge of different cultures), affective (empathy and open-mindedness), and behavioural (ability to modify own communicating style). Individuals who understand how to conduct intercultural relations are more concerned, attentive and reverent about how they relate with others. This competency is a critical strength in cross-cultural situations because several differences between beliefs, norms, and communication patterns can lead to misunderstanding (Chen & Starosta, 1996). The study by Dalib et al. (2023) implies the application of the ICC theory, criticizing the available knowledge on the topic and creating an effective framework to determine the communication efficacy of migrant workers in Malaysia. This means that the theory can be applied to current studies because it assists in appreciating the significant elements that enhance good intercultural communication. In this study, the theory is firmly grounded as it can be used in different environments. One can study the role played by different characteristics like motivation and attitude and even outcomes like ability to adapt into a new culture on communication skills among any given population. In this research, the use of ICC will be important in determining how Malaysian working adults use internet sites to connect with individuals of other cultures. To interpret the tone, body language, and expressions specific to the culture, it is necessary to have ICC when communicating online through applications like WhatsApp, Zoom, or Instagram, primarily when it is not possible to see the facial expression. Online professed individuals will have to depend on their skills of communication and cultural sensitivity to enhance peace and understanding (Chen & Starosta, 1996). ICC has both theoretical and practical bases where the analyses of how various communications have been done.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Sampling

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive research design to examine the digital communication practices and online cross-cultural friendship patterns among Malaysian working adults. A total of 237 Malaysian working adults aged between 30 and 52 years participated in the study. This age range was selected because individuals within this stage of adulthood are typically engaged in full-time employment, actively use digital communication technologies, and maintain established social relationships despite increasing professional and family responsibilities (Wrzus et al., 2013). Participants were required to be currently employed and to have experience communicating with friends from different cultural backgrounds through digital communication platforms. By focusing on working adults rather than university students, this study addresses an underexplored population in the existing literature on digital intercultural communication.

Instrument

The study employed a structured questionnaire adapted from Butt (2020) and contextualised for Malaysian working adults. The questionnaire comprised two screening questions and five sections. The screening questions ensured that respondents were currently employed and had experience maintaining friendships with individuals from different cultural backgrounds through digital communication platforms.

The present study focused on three sections of the questionnaire. The first examined respondents' use of digital communication platforms, including the frequency with which they used applications such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Zoom, and email to communicate with cross-cultural friends. The second explored respondents' perceptions of digital communication in sustaining cross-cultural friendships, while the third examined their online cross-cultural friendship patterns. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with higher scores indicating stronger agreement with each statement.

Prior to the main data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed by the research supervisor and course lecturer to establish face and content validity. The adapted instrument was also pilot-tested to ensure the clarity and suitability of the questionnaire items before being administered to the study participants.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version XX. Descriptive statistics were employed to address the research objectives. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe respondents' preferred digital communication platforms, while means and standard deviations were calculated to examine respondents' perceptions towards digital communication in sustaining cross-cultural friendships and their online cross-cultural friendship patterns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study intends to examine the cross-cultural friendship patterns in the online context. The first research objective is to determine the preferred communication tools used among Malaysian working adults. The results are tabulated in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of Communication Tools

Communication Tools	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Whats App	237	1	5	3.71	1.165
Instagram (DMs)	237	1	5	3.95	1.156
iMessage	237	1	5	3.68	1.142
Facebook Messages	237	1	5	3.76	1.130
TikTok	237	1	5	3.87	1.250
Zoom/Google Meet/Webex/Microsoft Teams	237	1	5	3.69	1.151
E-mail	237	1	5		1.220

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for communication tool usage among the respondents. All seven communication tools recorded 237 valid responses with no missing data. Usage of communication tools was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = minimum, 5 = maximum), with results indicating relatively high levels of

active usage across all platforms. Instagram Direct Messages reported the highest usage ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.156$), closely followed by TikTok ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.250$) and email ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.220$). The remaining platforms also showed consistent, moderate-to-high usage: Facebook Messenger ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.130$), WhatsApp ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.165$), video conferencing tools like Zoom and Google Meet ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.151$), and iMessage ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.142$). Overall, these findings demonstrate that Malaysian working adults actively utilise a diverse range of digital tools to maintain cross-cultural friendships.

Table 1 shows that Malaysian working adults actively utilise a range of digital communication platforms to maintain their cross-cultural friendships. Instagram Direct Messages emerged as the most frequently used platform, followed by TikTok and email, while WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, iMessage, and video conferencing platforms also recorded relatively high levels of usage. The findings suggest that respondents do not rely on a single communication platform but instead use multiple digital tools depending on the purpose and context of their interactions. Social media applications such as Instagram and TikTok provide opportunities for informal and continuous engagement through multimedia content, whereas email and video conferencing platforms remain useful for more structured communication. This reflects the increasingly integrated nature of digital communication in both personal and professional contexts among working adults.

The findings support previous studies that describe digital communication platforms as important enablers of relationship maintenance across geographical boundaries. Chen and Nakazawa (2009) argue that digital technologies have transformed interpersonal communication by enabling individuals to remain socially connected regardless of physical distance, while Saleem et al. (2023) highlight the flexibility of digital communication in accommodating busy work schedules. For Malaysian working adults, the availability of multiple communication platforms appears to provide greater opportunities to maintain regular contact with friends from different cultural backgrounds despite competing professional and personal commitments.

The second research objective of this study is to gauge Malaysian working adults' perception on cross-cultural friendships in the online setting. The descriptive results are presented in Table 2 as follows:

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions on Cross-Cultural Friendships

Perception	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
I love to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds.	237	1	5	3.68	1.202
I have close friends from different ethnicities/cultures.	237	1	5	3.70	1.100
I find it is easier to maintain cross-cultural friendships by using communication tools.	237	1	5	3.94	1.157
I feel more comfortable expressing myself online than in person.	237	1	5	3.71	1.162
I prefer to learn about other cultures through virtual communications.	237	1	5	3.74	1.107
I think social media is significant to help me connecting with friends from different cultural backgrounds.	237	1	5	3.78	1.141
I utilise communication tools to create a bonding among intercultural friendship.	237	1	5	3.97	1.179

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of respondents' perceptions towards cross-cultural friendship patterns. All seven perception items recorded 237 valid responses, with values ranging from 1 to 5, indicating the full measurement scale was utilized. The mean scores reveal generally positive perceptions toward cross-cultural interaction and the role of digital communication. The highest mean was observed for the item 'I utilise communication tools to create a bonding among intercultural friendship patterns' ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.179$). This was followed closely by 'I find it is easier to maintain cross-cultural friendships by using communication tools' ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.157$) and 'I love to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds' ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.202$). The remaining items also demonstrated moderate to high levels of agreement. These included perceiving social media as significant in connecting with friends from different cultures ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.141$), preferring to learn about other cultures virtually ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 1.107$), feeling more comfortable expressing oneself online than in person ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.162$), and having close friends from different ethnicities ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.100$). Across all items, the standard deviation values indicate moderate variability in respondents' perceptions. Overall, these descriptive findings directly provide empirical evidence on online and real-life cross-cultural friendship patterns. They highlight the perceived importance of digital tools in sustaining these relationships.

The findings indicate that Malaysian working adults generally hold positive perceptions towards the use of digital communication in sustaining cross-cultural friendships. Respondents strongly agreed that communication tools help create stronger intercultural bonds and make it easier to maintain friendships across cultures. They also expressed positive attitudes towards interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds and recognised the importance of social media in strengthening these relationships. These findings suggest that respondents perceive digital communication not merely as a communication medium but as an important facilitator of intercultural interaction and relationship maintenance.

From the perspective of the ICC framework, these findings reflect the affective dimension of intercultural communication competence, particularly openness, empathy, and willingness to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds (Chen & Starosta, 1996). Respondents' willingness to interact with culturally diverse individuals and learn about other cultures through digital platforms suggests that communication technologies can create environments that encourage intercultural engagement. This finding is consistent with Kim (2020), who argues that digital communication platforms provide opportunities for continuous intercultural interaction and cultural learning despite geographical separation. Similarly, Gupta et al. (2021) note that digital communication tools support intercultural understanding by enabling users to communicate through multiple modes, including text, images, voice messages, and translation features.

The final objective of this paper is to examine the respondents' perceptions on online friendships. The results for this objective are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions on Online Friendships

Item	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
I love to talk on different topics more easily with my online cross-cultural friends.	237	1	5	3.95	1.176
I talk more freely with my online cross-cultural friends about being in love.	237	1	5	3.71	1.155
I feel more connected with my online cross-cultural friends.	237	1	5	3.72	1.128
I prefer to hangout more with online cross-cultural friends	237	1	5	3.65	1.109
I rely on my online cross-cultural friends for help.	237	1	5	3.62	1.175
I rely on my online cross-cultural friends for advice	237	1	5	3.86	1.212

I prefer my online cross-cultural friends over real-life friends.	237	1	5	3.71	1.143
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Table 3 reveals that Malaysian working adults find it exceptionally easy to engage in diverse and meaningful discussions through online platforms. The item 'I love to talk on different topics more easily with my online cross-cultural friends' recorded the highest mean score of 3.95, while relying on these friends for advice followed closely with a mean of 3.86. These positive responses strongly align with the literature regarding the benefits of digital communication tools in cross-cultural settings. As noted by Ab Rahman et. al (2023), asynchronous platforms like WhatsApp allow individuals to craft answers without the pressure or sense of urgency found in face-to-face interactions. This flexibility and reduced tension likely explain why working adults feel so comfortable discussing varied topics and seeking guidance from their cross-cultural online peers.

Furthermore, the results highlight a significant emotional depth and connection achieved within these digital relationships. Respondents reported feeling more connected with their online cross-cultural friends ($M = 3.72$), and they expressed a willingness to talk more freely about intimate subjects, such as being in love ($M = 3.71$). Interestingly, they even indicated a slight preference for their online cross-cultural friends over real-life friends ($M = 3.71$). This emotional closeness directly supports assertion by to Xudoyberdiyeva and Arshad (2025) that digital tools make it easy to overcome cultural differences, allowing individuals to exchange emotions and build stronger, long-lasting bonds. It also reflects the affective component of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)—specifically empathy and open-mindedness—which enables people to approach diverse cultures politely and build trust despite physical distance and cultural barriers.

Despite the strong conversational and emotional ties, the lowest mean scores were observed in areas requiring tangible support and physical presence. Relying on online cross-cultural friends for help recorded the lowest mean at 3.62, and preferring to hang out with them recorded a mean of 3.65. While these scores still lean positive, they suggest that the geographical barriers inherent in online cross-cultural friendships might slightly limit practical, hands-on assistance or physical hangouts. However, digital communication tools are fundamentally designed to overcome these geographical barriers to maintain operations and connections. Ultimately, these findings demonstrate that working adults aged 30 to 52 successfully leverage digital tools, and features like emoticons, visuals, and translation technologies, to sustain meaningful, supportive relationships beyond their immediate physical environments.

The findings demonstrate that Malaysian working adults generally experience positive online cross-cultural friendships. Respondents reported that they were able to discuss a wide range of topics comfortably with their online cross-cultural friends and frequently relied on these friends for advice. They also reported feeling emotionally connected and comfortable discussing personal matters, indicating that online communication platforms facilitate meaningful interpersonal relationships rather than merely superficial interactions. These findings suggest that digital communication has become an important medium through which working adults sustain emotional closeness despite geographical distance.

The findings also highlight the role of digital communication in supporting the development of intercultural relationships. According to Ab Rahman et al. (2023), asynchronous communication platforms such as WhatsApp allow users to communicate without the pressure of immediate responses, enabling them to formulate more thoughtful messages and minimise communication anxiety. This flexibility may encourage more open conversations and stronger interpersonal connections, particularly in cross-cultural contexts where language differences and cultural norms may otherwise create communication barriers. Furthermore, the findings support Xudoyberdiyeva and Arshad (2025), who suggest that digital communication platforms facilitate emotional exchange and relationship development by enabling users to share experiences across cultural boundaries. Viewed through the ICC framework, respondents' willingness to communicate openly and maintain emotional connections reflects important affective competencies, including empathy, openness, and respect for cultural diversity (Chen & Starosta, 1996).

Nevertheless, respondents reported comparatively lower agreement regarding relying on their online cross-cultural friends for practical help and preferring to spend time with them physically. Although these items recorded the lowest mean scores, the findings remain generally positive and suggest that online friendships

may function differently from friendships maintained through regular face-to-face interaction. Rather than replacing physical relationships, digital communication appears to complement them by providing emotional support, opportunities for intercultural learning, and continuous social interaction despite geographical separation. Consequently, digital communication platforms should be viewed as important spaces for sustaining online cross-cultural friendships among Malaysian working adults.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Malaysian working adults utilise digital communication platforms to sustain online cross-cultural friendships. Guided by the Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) framework, the findings demonstrate that digital communication platforms, particularly widely used applications such as WhatsApp and Zoom, provide important spaces for maintaining meaningful intercultural relationships despite geographical distance and demanding work commitments. Respondents reported positive perceptions towards digital communication and indicated that online platforms facilitate open communication, emotional connectedness, and the exchange of advice and personal experiences among friends from different cultural backgrounds.

The findings contribute to the growing body of research on digital intercultural communication by extending the focus beyond university students to Malaysian working adults, a population that has received comparatively less scholarly attention. The study also demonstrates the continued relevance of the ICC framework in digitally mediated interactions, highlighting how openness, empathy, and culturally appropriate communication remain essential for sustaining online cross-cultural friendships. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organisations and individuals can leverage digital communication platforms not only to support professional collaboration but also to foster intercultural understanding and strengthen social relationships within increasingly multicultural workplaces.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations. As the study relied on self-reported questionnaire data, participants' responses may have been influenced by personal perceptions, social desirability, or recall bias. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on Malaysian working adults aged between 30 and 52 years, limiting the generalisability of the findings to other age groups or cultural contexts. Future research could extend this work by examining other demographic groups, comparing different digital communication platforms, or adopting qualitative or mixed-method approaches to gain deeper insights into how online cross-cultural friendships are developed and maintained over time.

Overall, the study demonstrates that digital communication platforms have become an important medium through which Malaysian working adults establish and sustain online cross-cultural friendships. As workplaces continue to become increasingly multicultural and digitally connected, understanding how these platforms facilitate meaningful intercultural relationships remains an important area of communication research.

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