



## Digital Mediation and Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) : Trust-Building Amidst Structural Prejudice in the Three Southern Border Provinces of Thailand

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### Abstract

This paper reports the qualitative strand of a larger mixed-methods study on Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) among university students in Thailand's southernmost provinces—Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—an area characterized by multicultural diversity and long-standing socio-political tensions. The research aims to explore how students develop communication competencies that facilitate cross-cultural interaction and trust-building in a context shaped by structural prejudice and identity-based divisions. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with 30 university students from three major universities in the region and 10 experts in communication, civil society, and regional development. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the semi-structured interview data. The findings revealed that students' educational and sociocultural backgrounds significantly influence their intercultural attitudes and communication practices. Students from Islamic private schools (Pondok) often demonstrated strong cultural and religious identity, which initially led to communication anxiety in cross-group interactions. However, those with strong identity security tend to develop higher levels of intercultural competence over time. This study emphasized the critical role of social media in facilitating intercultural engagement through 'digital mediation,' allowing students to mitigate social distance via code-switching and symbolic digital cues.

**Keywords:** Digital Mediation, Intercultural Communication Competence, Trust-Building, Religious Identity, The Southernmost Provinces of Thailand



## Introduction

Thailand's southernmost provinces represent a complex multicultural landscape burdened by a persistent "Wall of Mistrust." This divide stems from "Structural Prejudice," where the distinct Patani Malay identity—rooted in the Yawi language and Islamic traditions—contrasts sharply with the state-promoted monocultural "Thainess." Historical inequities and ongoing conflicts since 2004 have cultivated deep-seated alienation, rendering cross-cultural relationships highly fragile. Against this backdrop, this study investigates Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) among university students. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with 40 key informants, the research explores how educational backgrounds, religious security, and digital mediation impact social cohesion, aiming to identify behavioral indicators of effective cross-cultural navigation and propose strategic frameworks for fostering sustainable peace

At the structural level, educational problems in the three southern border provinces of Thailand can be understood as a "Iceberg of Inequality" phenomenon, in which visible learning outcomes are only one part of a deeper inequality rooted in policy, language, and social context. Empirical evidence suggests that students in the area experience lower educational attainment than their peers in other parts of the country. For example, one study found that children in the three southern border provinces completed, on average, 0.88 fewer years of schooling than children in other southern provinces (ThaiPublica, 2022). In addition, learning achievement remains below the national average, particularly in literacy and numeracy (Isranews, 2012). A substantial proportion of primary students still struggle to read Thai fluently (Research Cafe, 2021). These disparities are closely linked to language policy, one of the hidden structural problems beneath the surface of the "iceberg of inequality". The school system is largely organized around Standard Thai, while many children in the region use Malay in everyday life. This creates a gap between home language and school language that can hinder access to learning. As a result, educational inequality in the region should be viewed not only as a matter of individual performance, but also as a structural issue shaped by linguistic, cultural, and institutional exclusion (The Active, 2025).

University students, as emerging citizens, find themselves at the center of this tension. They are tasked with navigating an information ecosystem saturated with hate speech and Information Operations (IO) designed to polarize groups through "us versus them" narratives. Consequently, the development of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) is no longer a peripheral soft skill but a critical peacebuilding strategy necessary for survival and social transformation. Therefore, this research was conducted to bridge this gap, guided by these three research questions as follows:



1. What is the level of intercultural communication competence among students in higher education institutions in Thailand's three southernmost border provinces?
2. What are the problems and barriers to intercultural communication among students, and among these factors, i.e., demographic and background differences, self-esteem and cultural identity maintenance, religious closeness, and existing intercultural communication competence. What factors are associated with the outcomes of intercultural communication competence regarding close social relationships?
3. What are the pathways for developing intercultural communication competence among students in higher education institutions in Thailand's three southernmost border provinces?

### Research Objectives

1. To investigate the intercultural communication competence of students in higher education institutions in Thailand's three southernmost border provinces.
2. To analyze the problems and barriers to intercultural communication among students, and to examine the factors associated with the outcomes of intercultural communication competence regarding close social relationships among students in higher education institutions in Thailand's three southernmost border provinces.
3. To propose pathways for the development of intercultural communication competence among students in higher education institutions in Thailand's three southernmost border provinces.

### Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks

To analyze the complexity of communication in the Deep South, the research integrates several multi-dimensional theoretical frameworks that address the interplay of attitude, behavior, and social structure. The primary framework utilized is the model proposed by Deardorff (2006), which conceptualizes ICC as a developmental process starting from internal attitudes and progressing to external behavioral outcomes. In this model, ICC begins with "Attitudes" such as respect and openness, which provide the foundation for acquiring "Knowledge and Skills" regarding cultural self-awareness and sociolinguistic sensitivity. These lead to "Internal Outcomes," including adaptability and empathy, which are finally manifested as "External Outcomes"—the actual effective and appropriate communication behavior in intercultural encounters.



The intercultural communication competence (ICC) scale in this study was developed by integrating Deardorff's conceptual framework with the behavioral measurement model established by Ruben (1976) and Chen (1992). This integrated framework encompasses seven key behavioral dimensions, including, the display of respect for others' cultural values, a non-judgmental interaction posture, an orientation to knowledge recognizing cultural boundaries, cognitive and emotional empathy, the enactment of relational roles to maintain interpersonal harmony, effective interaction management, and the tolerance of ambiguity to constructively navigate intercultural uncertainties

The Concepts of Digital Trust-Building Communication and Cyber-Sociology; the literature on digital trust-building and cyber-sociology should be incorporated to explain the notion of a “digital safe space.” Such a space is not created merely by the existence of an online platform; rather, it emerges through users' trust in the people, systems, norms, and communicative practices that structure digital interaction. From a digital trust perspective, trust in online environments depends on users' perceptions of competence, integrity, benevolence, privacy protection, transparency, and data security (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Saveljeva & Volkova., 2025). Cyber-sociological perspectives further suggest that online spaces are not detached from social reality, but are shaped by power relations, collective norms, identities, risks, and forms of social support (Oksanen, Celuch, Oksa, & Savolainen, 2024). In this sense, a digital safe space can be understood as a socially constructed environment in which individuals are able to express themselves, share experiences, seek support, and build relationships without fear of harassment, stigma, or privacy violation. Previous studies on digital safe spaces also indicated that such environments particularly significantly influenced the vulnerable groups, as they fostered emotional support, belonging, and connection with others who share similar experiences (Ruiz-Bravo, 2024). Therefore, the concept of a digital safe space should be framed as the outcome of trust-building communication, ethical platform design, community moderation, and supportive online interaction.

## Research Methods

This paper reports the qualitative strand of a larger sequential mixed-methods study examining intercultural communication competence among university students in higher education institutions in Thailand's three southern border provinces. A qualitative approach was adopted to explore participants' lived experiences in depth through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The research instrument was validated for content validity by a panel of three experts (IOC > 0.50).



A total of 40 key informants participated in this study, drawn from two groups, including 30 undergraduate students from Prince of Songkla University (Pattani Campus), Yala Rajabhat University, and Narathiwat Ratchanakharin University. Students from these three universities were selected as these universities are the main Higher Education institutions in this region. Additionally, 10 experts, including, academics, civil society leaders, and NGO practitioners, were interviewed to provide structural context insights. Prior the data collection, the research procedures and instruments were submitted to review and approve by the Ethical committee. Participants were informed of the research's objectives and asking for consent. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their privacy and ensure data confidentiality throughout the research process, with particular sensitivity to the complex socio-political context of Thailand's southernmost provinces.

Each interview lasted approximately 30–60 minutes and was audio-recorded following written informed consent obtained from all participants prior to data collection. All interview data were transcribed word-by-word. T

The transcribed interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, two researchers independently read and re-read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. Then, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful statements related to intercultural communication experiences. The researchers then group similar codes into broader categories to identify recurring themes. The themes were then reviewed and refined by involving the other research teams to ensure consistency with the dataset. Fifth, final themes were defined and named to reflect patterns of intercultural communication behaviors and perceived barriers. Finally, representative quotations were selected to support each theme. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking and peer debriefing were conducted throughout the analysis process.

## Results

Drawing on the qualitative strand of a larger mixed-methods study, this article exclusively presents the qualitative research findings. The participants were 43.33 % male students 56.67 % female students. 73.33 % were Muslim, 26.67 % were Buddhist Most of them graduated from Private Islamic School (Pondok) 73.33 % (N = 30), 26.67 completed high school from General Secular Schools and 20 % from Cross-Cultural /Interfaith Families. The majority identified themselves as Malay Muslim, accounting for 43.33 % of the total group. This was followed by Thai Muslims at 30 % and Buddhist at 23.33 %, while Thai Chinese represented the smallest segment at 3.33 %

Based on the thematic analysis, this study found the following insights:

### 1. Intercultural Communication Competence among Undergraduate



## Students

### 1.1 Behaviors Indicating Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

Based on the analysis of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) components by Ruben (1976) and Chen (1992), students with high intercultural communication competence exhibit the following concrete behaviors

1) Display of Respect: The findings reveal that respect and acceptance of diversity are primarily manifested through polite discourse and behavioral accommodation of others' religious boundaries. Selecting Halal dining venues has emerged as a fundamental norm for multicultural coexistence on campus. As Ramil, a Malay-Muslim student, noted, the core skill involves "honoring personal and religious boundaries," while Wittaya, a Thai-Chinese student, demonstrated respect by waiting for Muslim peers to pray and Christian friends to say grace before shared meals.

2) Interaction Posture: This dimension is characterized by non-judgmental communication and the capacity to respond to identity-based inquiries or structural prejudices without defensiveness. Haris (Thai-Muslim) explained his approach of using reason to clarify cross-cultural misunderstandings, though he strategically disengages if the counterpart remains unreceptive. Conversely, Fareeda (Malay-Muslim) described adopting a non-confrontational stance—such as simply smiling—when faced with intrusive questions regarding her Hijab, avoiding unnecessary escalation.

3) Orientation to Knowledge: Students with high Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) proactively exchange "Cultural Capital," including the local Yawi dialect, and seek to understand the rituals of other faiths to bridge communication gaps. Kanda (Thai-Buddhist) shared her experience of exchanging the 'Salam' greeting to foster friendship and inclusion across religious lines. Similarly, Naeem (Thai-Muslim) demonstrated this orientation by visiting Buddhist temples during cultural exchange programs to appreciate the architecture without participating in religious worship.

4) Empathy: Empathy essentially requires individuals to project themselves into another's experience, particularly concerning religious obligations and linguistic habits. Somporn (Thai-Buddhist) articulated an understanding that his peers' use of Yawi is a deeply ingrained habit rather than an intentional act of linguistic exclusion. High-ICC students demonstrate profound empathy; for instance, Kanda (Thai-Buddhist) frequently waits inside the prayer room while her Muslim friends perform their religious duties, moving beyond mere tolerance to deep intercultural understanding.

5) Relational Roles Behavior: This behavior frequently manifests as "Crisis Empathy," where shared human vulnerability transcends religious "symbolic boundaries". Ticha (Thai-Buddhist) recounted an instance where a male Muslim peer took her to the hospital at night, reasoning that the biological imperative of human care ("a friend is



dying") overrides religious restrictions on cross-gender physical contact. Additionally, collaborative academic tasks, such as preparing the traditional *Wai Kru* tray, are managed by assigning non-religious roles to Muslim students, thereby maintaining intergroup harmony.

6) Interaction Management: High-ICC students exhibit positive attitudes toward inquiries about their faith and maintain dialogue despite prevailing stereotypes. Ticha (Thai-Buddhist) expressed appreciation when her Muslim peers inquired about her temple visits, interpreting these questions as genuine care and a proactive desire to engage with her cultural background.

7) Tolerance of Ambiguity: High-ICC individuals adeptly navigate ambiguous intercultural signals without reacting emotionally or withdrawing socially. For example, when hearing peers converse in Yawi and suspecting they might be the subject of gossip, these students practice the tolerance of ambiguity by ignoring the perceived gossip or waiting to politely seek clarification. Furthermore, humor is frequently employed as a strategic mechanism to diffuse tension arising from linguistic uncertainties.

## 1.2 The Use of Digital Media as a Mediating Space for Students' "Digital Intercultural Communication"

An intriguing finding from this study is the students' adaptive behavior in cross-cultural communication via social media, which can be summarized into three key aspects:

1) Platform Selection Aligned with Geographic and Cultural Preferences  
Students adapt by assessing the cultural or regional background of their interlocutors and subsequently selecting applications that align with the preferences of those specific groups. For instance, Western demographics favor certain applications, whereas Asian or Muslim populations prefer others. Additionally, they utilize global applications to open new cross-border communication spaces.

*"I communicate with friends from diverse cultures primarily through online media. Westerners tend to use Snapchat and Instagram, while Muslims and people in Asia mostly use Facebook."* (Wittaya, Thai-Chinese student)

*"I use the Azar app to talk with people worldwide; you can add friends via email."* (Abdul, Malay-Muslim student)

2) Compartmentalization of Online Spaces Based on Usage Objectives  
Students clearly divide their communication spaces according to the nature of the content, strictly distinguishing between personal interactions and work-related tasks. For example, group work is typically conducted on platforms that emphasize text-based communication over emotional expression. Furthermore, some students exhibit behaviors of limiting their social media screen time to avoid excessive usage.



"In LINE, we mostly discuss group work, so we rarely use emojis and communicate more through text." (Fareeda, Malay-Muslim student)

"With school friends, I talk via chat. I don't really use Facebook or social media. My screen time on the phone is only about 5-10 minutes a day just to follow the news." (Haris, Thai-Muslim student)

### 3) Strategies for Managing Language Barriers and Utilizing Digital Cues

In online interactions, students utilize emojis and stickers as crucial tools to express emotions and alleviate the rigidity or tension of text-based messages. To navigate linguistic differences (such as typing in regional dialects), they employ direct inquiry to verify comprehension and opt for intermediary languages, such as Central Thai or Central Malay.

- Example of Utilizing Digital Non-verbal Cues: *"My methods include chatting, video calling, voice calling, and using comments to express feelings. For example, if someone tells a joke, we send an emoji."* (Wittaya, Thai-Chinese student)

- Examples of Managing Language Barriers: *"I have a friend in LINE who can speak the official [Central] language, but when chatting, they use the spoken Southern dialect. Whenever I don't understand a word, I try to ask directly what it means, and they will explain it."* (Fareeda, Malay-Muslim student) *"I talk about general topics, like love and studies. For example, I have video calls with Malaysians as well. I can use Central Malay."* (Abdul, Malay-Muslim student)

## 2. Barriers to Intercultural Competence: Structural Prejudice and Security

The barriers to intercultural communication among students in Thailand's three southernmost border provinces do not stem solely from linguistic differences; rather, they are compounded by complex structural and psychological dimensions. These can be summarized into three key issues as follows

### 1) The Impact of Security Measures and Information Operations (IO)

The state surveillance environment in the Deep South fosters a culture of systemic distrust, inducing a "Communication Freeze" where students self-censor out of fear that cross-cultural interactions might be misinterpreted as security threats.

Supporting Quote: "State officials tried to contact me and invite me for a meal... I think they wanted to offer financial support in exchange for me acting as an informant about campus activities," and "They asked for my student ID... and took a photo of my face with my ID card, which I disliked... My concern is that my information could be used to blackmail or discredit me, linking me to the unrest." (Naeem, Thai-Muslim student).



## 2) Majority Ethnocentrism and Cultural Erasure

The presence of a Malay-Muslim majority fosters an underlying assumption that their norms should serve as the institutional default, marginalizing the traditions of minority groups. Consequently, Thai-Buddhist students experience a profound fear of "cultural erasure" within what they perceive as an increasingly monocultural space.

Supporting Quote: "Currently, very few activities remain for Thai-Buddhist students—mostly just the Wai Kru (Teacher Appreciation) ceremony. Other activities have gradually disappeared, to the point where it feels like it is becoming an Islamic university... We feel like we are being assimilated." (Ticha, Thai-Buddhist student).

## 3) Language, Power, and Symbolic Boundaries

While the Yawi (Local Malay) dialect preserves cultural identity, it inadvertently creates "symbolic boundaries" that exclude non-speakers from shared communicative spaces. Conversely, Central Thai functions as a structural power, highlighting inequalities in "linguistic capital" that leave some students feeling disempowered.

Supporting Quotes: "When we converse, my friends often use the Malay language, forgetting that I am right there. I feel devalued... sometimes they chat and have fun, and I feel completely overlooked." (Suda, Thai-Buddhist student).

## 4) Digital Vulnerabilities and the Deficit in Media Literacy

Students face significant online barriers, including religious hate speech, cyberbullying, and the weaponization of Information Operations (IO) against LGBTQ+ individuals. These challenges are further exacerbated by students being trapped in digital "echo chambers," restricting their engagement to solely like-minded peers.

# 3. Concise Guidelines for Developing Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)

## 1. Strengthening Identity Security

A profound understanding of one's religion builds "identity security," empowering students to be open to differences without feeling threatened. Development should shift from viewing differences as an obstacle to recognizing them as valuable "cultural capital"

## 2. Utilizing Online Spaces as Digital Safe Zones

Using social media and dating apps (such as Tinder and Omi) significantly reduces anxiety and social distance when interacting with people of different faiths. Additionally, using digital non-verbal cues like emojis and comments serves as a gentle bridge to build cross-cultural friendships and soften rigid communication.

## 3. Organizing Multicultural Camps as Shared Neutral Spaces

Camps must be designed as genuine "shared neutral spaces" where individuals from different backgrounds become "welcomed guests". The goal is not cultural



assimilation, but peaceful coexistence with dignity, which helps students open their minds, reduce fear, and become aware of their own biases.

#### 4. Developing ICC Skills and Multilingual Competence

Core ICC skills require cultural knowledge, deep listening, and sensitive language use. Furthermore, promoting multilingual competence—such as Muslim students speaking clear Thai and Thai-Buddhist students speaking Malay—boosts confidence and reduces power imbalances. Using Central Thai in shared activities also increases accessibility for Thai-Buddhist students and reduces mutual mistrust.

#### 5. Fostering Context-Sensitive Policies and Civil Society Support

State policies must be designed with a deep understanding of the local context to reduce mistrust between the state and the community. Concurrently, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) must act as intermediaries to support cross-cultural learning, filling the structural gaps that educational institutions cannot fully cover.

### Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significance of "Digital Safe Spaces" as a primary mechanism driving intercultural competence and serving as a starting point for peacebuilding in structurally conflicted areas like the three southernmost provinces of Thailand. This discovery provides novel contributions to both academia and society, which can be discussed as follows:

1. Transcending the "Wall of Mistrust" through Digital Liminal Spaces In protracted conflict contexts, online platforms function as "liminal spaces" that help dismantle prejudice more effectively than forced face-to-face encounters, which can trigger stress and resistance. Particularly for students from monocultural educational backgrounds, such as Islamic private schools (Pondoks), digital safe spaces allow them to gradually initiate out-group communication while safely managing their emotional risks, establishing a crucial foundation for grassroots peacebuilding. This is aligned with Ruiz-Bravo (2024) proposed that digital safe spaces enable individuals to express themselves and foster cross-group relationships without the fear of harassment or stigma. These spaces, resulting from ethical platform design and supportive interactions, serve as a bridge to connect differences and establish a foundation for sustainable peacebuilding.

2. Expanding Theoretical Boundaries to "Digital Intercultural Competence" Expanding upon Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory, this study demonstrates that modern students apply "digital strategies" to navigate linguistic and cultural barriers. They strategically select platforms based on their counterparts' communication styles (e.g., Snapchat, Facebook, Azar, or Tinder) and utilize non-verbal digital cues, such as emojis and stickers, to express friendliness and de-escalate tensions



during linguistic misunderstandings. The strategic selection of diverse platforms aligns with the concept of Digital Trust by Saveljeva and Volkova (2025). This concept asserts that trust in online environments does not rely on technology alone but is fundamentally rooted in users' perceptions of integrity, privacy protection, and transparency within those digital spaces.

3. Paradigm Shift: From "Spaces of Conflict" to "Spaces for Positive Peace", this creates a challenging the pessimistic view of social media as merely a catalyst for hate speech and polarizing echo chambers. This research provides evidence to the contrary. When higher education institutions establish socialization mechanisms and foster positive attitudes through curricula—such as mandatory General Education courses on peaceful coexistence—digital spaces are transformed from mere transmission "tools" into intentionally designed "social environments" that facilitate diversity acceptance and tangible positive peace. The view that social media is a catalyst for hatred often perceives technology in isolation from its social context. However, research by Oksanen, Celuch, Oksa, and Savolainen (2024) highlights that online spaces are not detached from social reality but are instead shaped by power relations and collective norms

. Consequently, when educational institutions implement socialization mechanisms through curricula focused on peaceful coexistence, these areas are transformed from mere data transmission tools into "digital liminal spaces." These environments foster the trust necessary for students to express themselves and build relationships without the fear of harassment or stigma.

This study advances the fields of intercultural communication and peacebuilding through three highly interconnected contributions. First, by expanding Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) frameworks into conflict zones, it introduces the 'Paradox of Identity Security,' demonstrating that a strong religious identity actually fosters the psychological stability necessary to embrace diversity, rather than causing ethnocentrism. Building upon this foundation, the research conceptualizes 'Digital Safe Spaces,' highlighting how digital platforms serve as novel buffers to de-escalate cultural tensions and cultivate 'Smart Social Trust' at the grassroots level. Ultimately, these insights converge to elevate ICC from a mere soft skill to a crucial micro-mechanism for sustainable peacebuilding, thereby providing actionable guidelines for universities and policymakers to foster pluralistic coexistence.



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