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## Exploring an Integrated Conceptual Framework as an Interpretive Framework for Intercultural Communication Research

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes an interpretive framework that is based on an integrated conceptual framework for intercultural communication as the focal point to understand the interconnectivity between social categories and intercultural interactions. Intercultural communication is communication between individuals who are culturally distinct. While a wide range of intercultural communication studies can be found in various literatures, none has offered an integrated conceptual framework to study intercultural interactions in a Malaysian context. There is a gap on an interpretive approach as a framework to support its data analysis and meaningful claims, particularly in multicultural and multilingual Malaysia. Thus, this paper offers an integrated conceptual framework based on intercultural communication, language and intercultural communication, social identity theory, and identity and interaction, to address face-to-face interactions between culturally diverse individuals. Besides adding on to the body of knowledge in intercultural communication, this paper assumes an impetus for approaching interdisciplinary future research in various intercultural interaction settings.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, culture, identity, social categories, interactions

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### Introduction

Intercultural Communication (IC) is an emergent discipline, drawing from interdisciplinary fields of linguistics, sociology, psychology, and anthropology. With communication as the inherent discipline underlying it, IC can explore and investigate linguistic aspects and intercultural perspectives within the nexus of communication, language, and culture. This is evident in the works of scholars such as Bennett (1998), Gudykunst and Kim (1997), Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005), Holliday (1999, 2010), Zhu (2011), Martin and Nakayama (2013, 2014), Nair-Venugopal (2003, 2009, 2015), Piller (2011, 2012) and many others.

IC occurs when individuals from different cultural groups and contexts negotiate shared meanings in interaction (Gudykunst, 1998; Hall, 2005; Jandt, 2018) and during such interactions, social categories such as ethnicity, religion, gender, etc. become salient. Our beliefs, norms, values, and attitudes shape these identities during intercultural interactions. Irrespective of our consciousness in evoking these social categories, they are intrinsic during our communication, especially with “strangers” (Harman, 1988). When individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds interact, they are in fact interacting with “strangers” that expose them to a relatively high degrees of anxiety (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997) with

each other. These encounters frequently expose intercultural interactions to the possibility of misunderstandings, arguments, altercations, and even serious conflicts.

### **Fundamentals of Research in IC**

The research field of IC is emergent, multifaceted, and interconnected. The traditions of conducting and understanding quantitative or qualitative empirical research on IC is complex due to its interdisciplinary nature. Moreover, the emic or etic perspectives also influence the way researchers construct and re-construct their views of IC. Also known as the insider-outsider binary made popular by Kenneth Pike and Marvin Harris (Headland, 1990), these perspectives assume culture as a phenomenon differently. The emic perspective requires the researcher to be culturally immersed in the specific cultural system whereas the etic perspective sees a cultural system as mainly universal and can be cross-culturally compared. Instead of seeing them as two different analytical perspectives on IC, Otten and Geppert (2009) suggest accepting both emic and etic nature as complementary.

In studying IC issues, there are three main methodological perspectives, namely the social scientific, interpretive, and critical (Oetzel et al., 2021; Ting-Toomey, 2010). First, the social scientific approach is based on psychology and sociology and relies on quantitative methods. This approach sees culture as a predictable variable and how it influences communication. Second, the interpretive approach is based on sociolinguistics and relies on qualitative methods derived from anthropology and linguistics. It sees interaction as a meaningful process where culture is created and discursively negotiated through communication. Third, the critical approach is based on various fields of study and sees reality as subjective (Flammia & Sadri, 2011). It focuses on analysing the context of communication such as social, economic, and political structures where the notion of power in intercultural encounters is imperative.

A deeper understanding of the three methodological perspectives above is to relate them to the ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions (Oetzel et al., 2021). Ontology is the study of what exists as our reality, while Epistemology looks at how we use our knowledge on a certain phenomenon and how it is studied. Axiology explores the values that guide our research design (Oetzel et al., 2021) and these values can be based on the four major research philosophy of Positivism, Realism, Interpretivism, and Pragmatism (Creswell, 2009; Newman, 2011; Saunders et al., 2009). Hence, the ways we think about social reality interconnects the research in IC.

### **The Concepts of Culture, Communication, IC, and Identity**

#### ***Culture***

Naturally, to understand IC is to first understand the interconnectivity of the concepts of culture and communication. Belonging exclusively to the field of anthropology in the 50s, culture as a concept today has evolved from its restrictive essentialist stance. Despite labelling culture as “a very muddled” concept, Hall (1959, p. 44) is certain that culture has “long stood for the way of life of a people, for the sum of their learned behaviour patterns, attitudes, and material things”. This constitutes a pragmatic concept of culture (Moon, 2013; Shuter, 2008) as it is a goal-oriented approach to function in a community that includes the way we think, do, and say things.

Essentialist in approach, the Hofstede Project in the 80s studied culture on a global scale. Defining culture as “the software of the mind”, Hofstede (1991, p. 5) argues that culture is the “collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”. His five dimensions of collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and long term versus short term orientation have been used by many researchers to study culture. However, Hofstede’s association of ‘culture’ to ‘nation’ as a universalistic notion (McSweeney, 2002; Signorini et al., 2009), has drawn flak from various critiques for not considering the depth and diversity of national practices.

Holliday (1999) marks a distinction between two models of culture: ‘small culture’ and ‘large culture’. Large culture refers to the essentialist, culturist, national level understanding of culture, while small culture refers to the non-essentialist, non-culturist smaller social groupings at a community level.

Holliday stresses that the small culture approach is more appropriate for a multi-cultural society with intercultural complexity. He argues against a reductionist perception where large culture encourages stereotypes and sustains the 'us versus them' stance.

Research on culture that employs interpretive theories such as phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, social constructivism, and ethnomethodology would not regard culture as fixed to territory, nation, ethnicity, or language but culture as a social construct that perpetuates meaning making of individual social actors (Otten & Geppert, 2009). This resonates with the interpretive mode as the centrepiece of cultural discourse analysis (Carbaugh, 2007), giving rise to the conceptual notion of 'doing culture' rather than 'being culture' in IC. The being culture perspective takes on the fact that individuals come from different cultures and is regarded as an a priori condition for interpreting social interaction and behaviour, whereas the doing culture perspective embraces culture as a dynamic process which individuals make aspects of their multiple and shifting identities relevant.

Kramsch (1998) believes that culture involves what people think, do, and create as a shared ways of doing things. Thus, as a way of life, the ways we dress, eat, or speak is also culture. This means culture goes beyond a static set of norms and values, within or for a specific group or nation state (Kramsch, 1998).

### ***Communication***

From a social constructivist perspective, Hall (2005; 23) believes that all human communication is interdependent because meanings generated in communication are always situational to some degree. As an interactive process, Žegarac (2008) sees communication as an interpersonal discourse. It is important to realise that communication is not purely the transmission of information. Communication also involves the management of social relations. Thus, as a form of "social interaction", communication includes all aspects of the creation and negotiation of shared meanings in society.

Gudykunst (1998: p. 9) argues that the concept of communication lies within the "exchange of messages and the creation of meaning". He believes that messages can be transmitted verbally or non-verbally, but meanings cannot simply be transmitted between people. During the process of transmission and interpretation, shared meanings are created, communicated, and negotiated. We construct messages and interpret them using our own perceptions that is based on our cultural schema.

Jandt (2018, p. 1069) defines communication as a process of "intentionally stimulating meaning in other humans through the use of symbols" which he looks at it as a cultural element by studying different models of communication. Describing communication from both the Western and Confucian perspectives, Jandt (2018) refers to a popular communication model by David Berlo (1960) for the Western perspective. The components of communication of this model, known as the transmission model, include the source, encoding, message, channel, noise, receiver, decoding, receiver response, feedback, and context. The transmission model of communication takes place within the cycle of these components. In this perspective, communication is intentional, symbolic, and requires at least two people. On the other hand, communication from the Confucian perspective stresses upon balance and harmony in human relationships as the basis of society. This involves an interpretative process where individuals enhance and maintain a social relationship.

Thus, when communication is recognised as an interactive, the collaborative and dynamic process of meaning making is the crux of interaction between individuals. Meanings, intentions, and actions are jointly and progressively negotiated between the individuals involved in each interaction (Stubbe, 2010, p. 76).

### ***Intercultural Communication (IC)***

Early study of IC began with Edward T. Hall's publications of *The Silent Language* (1959), *The Hidden Dimension* (1969), and *Beyond Culture* (1976). For Hall, the notion of IC refers to communication that happens when people from different cultural backgrounds meet. He compares universal dyadic cultural dimensions such as high vs. low context communication, monochronic vs. polychronic time concepts,

or private vs. public space orientation. Over the years, the studies of IC have gained much attention and expanded.

From an interpretive perspective, IC focuses on interactions among human beings and such studies have attracted many scholars such as Cheng (2003), Bucholtz and Hall (2005), Bargiela-Chiappini and Haugh (2009) to name a few. On a basic level, IC is communication between people of different cultures, be it different countries or different subcultures within the same country. Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005, p. 39) define IC as the “symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation”. This definition highlights key terms such as ‘different’, ‘culture’, ‘negotiate’, ‘meaning’ and ‘interaction’ that are commonly invoked in relation to IC.

Piller (2011, 2012) advocates the social constructionist approach in studies of identity. Regardless of whether culture is viewed as nation, religion, gender, or ethnicity, all these “cultures” are “imagined communities” which members of a culture imagine themselves and are imagined by others as group members (Anderson, 1991). For Piller (2012), culture is best considered as a discursive construction.

Nair-Venugopal (2015) underscores that IC transcends political, geographical, and social borders and boundaries, because IC is restrained by contextually dependent and relational situations. These situations include “the discourse of the minorities within them, whether defined by localities or by ‘other’ cultures, or sub-fields within the margins of territories, communities and disciplines, respectively” (Nair-Venugopal, 2015, p. 31). It acknowledges the intricacies of communication that mediate ‘cultures’ and impact language use whichever way ‘cultures’ is understood. By acknowledging that culture is multimodal ways of doing things, Nair-Venugopal (2003, 2009) argues for a less constrained view of culture, by offering a reconceptualised notion of culture as approximations of social reality. She proposes an extension to a framework of analysis for IC through three key factors: sociocultural awareness, situational adaptability, and communication accommodation. This framework dismantles ‘culture’ as the most dominant factor in IC and provides a theoretical basis for understanding IC as “situated discourse that avoids a generic cultural stereotyping of difference” (Nair-Venugopal, 2003, 26). By dismantling culture as the main impinging factor, IC can firstly be addressed as a type of communication albeit in intercultural encounters. Moving away from perceiving the individual as the ‘cultural other’ to that of the individual as the ‘social actor’ or ‘stranger’, this perspective thus allows the discussion of the individual’s social identities as social actors or strangers interacting in terms of their “attitudes as outlook, social motivations, social priorities and expectations, values and self-construals, differences of personality and lastly, language in its reality-constructing, intention communicating and empowering roles” (Nair-Venugopal, 2003, p. 23).

Thus, the relationship between culture and communication is irrefutable in IC. Communicative behaviours are shaped by aspects of culture as being complex, abstract, and pervasive. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that communication is not determined solely by cultural influences.

### ***Identity***

With a concept of strong heuristic power, identity is created through communication (Rassokha, 2010). Many scholars have acknowledged the complexity of the notion of identity in IC (Lee, 2007; Lee et al., 2010; Lemke, 2008; Wetherell, 1996). As a sociocultural construction, it is fluid, fragmented, and fractured (de Fina et al., 2006; Norton, 2011). Irrespective of whether identity exists in an individual’s mind (cognitive approach) or is always in process in interactions (discursive approach), this means, identity is not what we are, but what we do (Bentwell & Stokoe, 2006; Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

From a non-essentialist perspective, Hall’s (1996) notion of identity is strategic and positional. For Hall, identities are about questions of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’. Our identities must be actively created and constructed, and not a reflection of some identity which is already present and determining. In other words, identities are flexible and changing, instead of fixed and essential. Hall (1996, p. 4) argues that “because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and

practices, by specific enunciative strategies.” This means the presentation of an identity depends on the discourses produced by the individual.

Taking a social constructionist view, identity is the “social positioning of self and other” through social interactions (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 586). To approach the question of identity, they propose five principles to the study of identity, namely emergence, positionality, indexicality, relationality, and partialness. Within the social constructionist paradigm, these five principles of identity construction highlight the premise that identity is enacted and created in interaction (Schnurr, 2013). Thus, by “anchoring identity in interaction” Bucholtz and Hall (2005) emphasize the complexities of identity in terms of social, cultural, and interactional phenomenon.

Wetherell (1996, p. 224) believes that “to talk at all is to construct an identity”. For her this is because identity is accomplished when people speak. The constructions of identities are based on the multiple voices of an entire culture. It is always in production, a continuing process rather than an already accomplished fact. Lee (2007) agrees that when language is used to communicate, it implicates one’s identity to some extent. She explains that identity is an “evolving, dynamic, complex and ongoing process [of] social constructivist orientation that allows us to examine the building of multiple, yet perfectly compatible identities”. Therefore, identity is a social construct. When individuals assume their particular identities, they acquire and exhibit specific social characteristics that enable the creation of multiple identities that are relevant to a particular context.

Studying identity certainly requires the study of the notion of social identity. Established by social psychologists like Tajfel and Turner (1979), Hogg and Abrams (1988, 1993), and Brown (2000), Social Identity Theory (SIT) addresses how we respond when our group identity becomes salient. Social psychologists are interested in what happens to people’s identities, their motivations, judgements, and perceptions when they identify themselves as members of groups. This theory is now one of the most influential models for analysing language and social interactions. According to Tajfel (1981, p. 255), social identity is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership”. Jenkins (2008) extended the understanding on social identity as a matter of the ‘outs’ as well as the ‘ins’. For Jenkins (2008), it is a process, not a thing, and it is not something one ‘have’, but something one ‘does’. In other words, social identity is constructed in terms of exclusion from or inclusion within groups in relation to others or in terms of the individual’s life’s experiences with out-group or in-group division.

As an extension of social identity, social category is a way of ‘self-sorting’ based on common traits. The study of social identity has been synonymous with the study of social category, social roles, and social locations (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Wetherell, 1996) such as ‘woman’, ‘black’, ‘American’, ‘worker’, etc. Kinzler, et al. (2010) suggest that humans divide the social world into groups by creating group distinctions based on social categories, such as religion, political affiliations, or even sports team allegiance. Banton (2011) recognises that individuals often have multiple origins and opens opportunities for moving beyond ‘groupism’. This accentuates the nature of social categories that is never constant and changes according to their relations with other categories.

### **An Integrated Conceptual Framework as an Interpretive Framework for IC Research**

A conceptual framework, unlike a theoretical framework that is drawn from an existing theoretical literature about a research topic, is a much broader notion that comprises all aspects of a research topic. It is a logical conceptualisation of an entire research project which is metacognitive, reflective, and operational (Kivunja, 2018). An interdisciplinary research such as IC often faces the conundrum of relying on a specific theoretical framework. Hence, IC as an interpretive approach is an intricate concept based various disciplines integrated into it as a field of discourse. IC provides an approach to studying interactions between individuals who either identify themselves as culturally distinct from each other or are strangers to each other. Any encounter with strangers naturally increases the intricacy of IC.

There is an undeniable diversity in human interactions. With the various dimensions in IC, an integrated conceptual framework is deemed a necessity, particularly for the integration of interaction and social studies. Because investigating diversity presents researchers “a paradox of inconsistent and conflicting findings”, according to Qin, et al. (2009, p. 739), it is moot to develop an integrated conceptual framework for different levels of analysis.

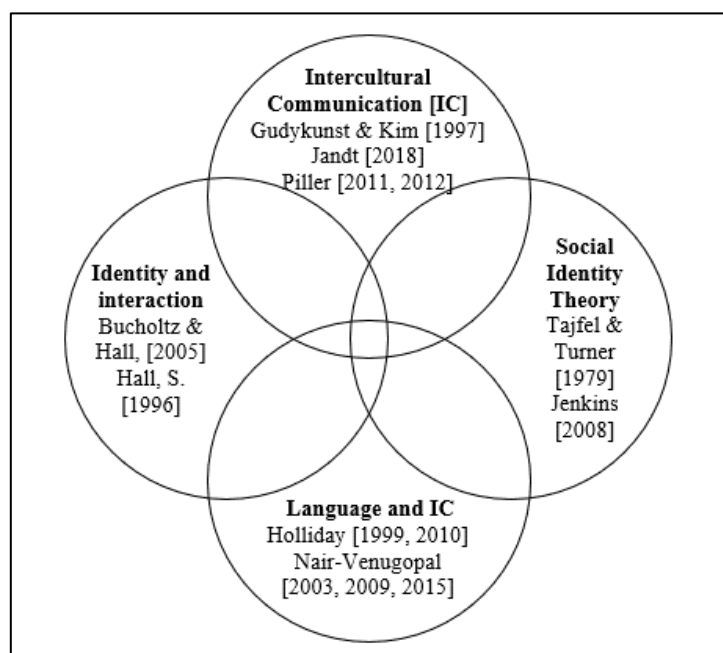
This paper thus presents an integrated conceptual framework as an interpretive framework, drawn from theories and concepts from the following fields of study:

- Intercultural Communication as an interdisciplinary field (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Jandt, 2018; Piller, 2011, 2012)
- Language and Intercultural Communication as a sub-field (Holliday, 1999, 2010; Nair-Venugopal, 2003, 2009, 2015)
- Social Identity Theory (Jenkins, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979)
- Identity and interaction (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Hall, 1996)

This integrated conceptual framework can be used to analyse social categories as an extension of social identities in intercultural interactions. Refer to Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*An Interpretive Framework of IC Research*



### **Research on IC in the Malaysian Context**

A review of literature shows there have been some brilliant research studies conducted in the Malaysian context on IC from various academic disciplines. However, most research stem from mainly the social scientific and interpretive methodological perspectives. There is clearly a lack of critical approach to IC in Malaysia.

A recent contribution that sheds light to IC studies in Malaysia is by Tamam and Waheed (2017) who published an article entitled Intercultural Communication Study in Malaysia in The Encyclopedia of Intercultural Communication by Wiley Online Library. It tracks IC terrains in Malaysia from the 60s to the current research developments and moving forward with IC. From the 40-decade observation, Tamam and Waheed (2017) remark that the literature of IC scholarship in Malaysia has gradually increased although contributing to the eclectic body of knowledge in the field. Researchers in this field have mainly been working in silo due to their diverse interest in IC.

In the earlier days, studies on IC from a sociolinguistics discipline in Malaysia have been mainly confined to studies on national identity. Among the prominent researchers on identity related issues at that time is Asmah Haji Omar (1982) who investigates the relationship between language and ethnicity. She highlights the perceived importance of one's multiple linguistic identities as an important marker of one's cultural identity and they are relational.

Lee (2003) explores the relationship between language, culture, and identity in an overview of the work of social theorists and educationists. She discusses the three constructs in relation to the field of Second Language Acquisition which recognises second language learners as a complex social being with multiple identities. The bilingual or multilingual identities of Malaysian learners are constantly socially negotiated due to their ability of switching from identity to another through language choice (Lee, 2007). In qualitative research on the role of English in the identity construction, Lee et al., (2010) studied Malaysian undergraduates. They found three dominant themes which saw English as the emerging language in a multilingual context, English as a pragmatic and socially empowering language, and varying degrees of 'othering' for being competent versus less competent among their ethnic groups. Resentments were found on both ends of the language competencies.

Initial studies on IC can also be found in Tamam and Phang (2003) who studied qualitative inquiry approach coping strategies on difficulties experienced by sojourners (African graduate students) in Malaysia. They found IC experience of African students 'difficult' due to differences in culture, lack language competency, prejudice, and stereotype, and limited cultural knowledge. This study also highlighted how cultural and communication styles differences are negotiated in the interaction and relationship building between the African students and Malaysians. From a partial report on the quantitative study of cross-sectional national study on ethnic tolerance, Tamam (2009) studied the Malay and Chinese-Malaysian public university students. He found that interethnic contact contributes towards positive attitudes for different ethnic groups. In this study, both the Malay and Chinese-Malaysian students were found to be accommodating which supports the predictions of Western-based contact theory that observes majority-minority and host-immigrant contexts. Tamam and Krauss (2017) provide quantitative empirical evidence on the relationship between ethnic-related diversity engagement diversity which covers communication concept elicited through contact and interaction, and three dimensions (interaction attentiveness, interaction openness and interaction confidence) of intercultural sensitivity. An interesting finding is that university students with a high level of interaction confidence are more likely to seek out opportunities for ethnic-related diversity engagement.

Recent development has also seen studies on Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC) gaining some momentum in Malaysia. Noting the absence of relational aspects in the existing Western definitions, Dalib, et al. (2017) propose a relational framework in conceptualising intercultural competence in an Asian context. Studying local and international students qualitatively in Malaysian universities, Dalib, et al. (2019) find that language proficiency is an important factor to achieve intercultural competence in multilingual Malaysia. They again highlighted the over reliance on western models of intercultural competence and advocate for more localised knowledge of intercultural competence.

Studying IC from an interpretive approach, Nair-Venugopal (2003) proposes a re-conceptualisation of culture as approximation to social reality in IC, whereby IC should be liberated from the confines of an essentialist notion of culture and emphasis should be placed in communication as social interaction. Later, she attempts to reframe identities as interculturalities in the Malaysian context where language is used for multimodal identity constructions Nair-Venugopal (2009). She discusses personhood as social identity and nationhood as notional identities in the intercultural encounters among Malaysians that contribute to the evolving discourse on the hybrid construction of a Malaysian national identity.

Foregrounding interactions, a recent doctoral research study by Ong (2016) investigated the influence of social categories on intercultural group work interactions among students in a private university in Malaysia using an integrated conceptual framework comprising Intercultural Communication, Language and Intercultural Communication, and Social Identity Theory. It also employs Pragmatics as the broad explanatory apparatus that relies on Goffman's (1967) notions of Face, and Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory as the main analytical approach. Using an ethnographically

informed qualitative approach, the study was conducted on groups comprising a total of 193 culturally diverse international and local undergraduate students. The study found that certain negotiations take place during the formation of self-selected groups where age and English language ability were significantly influential. In her study of face-to-face group work interactions, all the seven social categories of age, sex/gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, mother tongue and English language ability showed some salience and influenced group work interactions in varying degrees. The influences of age, gender, mother tongue and English language ability were more noticeable than those of nationality, ethnicity, and religion during face-to-face interactions. The study confirms that social categories of people from diverse cultural backgrounds influence face-to-face interactions that affect the interactional goals of the interactions.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss and explore an integrated conceptual framework as an interpretive framework for IC research in intercultural interactions. It is evident that culture and communication are so intertwined that it is easy to conceive that culture is communication and communication is culture (Hall, 1959). This underscores the undeniable relationship between culture and communication as they reciprocally influence each other. By conceptually integrating them into an interpretive framework it provides researchers an important foundation to understand the relationship between IC and social interactions.

The concept of identities is included in the framework because when we communicate, our identities are foregrounded during interactions. Thus, IC inevitably entails the co-construction and negotiation of social categories in intercultural interaction by means of language. Individuals can choose when to make a particular social category or multiple social categories salient during interactions. With the cultural values they hold, these individuals interact with the 'other' which includes the anxiety of encountering the unknown, the 'stranger' (Harman, 1988). Such encounters with strangers increase the intricacy of IC.

This paper contributes to the local literature in the field on IC with regards to identity and culture as the cornerstones of IC. It offers a discussion on an integrated conceptual framework as an interpretive framework for IC in the study of face-to-face interactions. Despite the steady increase on IC studies in the Malaysian context, there is a need for more exploration and reflection on how to use the integrated conceptual framework to study intercultural interactions. The study on IC shall remain interdisciplinary and needs to be approached with an open mind, be mindful and be aware of alternative perspectives.

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No conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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