



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF LAW, GOVERNMENT
AND COMMUNICATION
(IJLGC)

www.gaexcellence.com/ijlgc



SOCIAL MEDIA-MEDIATED NEGOTIATION OF CULTURAL VALUES AND NORMS AMONG CHINESE STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

Duo Zhang^{1*}, Awan Ismail²

¹ Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, Malaysia; Xi'an Siyuan University, China

 xianya.121@163.com

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1114-5936>

² Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, Malaysia

 cloudawan72@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1425-0591>

* Corresponding Author

Article Info:

Article history:

Received date: 01.06.2026

Revised date: 15.07.2026

Accepted date: 30.08.2026

Published date: 10.09.2026

To cite this document:

Duo, Z., & Ismail, A. (2026). Social Media-Mediated Negotiation of Cultural Values and Norms Among Chinese Students in Malaysia. *International Journal of Law, Government and Communication*, 11(45), 52-60.

DOI: 10.35631/IJLGC.1145004

Abstract:

Research on the cultural adaptation and psychological adjustment of international students abroad has been carried out extensively; however, relatively little attention has been paid to digitally mediated intercultural communication in Southeast Asian multicultural contexts, and specifically, how social media platforms shape emotional belonging, identity negotiation and participation norms. Therefore, this paper will address the above problem by redefining intercultural communication among Chinese international students in Malaysia as a platform-based communication process in a digital environment. Based on mediatization theory, intercultural communication theory and digital identity studies, this conceptual paper develops an integrated framework to explain how platform affordances and algorithmic visibility shape four interconnected dimensions: platformised emotional belonging, digital intercultural participation, hybrid digital identity negotiation, and emotional visibility pressure. The framework shows that today's cross-cultural communication often occurs in communication ecologies shaped by online visibility, transnational connectivity and norms of emotional mediation. This study adds to the body of research on intercultural communication by extending mediatization theory to the context of digital international students and providing a conceptual basis for future qualitative research on digitally mediated intercultural experiences among Chinese students in Malaysia.

Keyword:

Chinese International Students; Digital Identity; Intercultural Communication; Malaysia; Mediatization; Social Media



© The authors (2026). This is an Open Access paper under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY-NC) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which allows non-commercial reuse, distribution and reproduction in any media, provided that proper attribution is given to the original work. Business use is restricted to ijlgc@gaexcellence.com.

Introduction

With the internationalisation of higher education and the rapid development of digital communication technology, students from all over the world are now able to communicate and live together in new ways (Castells, 2010; Hepp, 2020). At present, intercultural communication in universities is no longer confined to face-to-face interaction in classrooms, dormitories and other campus activities. Cross-cultural experiences are now also taking place in the environment of digitally mediated communication created by social media platforms, mobile communication technology and transnational online networks (Couldry & Hepp, 2017).

Among the world's international student populations, Chinese international students are one of the largest and most mobile educational groups. In recent years, Malaysia has gradually become one of the top choices for Chinese students studying abroad due to its multi-ethnic society, relatively low tuition fees, and regionalisation efforts in higher education. Malaysia offers a special case for studying digitally mediated intercultural communication due to its multi-ethnic society and an increasingly internationalised higher education environment. Malaysian universities are multilingual and multiethnic, so they have been influenced by the cultures of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and other countries. As a result, Chinese international students in Malaysia have been exposed to cross-cultural communication and language differences in their daily lives and studies. Therefore, social media platforms provide students with a place to maintain emotional connections, negotiate intercultural participation and build hybrid digital identities in multicultural communication environments (Lim, 2020; Ryan & Fritz, 2021).

At the same time, social media platforms such as WeChat, WhatsApp, TikTok, Xiaohongshu, Instagram and Telegram have also been integrated into students' daily communication. These platforms are no longer only used for communication. Instead, they are gradually being used to enable students to maintain cross-border connections, manage emotions across borders, build digital identities, and participate in cross-cultural exchanges. These changes are in line with the general trend of deep mediatisation, and digital communication systems are increasingly impacting people's daily lives and emotions (Hepp, 2020).

Research abroad has studied in detail the adaptation of international students, language differences, intercultural communication skills and other problems. However, several important limitations remain. First, many previous studies continue to approach intercultural communication primarily from traditional face-to-face communication frameworks, paying insufficient attention to digitally mediated communication environments. Second, most existing studies focus on measurable adaptation results and give relatively little attention to emotional communication dimensions, such as loneliness, emotional pressure, anxiety about

online visibility, and digital belonging. Third, research on the intercultural communication experiences of Chinese international students in Southeast Asian multicultural environments is relatively scarce (Dalib, 2023).

At present, the environment of communication is changing due to mediatisation. Couldry and Hepp (2017) believe that in recent years, social reality has been shaped by media environments; Hepp (2020) further put forward the idea of deep mediatisation and pointed out that digital technology has now permeated all aspects of daily life. Given the above, intercultural communication should no longer be viewed as merely interpersonal contact among people of different cultures. Intercultural communication is now a platform-based form of communication shaped by digital infrastructure, platform affordances, visibility mechanisms and norms for emotional interaction.

This paper reconceptualizes intercultural communication among Chinese international students in Malaysia through the lens of mediatisation and digital identity. This paper will introduce a conceptual system to study how social media platforms reconstruct emotional communication, cultural participation and identity construction in the context of online education. Although the platforms have promoted cross-cultural communication, they have also created problems of emotional exposure, online responsiveness and digital self-presentation.

This study adds to the existing research in three ways. First, extend Mediatisation Theory to study intercultural communication by examining how social media platforms alter intercultural interaction in the digital age. Second, it can be seen that in current cross-cultural communication, emotions and online presence are also required. Thirdly, it proposes a system of concepts for platform-based intercultural communication to explain how emotional belonging, identity negotiation and intercultural participation are gradually being embedded in platform-based communication structures.

Intercultural Communication in Digital Contexts

In the past, most research on cross-cultural communication has concentrated on the roles of interpersonal contact, cultural adaptation, communication skills and psychological adjustment. The first theoretical views generally thought that cross-cultural adaptation was a gradual process of learning about other cultures, acquiring communication skills, participating in society and building emotional resilience. Among the above theories, Kim's (2001) integrative theory of cross-cultural adaptation is still one of the most influential frameworks, and it believes that adaptation is an ongoing process of stress, adjustment and growth driven by communication participation.

However, with the development of digital communication technology in recent years, intercultural communication has also changed. Participation in communication no longer needs to be face-to-face. Cross-cultural experiences are now being spread more widely through digitally mediated communication ecosystems, and people can maintain cross-border communication networks and participate in local academic and social environments simultaneously.

Therefore, the social media platform is now a place for cross-cultural communication. WeChat, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram and Xiaohongshu are the platforms for spreading communication and emotion and creating expectations for participation and identity. Social media has gradually taken on an emotional function for international students to cope with homesickness, a sense of belonging, socialisation and cultural inheritance (Ryan & Fritz, 2021).

Based on previous research, the two sides may be in conflict at the same time. Some scholars believe that digital platforms promote cross-cultural communication and emotional closeness among international students; others believe that platform-based communication may lead to emotional fragmentation, online fatigue and visibility anxiety in an always-on communication environment (Madianou, 2020).

Digital communication environments have changed how people communicate, and at the same time, the experience of cross-cultural interaction has also been altered. Communication is also now affected by online exposure, recommendation algorithms, interaction indicators, read receipts and platform functions. Thus, intercultural communication can no longer be seen as a type of traditional interpersonal communication. Instead, it is increasingly functioning as a platformised communication process shaped by digitally mediated structures (Poell et al., 2019).

Mediatisation, Platformisation and Digital Identity

Mediatisation theory offers a way to understand how digital media are changing society in recent years (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Hepp, 2020). According to Mediatisation Theory, media are not only tools for communication but also actively create social interaction, emotions, institutional behaviour and other forms of daily communication in a media environment.

Therefore, the platforms of social media should not be viewed simply as communication tools. They proactively generate communication behaviour via recommendation algorithms, visibility mechanisms, interaction metrics, emotional feedback systems and platform affordances. These changes are in line with the general trend of platformisation, and the algorithms have been reducing the visibility, participation and emotional expression of communication progressively (Poell et al., 2019; Gillespie, 2018).

Mediatised communication environments are particularly relevant to international students because they live in the space between transnational communication networks and local multicultural societies at all times. Social media platforms increasingly mediate emotional belonging by allowing students to stay in touch with family, friends and the cultural community in their home countries continuously (Lim, 2020).

At the same time, the environment of mediated communication may increase the emotional pressure for online response, delayed replies, digital self-presentation and visibility management. Continuous online connectivity may thus provide emotional support at the same time as causing emotional exhaustion, communication anxiety and social pressure (Papacharissi, 2015; Madianou, 2020).

Digital Identity is now one of the main forms of cross-cultural communication. The new digital identity is no longer static or uniform; rather, it is becoming more fluid, performative and subject to change under digital mediation. Research has shown that people are motivated to manage their own public images and the expectations of others on all sides of social media (Boyd, 2014; Zhao et al., 2008).

Digital identity negotiation for Chinese international students often involves balancing familiar cultural communication practices with new norms of behaviour in an international communication environment. Students may maintain cultural familiarity through Chinese social media platforms while simultaneously adapting to globalized communication practices in international digital environments (Sun, 2022).

As a result, hybrid and transnational digital identities are gradually appearing in geographically dispersed and culturally diverse communication ecosystems. International students no longer have a single culture. Identity negotiation is now occurring in many places online, in culture and in mediated communication.

Emotional Expression is also a type of online identity construction. Emotionally expressive continuous expression of social media includes visual sharing, interaction feedback, status updates and visibility-based communication. Thus, emotional expression is now an increasingly mediated performance shaped by platform structures and audience demands (Papacharissi, 2015).

Therefore, at present, emotional display has gradually become one of the features of cross-cultural communication. Students may be anxious about communication because of problems with online manners, slow responses, impression management, etc. Platformised communication environments thus transform emotional interaction into an ongoing negotiation of digital visibility.

Reconceptualizing Platform-based Intercultural Communication

Based on the theoretical discussions above, this paper proposes that intercultural communication among Chinese international students in Malaysia should be viewed increasingly as a platformised communication process influenced by mediatisation, digital visibility, emotional responsiveness and transnational connectivity. Early theories of cross-cultural communication focused more on interpersonal communication, cultural adaptation and communication skills in physical social environments. However, the current digital communication ecology has changed the form of cross-cultural interaction, emotional affiliation and identity construction.

Social media platforms in mediatised environments are also not for communication. Instead, they have begun to investigate what international students mean by emotional belonging, social participation and cross-cultural interaction in digital spaces.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework proposed in this paper. The framework shows how social media platforms and their affordances shape the experience of cross-cultural communication for Chinese international students in Malaysia. Four interconnected types of digitally mediated communication environments have emerged: platformised emotional belonging, digital intercultural participation, hybrid digital identity negotiation, and

emotional visibility pressure. Together, these attributes constitute the platformised intercultural communication process.

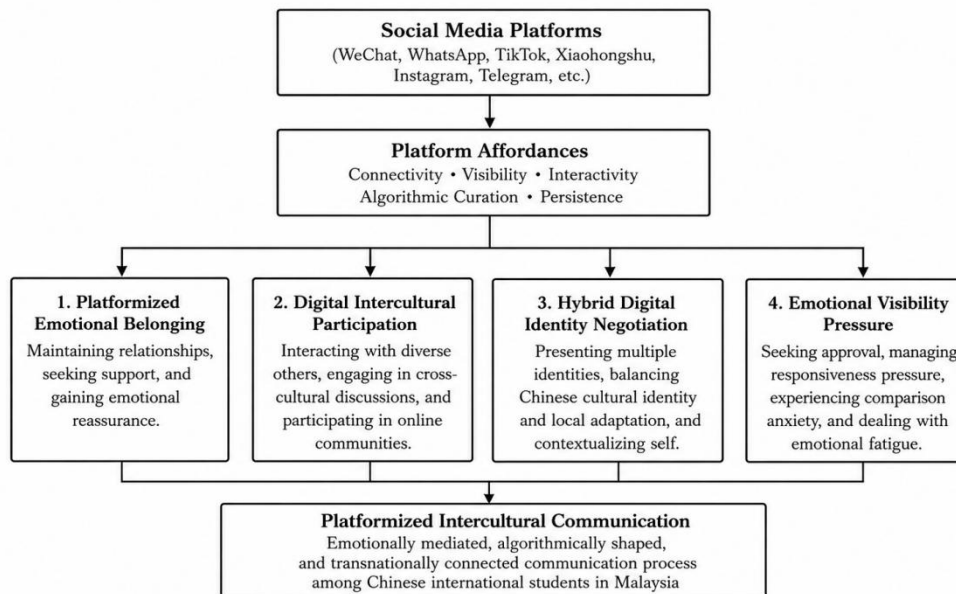


Figure 1. Framework of Platformized Intercultural Communication for Chinese International Students in Malaysia

Platformised Emotional Belonging

It refers to how people use social media to feel close to and stay in touch with others in different places emotionally. Platformised emotional belonging is not based on the traditional concept of physical co-presence; instead, it is maintained through continuous digital communication behaviour, such as updates on WeChat Moments and group chat interactions, which allow students to keep affective ties with family and friends in China while also participating in local Malaysian social networks. This dimension refers to how platform infrastructure (e.g., real-time notifications, multimedia sharing, group interaction) alters the time and space of emotional attachment, making a sense of belonging an ongoing, digitally performed practice rather than a fixed state.

Digital Intercultural Participation

The shift of cross-cultural communication from face-to-face interaction to digitally mediated communication is known as this phenomenon. Social media platforms are the main places where international students experience the differences in culture, face language barriers, and participate in all sorts of multicultural activities online, such as following local university pages, joining multicultural groups, and taking part in cross-cultural discussions on TikTok and Instagram. Digital intercultural participation is not only about learning about other cultures but also about actively communicating and sharing; thus, students feel more included and competent in the host society. At the same time, this participation is filtered by platform affordances, such as algorithmic recommendations, and may either expand or limit exposure to various cultures.

Hybrid Digital Identity Negotiation

It refers to fluids and all sorts of identities in transnational digital spaces. Chinese international students do not have a single cultural identity; rather, they are constantly balancing their Chinese cultural inheritance with the new roles of international students and their participation in global digital culture. The two sides can use social media to negotiate by switching languages and curating different selves for different audiences (e.g., WeChat for family, Instagram for friends) to show a hybrid cultural identity. However, this negotiation is also limited by platform logic, such as visibility indicators and audience feedback; thus, performative identity display may conform to peer expectations and lead to a conflict between authentic self-expression and socially rewarded digital personas.

Emotional Visibility and Communication Pressure

This factor shows the two sides of platform-based communication. On the other hand, social media can also increase students' sense of social responsibility by exposing them to the problems of society. At the same time, this visibility is also a demand for communication; there are expectations for a quick response, appropriate emotional expressions and continuous online presence, which can cause anxiety, fatigue and self-censorship. Students are worried about how their digital images will be used and are afraid that if they do not respond or post in time, their peers and teachers will misunderstand them. Algorithmic visibility mechanisms (e.g., read receipts, "seen" status, and interaction counts) also increase the pressure to respond by making this responsiveness public. Thus, emotional display is not a choice by individuals but rather a structurally constrained phenomenon resulting from platform design and social norms.

The four dimensions suggest that, at present, intercultural communication can no longer be fully explained by the traditional framework of interpersonal communication. Cross-cultural interaction is now also affected by platform logic, algorithmic visibility, emotional responsiveness and structures of digital participation. Therefore, this paper puts forward the idea that intercultural communication should be rethought as both interpersonal communication among different cultures and a platform-based communication process within a larger digital communication ecosystem.

Summary

With the spread of digital communication technology, people have begun to connect and communicate in different parts of the world. With the development of digitally mediated higher education, social media platforms have gradually become places for international students to feel a sense of belonging, form identities and engage in cross-cultural exchange. Based on mediatisation theory, intercultural communication theory and digital identity studies, this paper redefines intercultural communication among Chinese international students in Malaysia as a platformised communication process in a digitally mediated environment. It is now believed that cross-cultural communication increasingly takes place in communication ecologies shaped by online visibility, emotional responsiveness, algorithmic interaction mechanisms and platform affordances.

Theoretically, this paper extends Mediatisation Theory to research on intercultural communication by emphasizing the role of platformised communication structures, emotional communication and digital identity negotiation. The study provides a conceptual system to explore how international students communicate in multicultural and digitalised educational environments in practice.

Future research will extend the proposed conceptual framework through qualitative interviews, digital ethnography and platform-based communication analysis of Chinese international students in Malaysia. Empirical studies can confirm, extend or refute the contents listed above and provide more detailed information on the characteristics of digitally mediated intercultural communication.

Acknowledgements: The authors would like to thank the Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology (KLUST) for providing academic support and research resources for this study in the preparation stage. The authors want to thank their colleagues and friends for providing some references and other ideas that have helped to improve the quality of this paper.

Funding Statement: No Funding

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. All authors have contributed to this work and approved the final version of the manuscript for submission to the International Journal of Law, Government and Communication (IJLGC)

Ethics Statement: This study did not involve any human participants, animals, or sensitive data requiring ethical approval. The authors confirm that the research was conducted in accordance with accepted academic integrity and ethical publishing standards.

Author Contribution Statement: All the authors have contributed to the writing of this paper. Duo Zhang was in charge of the concept, literature review, methodology and general direction of the study. Awan Ismail collected data and analysed the results of the study. All the authors have read and approved the final version of the paper for submission.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. Yale University Press.
- Castells, M. (2010). *The rise of the network society* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The mediated construction of reality*. Polity Press.
- D'Silva, M. U., & Atay, A. (2019). *Intercultural communication, identity, and social movements in the digital age*. Routledge.
- Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press.
- Gudykunst, W. B. (2004). *Bridging differences: Effective intergroup communication* (4th ed.). SAGE.
- Hepp, A. (2020). *Deep mediatization*. Routledge.
- Jin, D. Y. (2015). *Digital platforms, imperialism and political culture*. Routledge.
- Kim, Y. Y. (2001). *Becoming intercultural: An integrative theory of communication and cross-cultural adaptation*. SAGE.
- Lim, S. S. (2020). Transnational social media practices and emotional belonging among Asian international students. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(6), 889–905. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920911123>
- Madianou, M. (2020). A second-order disaster? Digital technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Social Media + Society*, 6(3), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120948168>
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & van Dijck, J. (2019). Platformisation. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(4), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425>
- Ryan, L., & Fritz, J. (2021). International students and digitally mediated belonging in transnational education contexts. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 84, 253–264. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2021.08.004>
- Sun, W. (2022). Digital migration and mediated identity negotiation among Chinese students abroad. *Global Media and China*, 7(2), 133–149. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364221084567>
- van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society: Public values in a connective world*. Oxford University Press.
- Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J. (2008). Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 1816–1836. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2008.02.012>
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Profile Books