

AI-Mediated Cross-Cultural Communication Among the Vietnamese Generation Z: Navigating Digital Dialogue in a Globalized Era

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how the Vietnamese Generation Z individuals perceive and experience artificial intelligence tools as mediators in cross-cultural communication. Adopting an interpretive phenomenological framework, the research draws on data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 Vietnamese participants aged 18-27 who reside in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to explore the complex interplay between AI-assisted translation technologies and authentic intercultural exchange. Findings reveal a fundamental tension: while AI tools dramatically lower barriers to initiating cross-cultural contact, participants consistently reported experiencing connection without understanding, technically successful exchanges that nonetheless felt emotionally hollow. Three interconnected themes emerged: paradoxical isolation despite increased connectivity, in which technical efficiency masks relational distance; cultural flattening through algorithmic mediation, which erodes distinct cultural nuances; and persistent authenticity concerns about the ownership of communication. The study contributes to communication theory by extending Communication Accommodation Theory to AI-mediated contexts, proposing that algorithmic translation creates a new form of technological convergence, distinct from traditional interpersonal accommodation. Practical implications suggest that educators and technology designers must look beyond linguistic accuracy to address the human dimensions of interaction, recommending that effective digital communication requires complementing AI tools with intentional cultural learning strategies to preserve authentic human connection.

Keywords: *Artificial intelligence, cross-cultural communication, Generation Z, Vietnam, digital mediation.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of artificial intelligence technologies has fundamentally transformed how young people communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries in the contemporary globalized world. In Vietnam, where internet penetration reached 79.1% in 2024 (Do, 2026), and a mobile-first digital environment characterizes youth communication, Generation Z has emerged as enthusiastic early adopters of AI-powered communication tools that promise unprecedented access to global conversations and relationships. Surveys of digital adoption in the Vietnamese context indicate that mobile-first and AI tool use is concentrated among the under-30 cohort (Bui, 2025; Do, 2026), corroborating the characterization of Generation Z as a primary user group. This demographic, born between 1997 and 2012, represents the first generation to come of age with ubiquitous access to sophisticated machine translation, AI chatbots, and algorithm-driven social platforms that promise to dissolve traditional barriers to cross-cultural exchange. The integration of these technologies into daily life has been remarkably swift and comprehensive, with AI translation features now embedded in nearly every major social media platform and messaging application used by Vietnamese youth.

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Yet this technological promise carries profound implications that extend far beyond mere convenience. When algorithms mediate human connection, they inevitably shape the nature of that connection in ways both subtle and significant. The question of how AI tools influence authentic cross-cultural understanding has become increasingly urgent as these technologies move from novelty to necessity in the daily communicative practices of young Vietnamese. AI-mediated communication is treated in this study as an exchange in which an algorithmic system actively reformulates, translates, or generates message content situated between human interlocutors (Cardon et al., 2023). Cross-cultural dialogue is understood as a communicative exchange across recognised cultural or linguistic boundaries that involves the negotiation of identity and meaning (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Digital agency is treated as the user capacity to direct, evaluate, and resist the algorithmic shaping of communicative content, drawing on the agency dimension of Cardon et al. (2023). Recent research indicates that approximately half of Vietnamese youth aged 14-24 who regularly use social networking sites experience psychological distress, suggesting that digital communication patterns may have complex effects on well-being that warrant careful examination (Nguyen et al., 2025). This finding raises important questions about whether AI-mediated communication compounds or alleviates such distress, particularly in cross-cultural contexts.

The Vietnamese context presents particularly compelling conditions for examining AI-mediated cross-cultural communication. Vietnam has undergone rapid economic development and increasing integration into global economic and cultural networks over the past three decades. Young Vietnamese today navigate a complex communicative landscape wherein traditional values emphasizing collective harmony, hierarchical respect, and indirect communication intersect with digital affordances that privilege immediacy, directness, and individual expression. This cultural tension creates distinctive challenges and opportunities for AI-mediated cross-cultural exchange that merit careful scholarly attention.

This study addresses a critical gap in communication scholarship by examining how the Vietnamese Generation Z individuals perceive, experience, and make meaning of AI-mediated cross-cultural communication. The research questions guiding this investigation are: (1) How do the Vietnamese Generation Z individuals perceive the role of AI tools in their cross-cultural communication experiences? (2) What tensions or contradictions emerge when AI mediates intercultural exchange? (3) How do young Vietnamese negotiate authenticity and cultural identity in algorithm-assisted interactions? By exploring these questions through qualitative inquiry, this study seeks to illuminate the complex human dimensions of what might otherwise appear as straightforward technological facilitation.

Understanding these dynamics has significant implications for communication theory, educational practice, and technology design. As AI tools become increasingly sophisticated and ubiquitous, their influence on fundamental human activities such as cross-cultural communication will only intensify. By examining how young people in a rapidly digitalizing society experience and evaluate these tools, this study provides insight into both current practices and emerging trends that will shape intercultural communication for generations to come. The findings offer practical guidance for educators developing intercultural competence curricula, for technology designers seeking to create more culturally sensitive AI tools, and for individual communicators navigating the opportunities and pitfalls of algorithm-mediated cross-cultural exchange. More broadly, this research contributes to urgent societal conversations about human-AI interaction in domains that fundamentally shape identity, belonging, and human connection across cultural differences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Theoretical Foundations of Cross-Cultural Communication

Cross-cultural communication research has long grappled with questions of meaning-making across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Ting-Toomey's (1999) foundational work on identity negotiation established that intercultural encounters involve continuous processes of identity assertion and accommodation, wherein communicators dynamically adjust their self-presentation based on perceived cultural expectations and relational goals. This perspective emphasizes that cross-cultural communication is never merely the transfer of information but always involves complex negotiations of identity, power, and belonging.

Communication Accommodation Theory, originally developed by Giles (1973), provides essential theoretical grounding for understanding how individuals adjust their communicative behaviors in intercultural contexts. The theory posits that speakers may converge toward or diverge from their interlocutors' communication patterns based on desires for social approval, communication efficiency, or identity maintenance. The introduction of AI mediation fundamentally alters these dynamics by inserting algorithmic processing between communicators, raising important theoretical questions about agency and intentionality. Within the integrated conceptual framework adopted in this study, CAT serves as the primary theoretical anchor, complemented by Cardon et al.'s (2023) four-dimensional AI-literacy framework (application, authenticity, accountability, agency) as an evaluative lens for AI-mediated exchange.

Recent scholarship has begun examining how social media platforms shape cross-cultural communication. Yuna et al. (2022) synthesized insights from cultural psychology and neuroscience to propose integrated frameworks for understanding social media's role in intercultural exchange. Their analysis suggests that digital platforms create distinctive conditions for cross-cultural contact that differ substantially from traditional face-to-face encounters.

b. AI Technologies in Language Learning and Translation

The emergence of sophisticated AI language tools has generated substantial scholarly attention regarding their implications for language learning and cross-cultural communication. Han (2024) issued a call for more systematic research on the use of ChatGPT in second language acquisition, noting that while enthusiasm for these tools is widespread, rigorous empirical investigation of their effects remains limited.

Recent studies have begun to address this gap, with mixed findings. Klimova et al. (2024) found that university students expressed both fascination and concern regarding ChatGPT's role in language learning. Similarly, Derakhshan and Ghiasvand (2024) documented how English language teachers viewed ChatGPT as a double-edged sword, offering unprecedented pedagogical possibilities while raising concerns about student dependency. Lo et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review examining the use of ChatGPT in ESL/EFL contexts, finding that its effects on deeper cultural competence remained understudied. In a related JKMJC study, Esmaeil et al. (2023) documented Malaysian university students' perceptions of ChatGPT in argumentative writing, identifying parallel tensions between functional benefit and authenticity concerns.

Machine translation technologies present particular challenges for preserving cultural nuance. Lo et al. (2024) comprehensively reviewed the affordances of ChatGPT for language learning, noting that while the technology offers personalized experiences and immediate

feedback, its ability to handle cultural subtleties remains limited. Yang et al. (2023) specifically examined Chinese-English news translation, demonstrating how cultural semantics are often distorted by algorithmic processing.

c. Generation Z Digital Communication Patterns

Generation Z has been characterized as digital natives whose communication practices are fundamentally shaped by lifelong immersion in networked technologies. However, recent research complicates simplistic narratives of seamless digital fluency. Elkatmış (2024) examined how Turkish Generation Z individuals' social media habits shape their cultural life, finding complex patterns of both connection and alienation. Similarly, Tirocchi (2024) documented tensions Italian Generation Z youth experience between desires for authentic self-expression and pressures for strategic visibility. Lim et al. (2023) likewise reported that source attributes of internet celebrities are positively associated with purchase intention among Malaysian Generation Z, indicating the influence of digital communication sources on this cohort's information processing.

The relationship between digital communication and psychological well-being among young people has attracted considerable research attention. Herbener and Damholdt (2025) conducted a large-scale study of 1,599 Danish high school students, finding that those who used AI chatbots for emotional support exhibited significantly higher levels of loneliness than non-chatbot users. Conversely, Kim et al. (2025) found that engaging with an AI social chatbot reduced loneliness and social anxiety among Korean university students over a four-week period. Jacobs (2024) introduced the concept of digital loneliness to describe the paradoxical isolation that can emerge from technology-mediated social connections. De Freitas et al. (2025) found, through rigorous experimental methods, that AI companions could reduce subjective loneliness at rates comparable to those of human interaction, at least in the short term. Taken together, these studies indicate that the effect of AI-mediated interaction on well-being is correlated with the use purpose and outcome window rather than being unidirectional.

d. Vietnamese Youth and Digital Culture

Vietnam presents a distinctive context for examining Generation Z digital practices, given its rapid adoption of technology alongside the preservation of traditional cultural values (Bui, 2025; Do, 2026). Jang and Kim (2024) examined how Vietnamese consumers assimilate Korean cultural products through social media, finding that digital platforms facilitate complex processes of cultural hybridization. Nguyen et al. (2025) found that approximately half of Vietnamese youth aged 14-24 who regularly use social networking sites experience psychological distress. These lines of evidence converge on a Vietnamese youth context that is simultaneously highly connected, intercultural in orientation, and exposed to well-being risks not captured by indicators of access alone.

e. Authenticity in AI-Mediated Communication

Questions of authenticity have emerged as central concerns in scholarship on AI-mediated communication. Turkle's (2015) influential work documented how digital technologies can simulate intimacy that feels compelling yet lacks the substance of genuine human connection. Coman and Cardon (2024) found that recipients rated AI-generated messages lower on perceived sincerity and caring compared to messages believed to be human-authored. Cardon

et al. (2023) proposed a framework for AI literacy encompassing four dimensions: application, authenticity, accountability, and agency. Together, these contributions indicate that perceptions of authenticity are correlated with both message content and disclosure context, motivating empirical attention to how senders and receivers experience AI-mediated exchanges in cross-cultural settings.

METHODOLOGY

a. Research Design and Philosophical Foundations

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of Vietnamese Generation Z individuals in AI-mediated cross-cultural communication. The interpretive phenomenological approach was selected because it enables in-depth exploration of how participants make sense of their experiences while acknowledging the researcher's active role in co-constructing understanding (Smith et al., 2009). This methodology aligns with the study's aim to understand the subjective meanings participants attribute to their AI-mediated communication experiences rather than to establish generalizable patterns, and it corresponds to the three research questions: a phenomenological description addressing RQ1, a reflexive thematic analysis addressing RQ2, and an interpretive analysis addressing RQ3.

b. Participants and Sampling

Twenty-five Vietnamese participants aged 18 to 27 were recruited through purposive sampling designed to capture diverse experiences of AI-mediated cross-cultural communication. The 18-27 age range was selected because it covers the Vietnamese Generation Z above the age of independent informed consent, captures the cohort with the highest reported AI tool use in the national digital context (Bui, 2025; Do, 2026), and corresponds to the operational definition of older Generation Z, avoiding overlap with the Millennial cohort. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (a) be Vietnamese nationals residing in Vietnam, (b) be aged 18-27 years, (c) have regular experience using AI tools for cross-cultural communication, and (d) be willing to discuss their experiences in depth. Sample size was determined by the principle of theoretical saturation (Guest et al., 2006); after interview 22, no new codes emerged, and interviews 23-25 confirmed existing themes without introducing new conceptual categories. Table 1 presents participant demographic characteristics.

Table 1: Participant demographic characteristics (N = 25)

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	14	56
Male	11	44
Age Group		
18-21 years	10	40
22-24 years	9	36
25-27 years	6	24
Occupation		
University student	16	64
Young professional	9	36

Location		
Ho Chi Minh City	15	60
Hanoi	10	40
Primary AI tools used*		
Google Translate	23	92
ChatGPT	19	76
Social media translation	18	72
DeepL	8	32

*Participants could report multiple tools.

c. Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes (M = 72 minutes) and was conducted in Vietnamese. Interviews were conducted between September and November 2025, with 15 conducted in person at university locations and 10 via Zoom. The interview protocol covered: participants' history of AI tool use, specific memorable experiences, perceptions of AI's influence on communication quality, concerns about AI mediation, and strategies for navigating AI tools' limitations. Interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese. Vietnamese transcripts served as the primary material for coding and theme development; participant quotations selected for illustration in this report were translated into English by the bilingual first author and verified by an independent bilingual researcher through back-translation.

d. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis approach. Initial coding was conducted inductively using NVivo 14, generating 156 initial codes. A second researcher independently coded five transcripts (20% of the data). Inter-coder agreement yielded Cohen's $\kappa = .81$, indicating substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). After discussion, the codebook was refined to 134 codes organized into 9 sub-themes and 3 overarching themes (see Table 2).

Table 2: Thematic structure: themes, sub-themes, and codes

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative codes	n (%)
Paradoxical isolation	Connection without understanding	surface_communication, hollow_exchange, missing_essence	21 (84%)
	Invisible barriers	new_walls, sensing_distance, unbridgeable_gap	18 (72%)
	Loss of shared struggle	effort_builds_intimacy, bonding_through_difficulty	15 (60%)
Cultural flattening	Loss of cultural depth	meaning_lost, cultural_logic_missing, words_not_meaning	22 (88%)
	Generic output	culturally_neutral, distinctive_lost, homogenized_style	19 (76%)
	Self-simplification	algorithm_friendly, simplifying_expression	16 (64%)

Authenticity concerns	Self-authenticity doubt	imposter_feeling, borrowed_fluency, not_really_mine	20 (80%)
	Skepticism of others	questioning_authorship, human_or_AI, uncertain_source	17 (68%)
	Emotional flatness	polite_but_empty, smoothed_edges, lacking_genuineness	18 (72%)

Note: n = number of participants whose transcripts contained codes related to each sub-theme.

e. Trustworthiness

Multiple strategies enhanced trustworthiness in line with Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the data, peer debriefing with two colleagues, and member checking with eight participants, who confirmed the themes’ resonance. Transferability was supported through a thick description of the research context. Dependability was addressed through a detailed audit trail documenting all analytical decisions. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling throughout data collection and analysis.

f. Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from the institutional review board before data collection (Letter of Confirmation No. 5122/HVBCTT issued by the Academy of Journalism and Communication, Hanoi, on 29 August 2025; principal researcher: Nguyen Thi Truong Giang; research site: Ho Chi Minh City; research period: 5 September 2025 to 30 December 2025). All participants provided written informed consent. Pseudonyms replace real names throughout this report, and potentially identifying details have been modified to protect confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of participant interviews revealed three interconnected themes that illuminate the Vietnamese Generation Z experiences of AI-mediated cross-cultural communication: paradoxical isolation amid connectivity, cultural flattening through algorithmic mediation, and persistent authenticity concerns. These themes capture dimensions of the complex relationship between AI tools and meaningful intercultural exchange. The findings paint a nuanced picture of young Vietnamese navigating both opportunities and limitations of AI-mediated cross-cultural communication.

a. Theme 1: Paradoxical Isolation Amid Connectivity

Participants consistently described experiences of isolation that emerged paradoxically from their increased capacity for cross-cultural connection (n = 21, 84%). While AI tools dramatically expanded their ability to communicate across linguistic boundaries, this expanded connectivity often failed to produce the sense of genuine connection that participants sought. The pattern echoes Jacobs’s (2024) concept of digital loneliness, in which technology-mediated connections create illusions of intimacy while impeding the formation of authentic relationships.

Minh, a 23-year-old marketing professional, articulated this paradox with particular clarity: “The words arrive correctly, but something essential is missing. I can discuss work projects efficiently with my Korean colleagues, yet I feel further from genuine understanding

with each conversation. It is like we are talking through a very clean glass wall – I can see them, hear the words, but cannot truly reach them.” Her account captures the fundamental tension many participants experienced: technical success coexisting with relational failure.

Linh, a 21-year-old university student, used the metaphor of invisible walls to describe her experience: “Before AI translation, the language barrier was obvious; we both knew we were struggling to understand each other, and that shared struggle created a kind of bond. Now the barrier is invisible. The messages flow smoothly, but I feel more distant from my international friends than before. It is strange; easier communication somehow makes a deeper connection harder.” This observation points to something the literature on AI-mediated communication has not fully explored: the productive function of communicative difficulty in relationship formation.

Several participants (n = 15, 60%) connected this isolation to the loss of what they called shared struggle. Duc, a 25-year-old software developer working with international teams, explained: “When my American colleague and I used to struggle together, using gestures, drawings, broken sentences, laughing at our mistakes, that effort itself created intimacy. We were partners in understanding each other. Now AI does that work for us. The message arrives perfectly, but we have lost the journey together.” This finding resonates with Turkle’s (2015) argument that technologies promising to simplify connection may paradoxically impoverish it.

The isolation participants described was not simply loneliness but a more specific inability to reach the other person despite apparent communicative success. Ha, a 24-year-old graduate student, put it this way: “I have more international contacts than ever before. I message people in Japan, Korea, Germany, and America, all through AI translation. But these relationships feel thin, like paper. They could tear at any moment because nothing is holding them together except the algorithm.” Her metaphor of paper-thin relationships captures the fragility that participants perceived in AI-mediated connections.

The paradox of isolation amid connectivity manifested differently across professional and personal contexts. Participants working in international business settings often described functional efficiency coexisting with relational emptiness. Binh, a 25-year-old working in export trading, explained: “My communications with foreign clients are perfectly smooth now. We close deals, resolve problems, and move projects forward. But after three years of working with some clients, I realize I know nothing about them as people. We have never shared a joke, never talked about anything beyond business. The AI makes our work communication efficient, but kills any chance of a real relationship.” This account suggests that AI-mediated communication may be particularly suited to transactional exchanges while being inadequate for the relational dimensions of intercultural connection.

Younger participants, particularly university students, expressed a poignant sense of missed developmental opportunities. Tuan, a 19-year-old student interested in Korean culture, reflected: “I started learning Korean because I wanted to connect with Korean friends, understand K-dramas without subtitles, maybe even study there someday. But now I just use AI for everything. I can communicate, but I am not really learning. I feel like I am cheating myself out of something important, the experience of actually acquiring another language and culture through effort and immersion. The easy path the AI offers might be taking something valuable away from me.”

b. Theme 2: Cultural Flattening Through Algorithmic Mediation

A second prominent theme concerned the ways AI translation tools appeared to flatten or homogenize cultural distinctiveness (n = 22, 88%). Participants described experiences in which the unique textures of their Vietnamese cultural expression were processed by algorithms that produced outputs lacking cultural depth. This finding resonates with Lo et al. (2024) analysis of the limitations of AI language tools in handling cultural and sociolinguistic nuances and extends it by documenting the lived experience of this limitation.

Hoa, a 22-year-old international relations student, provided a detailed account of cultural loss in translation: “I tried to explain the Vietnamese family concepts to an American friend, the difference between *nội* and *ngoại* grandparents, why the eldest son has special responsibilities, and how we address relatives by their position in the family tree rather than just names. Google Translate gave her grammatically correct English, but the cultural logic was completely lost. She understood the words but not why any of it mattered. The AI translated my language but erased my culture.” This experience illustrates what Yang et al. (2023) identified as cultural semantic loss in machine translation, here manifested in personal communication rather than news media.

Nam, a 24-year-old teacher who regularly communicates with Japanese colleagues, noted a reciprocal flattening: “Messages I receive from Japanese contacts feel strangely generic. I know Japanese communication has its own rhythms, its own ways of showing respect and building relationships gradually. But what arrives through translation could have been written by anyone from anywhere. Something distinctively Japanese is being lost in the processing, leaving culturally neutral content rather than genuine communication from a specific cultural perspective.” His observation suggests that cultural flattening operates bidirectionally, affecting both sent and received messages.

Perhaps most concerning was the self-modification participants described undertaking to accommodate AI limitations. Trang, a 20-year-old student, worried about generational effects: “I catch myself thinking about what will translate well before I even form my thought. I avoid Vietnamese idioms, indirect expressions, cultural references, and anything that might confuse the AI. My generation is learning to communicate in algorithm-friendly ways. We are simplifying ourselves to be understood by machines, and in the process, we are losing what makes us Vietnamese.” This self-flattening represents a troubling adaptation wherein users modify their cultural expression to suit technological constraints rather than technology adapting to cultural diversity.

The flattening effect extended beyond individual expression to participants’ sense of participating in cultural exchange. Quan, a 26-year-old working in international trade, reflected: “The whole point of cross-cultural communication should be encountering difference, learning new ways of thinking and expressing. But AI translation smooths everything into a kind of international business English. Everyone sounds the same. Where is the culture in cross-cultural communication when the algorithm removes all the cultural markers?” His question points to a fundamental tension between AI’s promise to facilitate cross-cultural contact and its tendency to homogenize cultural expression.

Several participants noted that cultural flattening affected not only outgoing messages but also their reception of others’ communications. The Vietnamese concept of “implication”, the indirect, contextual, and relational layers of meaning beneath surface words, was frequently cited as particularly vulnerable to algorithmic processing. Loan, a 23-year-old student of literature, explained: “When I read Vietnamese, I am reading between the lines,

understanding what is not said, catching the tone, feeling the relationship. When I read AI-translated messages from foreign friends, everything is direct and explicit. I do not know if they are actually being that direct or if the AI is stripping away their own cultural layers. I cannot read between the lines anymore because the AI has erased the lines.” This loss of interpretive depth represents a significant impoverishment of cross-cultural communication beyond mere translation accuracy.

The implications of cultural flattening extended to participants’ sense of cultural identity and pride. Several participants expressed concern that AI-mediated communication positioned Vietnamese culture as something to be translated away rather than shared and valued. Mai, a 21-year-old international relations student, articulated this concern: “I want my international friends to know Vietnamese culture, our humor, our way of showing respect, our family values. But the AI just converts everything into generic English. My culture becomes invisible. It is like the AI is saying: your Vietnamese way of expressing things does not matter, here is the standard international version. That feels like erasure, not communication.”

c. Theme 3: Persistent Authenticity Concerns

The third theme encompasses participants’ widespread concerns about authenticity in AI-mediated communication (n = 20, 80%). These concerns operated at multiple levels: uncertainty about whether their own AI-assisted communications authentically represented them, questions about the genuineness of communications received from others, and broader philosophical anxieties about authentic human connection in an increasingly algorithmic world.

Lan, a 26-year-old business analyst who uses ChatGPT daily for professional correspondence, described a persistent sense of inauthenticity: “When AI polishes my English emails, I wonder if the result is really mine. The improved fluency feels borrowed rather than earned. My international colleagues probably think I write excellent English, but that excellence belongs to ChatGPT, not to me. I feel like an imposter in my own communications.” This validates Coman and Cardon’s (2024) findings that AI-assisted messages are perceived as less sincere, as documented from the sender’s rather than the recipient’s perspective.

Khanh, a 27-year-old entrepreneur with extensive international business contacts, described uncertainty flowing in the opposite direction: “I have started wondering about every thoughtful message I receive. Is this my partner’s genuine voice, or did their AI assistant compose this? The doubt is corrosive. I can never be entirely sure whether I am building a relationship with a person or with that person’s AI.” His experience suggests that awareness of AI writing assistance creates epistemic uncertainty that undermines the trust necessary for genuine relationship formation.

Thao, a 22-year-old student, identified a particular quality of AI-mediated communication that triggered her authenticity concerns: “AI translation produces messages that are unfailingly polite but emotionally flat. Everything is correct and appropriate, but there are no rough edges, no personality quirks, no moments where someone’s frustration or excitement breaks through the surface. Real human communication has texture, sometimes awkward, sometimes too direct, sometimes surprisingly warm. AI smooths all that away.” Her observation aligns with Cardon et al.’s (2023) identification of authenticity as a critical dimension of AI literacy.

Beyond immediate communication, participants worried about longer-term effects on their own development. Hung, a 23-year-old graduate student, expressed concern about competence atrophy: “I used to work hard at my English, making mistakes, learning from them, and gradually improving. Now I just run everything through ChatGPT. My English probably looks better, but I am not actually learning anything. I am becoming dependent on a tool rather than developing genuine cross-cultural competence. What happens when the AI is not available?” His concern echoes broader scholarly debates about whether AI tools enhance or diminish human capabilities, situated here in the specific context of the development of intercultural communication.

d. Theoretical Implications

These findings carry significant implications for communication theory. The experiences described suggest that AI-mediated cross-cultural communication represents a qualitatively different phenomenon from traditional intercultural exchange, requiring theoretical frameworks that account for algorithmic mediation as a distinct variable. Communication Accommodation Theory may require extension to account for what might be termed algorithmic accommodation or technological convergence, in which convergence occurs not through intentional human adjustments but through algorithmic processing that standardizes output regardless of communicator intentions. This represents a fundamental shift in the locus of accommodation from human agency to machine processing.

Read against prior empirical work, the findings confirm, extend, and partly qualify existing literature. They confirm the bidirectional ambivalence documented in Klimova et al. (2024) and Derakhshan and Ghiasvand (2024), in which fascination and concern co-occur within the same user. They extend the disclosure-effect findings of Coman and Cardon (2024) by indicating that the authenticity discount, previously documented from the recipient perspective, is also operative from the sender perspective. Read against the patterns in Herbener and Damholdt (2025), Kim et al. (2025), and De Freitas et al. (2025), the findings indicate that the well-being correlate of AI-mediated interaction depends on the purpose of use rather than being unidirectional.

Engagement with classical cross-cultural communication theory further sharpens the contribution. Ting-Toomey’s (1999) identity-negotiation framework presumes that identity-relevant cultural markers are present in the message and available for interlocutors to read; the cultural-flattening pattern reported here indicates that algorithmic mediation is correlated with the removal of precisely these markers, with implications for whether identity negotiation, as classically theorized, remains operative in AI-mediated exchanges. Yuna et al. (2022) review of social-media cross-cultural communication argues that digital platforms create distinctive conditions for intercultural contact; the present findings indicate that AI translation layers on top of social media produce a further reconfiguration in which the speaker, the algorithm, and the platform jointly shape the message in ways that classical CMC theory has not yet captured. Yushriman et al. (2024) report on intercultural adaptation in Malaysian universities is similarly informative: their finding that perceived intercultural competence is shaped by language and communication-norm variables aligns with the present observation that the absence of cultural texture in AI output is correlated with poorer perceived intercultural quality.

Drawing on Turkle's (2015) analysis, this study suggests AI tools can create simulated cross-cultural competence, the ability to perform successful intercultural exchange without developing underlying cultural knowledge. This distinction has implications for how scholars conceptualize the effectiveness of intercultural communication. Traditional models assume that successful cross-cultural communication reflects communicator competence; in AI-mediated contexts, successful communication may instead reflect algorithmic capability, leaving the human communicator no more interculturally competent than before the exchange.

Engagement with the AI-mediated communication literature further situates the contribution. Cardon et al. (2023) four-dimensional framework anchors authenticity and agency as evaluative dimensions of AI use; the present findings supply empirical grounding for both. The sender-side authenticity discount documented in this study indicates that authenticity, in the sense of Cardon et al., is contested not only at the receiver pole but also within the sender. Coman and Cardon's (2024) disclosure effect, observed in workplace messages, is extended here to cross-cultural personal communication, where the sender's uncertainty about the ownership of the message content becomes a chronic rather than episodic feature. In the language-learning strand, Lo et al. (2024) systematic review concerns regarding over-reliance and hindered real-life communication find lived-experience confirmation in the competence-atrophy theme reported by Hung; Klimova et al.'s (2024) and Derakhshan and Ghiasvand's (2024) reports of mixed appraisals are consistent with the simultaneous appreciation and concern voiced by participants here.

The findings also suggest reconsidering assumptions about technological mediation in communication research. Much scholarship has treated technology as a neutral channel through which human communication flows. The experiences documented here suggest that AI tools actively shape the content and quality of communication in ways that merit theoretical attention. The concept of cultural flattening, as proposed by participants, warrants further theoretical development as a distinct phenomenon in AI-mediated intercultural communication. Unlike simple information loss, cultural flattening involves the systematic removal of culturally specific elements that make communication meaningful within particular cultural contexts, replacing them with a culturally neutral global norm that belongs to no particular culture.

The paradox of isolation amid connectivity also has theoretical significance. Existing theories of computer-mediated communication have generally assumed that increased communicative capacity leads to increased social connection. The Vietnamese Generation Z experiences documented here suggest a more complex relationship: AI tools may increase the quantity of cross-cultural contact while decreasing its quality, leaving users with more superficial connections but less genuine understanding than they might have developed through fewer, more effortful, unmediated interactions. This finding resonates with Jacobs's (2024) concept of digital loneliness and extends it specifically to AI-mediated cross-cultural contexts.

e. Practical Implications

The practical implications extend to education, technology design, and individual practice. Educational institutions preparing students for cross-cultural engagement should consider how the use of AI tools intersects with the development of intercultural competence. The findings suggest that pedagogical approaches emphasizing AI assistance may inadvertently

undermine the development of genuine cross-cultural competence. Educators might consider deliberately structuring activities that require unmediated cross-cultural interaction alongside AI-assisted communication to help students develop both technological facility and authentic intercultural skills.

For technology designers, participants' experiences suggest that current AI translation tools optimize for linguistic accuracy while neglecting cultural fidelity and relational authenticity. Design interventions might include cultural context-preservation features, transparency about translation limitations, or prompts that encourage users to verify culturally sensitive content. The goal would be to design AI tools that augment, rather than replace, human cross-cultural learning.

For individual communicators, findings suggest value in developing what Cardon et al. (2023) termed AI literacy, encompassing application, authenticity, accountability, and agency. Young people navigating AI-mediated cross-cultural communication may benefit from critical awareness of how these tools shape their interactions. Practical strategies might include deliberately engaging in some unmediated cross-cultural communication, reflecting on the differences between AI-assisted and direct interaction, and maintaining investment in genuine language and cultural learning alongside AI tool use.

Specifically on education, Emir and Yangin-Eksi's (2024) systematic review of telecollaboration provides a practical template: structured online intercultural exchange embedded in coursework, with explicit reflective tasks, is positively associated with the development of intercultural competence. The present findings indicate that complementing such structured exchange with explicit instruction in AI literacy, in the four-dimensional sense articulated by Cardon et al. (2023), is likely to address the simulated-competence risk identified in this study.

The findings also have implications for how individuals approach relationship development across cultural boundaries. Participants' experiences suggest that meaningful cross-cultural relationships may require intentional effort to create spaces for authentic exchange beyond AI-mediated efficiency. This might involve video calls where participants speak in their own voices rather than text translation, shared activities that do not depend on linguistic perfection, or explicit conversations about the role of AI tools in the relationship. The goal would be to use AI as a scaffold for connection rather than a substitute for the messy, effortful, but ultimately rewarding work of genuine intercultural relationship building.

Engagement with the digital-globalization literature is similarly indicated. Bui's (2025) characterization of the Vietnamese digital marketing environment and Do's (2026) account of digital banking adoption together describe a Vietnamese context in which young consumers are positioned as primary adopters of digital tools; the cultural-flattening pattern reported here indicates that the same adopter position carries a cultural cost that descriptions framed at the level of access or usage do not capture. Jang and Kim's (2024) treatment of social media as an acculturation agent in the Vietnamese case is informative: where their study identifies acculturation toward South Korean cultural content, the present study points to a parallel acculturation toward an algorithmic communicative norm. Nguyen et al. (2025) finding that approximately half of Vietnamese youth on social media report psychological distress contextualizes the well-being concerns expressed by participants here and indicates that cross-cultural AI use is a domain in which such distress may be specifically reproduced.

Finally, these findings speak to broader societal questions about the role of AI in fundamental human activities. Cross-cultural communication is not merely instrumental; it is one of the ways humans expand their understanding of the world and their own identity. If AI tools facilitate surface-level contact while impeding deeper cultural learning and the formation of authentic relationships, the long-term consequences for human intercultural understanding could be significant. The Vietnamese Generation Z participants in this study are early adopters navigating these tensions in real time; their experiences offer important lessons for societies worldwide grappling with similar questions.

f. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the study focused on the Vietnamese Generation Z, which limits its generalizability to other cultural contexts and age groups. Second, the cross-sectional design captured experiences at one point in time; longitudinal research could track how perceptions evolve as AI tools improve. Third, participants were recruited primarily from urban areas with high digital literacy, potentially excluding perspectives from less digitally connected populations. Fourth, the study relied on self-reported experiences rather than observation of actual AI-mediated interactions.

Future research should examine these phenomena across diverse cultural contexts to identify universal versus culturally specific patterns. Longitudinal designs could track how experiences of AI-mediated communication evolve. Mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative measures of communication outcomes would provide complementary perspectives. Research examining the differential effects of specific AI tools would inform technology design. Finally, studies comparing AI-mediated communication across relationship types-professional, personal, and romantic- could illuminate how context shapes these dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how the Vietnamese Generation Z individuals experience AI-mediated cross-cultural communication, revealing complex tensions between technological capability and authentic human connection. The three themes identified, paradoxical isolation amid connectivity, cultural flattening through algorithmic mediation, and persistent authenticity concerns, collectively suggest that AI tools simultaneously enable and constrain meaningful intercultural exchange. Participants described AI translation tools as creating connections without understanding, technically successful communications that nonetheless failed to produce genuine cross-cultural comprehension.

The findings challenge the prevalent narrative that frames AI translation primarily as a solution to cross-cultural communication barriers. While AI tools undoubtedly lower barriers to initial contact across linguistic boundaries, they appear to create new barriers to the deeper understanding and authentic relationship formation that make cross-cultural communication valuable. The Vietnamese Generation Z participants in this study appreciated the practical utility of AI tools while simultaneously mourning something they perceived as lost: the struggle, the cultural texture, and the authentic human connection that characterized cross-cultural communication before algorithmic mediation became ubiquitous.

The study contributes to communication theory by extending Communication Accommodation Theory to AI-mediated contexts and proposing technological convergence as a distinct phenomenon requiring theoretical attention. It provides empirical grounding for

authenticity concerns previously articulated primarily at theoretical levels. The concept of cultural flattening, articulated by participants themselves, deserves further theoretical development as a phenomenon with significant implications for how cultural difference is encountered, understood, and valued in an age of algorithmic mediation.

As AI technologies become further embedded in everyday communication, understanding their effects on cross-cultural exchange becomes increasingly urgent. The challenge for researchers, educators, technology designers, and individual communicators will be to harness AI's genuine capabilities for facilitating cross-cultural contact while preserving the authentic human struggle and connection that make such contact meaningful. This balance requires ongoing attention to the human dimensions of AI-mediated communication and a commitment to developing approaches that complement, rather than replace, genuine intercultural learning. The experiences of the Vietnamese Generation Z documented here offer both warnings and guidance for societies worldwide as they navigate similar transitions toward AI-mediated human connection.

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BIODATA

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