

# A conceptual framework to explain transition of intercultural communication conflict, social environment and personality

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## Abstracts



Received 9 April 2017

Revised 7 May 2017

Accepted 17 June 2017

Citation: Ihtiyar, A. (2017). A conceptual framework to explain transition of intercultural communication conflict, social environment and personality. *Journal of Management, Economics, and Industrial Organization*, 1(1), 37-50.  
<http://doi.org/10.31039/jomeino.2017.1.1.4>



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This study conceptually examines a comprehensive framework that integrates intercultural communication competence (ICC) as a key perspective to better understand intercultural communication conflict in multicultural social environment. Although numerous researchers have studied extensive topics of intercultural communication in various literatures, none have conceptualized on the critical role of ICC or incorporated the construct as a major predictor to intercultural communication conflict and loyalty. ICC explains the ability to consider and internalize the various cultural settings to appropriately manage and build an effective communication in the multicultural atmosphere. ICC, which deals with having the right intercultural mind set, skill and sensitivity is crucial for intercultural encounters particularly in the culturally diverse societies. While, ICC has generated a lot of recent interest amongst scholars and practitioners, there is still a gap on the conceptualization to support or validate its theoretical claims. Hence, the study exposes additional insights into some practical and conceptual solutions for addressing the intercultural communication of culturally diverse encounters in culturally diverse social environment. These contributions postulate an impetus for future research in various service settings.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural communication conflict, social environment and personality*

## Introduction

The cross-cultural themes and concepts from various literatures have increased quite an attention among social science researchers in explaining to understanding of intercultural communication and adaptation processes of

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individuals who are participating from different cultures to host culture (Ihtiyar and Ahmad, 2015; Polsa et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2009). Most discussions on intercultural communication literature reflect the importance of the notion for the organizations intend to penetrate their internationalization activities particularly when the culture of the new society differs from the base or origin society. In regarding this perspective, this study is focusing on multicultural societies, the societies with multicultural and multiracial peculiarity and with greater needs for intercultural understanding. The rich multicultural social environments pose greater challenges for individuals to sharpen their intercultural communication compared to the other more culturally uniform societies such as China, Japan, Korea and Malaysia. For instance, Malaysia presents an extremely multicultural and combined ethnic structure of three dominant groups with the percentage of Malays at 50.35%, Chinese at 22.21% and Indians at 6.67% and other races for the remaining percentage (Statistics Department of Malaysia, 2013). Due to the cultural alterations, there is an obvious deficiency of behaviour homogeneity where the nature of Malaysia domestic society is highly categorized by the ethnically segmented society (Ahmad et al., 2014).

The context of cultural phases must be combined into a universal theory particularly in social sciences, as this would better explain the highly visible differences in intercultural dialogues (Ihtiyar et al., 2014; Shekarchizadeh et al., 2011). However only a few of earlier studies have explained how the proper intercultural communication competence between (intercultural) encounters has a significant influence or consequences on intercultural communication (Danylova, 2013; Herzog, 2010). It is also noted that in these earlier discussions, there is even a wider a gap of knowledge in explaining the antecedents of intercultural communication conflict. Consequently the present study intends to conceptualize the role of social environment, perceived cultural distance and personality, as antecedents to intercultural communication and the consequences of intercultural communication are intercultural communication conflict. The proposition is based on a theory referred to as “*role theory*” which posits that people interact in socially defined role (Biddle 1979) and hence determine expectations. However, people may also be expected to interact in multiple roles that could lead to contradictory expectation or causing conflicts. The other theory contributing to this proposal is described as “*Interdependence theory*” which identifies that most important characteristic of interpersonal situations is not just from intrapersonal perspectives but also through interpersonal process or a comprehensive analysis of situation structure (Rusbult & Lange, 2008). The theory hypothesizes that the ability of a person to interact in social environment is partly due to the anticipation of the social reward or enjoyable social comforts.

Consequently, the structure of the paper is as follows. Firstly, it discusses the literature review, which focuses on the theoretical background for the research, which leads to the research propositions. Then, it suggests the appropriate research framework and the research design. Finally, it concludes with a discussion on anticipation of findings and key suggestions for future research.

## 1. Literature review

Understanding leading communication types used in various cultures is a significant stage for understanding behaviours' of individuals who are from different cultural backgrounds (Pekerti & Thomas, 2015). Although, there are pioneer models, which explain processes of intercultural communication among culturally diverse encounters comprehensively, however, these models may insufficient in understanding of nature of intercultural interactions due to the individual's preferred behaviours, which are unpredictable in different situations and social environments (Pekerti and Thomas, 2015; Claeson, 2014; Toomey et al., 2013). As such, Laurent (1983) found that individuals from multicultural social environments exhibit in characteristics of their own culture obviously, however individuals from monocultures did not. Hereby, individuals incline to rely on interior indicators for guidance in different social environments (Pekerti & Thomas, 2015).

According to The similarity-attraction paradigm, which develops by Byrne, (1971) was one of the initial theoretical perspectives employed in interpersonal demography research (Wells and Aicher, 2013) and explains how behaviours and attitudes realize in the social environment regarding in and out group comparisons are made (Menguc and Boichuk, 2012). The paradigm is formed the individuals' personality, social status, values, beliefs, and demographics to use for better understanding the individuals and their directly relates to their interpersonal attraction and forms for further progresses. In accordance with the paradigm, the interactions among individuals are discovered similarities and dissimilarities, and individuals who share characteristics that are more familiar may have a greater attraction to another (Byrne, 1997:1971). Furthermore, similarities (associated positively) or dissimilarities (associated negatively) of social attractions and interrelationships of members in social groups have been correlated with individual's competence, socioeconomic status and enjoyments (Wells & Aicher, 2013). In short, when individuals interact with different cultures, they have a choice of using either an adaptive strategy or not (Pekerti & Thomas, 2015).

In regarding to these perspectives, individual's social environment and personality may affect their communication style during intercultural communication; however, it is still unclear which strategy will reduce intercultural communication conflict. The study suggests that social environment and personality should be paid attention to generate a comprehensive framework. To explore this issue, the study proposes three additional theories in addition to similarity attraction paradigm in regarding to understand communication behaviours in initial culturally diverse encounters. Therefore, this literature review will focus on the theoretical background of the research, which is focusing on three major theories namely *role theory*, *interdependence theory* and *cognitive consistency theory*. It will also explain the research constructs of the proposed research framework by understanding its embedded theory and past literature. Next it will suggest the research propositions, which explain the interrelationships between the constructs.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Role theory

Role theory was initially endorsed by Biddle (1979) and later by Solomon et al. (1985) to postulate that individuals interact in socially defined role and hence determine expectations. It is considered as “*a science concerned with the study of behaviors that are characteristic of persons within contexts and with processes that produce, explain or are affected by these behaviors*” (Biddle, 1979). In accordance with this description, social environment has an effect on personality and individuality as an integrative model of behaviour (Solomon et al., 1985). Therefore, the concentration of the theory among researchers is mainly on recognition of interaction of (intercultural) encounters on anticipated encounters’ behaviours.

One of the significant topics relating to the role theory is the recognition on the importance of the person-to-person interaction in terms of intercultural context and its overall influence on basic outcomes of intercultural communication such as communication efficiency and continuity (Sharma et al., 2012). In terms of this aspect, “*person-to-person*” interaction is becoming crucial indicator to decrease communication conflict level and creating powerful interaction for intercultural encounters (Ihtiyar et al, 2013). To an extent, encounters that are involved in intercultural communication are considered as the part of intercultural communication conflict (Solomon et al., 1985). However, although the role of encounters in interaction is significant; the interaction is not defined as linear. In other words, the interaction between intercultural encounters as person-to-person is dyadic interaction as further explains in the subsequent interdependence theory.

### 2.2. Interdependence theory

The perspective of Interdependence theory is established on logical analysis of structure of inter/intra personal interaction (Sharma et al., 2012; Paswan and Ganesh, 2005). The theory is implying a logical and explicable process to better understand specific situations, problems, motivations and opportunities via the concept of transformation. The theory hypothesizes that the ability of a person to interact in social environment is partly due to the anticipation of the social reward or enjoyable social comforts. Furthermore, the theory illuminates our thought of social-cognitive processes, attributions, and self-presentations for encounters and it enlightens adaptation, personification, relationships and social norms of encounters through unintended and intended situations (Rusbult and Van Lange 2003).

The theory also identifies the most important characteristics of inter/intrapersonal situations are not just from intrapersonal perspectives but also through inter/intrapersonal process or a comprehensive analysis of situation structure (Rusbult and Lange, 2008). Few studies on the theory resulted in few interesting findings. For example, an individual in multicultural social environment who has a foreign accent is frequently more culturally distant than another individual who can speak official language fluently (Hill and Tombs, 2011). Another finding indicates linguistic ability of employee in an organization (i.e. American, British and Indian accent) is influencing another encounters’ perceptions and interpretations during the service

experiences in the call centre setting (Wang et al., 2009). Thus, clarifying, describing and decoding the interaction among the encounters is a crucial process to better understand the consequences and possible outcomes of encounters.

### **2.3. Cognitive consistency theory**

An additional theory for explaining further perspectives and predict differences of intercultural encounters in terms of intercultural communication conflicts is cognitive consistency theory. The theory assumes that behaviours or attitudes of individuals change when there are differences between expected and perceived situation, particularly outcomes are significant to them (Pekerti and Thomas, 2015; Heider, 1946). In accordance with the theory, individuals who are comfortable with differences between realized situations and not attempt to change their own opinions or behaviours in others; these behaviours are entitled inconsistency-support behaviours; in contrary to this definition, individuals who are not comfortable attempt to others to change opinions or behaviours; these behaviours are entitled inconsistency-reduction behaviours (Iwao, 1997; Kelman and Baron, 1968).

In short, intentionally or unintentionally gained information from social environment is significant for encounters. Therefore, social environment and personality is linked to cognitive consistency orientation and communication behaviour (Triandis, 1989; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1977)

## **3. The research constructs**

### **3.1. Intercultural communication competence**

ICC is the aptitude to communicate effectively and correctly with people of different cultures (Messner and Schäfer, 2012). It deals with the capability to think positively, discriminate the differences, internalize various cultural settings, manage the experiences properly and build an effective communication in the most appropriate way with individuals from different cultures in the cross-cultural environment (Friedman and Antal, 2005). ICC effects cross-cultural interactions (Sharma *et al.*, 2012) where people with stronger ICC have greater propensity to learn foreign languages and norms or values of other cultures. They can communicate effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds (Lustig and Koester, 2009). Furthermore, revenue contribution, service concentration, interpersonal skills, social and job satisfaction are influenced by encounters' intercultural competence (Sizoo *et al.*, 2005). However, most of the encounter's expectations and reactions have been examined without ICC (Ryoo, 2005). This study on the other hand proposes an exploration on the antecedents of ICC (based on the interdependence theory) and its immediate consequence on positive cognitive reward such as interaction comfort and inters role conflict (based on both of the interdependence theory and the role theory). Although it is understood that the positive cognitive reward will lead to decrease the communication conflict level, the limit of this discussion is on the two most important antecedents (multicultural personality and social environment) and immediate cognitive consequence (interaction comfort) of ICC based on the discussed theories.

Individuals with lower ICC are likely to feel less comfortable and expose weak inter-role conflict in intercultural encounters compared to those with higher levels of ICC (Friedman and Antal, 2005). Those with higher ICC exhibit more empathy and respect for individuals from other cultures, respond to curious circumstances and behaviors in a non-judgmental way without showing visible or perceivable discomfort, and enthusiastically use their knowledge and experience to predict various expectations in numerous situations (Lustig and Koester, 2009). Individuals with higher ICC also may not only be more aware of cross-cultural differences in service roles and perceptions, but they are also more likely to agree with these differences. Furthermore, they have greater experience and knowledge about other cultures and are able to use this experience and knowledge efficiently with people from other cultures, compared to those with lower ICC (Earley et al., 2007). Hence, higher ICC may also contribute in reducing discomfort and uncertainty generally associated with intercultural service encounters. The study thus proposes ICC predicts interaction comforts and intercultural communication conflict.

### **3.2. Social environment**

The social environment is a major antecedent for explaining the consumption experiences in various businesses settings (Uhrich and Benkenstein, 2012). Previous studies in the literature, conceptually or empirically, have paid considerable attention to environment such as; impact of social environment on communication conflict (Chua, 2012), social and physical atmospheric effects in communication conflicts (Hinds and Mortensen, 2005); the relationship of physical environment and intercultural communication competence (Ahmad et al., 2015).

Cultural environment and social environment have dyadic interaction (Kotler and Keller 2012). In this study, social environment is a compromised of four main factors that are namely socio-economic status, socio-education background, socio-cultural environment and national socio-policy. Socio economic deals with the impacts economic development has on social milieu. Socio education assesses educational background that helps people to fully integrate in intercultural society. Socio cultural environment deals with set of interaction beliefs and practices among the people within a population while socio policy is an assessment on national policy that deals with social integration. The present study would assist to explain how individuals' social environment affects their ICC, multicultural personality and interaction comforts.

### **3.3. Multicultural personality**

Theories of personality have been essentially concentrated on the dimensions of human characteristics that can be categorized under cognitive and affective patterns such as thoughts and emotions for explaining the behavioral aspects of human being (Ahmad et al., 2012; Boag and Tiliopoulos, 2011). According to traditional definitions of personality, it is a self-motivated psychophysical system that create an individual's characteristic patterns of behaviour, thoughts, and feelings and these patterns give direction to the individual's life (Boag and Tiliopoulos, 2011; Pervin, 2003). The popular trait psychology approach was materialized a theory called Five Factor Model with constructs of neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004). Although, the model has been researched from

numerous scholars in various fields, however, critics argues on its limitation in explaining “*how culture shapes personality*”, “*how personality traits and culture interact to shape the behaviour of individuals and social groups*” (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004) and “*What extent do the culture and sub-cultures in which people are immersed shape their personality?*”(Dumont, 2010). Therefore, in contrary to classical perspective on personality and the subsequent critics, the study suggests to understand the personality in terms of the cultural indicators.

The multicultural personality model have actually been applied by many authors in various areas such as in the study by Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002) for measuring multicultural effectiveness of expatriates students and employees; in the study of Van Oudenhoven et al. (2003) for explaining the cultural adaptation of expatriates to local culture; in the study of Leong (2007) for measuring the socio-psychological adaptation of Singaporean undergraduate students to local culture; in the study of Yakunina et al. (2012) for investigating of international students’ openness to diversity and intercultural alteration; in the study of Horverak et al. (2013) to investigate the interrelationship between manager selection preferences and multicultural personality traits in Norway; in the study of Lee and Ciftci (2014) for examining the influence of assertiveness, social support, academic self-efficiency and multicultural personality on Asian international students’ socio-cultural adjustment in USA.

In the present study, trait theory of personality within multicultural personality perspective will assist to explain the how individuals’ personality affects their perceptions on cultural distance, ICC and interaction comforts.

### **3.4. Interaction comfort**

Earlier studies in psychology and sociology have provided several validated reasons of increasing encounters comfort during interaction of (intercultural) encounters. Strengthened interaction comfort leads to reduce the perceived risk, increased confidence, trust, interaction satisfaction and improved relational exchange (Sharma et al., 2012; Lloyd and Luk, 2011;).

As stated in the interdependence theory (Surprenant et al, 1983), each part of interaction has an impact on another part because behavior of the second part is influenced by the outcomes of the first part. In other words, the (intercultural) encounters are not independent and it may increase the level of knowledge on each other parts and also reduce possible risks and uncertainty. Basically, interaction comfort is defined as the likeliness individuals share common norms, values, languages and other factors related to culture and this will improve predictability of individual’s expectations and behavior, decrease uncertainty and create an effective communication. On the other spectrum, perceived dissimilarities in behavioural values or norms such as on language, religion and so on will lead to a sense of discomfort (Ihtiyar and Ahmad, 2013). In this study, interaction comfort is one of the critical dimensions for mirroring the impact of social environment, multicultural personality, perceived cultural distance, intercultural communication competence and inter-role conflict on intercultural communication conflict.

### **3.5. Inter-role conflict**

A favourable interaction outcome depends on role clarity, and it should be understood each

other's roles and perceptions during communication (Solomon et al., 1985). Unfortunately, even when (intercultural) encounters happen among between people of similar cultures, they may have different perceptions about each other, or they may not always be able to act within their expected roles in interaction (Baker et al., 2009). The inter role conflict would be more complicated in intercultural interactions where participants must consider the different ethic roles among (intercultural) encounters.

According to the role theory (Solomon et al., 1985), the level of conflict and misunderstanding that are caused by the role perception (the degree of understanding and agreement between both sides on each other's role in an interaction) may involve breaking the communication between both sides, and it may lead to a dissatisfied communication experience for (intercultural) encounters. Moreover, as highlighted in the studies of Nicholls (2011); Reimann et al. (2008) and Hofstede (1984), people from high-power distance cultures, individualistic background, high uncertainty avoidance cultures represent distinctive differences on inter-role conflict in the context of (intercultural) encounters. Inter role conflict would consequently positively affect interaction comfort.

### **3.6. Perceived cultural distance**

Due to the dissimilarities or familiarities about cultural background of (intercultural) encounters indicate important changes in their expectation and / or perceptions on intercultural communication experiences and, hence, intercultural communication efficiency is influenced by their pre-conceptions (Sharma et al. 2012). In literature of sociology, social psychology, positive psychology and associated fields, dissimilarities or familiarities of individuals have been investigated under cultural distance. Most studies in the literature utilized cultural distance using various index for analysing; for instance, Hofstede's cultural dimensions those are namely, "*uncertainty*" "*avoidance*", "*individualism-collectivism*", "*masculinity-femininity*" and "*power distance*" (Sharma et al. 2012). Instead of this general approach, the present study will concern to apply Sharmas' et al., (2012) method, which is entitled "*perceived cultural distance*" for measure of overall differentiation among individuals from different cultures. Instead of this widely definition for perceived cultural distance, it is explained more likely as it measures "*an individual difference of the perceived discrepancies between social and physical aspects of home and host culture environments*" by Suanet and Van de Vijver (2009).

### **3.7. Intercultural communication conflict**

Individuals' assumptions, values and beliefs present fluctuations and even if individuals from ethnically same backgrounds, they have different expectations and perceptions (Herzog, 2010). Therefore, regardless of racial backgrounds, the values, assumptions and experiences generate individuals' opinions that influence peoples' behaviour and decisions on certain activities (Herzog, 2010). Hence, in order to better understand the individual's decisions, expectations or perceptions, encounters may consider to communicate with each other in terms of scripts and frames, which are generated by cultural differences (Ahmad et al., 2015).

Another significant point in dealing with intercultural conflicts is native knowledge, which is explained by Sefa Dei et al. (2000) as "*...acquired by local peoples through daily experience.*



*They deal with the experiential reality of the world. They are forms of knowledge that reflect the capabilities, priorities, and value systems of local peoples and communities.”* Hence, individuals’ experiences are framed by their own world, work, family, socialization experiences, and so on. Although there is a limited sharing experience, individuals may expect to behave according to same values they hold (Herzog, 2010). In other words, individuals’ expectations on each other are a potential source of conflict. In paralleling to this perspective, as highlighted in the study of Linds, (2002) *“created and sustained by a network (form) of communications (process), in which meaning is generated. The culture’s material embodiments (matter) include artifacts and written texts, through which meaning is passed on from generation to generation.”* Therefore, culture is a significant indicator for forming of individuals’ worldviews.

Considering all these components, as long as individuals have shared their experiences, values and opinions; conflicts, which are generated both parties remain in zone of tolerance. Furthermore, expected differences in an intercultural communication may be reduced via better preparation and negotiation, either face-to-face, through a mediator or neutral party without adding his or her own opinions (Herzog, 2010). Hereby, reduced potential conflicts and strengthened interaction comfort leads to decrease the perceived risk and increased confidence, trust, interaction satisfaction and improved relational exchange (Sharma et al., 2012; Lloyd and Luk, 2011; Paswan and Ganesh, 2005;).

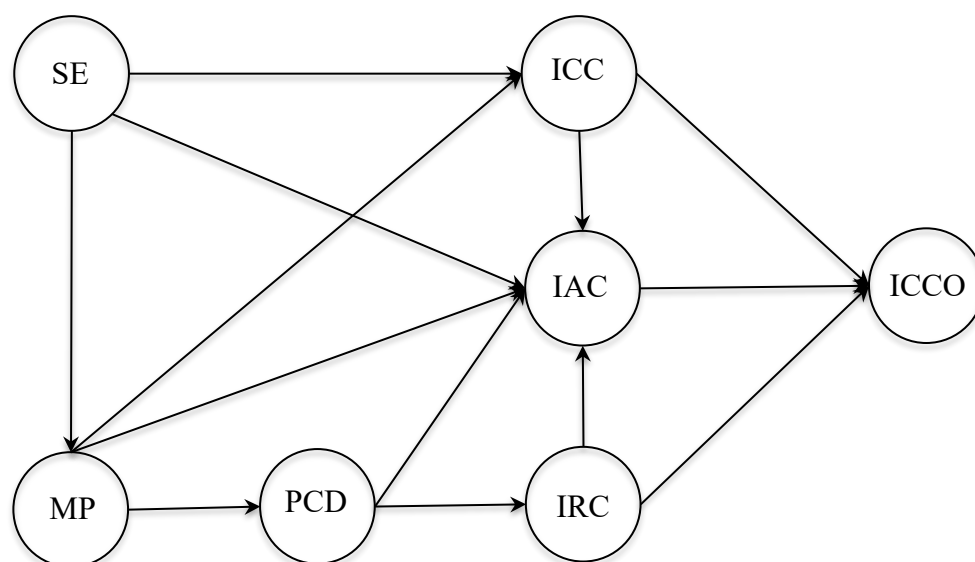
### **3.8. Interrelationship among constructs**

The present study proposes a framework to research the impact of social environment and multicultural personality on perceived cultural distance, intercultural communication competence and interaction comfort. The framework also includes the consequences of ICC on interaction comfort and intercultural communication conflict among the individuals of multicultural social environment as shown in propositions below.

- P1: Social environment determines multicultural personality.
- P2: Social environment determines interaction comfort.
- P3: Social environment determines intercultural communication competence.
- P4: Multicultural personality determines interaction comfort.
- P5: Multicultural personality determines intercultural communication competence.
- P6: Multicultural personality determines perceived cultural distance determines.
- P7: Perceived cultural distance determines interaction comfort.
- P8: Perceived cultural distance determines inter-role conflict.
- P9: Inter-role conflict determines interaction comfort.
- P10: Inter-role conflict determines intercultural communication conflict.
- P11: Interaction comfort determines intercultural communication conflict.
- P12: Intercultural communication competence determines interaction comfort.
- P13: Intercultural communication competence determines intercultural communication conflict.

## 4. Research framework and design

This paper intends to propose an appropriate research framework and research design to empirically examine the interactions among the various constructs discussed above for future researches. The proposed research framework is based on the proposed theories and shown in Figure 1. The following discussion explains and justifies the research design, as well as detailing its administrative procedures or operational framework to examine the data for future researches.



**Figure 1:** Research Framework

In designing this research, the nature of the research problems and the objectives of the study, which then translated into the conceptual framework, served as a basis to indicate the types of design to be applied. This research intends to test whether the proposed model is a valid way to conceptualize and explain the endogenous and exogenous variables in multicultural social environment. It shall start with the further investigations on relevant constructs through extensive literature review and expert opinions in order to clarify and define the nature of notions. Furthermore to that, based on the established conceptual framework, questionnaire survey will be developed. The survey design should incorporate available tools from existing theories and literature on each of the recognized elements of the research constructs as discussed earlier.

The next step would be conducting fieldwork study or collecting the survey data among the respondents to examine and measure the latent constructs based on the selected parameters and variables. In this major quantitative phase, the study may apply partial least square-structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) technique to assess the relationships between the constructs and consequently address the hypotheses and model fit.

The advantage of the technique is that it combines the principle of factor analysis and multiple regressions in one procedure (Hair *et. al.*, 2013). Employing PLS-SEM technique would thus contribute to theory testing and to explain the relationships among the model constructs.

## Conclusions and future recommendation

The fundamental objective of this study is to present and examine the relationships of the theoretical model among the dimensions of ICC, multicultural personality, social environment, perceived cultural distance, inter-role conflict, interaction comfort and intercultural communication conflict. The theoretical model presented in the study postulates that social environment predicts multicultural personality, ICC and interaction comfort. Multicultural personality predicts ICC, perceived cultural distance and interaction comfort. ICC affects interaction comfort; inter-role conflict influence interaction comfort and; finally, interaction comfort, inter-role conflict and intercultural communication competence influence intercultural communication conflict.

The possible findings are anticipated to bring meaningful improvement in managing and understanding the intercultural communication conflict constructs in the practice and beyond the theory. The implications for further research would be to test both the indirect and direct effects of the model on intercultural communication conflict in various multicultural social environments. The main administrative implication from the study will be that assessments of communication conflict experience in terms of intercultural communication literature in addition to the conventional cognitive assessment of the normal perspectives. To scholars, the study would assist in strategizing ICC effectively when operating in multicultural social environment. The primary concern of multicultural societies' authorities is to decrease internal and external communication conflict issues in intercultural social environments that is the most active and strategically significant situations. Promoting ICC will not just improve the competitiveness among the multicultural encounters but would also boost the racial integration and the government campaign on unity program. Another positive outcome of the study would be the re-defining and re-conceptualizing the communication conflict and raise the highly skilled employees with strong ICC aptitude among participants.

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