

CROSS-CULTURAL FRIENDSHIP IN THE DIGITAL ERA: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed the way people communicate and build relationships across cultural boundaries. Through social media, online communities, and virtual communication platforms, individuals can establish and maintain cross-cultural friendships more easily than ever before. These friendships provide opportunities for cultural exchange, the development of intercultural competence, English language practice, and global networking. However, they also present challenges, including language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, stereotypes, differences in communication styles, and the limitations of digital communication. This article discusses both the opportunities and challenges of cross-cultural friendship in the digital era by drawing on recent literature in intercultural communication and English language education. The discussion highlights the importance of intercultural awareness, empathy, mutual respect, and responsible digital communication in fostering meaningful intercultural relationships. Furthermore, the article emphasizes the role of cross-cultural friendship in supporting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' language development and intercultural competence. It concludes that meaningful cross-cultural friendships can contribute to greater global understanding and prepare students to participate effectively in multicultural academic and professional environments.

Keywords: cross-cultural friendship, digital era, intercultural communication, intercultural competence, English language education, EFL students.

ABSTRAK

Perkembangan pesat teknologi digital telah mengubah cara orang berkomunikasi dan menjalin hubungan melintasi batas-batas budaya. Melalui media sosial, komunitas daring, dan platform komunikasi virtual, individu dapat menjalin dan memelihara persahabatan lintas budaya dengan lebih mudah daripada sebelumnya. Persahabatan ini memberikan peluang untuk pertukaran budaya, pengembangan kompetensi antarbudaya, latihan bahasa Inggris, serta jaringan global. Namun, hal ini juga menghadirkan tantangan, termasuk hambatan bahasa, kesalahpahaman budaya, stereotip, perbedaan gaya komunikasi, dan keterbatasan komunikasi digital. Artikel ini membahas peluang dan tantangan persahabatan lintas budaya di era digital dengan mengacu pada literatur terkini dalam bidang komunikasi antarbudaya dan pendidikan bahasa Inggris. Pembahasan ini menyoroti

pentingnya kesadaran antarbudaya, empati, saling menghormati, dan komunikasi digital yang bertanggung jawab dalam membina hubungan antarbudaya yang bermakna. Selain itu, artikel ini menekankan peran persahabatan lintas budaya dalam mendukung pengembangan bahasa dan kompetensi antarbudaya siswa Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa persahabatan lintas budaya yang bermakna dapat berkontribusi pada pemahaman global yang lebih baik serta mempersiapkan siswa untuk berpartisipasi secara efektif dalam lingkungan akademik dan profesional yang multikultural.

Kata Kunci: persahabatan lintas budaya, era digital, komunikasi antarbudaya, kompetensi antarbudaya, pendidikan bahasa Inggris, siswa EFL.

A. INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has transformed the way people communicate, interact, and establish relationships across the world. The widespread use of social media platforms, online learning environments, messaging applications, and virtual communities has eliminated many geographical barriers, enabling individuals from different cultural backgrounds to connect more easily than ever before. As a result, intercultural interaction has become an integral part of everyday life, particularly among young people and university students who actively engage in digital communication. This transformation has created greater opportunities for people to develop friendships that extend beyond national and cultural boundaries while also encouraging the exchange of ideas, experiences, and

values (Chang, 2021; Stuart et al., 2025). One important outcome of digital globalization is the increasing prevalence of cross-cultural friendship. Cross-cultural friendship refers to a close interpersonal relationship between individuals who come from different cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or national backgrounds. Unlike casual online interactions, cross-cultural friendships involve mutual trust, emotional support, shared experiences, and continuous communication. Such friendships enable individuals to learn directly from one another about cultural traditions, beliefs, social norms, and everyday practices. According to Holliday et al. (2021), meaningful intercultural interaction encourages individuals to appreciate cultural diversity while developing the ability to communicate respectfully with people whose values and perspectives differ

from their own. Similarly, Jackson (2024) emphasizes that successful intercultural communication requires not only language proficiency but also cultural awareness, openness, and the willingness to understand different ways of thinking and behaving. The emergence of digital communication has significantly accelerated the development of cross-cultural friendships. Digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, Discord, and Zoom provide spaces where individuals can interact regardless of physical distance or national borders. These platforms facilitate cultural exchange by allowing users to share daily experiences, celebrate cultural events, discuss global issues, and collaborate on academic or professional activities. For university students, digital communication also creates opportunities to participate in virtual exchange programs, international online communities, and collaborative learning projects that foster intercultural understanding (Freiermuth & Huang, 2021; Luo & Gao, 2024). Consequently, digital technology has become an important medium through which intercultural friendships are initiated, maintained,

and strengthened. Cross-cultural friendships offer numerous benefits for individuals living in an increasingly interconnected world. Through regular interaction with friends from different cultures, individuals gain firsthand knowledge of cultural diversity instead of relying solely on information from textbooks or media representations. These experiences contribute to the development of intercultural competence, which includes cultural awareness, empathy, adaptability, and effective communication skills. Baker (2022) argues that intercultural competence is an essential component of language learning because language and culture are inseparable. Learners who engage in authentic intercultural communication are more likely to develop the confidence and flexibility needed to interact successfully in multicultural environments. Moreover, cross-cultural friendships provide authentic opportunities for English language learners to practice communication in meaningful contexts while simultaneously broadening their global perspectives (Baker, 2022; Jackson, 2024). Despite these opportunities, establishing and maintaining cross-cultural friendships

is not without challenges. Differences in language proficiency, communication styles, cultural values, and social expectations often influence the quality of interpersonal interactions. Individuals from different cultural backgrounds may interpret words, behaviors, humor, or expressions differently, leading to misunderstandings or unintended conflicts. Furthermore, stereotypes and prejudice continue to influence intercultural communication, particularly when individuals rely on limited cultural knowledge or inaccurate media representations. Liang (2021) explains that multilingual online interactions require participants to negotiate meaning continuously because communication involves not only linguistic differences but also cultural interpretation. Likewise, Wahyuningtyas et al. (2021) highlight that effective communication in multicultural environments depends on individuals' ability to respect cultural diversity while adapting to different communication practices. Another challenge relates to the characteristics of digital communication itself. Although online communication enables rapid interaction across countries, it often

lacks important non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice. The absence of these cues may increase the possibility of misunderstanding because written messages can be interpreted differently depending on cultural background. In addition, time-zone differences, unequal access to technology, digital literacy, and concerns about privacy may also influence the sustainability of online friendships. Stuart et al. (2025) argue that digitally mediated intercultural contact creates valuable opportunities for global communication, but its success depends on users' intercultural sensitivity, ethical digital behavior, and willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue rather than superficial online interactions. For students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), cross-cultural friendship represents more than simply communicating with international peers. It provides authentic learning experiences that integrate language development with intercultural understanding. Through communication with people from different cultural backgrounds, students not only improve their English proficiency but also develop

critical thinking, empathy, tolerance, and global citizenship. These competencies are increasingly important in higher education because graduates are expected to communicate effectively in multicultural academic and professional settings. Freiermuth and Huang (2021) found that telecollaborative learning environments significantly enhance students' intercultural competence by encouraging authentic communication and collaborative problem-solving. Similarly, Luo and Gao (2024) demonstrated that online intercultural collaboration promotes both language learning and cultural understanding through sustained interaction between students from different countries. Considering the increasing importance of digital communication in contemporary society, examining cross-cultural friendship has become highly relevant in the field of intercultural communication and English language education. Understanding both the opportunities and the challenges associated with these friendships can help individuals develop the knowledge, attitudes, and communication skills needed to build meaningful relationships across

cultures. Therefore, this article aims to explore the opportunities created by digital technology in fostering cross-cultural friendships, analyze the challenges that may arise during intercultural interactions, and discuss the implications of these friendships for university students, particularly those studying English as a Foreign Language.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This article employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine the opportunities and challenges of cross-cultural friendship in the digital era. The review followed a systematic process consisting of literature identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and synthesis. Relevant studies were collected from reputable academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, and Wiley Online Library. The inclusion criteria consisted of peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books published between 2021 and 2025 that discussed cross-cultural friendship, intercultural communication, digital communication, and English language

education. After the selection process, the relevant studies were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to the opportunities, challenges, and educational implications of cross-cultural friendship in digital environments.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cross-cultural friendship is generally defined as a close interpersonal relationship between individuals who come from different cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, or national backgrounds. Unlike casual communication, cross-cultural friendship is characterized by mutual trust, emotional support, reciprocal understanding, and continuous interaction. These friendships enable individuals to exchange ideas, values, traditions, and personal experiences while learning to appreciate cultural diversity. In intercultural communication studies, friendship is regarded as an effective medium for reducing cultural distance because it allows individuals to experience another culture directly rather than relying on stereotypes or second-hand information (Holliday et al., 2021; Jackson, 2024). The development of

cross-cultural friendship is closely related to the concept of intercultural competence, which refers to the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds. According to Baker (2022), intercultural competence involves not only linguistic ability but also cultural awareness, empathy, openness, flexibility, and critical cultural reflection. These competencies enable individuals to understand that cultural differences should not be perceived as obstacles but as opportunities for mutual learning. Consequently, cross-cultural friendship becomes an important context in which intercultural competence is developed through authentic interaction rather than theoretical instruction alone. Research also suggests that friendship plays an important role in reducing prejudice and promoting intercultural understanding. Chang (2021) found that individuals who actively maintain friendships through digital platforms tend to develop more positive attitudes toward cultural diversity because they engage in continuous communication and cultural exchange. Instead of forming opinions based on media

representations or stereotypes, individuals learn directly from their friends' personal experiences. This process encourages mutual respect and strengthens social relationships across cultural boundaries. For university students, particularly those studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL), cross-cultural friendship provides meaningful learning experiences beyond classroom instruction. Communicating with international peers enables students to practice English in authentic situations while simultaneously developing intercultural sensitivity. These experiences expose learners to different perspectives, communication styles, and cultural norms that cannot be fully understood through textbooks alone. Therefore, cross-cultural friendship serves not only as a social relationship but also as an educational experience that contributes to both language development and personal growth (Jackson, 2024; Baker, 2022). The emergence of digital technology has fundamentally changed the nature of intercultural communication. In previous decades, opportunities to establish friendships with people from different countries were relatively

limited because communication depended largely on physical mobility or formal exchange programs. Today, however, social media, online learning platforms, messaging applications, and virtual communities enable individuals to communicate across geographical boundaries almost instantly. Digital communication has therefore become an essential component of globalization, allowing people to participate in intercultural interactions regardless of their physical location (Stuart et al., 2025). Digital platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Discord, Facebook, and Zoom have created new spaces for intercultural dialogue. Through these platforms, users share personal experiences, cultural traditions, educational activities, and social issues with audiences from different countries. Such interactions encourage cultural exchange because individuals are continuously exposed to diverse beliefs, lifestyles, and perspectives. Chang (2021) argues that social media has become an important facilitator of intercultural friendship by enabling regular communication and reducing the social distance between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In

educational settings, digital technology has expanded opportunities for international collaboration. Universities increasingly organize virtual exchange programs, telecollaborative learning projects, and online discussion forums that connect students from different countries. These programs allow students to complete collaborative tasks while learning about one another's cultures through authentic communication. Freiermuth and Huang (2021) reported that online video exchanges between language learners significantly improved students' intercultural competence, communication confidence, and willingness to interact with people from different cultures. Similarly, Luo and Gao (2024) demonstrated that telecollaborative projects encourage students to develop intercultural awareness while improving their English communication skills. Nevertheless, digital communication differs from face-to-face interaction in several important ways. Online communication often lacks non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and tone of voice, which are essential for interpreting meaning accurately. Consequently,

written messages, emojis, or short responses may be interpreted differently depending on cultural context. Liang (2021) explains that multilingual online communication requires participants to negotiate meaning continuously because cultural interpretation plays an important role in understanding messages. Therefore, successful intercultural communication in digital environments requires not only technological competence but also intercultural sensitivity, patience, and effective communication strategies. One of the most significant opportunities created by cross-cultural friendship is the promotion of cultural exchange. Through regular communication, individuals learn directly about different customs, traditions, languages, religious practices, values, and lifestyles. Unlike formal cultural education, friendship provides authentic and personal experiences that enable individuals to understand culture from an insider's perspective. This direct interaction reduces misconceptions and encourages greater appreciation of cultural diversity (Chang, 2021; Holliday et al., 2021). Furthermore, cultural exchange contributes to

mutual understanding because individuals begin to recognize similarities despite cultural differences. Rather than emphasizing distinctions, cross-cultural friendship highlights shared human values such as respect, kindness, cooperation, and empathy. As a result, friendship becomes an important mechanism for promoting peaceful intercultural relationships in an increasingly globalized society. Cross-cultural friendship also plays a crucial role in developing intercultural competence. Individuals who regularly interact with friends from different cultural backgrounds gradually become more aware of cultural differences and learn how to communicate appropriately in multicultural settings. According to Baker (2022), intercultural competence involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions, including cultural knowledge, empathy, flexibility, and effective communication skills. Authentic intercultural interaction encourages individuals to become more reflective about their own cultural assumptions while respecting the perspectives of others. Jackson (2024) emphasizes that intercultural competence cannot be developed

solely through classroom instruction because meaningful intercultural experiences are essential for transforming knowledge into practical communication skills. Therefore, cross-cultural friendship functions as an important learning environment where individuals continuously improve their intercultural abilities through everyday interaction. English serves as the primary medium of communication in many international digital communities. Consequently, cross-cultural friendships provide authentic opportunities for EFL students to use English in meaningful social contexts rather than merely completing classroom exercises. Through conversations about hobbies, education, culture, and daily life, learners improve their speaking, listening, vocabulary, pronunciation, and pragmatic competence. Freiermuth and Huang (2021) found that authentic online interaction significantly increases learners' confidence in communicating with international partners. Similarly, Luo and Gao (2024) concluded that sustained intercultural collaboration promotes both language development and intercultural awareness because students actively negotiate meaning

during communication. These findings suggest that cross-cultural friendship functions as an informal yet highly effective environment for language learning. Another important opportunity is the expansion of academic and professional networks. Digital communication enables students to establish relationships with peers from universities around the world, creating opportunities for collaborative research, international seminars, student exchange programs, and scholarship information. These international networks contribute to students' academic development while preparing them for future careers in multicultural workplaces (Stuart et al., 2025). In today's global labor market, employers increasingly value graduates who possess intercultural communication skills and international experience. Therefore, cross-cultural friendship not only enriches students' personal lives but also enhances their academic and professional competitiveness. Beyond academic benefits, cross-cultural friendship contributes significantly to personal development. Continuous interaction with culturally diverse individuals encourages empathy, emotional

intelligence, tolerance, adaptability, and open-mindedness. Individuals learn to manage cultural differences constructively while developing stronger interpersonal relationships. Moreover, cross-cultural friendships foster a sense of global citizenship by encouraging individuals to view themselves as members of a broader international community. This perspective motivates people to appreciate diversity, cooperate across cultures, and contribute positively to solving global challenges. As Baker (2022) argues, intercultural learning ultimately aims to develop individuals who can participate responsibly and ethically in an increasingly interconnected world. Although digital technology has created unprecedented opportunities for people to establish intercultural relationships, maintaining cross-cultural friendships remains a complex process. Cultural diversity enriches interpersonal relationships, but it also introduces differences in language, values, communication styles, and social expectations. Without sufficient intercultural competence, these differences may lead to misunderstandings and negatively affect the quality of friendships

(Jackson, 2024). Language remains one of the most significant challenges in cross-cultural friendship. Although English functions as an international language, many users communicate in English as a second or foreign language. Consequently, differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, idiomatic expressions, and language proficiency frequently create communication difficulties. For example, humor, sarcasm, or informal expressions that are easily understood by native speakers may confuse non-native speakers. Likewise, learners with limited English proficiency often hesitate to participate actively in conversations because they are afraid of making mistakes or being misunderstood. These communication barriers may reduce interaction frequency and weaken interpersonal relationships. Liang (2021) argues that multilingual online communication requires continuous negotiation of meaning because successful communication depends on both linguistic competence and cultural interpretation. Similarly, Freiermuth and Huang (2021) found that although online intercultural interaction improves language proficiency, participants initially experience anxiety

when communicating in English with international partners. Cultural misunderstandings are another common challenge in intercultural friendships. Every culture possesses unique values, beliefs, behavioral norms, and communication conventions that influence how individuals interpret messages and respond during conversations. Consequently, behaviors that are considered polite or appropriate in one culture may be interpreted differently in another. For instance, some cultures value direct communication and openness, whereas others prefer indirect communication to preserve social harmony. Differences in punctuality, eye contact, silence, humor, personal space, and expressions of disagreement may also influence interpersonal interactions. Without adequate cultural knowledge, these differences may create confusion or even interpersonal conflict. Holliday et al. (2021) emphasize that intercultural communication requires individuals to recognize that cultural norms shape communication behaviors. Therefore, cultural misunderstandings should be viewed as opportunities for learning rather than evidence of personal

incompatibility. Stereotypes continue to influence intercultural communication despite increasing opportunities for global interaction. Individuals sometimes form opinions about other cultures based on media portrayals, limited experiences, or generalized assumptions instead of direct personal interaction. Such stereotypes often simplify cultural identities and prevent people from appreciating individual differences. Chang (2021) explains that digital communication has the potential to reduce stereotypes because regular interaction allows individuals to replace assumptions with authentic experiences. However, the same digital environment may also reinforce prejudice when misinformation, biased content, or discriminatory narratives circulate through social media. Therefore, critical thinking and intercultural awareness are essential for evaluating online information and maintaining positive intercultural relationships. Communication styles vary considerably across cultures. High-context cultures often communicate indirectly and rely on contextual information, whereas low-context cultures generally prefer explicit verbal communication. These

differences influence how people express opinions, provide feedback, manage disagreements, and interpret silence during conversations. In digital communication, these differences become even more significant because written messages provide fewer contextual clues than face-to-face interactions. Emojis, abbreviations, and short responses may carry different meanings across cultures, increasing the possibility of misunderstanding. Jackson (2024) argues that successful intercultural communication requires flexibility and the ability to adapt communication strategies according to cultural context. Therefore, individuals should avoid making immediate judgments when encountering unfamiliar communication styles. Although digital technology enables continuous global communication, it cannot fully replace face-to-face interaction. Online communication lacks many non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and tone of voice that help individuals interpret meaning accurately. Consequently, messages may easily be misunderstood, particularly when discussing sensitive topics or expressing emotions. Other practical

challenges include differences in time zones, internet accessibility, digital literacy, and communication frequency. Friends living in different countries often experience difficulties finding suitable times for conversation, while unequal access to technology may reduce opportunities for regular interaction. Stuart et al. (2025) note that digitally mediated intercultural communication offers substantial opportunities for global engagement; however, meaningful relationships require sustained interaction, mutual trust, and responsible digital participation rather than occasional online contact alone. Developing successful cross-cultural friendships requires more than technological access; it also depends on individuals' willingness to understand cultural diversity and communicate respectfully. One of the most effective strategies is developing intercultural awareness. Individuals should actively learn about different cultures through reading, educational activities, intercultural exchange programs, and direct communication. Greater cultural knowledge reduces misunderstandings and encourages respectful interaction (Baker, 2022). Another important strategy is

practicing active listening. Effective intercultural communication involves listening carefully, asking for clarification when necessary, and avoiding assumptions. Instead of immediately interpreting unfamiliar behaviors negatively, individuals should consider possible cultural explanations. According to Holliday et al. (2021), curiosity and openness are fundamental attitudes that support successful intercultural communication. Empathy also plays a central role in maintaining cross-cultural friendships. Empathy enables individuals to appreciate different perspectives and respond respectfully even when cultural values differ from their own. Through empathy, disagreements become opportunities for dialogue rather than sources of conflict. Jackson (2024) emphasizes that empathy strengthens interpersonal trust and promotes meaningful intercultural relationships. In addition, responsible digital communication is increasingly important in the digital era. Individuals should respect privacy, avoid spreading misinformation, communicate politely, and demonstrate ethical behavior when interacting online. Digital citizenship

contributes to creating safe online environments where intercultural friendships can develop positively (Stuart et al., 2025). Finally, continuous communication is essential for sustaining long-term friendships. Regular interaction, mutual support, honesty, and respect strengthen interpersonal relationships despite geographical distance or cultural differences. Cross-cultural friendship should therefore be viewed as an ongoing process of mutual learning rather than a relationship that develops automatically. The findings discussed above have important implications for students in English Education programs. English is no longer taught solely as a linguistic system but also as a medium for intercultural communication. Consequently, English language education should prepare students not only to master grammar and vocabulary but also to communicate effectively with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds (Baker, 2022). Cross-cultural friendships provide authentic opportunities for EFL students to use English in meaningful communication. Through interactions with international peers, students improve their speaking,

listening, vocabulary, and pragmatic competence while simultaneously developing intercultural awareness. These authentic experiences complement classroom learning because students encounter real communication situations that require flexibility, negotiation of meaning, and cultural sensitivity (Freiermuth & Huang, 2021). Furthermore, future English teachers should integrate cultural learning into language instruction. Classroom activities such as virtual exchanges, collaborative international projects, online discussions, and intercultural reflection can help students develop both language proficiency and intercultural competence. Luo and Gao (2024) demonstrate that telecollaborative learning significantly enhances students' understanding of cultural diversity while improving their communication skills. In an increasingly globalized educational environment, graduates who possess intercultural competence are better prepared to participate in international academic collaboration, multicultural workplaces, and global professional communities. Therefore, fostering cross-cultural friendship should be regarded as an essential component

of English language education because it supports language learning, cultural understanding, and the development of responsible global citizens (Jackson, 2024; Baker, 2022).

D. CONCLUSION

The digital era has significantly transformed the way people establish and maintain friendships across cultural boundaries. Through social media, online communities, and various digital communication platforms, individuals can interact with people from diverse cultural backgrounds more easily than ever before. These interactions create valuable opportunities for cultural exchange, language learning, intercultural competence development, global networking, and personal growth. As a result, cross-cultural friendship has become an important aspect of communication in an increasingly interconnected world. Despite these benefits, cross-cultural friendships also involve several challenges. Language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, stereotypes, differences in communication styles, and the limitations of digital communication may hinder the development of

meaningful relationships if they are not managed appropriately. These challenges demonstrate that successful intercultural friendship requires more than access to digital technology; it also depends on cultural awareness, empathy, respect for diversity, and effective communication skills. For students of English Education, cross-cultural friendship provides authentic opportunities to apply English in real-life communication while developing intercultural competence. Such experiences prepare future educators to communicate effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds and to promote cultural understanding in English language classrooms. Therefore, English language learning should integrate both linguistic and cultural aspects to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed in a globalized society. In conclusion, digital technology has created unprecedented opportunities for building cross-cultural friendships, but its success depends on individuals' willingness to embrace cultural diversity and communicate with openness and respect. By developing intercultural awareness and

responsible digital communication practices, individuals can build meaningful international friendships that contribute to mutual understanding, global cooperation, and peaceful coexistence across cultures.

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