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Intercultural Communication Challenges in Culturally Diverse Teams: A Conceptual Framework of Knowledge Sharing, Cultural Intelligence, and Team Effectiveness

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Abstract: Intercultural communication challenges remain a significant concern in culturally diverse teams because differences in language, cultural norms, pragmatic conventions, stereotypes, and contextual expectations can disrupt mutual understanding and collaboration. This conceptual paper develops an integrated framework explaining how such challenges influence team effectiveness through knowledge sharing and how cultural intelligence shapes this process. Drawing on Social Information Processing Theory, the paper argues that intercultural communication difficulties can impede the interpretation, transfer, and integration of knowledge across cultural boundaries, thereby reducing the effectiveness of collective action. Knowledge sharing is positioned as the mediating mechanism through which communication challenges affect team outcomes, while cultural intelligence is proposed as a moderating capability that weakens the negative relationship between intercultural communication challenges and knowledge sharing. The framework therefore advances a moderated mediation perspective linking communication barriers, intercultural capability, knowledge processes, and team effectiveness. The paper contributes to intercultural communication research by moving beyond the identification of communication barriers toward explaining how and under what conditions these barriers influence culturally diverse teams. The proposed framework also provides a foundation for future empirical research in multicultural, virtual, and technology-mediated organisational settings.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication Challenges, Knowledge Sharing, Cultural Intelligence, Team Effectiveness, Multicultural Teams, International collaboration, Inclusive society

1. Introduction

Increasing globalisation, international mobility, and culturally diverse workplaces have intensified interactions among individuals from different linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds. Although such interactions provide opportunities for knowledge exchange, collaboration, and cross-cultural learning, they also create considerable communication challenges. Intercultural communication does not simply involve transmitting information between individuals from different national cultures; rather, it involves interpreting and negotiating meanings shaped by language, cultural norms, expectations, identities, and situational contexts. Consequently, individuals participating in intercultural encounters may interpret the same message differently, even when they share a common working language. Previous research has demonstrated that cultural and linguistic differences can contribute to misunderstandings and communication failure because communicators frequently rely on culturally embedded assumptions when interpreting messages and behaviours (Kaur, 2011; Melikyan, 2012; Muhammad, 2005). Therefore, understanding intercultural communication requires consideration not only of cultural differences but also of how individuals construct and interpret meaning during interaction.

The complexity of intercultural communication becomes particularly evident when linguistic and pragmatic differences intersect with culturally specific communication practices. Language proficiency can influence the ability of individuals to convey intentions accurately; however, sharing a common language does not necessarily guarantee effective communication. Pragmatic differences concerning directness, politeness, turn-taking, refusals, compliments, accents, and non-verbal behaviour may also produce misunderstanding between culturally different communicators (Abu-Arqoub & Alserhan, 2019; McGee, 2019; Bux, Zhu, & Devi, 2025; Vasumathi, Vasudevan, Razak, A., & Mohammad, 2025). Moreover, stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and culturally derived expectations may affect how individuals perceive both the message and the person communicating it. Thus, communication difficulties should not be understood merely as problems of linguistic competence. Instead, they emerge through the interaction of language, cultural assumptions, interpersonal perceptions, and contextual expectations. This multidimensional nature of intercultural communication makes it difficult to explain communication success or failure through a single cultural or linguistic factor.

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Another limitation in established research is the continued emphasis on broad national-cultural contrasts. Lee, Yoshikawa, and Reade (2018), for example, demonstrate that substantial communication challenges can also occur in East-East encounters between Japanese expatriates and Chinese employees, despite the relative cultural closeness of the two settings. Their work shows that apparently similar high-context communication systems do not necessarily provide a shared interpretive context and argues for greater attention to individual-level communication and societal context. This insight is important because it shifts the problem from the mere existence of cultural difference to the processes through which communicators interpret implicit meaning, adapt their communication, and construct shared understanding.

Furthermore, intercultural communication challenges are increasingly context-dependent. Communication experiences can vary considerably across educational institutions, multicultural workplaces, healthcare environments, international professional settings, and digitally mediated interactions. Tensions experienced during face-to-face intercultural workplace communication may persist or take different forms in computer-mediated communication rather than disappearing through the use of technology (He & Huang, 2014). Similarly, emerging digital environments and social media have introduced new spaces for intercultural interaction, requiring individuals to negotiate cultural meanings through technologically mediated communication (Zhang, Husain, & Mamat, 2026). These developments indicate that intercultural communication cannot be adequately understood without considering the environment in which interaction occurs. In other words, similar cultural or linguistic differences may lead to different communication outcomes depending on the relational, organisational, technological, and sociocultural conditions surrounding the interaction.

Despite substantial development in intercultural communication research, important theoretical gaps remain. Existing studies have extensively identified individual barriers to effective intercultural communication, including language differences, cultural values, stereotypes, pragmatic failure, and communication apprehension (Melikyan, 2012; McGee, 2019; Kuru Alici and Kaya, 2022). However, comparatively less attention has been given to explaining how these elements operate simultaneously and interact with specific relational and environmental conditions. Kudo, Volet, and Whitsed (2017), for instance, emphasise the importance of understanding intercultural relationships through an ecological and person-in-context perspective, suggesting that interpersonal experiences cannot be separated from the environments in which they occur. More recently, Hussain, Nshom, and Lin (2025) similarly highlight the need for stronger and more integrated approaches to intercultural communication competence. Consequently, although the literature offers substantial knowledge concerning individual sources of intercultural communication difficulty, theoretical understanding remains fragmented across linguistic, cultural, interpersonal, and contextual perspectives.

Another limitation concerns the contexts and populations represented in intercultural communication research. Current research has examined numerous educational, healthcare, and workplace settings; nevertheless, the literature still calls for greater attention to non-Western societies, multilingual workplaces, international students, migrant communities, and culturally diverse professional groups (Alsulami & Sherwood, 2020; Balante, Broek, & White, 2021; Ghosh, 2019; Kudo, 2023; Linh & Hang, 2024). At the same time, recent research demonstrates that individuals may experience intercultural communication differently depending on the specific environment in which interaction takes place (Yang, Popov, & Biemans, 2025). This suggests that broad explanations based primarily on cultural difference may obscure important variations arising from individual characteristics, social relationships, institutional environments, and communication settings. Accordingly, the central challenge for contemporary intercultural communication scholarship is no longer simply to establish that cultural and linguistic differences produce communication difficulties, but to explain how language, culture, individual characteristics, relational processes, and contextual conditions combine to produce or mitigate those difficulties.

Against this background, the present paper develops an integrated conceptual framework for understanding intercultural communication challenges in culturally diverse teams. Specifically, it proposes that intercultural communication challenges reduce knowledge sharing, which in turn limits team effectiveness, while cultural intelligence weakens the negative relationship between communication challenges and knowledge sharing. The paper uses Social Information Processing Theory as its primary lens to explain how individuals interpret available social cues and adapt their communication strategies, particularly in contemporary technology-mediated interaction. By integrating communication barriers, intercultural capability, knowledge processes, and team outcomes into a single framework, the paper moves beyond identifying communication problems to explain how and under what conditions they influence culturally diverse teams.

2. Theoretical Foundation: Social Information Processing Theory

Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) provides an appropriate theoretical perspective for understanding how individuals interpret social information and develop interpersonal relationships when communication occurs through technology-mediated environments. SIPT's central premise is that the absence or reduction of conventional nonverbal cues does not necessarily prevent individuals from developing meaningful interpersonal relationships. Instead, communicators adapt to the communication medium and use the social cues available to interpret others, form impressions, and build relationships over time (Farrer & Gavin, 2009; Oviedo & Fox Tree, 2024). Accordingly, social information continues to be communicated in computer-mediated environments, although the mechanisms through which it is transmitted and interpreted may differ from those in face-to-face communication.

A fundamental assumption of SIPT is that individuals actively adapt their communication behaviour according to the cues and affordances provided by a particular medium. In digitally mediated communication, individuals may depend more strongly on linguistic choices, message timing, textual expressions, emojis, hashtags, and other observable features of messages to infer social meaning (Godard & Holtzman, 2022; Kalman, Scissors, Gill, & Gergle, 2013; Khurana & Krishnan, 2025). Consequently, communication effectiveness depends not only on whether information is transmitted but also on how communicators interpret the social signals embedded in the available communication environment. Over repeated interactions, individuals can adapt their communication strategies and develop relational impressions that may become comparable with those formed through offline interaction (Oviedo & Fox Tree, 2024; Scott, Stuart, & Barber, 2024). Thus, SIPT emphasises communication as an adaptive process in which meaning and interpersonal understanding develop progressively through interaction.

This perspective becomes particularly relevant in intercultural communication because culturally diverse individuals may differ in how they produce, recognise, and interpret social cues. Although digital communication provides communicators with

shared technological channels, participants still bring culturally embedded expectations, communication conventions, and interactional practices into those environments. Research on intercultural computer-mediated communication demonstrates that social context influences collaborative interaction and information-seeking processes among culturally diverse participants (Cho & Lee, 2008). Similarly, culturally influenced communication patterns can shape how members of global virtual teams modify their communication behaviours during distributed interaction and decision-making (Zakaria, 2017). Therefore, technological connectivity does not automatically eliminate intercultural communication challenges; instead, those challenges may be reconstructed through the linguistic, relational, and contextual cues available within digitally mediated environments.

SIPT is particularly useful for explaining this process because it shifts attention from the presence or absence of communication cues to how individuals use and adapt to available social information. In intercultural settings, communicators may attach different meanings to the same linguistic expressions, response patterns, levels of directness, or digitally transmitted interpersonal signals. Previous research demonstrates that individuals modify communicative behaviour within technology-supported environments (Abedin & Daneshgar, 2011), while intercultural computer-mediated interaction may also contribute to changes in prejudice and perceptions of culturally different others over time (Mustafa, Abdul Hamid, Ahmad, & Siarap, 2012; Walther, Hoter, Ganayem, & Shonfeld, 2015). From a SIPT perspective, therefore, intercultural communication is not a static exchange of culturally predetermined messages but an adaptive relational process through which participants continuously interpret, evaluate, and respond to available social information.

The increasing use of virtual teams, digital platforms, and AI-mediated communication further strengthens the relevance of SIPT to contemporary intercultural communication research. Organisational interactions increasingly occur through communication technologies in which social presence and relationship development depend on individuals' ability to interpret technologically mediated cues. Recent research indicates that social presence and relational outcomes remain important in AI-mediated organisational communication, demonstrating that changes in communication technology continue to influence how individuals experience and develop workplace relationships (Nguyen, Pham, Thi Nguyet Trang, & Le, 2026). Consequently, contemporary intercultural communication challenges must be understood not only in relation to cultural and linguistic differences but also to the communication environments through which culturally diverse individuals interact.

Nevertheless, SIPT alone does not fully explain intercultural communication challenges. Its principal analytical emphasis remains on individuals and relational interaction, particularly within computer-mediated settings, while broader structural, institutional, and environmental influences receive comparatively less attention. Applying SIPT to intercultural communication therefore requires consideration of the wider cultural and contextual conditions within which social information is produced and interpreted. In this framework, SIPT serves as the primary lens for explaining social-cue interpretation and communicative adaptation, while the constructs of intercultural communication challenges and cultural intelligence provide the cultural and contextual specificity needed to extend the theory to culturally diverse teams.

3. Intercultural Communication Challenges

Intercultural communication challenges refer to recurring difficulties that arise when individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds attempt to exchange, interpret, and negotiate meaning. These difficulties do not arise from cultural difference alone; rather, they emerge from the interaction of language limitations, culturally embedded expectations, pragmatic conventions, non-verbal behaviour, stereotypes, and context-specific conditions. Accordingly, intercultural communication challenges should be understood as a multidimensional construct rather than as a single barrier to effective interaction.

Language represents one of the most visible dimensions of intercultural communication difficulty. Differences in language proficiency may limit individuals' ability to express complex ideas, interpret intentions, or respond appropriately during interaction. Communication also becomes more difficult when participants rely on translation, interpretation, or a shared second language that may not adequately capture culturally embedded meanings. Previous studies have shown that language-related difficulties can affect interaction across educational and professional settings (Chiang, 2009; Ellahham, 2021). However, language proficiency alone does not explain intercultural misunderstanding because individuals may communicate fluently while still assigning different meanings to the same expressions. Therefore, language is one component of a broader system of social and cultural interpretation rather than an isolated determinant of communication effectiveness.

A second dimension concerns cultural norms and expectations. Individuals develop assumptions regarding appropriate communication behaviour through their cultural and social environments, including expectations concerning directness, politeness, hierarchy, emotional expression, and interpersonal distance. When culturally diverse individuals interact, they may not share these expectations, increasing the risk of misunderstanding. Kaur (2011), for example, demonstrates that intercultural misunderstanding may occur even when participants communicate through English as a lingua franca because differences in culturally informed expectations continue to shape interpretation. Similarly, Qin (2014) illustrates how culturally influenced communicative elements may contribute to misunderstanding between Chinese and American participants. Consequently, communication difficulty often emerges not simply because cultural norms differ, but because participants may assume that their own norms are mutually understood.

Closely related to cultural norms is pragmatic mismatch. Pragmatic competence concerns the ability to interpret what speakers intend within a specific communicative situation rather than merely understanding the literal meaning of their words. Differences in speech acts, such as refusals, compliments, requests, turn-taking, and indirect expressions, may therefore result in communication failure even when individuals possess adequate linguistic competence (Kaur, 2011; McGee, 2019). For instance, a communication strategy regarded as appropriately indirect in one cultural context may be perceived as unclear, evasive, or uncooperative in another. Conversely, direct communication may be understood as efficient in one environment but as impolite or confrontational in another. Thus, pragmatic mismatch shows that intercultural communication challenges involve interpreting social intentions as well as decoding linguistic content.

Non-verbal communication represents another important source of intercultural difficulty. Meaning is frequently communicated through gesture, facial expression, eye contact, physical distance, vocal characteristics, and other non-verbal cues. Yet these cues are culturally interpreted, and behaviours that appear neutral in one environment may carry different meanings elsewhere. Abu-Arqoub and Alserhan (2019) identify non-verbal differences as potential barriers to effective intercultural communication, while Ellahham (2021) further emphasises the relevance of accent and language-related cues to

communication quality. Accordingly, intercultural misunderstanding may arise not because individuals fail to communicate, but because the signals accompanying their communication are interpreted through different cultural frameworks.

Furthermore, stereotypes, prejudice, and ethnocentric assumptions may shape communication before an interaction has fully developed. When individuals approach members of another cultural group through predetermined expectations, they may interpret messages selectively or attribute communication difficulties to cultural characteristics rather than to situational factors. Melikyan (2012) links cultural and linguistic stereotypes to communicative failure, while Kuru Alici and Kaya (2022) show the relevance of ethnocentrism and intercultural communication apprehension in attitudes toward culturally different groups. These findings suggest that intercultural communication challenges are partly perceptual. Individuals do not respond only to objectively transmitted information; rather, they respond to their interpretation of the communicator, and that interpretation may already be influenced by stereotypes, previous experiences, or group-based expectations.

Importantly, these dimensions do not operate independently. Intercultural communication challenges are interactive and context-sensitive because language, cultural norms, identity, interpersonal expectations, and environmental conditions may reinforce one another. Context is therefore a critical dimension of the construct. Intercultural communication occurs within specific institutional, organisational, educational, technological, and social environments that shape both expectations and available communication practices. Kudo et al. (2017) argue that intercultural relationships should be examined through an ecological, person-in-context perspective, whereas He and Huang (2014) show that intercultural workplace tensions may occur in both face-to-face and computer-mediated interactions. Similarly, Yang et al. (2025) show that individuals' perceptions and reactions to intercultural communication vary by communication context. Taken together, the literature supports a multidimensional and dynamic conceptualisation comprising language-related barriers, cultural norms, pragmatic mismatch, non-verbal differences, stereotypes and prejudice, and contextual conditions.

4. Intercultural Communication Challenges and Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing refers to the exchange through which individuals communicate knowledge, experience, ideas, and expertise to others so that others can understand and use it. Although knowledge may be available within an organisation or team, its effective transfer depends heavily on communication. In culturally diverse environments, this process becomes more complex because knowledge is communicated through language, social cues, culturally embedded meanings, and relational expectations. Consequently, intercultural communication challenges can restrict knowledge sharing by disrupting the processes through which knowledge becomes understandable, credible, and transferable between individuals and groups.

Language represents one of the most direct mechanisms through which intercultural communication challenges influence knowledge sharing. Knowledge transfer requires individuals not only to possess relevant information but also to express that information in a form that others can accurately understand. In multinational environments, linguistic differences may constrain participation, complicate sensemaking, and reduce the precision with which complex or tacit knowledge is communicated. Welch and Welch (2008) emphasise the importance of language in international knowledge transfer, while Tenzer, Pudelko, and Zellmer-Bruhn (2021) demonstrate that language barriers affect knowledge processing within multinational teams. Therefore, when culturally diverse employees have difficulty expressing or interpreting knowledge through a shared language, less information may be exchanged, and the knowledge that is transferred may be misunderstood, simplified, or lost during communication.

However, linguistic competence alone does not guarantee successful knowledge sharing. Pragmatic differences may prevent communicators from interpreting the intended meaning underlying an apparently understandable message. Cross-cultural differences in requests, refusals, politeness, indirectness, and other communicative conventions can create situations in which individuals understand the literal words but fail to understand the knowledge or intention being communicated (McGee, 2019; Wierzbicka, 2006). Such difficulties are particularly important for knowledge sharing because organisational knowledge frequently involves contextual explanations, interpretations, judgments, and experience rather than simple factual information. Accordingly, pragmatic mismatch may weaken the receiver's ability to interpret knowledge accurately even when a common working language exists.

Intercultural communication challenges may also affect knowledge sharing through relational mechanisms. Knowledge sharing generally requires a degree of trust, reciprocity, and willingness to expose one's knowledge to others. Yet stereotypes, perceived cultural distance, identity threats, and in-group/out-group distinctions may weaken these conditions. Eisenberg and Mattarelli (2017), for example, demonstrate that identity threats can inhibit knowledge sharing across subgroups in global virtual teams, while Makela, Kalla, and Piekkari (2007) show that interpersonal similarity can facilitate knowledge sharing within multinational corporations. Thus, employees may be more willing to exchange knowledge with individuals whom they perceive as socially or culturally similar and may become more cautious when interacting across cultural boundaries.

Furthermore, knowledge sharing is shaped by the organisational and relational context in which communication takes place. Hierarchical differences, power distance, organisational structures, and culturally embedded expectations concerning authority may determine who is expected to speak, question, contribute, or remain silent. Consequently, unequal participation can restrict the development of shared understanding even when relevant knowledge is available. Heizmann, Fee, and Gray (2018) demonstrate that intercultural knowledge sharing between expatriates and host-country nationals is influenced by communicative relations and power dynamics. Similarly, knowledge-sharing behaviour is affected by relational orientation and the opportunities available for individuals to exchange knowledge (Nguyen, Siri, & Malik, 2022). Therefore, intercultural communication challenges should be considered within the broader social and organisational structures that determine whose knowledge is expressed, received, and valued.

From the perspective of SIPT, this relationship can be further understood through the way culturally diverse individuals interpret the social information surrounding knowledge exchange. When communication cues are ambiguous or interpreted differently because of language, cultural expectations, or social identities, individuals may have greater difficulty determining the meaning, credibility, and intention behind the information being shared. Repeated interaction and communicative adaptation may improve this process; however, persistent communication difficulties can weaken mutual understanding and relational confidence. Research supports this reasoning by linking intercultural communication effectiveness to knowledge sharing. Presbitero and Attar (2018) show that intercultural communication effectiveness plays an important role in knowledge-

sharing processes and further demonstrate the relevance of cultural intelligence to this relationship. Likewise, studies of culturally diverse teams indicate that relational factors influence willingness to share knowledge across organisational and cultural boundaries (Nguyen, Sharma, Kingshott, & Malik, 2024).

Accordingly, the following proposition is advanced:

> ***Proposition 1 (P1):*** *Intercultural communication challenges negatively influence knowledge sharing among culturally diverse individuals and teams.*

5. Knowledge Sharing and Team Effectiveness

Knowledge sharing constitutes an important mechanism through which teams integrate distributed expertise, coordinate activities, and develop a common understanding of tasks. Team members typically possess different forms of knowledge, experience, and specialised information; therefore, team effectiveness depends not only on the amount of knowledge available within a team but also on whether that knowledge can be communicated, accessed, interpreted, and applied collectively. Existing evidence generally indicates that knowledge sharing contributes positively to team effectiveness, particularly when it strengthens coordination, trust, cohesion, shared understanding, and transactive memory rather than functioning merely as an isolated exchange of information.

One of the principal ways through which knowledge sharing enhances team effectiveness is by improving coordination and integration among team members. When individuals openly communicate their expertise and relevant task information, other members can better understand available competencies, identify who possesses particular knowledge, and coordinate interdependent activities. Chen, Li, Clark, and Dietrich (2013), for example, highlight the importance of knowledge sharing in developing transactive memory systems that help team members understand who knows what. Likewise, Huang (2009) demonstrates that knowledge sharing and group cohesiveness are associated with improved team performance. Consequently, knowledge sharing enables teams to integrate dispersed knowledge rather than relying on isolated individual expertise.

Knowledge sharing also contributes to team effectiveness by strengthening information processing and decision quality. Complex team decisions generally require members to exchange unique information, discuss alternative interpretations, and elaborate on available evidence. Van Ginkel and Van Knippenberg (2008) show that shared task representations facilitate group information elaboration and decision-making, and their subsequent work shows that knowledge about the distribution of information within a group can improve decision processes under appropriate conditions (van Ginkel & Van Knippenberg, 2009). Therefore, when team members effectively share knowledge, they are better positioned to evaluate different perspectives, reduce informational asymmetries, and arrive at more informed collective decisions.

Furthermore, knowledge sharing facilitates innovation and learning by exposing team members to diverse ideas, experiences, and problem-solving approaches. Knowledge exchange can generate new combinations of information, improve knowledge quality, and increase teams' ability to transform existing expertise into innovative outcomes. Doronin, Shen, and Ali (2020) demonstrate the importance of knowledge-sharing quality for team innovativeness, whereas Rahmi and Indarti (2019) link knowledge sharing with team climate and innovation. In addition, knowledge sharing can strengthen team learning and adaptability by enabling members to reflect on experience, correct misunderstandings, and respond collectively to changing conditions. This is particularly relevant in knowledge-intensive and culturally diverse teams, where expertise is often distributed across individuals with different professional and cultural backgrounds.

However, the relationship between knowledge sharing and team effectiveness should not be conceptualised as uniformly direct or unconditional. Trust is repeatedly associated with stronger knowledge sharing and better team outcomes, while cohesion can enhance the extent to which shared knowledge is converted into coordinated action (Lee, Gillespie, Mann, & Wearing, 2010; Staples & Webster, 2008). Moreover, the quality of shared knowledge may be more consequential than its quantity. These boundary conditions are especially significant for culturally diverse and virtual teams. Kardell, Hoffmann, and Meisner (2025), for instance, emphasise the role of trust and knowledge sharing in explaining virtual team effectiveness, while Shen, Gallivan, and Tang (2016) show that perceived subgroup formation can influence transactive memory systems and team performance in distributed teams. Similarly, knowledge hiding associated with interpersonal mistrust may negatively affect temporary team performance (Miao, Qi, Liu, & Zhai, 2022).

From the perspective of the present conceptual framework, knowledge sharing is particularly important because it provides the mechanism through which culturally diverse team members can transform individually held knowledge into collective resources. Intercultural communication challenges may impede this process by restricting communication, weakening trust, or creating ambiguity in how knowledge is interpreted. Conversely, when team members successfully exchange and interpret knowledge across cultural boundaries, they can develop greater shared understanding, improve coordination, and use their diverse expertise more effectively.

Accordingly, the following proposition is advanced:

> ***Proposition 2 (P2):*** *Knowledge sharing positively influences team effectiveness in culturally diverse teams.*

6. Cultural Intelligence as a Moderating Mechanism

Cultural intelligence (CQ) represents an important boundary condition in intercultural interaction because individuals differ in their capacity to respond constructively to cultural ambiguity, unfamiliar communication practices, and uncertainty. In culturally diverse environments, communication challenges do not necessarily have the same consequences for everyone. Rather, their effects depend partly on whether communicators can recognise culturally influenced differences, interpret unfamiliar interactional cues, and adjust their behaviour accordingly. Accordingly, CQ can alter the extent to which intercultural communication difficulties translate into negative relational and knowledge-related outcomes.

CQ's moderating role is particularly relevant because intercultural communication often involves uncertainty about how another person's words, intentions, and behaviours should be interpreted. When individuals encounter unfamiliar cultural expectations, they may experience uncertainty or anxiety that interferes with effective communication. However, individuals with relatively high CQ appear better able to maintain communication effectiveness under such conditions. Presbitero and Attar

(2018), for example, show that CQ shapes the relationships among anxiety, uncertainty, intercultural communication effectiveness, and knowledge sharing. Thus, CQ does not necessarily remove cultural differences; instead, it helps individuals manage their consequences more effectively.

This distinction is important for the present framework. Intercultural communication challenges may originate from language barriers, pragmatic differences, culturally embedded expectations, stereotypes, or ambiguous social cues. Nevertheless, culturally intelligent individuals may be better positioned to interpret such differences without immediately treating them as communication failure. Instead, they may adjust their communication behaviour, reconsider culturally based assumptions, and search for alternative explanations for unfamiliar interaction patterns. Consequently, the negative relationship between intercultural communication challenges and knowledge sharing should be less pronounced when CQ is high, because culturally intelligent individuals are better able to sustain productive interaction despite cultural uncertainty.

Research in culturally diverse organisational settings also supports the relevance of CQ to knowledge sharing. Van Greunen (2022) identifies cultural intelligence as relevant to intra-team knowledge-sharing behaviour in knowledge-intensive teams, while Li (2024) demonstrates its importance for knowledge sharing among host-country nationals in foreign subsidiaries. Similarly, Ratasuk and Charoensukmongkol (2020) associate CQ with knowledge sharing and innovation in cross-cultural teams. Collectively, these findings indicate that CQ facilitates the interpersonal and communicative processes required for knowledge to move across cultural boundaries.

However, CQ should not be viewed as universally beneficial regardless of circumstances. Its effectiveness may depend on team composition and the wider social environment. Adair, Hideg, and Spence (2013), for instance, show that cultural heterogeneity influences how different aspects of team CQ contribute to shared values. Thus, CQ operates within a broader relational and organisational context rather than independently. This contextual perspective is consistent with the broader conceptualisation of intercultural communication developed in this paper: if communication challenges arise through interactions among language, cultural expectations, social cues, and contextual conditions, then individuals' capacity to manage cultural complexity should influence how strongly those challenges affect subsequent behaviour.

CQ also complements SIPT by explaining individual differences in the interpretation and use of social information. SIPT suggests that individuals rely on available social cues to construct meaning and relationships, particularly when communication cues are constrained or ambiguous. In intercultural interaction, however, these cues may themselves carry culturally different meanings. CQ can therefore be understood as a capability that influences how effectively culturally diverse communicators interpret and respond to available social information. Importantly, the proposed moderating relationship does not imply that CQ eliminates intercultural communication challenges; rather, it is expected to reduce the magnitude of their negative consequences.

Accordingly, the following proposition is advanced:

> ***Proposition 3 (P3):*** *Cultural intelligence moderates the relationship between intercultural communication challenges and knowledge sharing, such that the negative relationship is weaker when cultural intelligence is high.*

7. The Mediating Role of Knowledge Sharing

The preceding arguments suggest that knowledge sharing provides a plausible mechanism through which intercultural communication challenges influence team effectiveness. Intercultural communication difficulties do not necessarily reduce team effectiveness directly; rather, they can first interfere with the exchange, interpretation, and integration of knowledge among culturally diverse team members. When language barriers, pragmatic differences, stereotypes, low trust, or contextual inequalities make communication difficult, employees may exchange less knowledge, misunderstand messages, or become less willing to contribute their expertise.

This relationship matters because culturally diverse teams often have substantial informational and experiential diversity. Such diversity can give teams broader perspectives and specialised knowledge; however, these resources generate value only when team members can and are willing to share them. Communication challenges can therefore create a separation between the knowledge potentially available within the team and the knowledge actually accessible to the team as a collective resource. Language barriers may constrain knowledge processing and transfer in multinational teams (Tenzer et al., 2021), whereas identity threats and subgroup boundaries can discourage knowledge exchange across culturally differentiated groups (Eisenberg & Mattarelli, 2017). Consequently, intercultural communication difficulties may reduce the extent to which culturally diverse knowledge becomes available for collective use.

Knowledge sharing, in turn, affects whether teams can coordinate their activities, develop shared understanding, make informed decisions, and integrate distributed expertise. The mediation can therefore be understood as a sequential process. First, intercultural communication challenges make it difficult to transmit and interpret knowledge across cultural boundaries. Second, these difficulties reduce effective knowledge sharing by weakening participation, mutual understanding, trust, and reciprocity. Third, reduced knowledge sharing limits the team's capacity to integrate expertise, coordinate tasks, generate shared understanding, and make effective collective decisions. Ultimately, these deficiencies may diminish team effectiveness.

This reasoning is also compatible with SIPT. From a SIPT perspective, individuals rely on available social and communicative cues to interpret others and gradually construct relational understanding. In intercultural interaction, culturally different interpretations of those cues can make social information ambiguous. When individuals do not resolve such ambiguity effectively, they may become less confident in the meaning or intentions behind the information they exchange. This can restrict knowledge sharing and, in turn, reduce the team's ability to transform individually held knowledge into coordinated collective action. Accordingly, knowledge sharing provides a theoretically meaningful link between interpreting social information and subsequent team outcomes.

The proposed mediation should not be interpreted as deterministic. Trust, cohesion, shared cognition, knowledge quality, and subgroup dynamics influence whether shared information contributes to team performance. Nevertheless, the existing literature provides strong theoretical support for the two-component relationships while leaving the exact mediation proposed here insufficiently integrated. This conceptual linkage therefore represents an important contribution of the framework.

Accordingly, the following proposition is advanced:

> ***Proposition 4 (P4):*** *Knowledge sharing mediates the relationship between intercultural communication challenges and team effectiveness, such that greater intercultural communication challenges reduce effective knowledge sharing, which in turn lowers team effectiveness.*

8. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Building on the preceding theoretical arguments, this paper proposes an integrated framework explaining how intercultural communication challenges influence team effectiveness through knowledge sharing and how cultural intelligence conditions this process. Rather than treating intercultural communication problems as isolated linguistic or cultural barriers, the framework conceptualises them as multidimensional difficulties involving language, cultural expectations, pragmatic interpretation, stereotypes, relational processes, and contextual conditions.

The first component of the framework concerns the relationship between intercultural communication challenges and knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing depends on the ability of individuals to communicate information in ways that others can understand, trust, and apply. However, language barriers may reduce knowledge processing, pragmatic differences may distort intended meanings, and stereotypes or subgroup divisions may decrease willingness to exchange knowledge. Consequently, the framework proposes that increasing intercultural communication challenges are associated with decreasing knowledge sharing.

The second component concerns the relationship between knowledge sharing and team effectiveness. Knowledge sharing enables team members to integrate distributed expertise, coordinate their activities, identify who possesses particular knowledge, and develop shared interpretations of tasks. Existing research associates knowledge sharing with improved performance, innovation, decision quality, cohesion, learning, and adaptability. Therefore, the framework proposes that effective knowledge sharing contributes positively to team effectiveness by converting individually held expertise into a collective resource.

When these two relationships are integrated, knowledge sharing becomes the central explanatory mechanism connecting intercultural communication challenges with team effectiveness. However, the first-stage relationship is unlikely to be identical for all individuals or teams. The framework therefore introduces cultural intelligence as a moderating mechanism. Individuals with higher CQ should be better able to interpret culturally unfamiliar behaviour, adjust their communication practices, and maintain knowledge exchange despite intercultural difficulties. Taken together, the framework represents a moderated mediation process in which intercultural communication challenges reduce knowledge sharing, knowledge sharing contributes to team effectiveness, and CQ weakens the negative first-stage relationship.

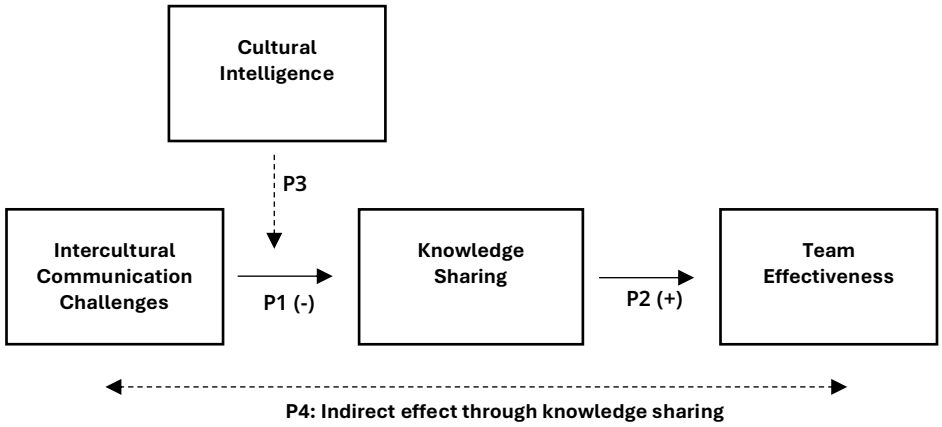


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework

9. Theoretical Contributions

The proposed framework offers several theoretical contributions to intercultural communication and multicultural team research. First, it advances the conceptualisation of intercultural communication challenges beyond a narrow emphasis on cultural difference. Existing literature identifies language barriers, pragmatic mismatch, non-verbal differences, stereotypes, and contextual conditions as recurring sources of communication difficulty; however, these factors are often examined separately. The present framework integrates them into a multidimensional construct and emphasises that intercultural communication difficulties emerge through the interaction of linguistic, cultural, relational, and contextual factors. Second, the framework shifts attention from identifying communication barriers to explaining how those barriers generate organisational consequences. Much of the intercultural communication literature focuses on misunderstanding, communication failure, or intercultural competence. In contrast, the present framework positions knowledge sharing as a central mechanism through which communication difficulties can influence team-level outcomes. This is theoretically important because communication challenges do not simply interrupt interaction; they can reduce the extent to which knowledge is understood, trusted, exchanged, and applied across cultural boundaries.

Third, the framework contributes by explaining why culturally diverse teams may fail to realise the potential benefits of their informational diversity. Cultural diversity can increase the range of knowledge and perspectives available within a team, yet these resources cannot contribute to collective performance unless they are effectively exchanged and integrated. By positioning knowledge sharing between intercultural communication challenges and team effectiveness, the framework explains how potentially valuable knowledge can remain fragmented at the individual or subgroup level. Fourth, the framework introduces cultural intelligence as a boundary condition rather than treating intercultural communication challenges as

uniformly harmful. This contribution recognises that culturally diverse individuals differ in their capacity to interpret unfamiliar social cues, tolerate uncertainty, and adapt their communication behaviour. The proposed moderating relationship therefore helps explain why similar communication difficulties can produce different knowledge-sharing outcomes across individuals or teams.

Fifth, the paper extends SIPT to the intercultural communication-knowledge sharing interface. SIPT emphasises that individuals construct impressions and relationships by interpreting available social cues and adapting their communication behaviour. In culturally diverse interactions, however, people may interpret those cues differently because of linguistic and cultural variation. By linking SIPT to intercultural communication challenges, knowledge sharing, and cultural intelligence, the proposed framework suggests that interpreting social information is not culturally neutral. Finally, the framework contributes through its moderated mediation logic by integrating a communication barrier, an interpersonal capability, a knowledge process, and a team outcome within a single conceptual explanation.

10. Practical and Managerial Implications

The proposed framework offers several practical implications for organizations that rely on culturally diverse teams. First, managers should recognise that intercultural communication challenges are not limited to language proficiency. Difficulties may also arise from pragmatic differences, culturally specific expectations, non-verbal cues, stereotypes, and contextual conditions. Therefore, organisational interventions should move beyond general language training and address the broader communicative processes through which employees interpret meaning across cultural boundaries. Second, organisations should pay particular attention to knowledge-sharing conditions within multicultural teams. Communication problems can limit the extent to which employees contribute, receive, and interpret knowledge, especially when trust is weak or subgroup boundaries develop. Managers can support knowledge exchange by creating opportunities for repeated interaction, encouraging open participation, and reducing communication structures that restrict particular cultural or professional groups from contributing. Attention should also be given to the quality and usability of shared knowledge, because frequent communication does not necessarily improve team effectiveness if shared information is ambiguous, inaccurate, or difficult to apply.

Third, the framework highlights the practical importance of developing cultural intelligence. Because CQ can reduce the negative consequences of intercultural uncertainty and communication difficulties, organisations may benefit from developing employees' ability to recognise cultural differences, reconsider culturally based assumptions, and adapt their communication behaviour. However, CQ development should not be treated as an isolated intervention; it should be supported by an environment in which employees can apply culturally adaptive behaviours. Finally, these implications are particularly relevant for virtual and technology-mediated multicultural teams. Digital communication may reduce or alter traditional interpersonal cues, requiring employees to rely more heavily on language, response timing, textual signals, and other technologically available social information. Managers should therefore establish communication norms that reduce ambiguity while allowing sufficient interaction for team members to develop shared expectations. More broadly, organisations should avoid assuming that cultural diversity automatically produces improved team outcomes; the benefits of diversity depend on whether members can communicate and exchange their knowledge effectively.

11. Future Research Directions

Future research should empirically examine the proposed framework across different cultural and organisational contexts. In particular, studies should test whether language barriers, pragmatic differences, stereotypes, and contextual conditions operate as distinct dimensions of intercultural communication challenges and determine how strongly they affect knowledge sharing. Because existing evidence shows that communication barriers can disrupt knowledge processing and exchange, future studies should directly test the mediating role of knowledge sharing between intercultural communication challenges and team effectiveness. Further research should also examine cultural intelligence as a boundary condition, including whether different dimensions of CQ vary in their ability to reduce the negative effects of communication challenges. Comparative, longitudinal, and multilevel studies would be particularly valuable in multicultural workplaces, virtual teams, and AI-mediated communication environments. Greater attention should also be given to underexplored non-Western and multilingual contexts to improve the generalizability of intercultural communication research.

12. Conclusion

This conceptual paper develops an integrated framework explaining how intercultural communication challenges influence team effectiveness. Rather than viewing such challenges solely as consequences of cultural difference, the framework recognises the combined influence of language barriers, cultural norms, pragmatic mismatch, stereotypes, and contextual conditions. The paper proposes that intercultural communication challenges reduce knowledge sharing, which subsequently limits team effectiveness, while cultural intelligence weakens the negative effect of communication challenges on knowledge sharing. In doing so, the framework shifts attention from merely identifying communication barriers toward explaining how and under what conditions these barriers influence culturally diverse teams. This perspective provides a concise theoretical foundation for future empirical research on intercultural communication, knowledge sharing, cultural intelligence, and team effectiveness.

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