

# **A Conceptual Framework to Explain the Role of Social Environment and Multicultural Personality on Intercultural Communication Competency, Inter Role Congruence and Interaction Comfort**

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## *Abstracts*

*The multicultural markets require marketers to gain strong intercultural communication competency (ICC). Several earlier studies have emphasized the significance of ICC in marketing. However, empirical investigations of the subject are scarce and inconclusive. The exceptional characteristic of Malaysia with its exceedingly variegated multicultural and combined ethnic mix makes it one of the proper examples for ICC research and analysis to explain its antecedents and consequence in retailing industry. Based on Role theory and Interdependence theory, the present study intends to assess the role of social environment and multicultural personality of grocery retail consumers on ICC and the ICC consequence on the inter-role congruence and interaction comfort. It is anticipated by filling this knowledge gap the research will assist to strengthen retail communication strategies which require inter cultural communication adjustments in multicultural business environment. The primary concern of Malaysian authorities is to increase the overall performance of its burgeoning retail industry which is the most active and fourth largest contributor or sub-sectors in Malaysia's economy. The ICC is expected to improve the retail industry competitiveness when it positively influences inter-role congruence and interaction comfort among customers.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

The cross-cultural understanding themes and concepts have gained quite an attention among marketing researchers in explaining consuming features, price perceptions and services satisfaction (Baker et al., 2009; Polsa et al., 2013; Ihtiyar and Ahmad, 2015) among consumers. Most discussion reflects the importance of intercultural appreciation for organizations intend to champion their internationalization activities particularly when the culture of the new markets differs from the base or origin

market. This study is focusing on Malaysia, a country with multicultural or multiracial peculiarity and with greater needs for intercultural understanding regardless whether the operative marketers remain local or move global. The rich multicultural Malaysia pose bigger challenges for marketers to sharpen their intercultural communication competency (ICC) compared to the other more culturally uniform Asian markets such as China, Japan and Korea. 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 variances, there is an obvious deficiency of behavior homogeneity where the nature of Malaysia domestic market is highly categorized by the ethnically segmented customers (Mokhlis, 2009).

The context of cultural aspects must be incorporated into a universal theory particularly in marketing, customer satisfaction and loyalty as this would better explain the highly visible differences in customer behavior (Shekarchizadeh et al., 2011; Cleveland et al., 2009). However only a few of earlier studies have explained how the proper intercultural interaction between customers and marketers have a significant influence or consequences on customer satisfaction (Sharma et al., 2012; Shekarchizadeh et al., 2011; Lloyd and Luk, 2011; Ladhari, 2009). It is also noted that in those earlier discussions, there is even a wider a gap of knowledge in explaining the antecedents of ICC. Consequently the present study intends to explain the role of social environment and multicultural personality as antecedents to ICC and the consequence of ICC on the inter-role congruence and interaction comfort. 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 which 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 characteristics of interpersonal situations are not just from intrapersonal perspectives but also through interpersonal process or a comprehensive analysis of situation structure (Rusbult and 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 hypotheses (2.0). Then, it proposes the appropriate research framework and the research design (3.0). Finally, it concludes with a discussion on anticipation of findings and key suggestions for future research (4.0).

## **2.0. Literature Review**

This literature review will focus on the theoretical background (2.1) of the research which is focusing on two major theories namely Role Theory and Interdependence Theory. It will also explain the research constructs (2.2) of the proposed research framework by understanding its embedded theory and past literature. Next it will suggest the research hypotheses (2.3) that explain the interrelationships between the constructs.

### **2.1 Theoretical Background**

#### **2.1.1 Role Theory**

Role theory was initially promoted by Biddle (1979) and later by Solomon et al. (1985) to posit that people 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 definition, social integration and interaction environments have effects on personality and individuality as an integrative model of behavior (Solomon et al., 1985). Therefore, the concentration of the theory among marketers is mainly on recognition of interaction of (intercultural) encounters on anticipated consumer behaviors.

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 marketing such as level of customer

satisfaction and loyalty (Sharma et al., 2012; 2009). In terms of this aspect, “person-to-person” interaction is becoming crucial indicator to decrease dissatisfaction level and creating powerful strategies for many “pure service” oriented or “mixed product / service” characterized by service providers (Ihtiyar et al, 2013;Sharma et al., 2009; Paswan and Ganesh, 2005). To an extent, all employees who are involved in customer contact are considered as service providers who represent the company to explain the product, promote it and to gain direct feedback from customers (Solomon et al., 1985). However, although the role of employee in interaction is significant; the interaction is not defined as linear. Instead it is a reciprocal and interactive experience among the encounters. In other words, the interaction between customer and employee as person-to-person is dyadic interaction as further explains in the subsequent interdependence theory.

### **2.1.2. Interdependence Theory**

The perspective of Interdependence theory is established on logical analysis of structure of interpersonal 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 Interdependence theory also identifies the most important characteristics of interpersonal situations are not just from intrapersonal perspectives but also through interpersonal 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 team 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 a retail setting (i.e. American, British and Indian accent) is influencing

the customers' 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.

## **2.2. The Research Constructs**

### **2.2.1 Intercultural Communication Competency(ICC)**

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 influences cross-cultural interactions (Sharma *et al.*, 2009) 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; Thomas *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, revenue contribution, service concentration, interpersonal skills, social and job satisfaction are influenced by encounters' intercultural sensitivity (Sizoo *et al.*, 2005). However, most of the encounter's expectations and reactions have been examined without ICC (Ryoo, 2005). In the earlier article by Ihtiyar and Fauziah Sh Ahmad (2014) the authors have explored the impact of ICC on customer satisfaction and purchase intention without exploring the antecedents of ICC. 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 congruence (based on both of the Interdependence theory and the Role theory). Although it is understood that the positive cognitive reward will lead to satisfaction and purchase intention, the limit of this discussion is on the two most important antecedents (multicultural personality and social environment) and immediate cognitive consequences (interaction comfort and inter role congruence) of ICC based on the discussed theories.

Individuals with lower ICC are likely to feel less comfortable and expose weak inter-

role congruence 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 intercultural communication competency 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 (Thomas et al., 2008; 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 inter role congruence.

### **2.2.2. Social Environment**

The environment is a major antecedent for explaining the consumption experiences in various businesses settings (Uhrich and Benkenstein, 2012). Previous studies in marketing literature, conceptually or empirically, have paid considerable attention to environment such as; impact of store environment on service setting (Jeong et al., 2012), social and physical atmospheric effects in hedonic service consumption (Uhrich and Benkenstein, 2012); the relationship of environmental externalities and consumption preferences (Jim and Chen, 2007); the relationship of physical environment and customer behavior (Tombs, and McColl-Kennedy, 2003) and the role of environment in marketing services (Baker, 1986).

Cultural environment affects social environment (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.

### **2.2.3. 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 (Boag and Tiliopoulos, 2011; Ahmad et al., 2012). 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' social environment affects their multicultural personality, ICC and interaction comforts.

#### **2.2.4. Interaction Comfort**

Earlier studies in psychology, sociology and marketing literature have provided several validated reasons of increasing customer comfort during interaction of service encounters. Strengthened interaction comfort leads to reduce the perceived risk, increased confidence, trust, satisfaction and improved relational exchange (Lloyd and Luk, 2011; Sharma et al., 2012; Sharma et al., 2009; Paswan and Ganesh, 2005; Spake et al., 2003).

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 (service) 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 a effective communication. On the other spectrum, perceived dissimilarities in behavioral 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, ICC and inter-role congruence in the overall research framework.

#### **2.2.5. Inter-Role Congruence**

A favorable 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 service 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 congruence would be more complicated in intercultural interactions where participants must consider the different ethic roles among retailers and consumers.

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 shopping or service experience for customers. Moreover, as highlighted in the studies of Nicholls (2011); Reimann et al. (2008); Hofstede (1984), people from high-power distance cultures, individualistic background, high uncertainty avoidance cultures represent distinctive differences on inter-role congruence in the context of intercultural service encounters. Inter role congruence would consequently positively affect interaction comfort.

### **2.3. Interrelationship among Constructs**

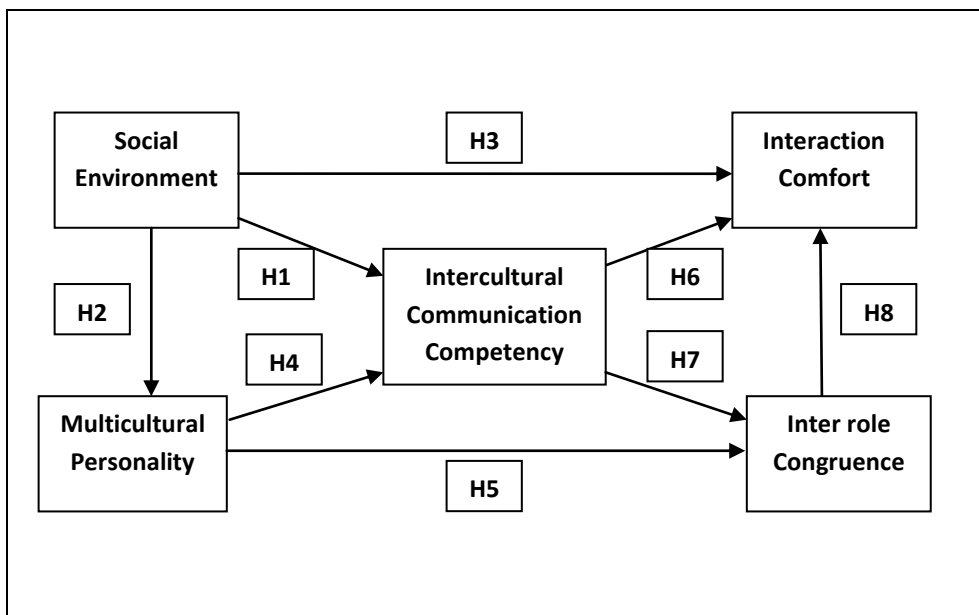
The present study proposes a framework to research the impact of social environment and multicultural personality on intercultural communication competency (ICC). The framework also include the consequence of ICC on the inter-role congruence and interaction comfort among the grocery retail customers of multicultural Malaysia as shown in hypotheses below.

1. H1: Social environment determines intercultural communication competency.
2. H2: Social environment determines multicultural personality.
3. H3: Social environment determines interaction comfort.
4. H4: Multicultural personality determines interaction comfort.
5. H5: Multicultural personality determines inter-role congruence.
6. H6: Intercultural communication competency determines interaction comfort.
7. H7: Intercultural communication competency determines inter-role congruence.
8. H8: Inter-role congruence determines interaction comfort.

### 3.0 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. 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.

Figure 1: Research Framework



Source: Developed for this Research

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 propose model is a valid way to conceptualize and explain the endogenous and exogenous variables related to ICC in multicultural retail environment. It shall start with the further investigations on relevant constructs through substantial literature review and expert opinions in order to clarify and define the nature of notions. Furtherance 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 structural equation modeling (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 SEM technique would thus contribute to theory testing and to explain the relationships among the model constructs.

#### **4.0 Conclusion 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, inter-role congruence and interaction comfort. The theoretical model presented in the study postulates that social environment predicts multicultural personality, ICC and interaction comfort. Multicultural personality predicts ICC and interaction comfort. ICC affects interaction comfort and finally; inter-role congruence influence interaction comfort.

The possible findings are anticipated to bring meaningful improvement in managing and understanding the intercultural marketing 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 customer satisfaction and loyalty in various service settings. The main administrative implication from the study will be that assessments of retail experience in terms of the intercultural communication in addition to the conventional cognitive assessment of the normal retail service quality. To marketers, the study would assist in strategizing ICC effectively when operating in multicultural market environment. The primary concern of Malaysian authorities is to increase internal and external satisfaction in its burgeoning retail industry which is the most active and fourth largest contributor sub-sectors in the Malaysian economy and Gross National Income (GNI). Promoting ICC will not just improve the industry

competitiveness among the multicultural customers and investors but would also boost the racial integration and the government campaign on unity program. Another positive outcome of the study would be the modernizing and humanizing the retail industry and raise the highly skilled service providers with strong ICC aptitude among the retailers.

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