Students' intercultural helping tendency: the role of societal mattering, Model United Nations, and digital literacy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the moderated mediation relationship between societal mattering, intercultural competence (ICC), and intercultural helping tendency (IHT) among university students. Societal mattering, reflecting individuals perceived relevance within broader societal contexts, is hypothesized to affect IHT indirectly through ICC. This research aligns with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 (quality education) and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) by advancing evidence on how educational experiences cultivate intercultural understanding and prosocial engagement in diverse communities. The study employs two moderators, namely Model United Nations involvement (MUNI) and new media literacy (NML), to assess their influence on these interactions. Using the G*Power sample size calculator, 97 purposively selected university students were recruited. Data collection utilized validated instruments, including the cultural intelligence scale, helping attitude scale, university mattering scale (UM-S), new media literacy scale (NMLS), and a demographic questionnaire. The data were analyzed using moderated mediation modeling with PROCESS Macro Model 76. Results indicate societal mattering indirectly impacts IHT via ICC, particularly for students with moderate or high MUNI and low NML. The findings highlight MUN value in fostering IHT and ICC, informing policies for multicultural education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, physical and cultural boundaries have been significantly diminished by advances in digital communication [1]. While organizations once consisted of members from similar geographical and cultural backgrounds, modern connectivity allows individuals from diverse contexts to collaborate and share ideas, as long as they have internet access and shared goals [2]. This global interaction increases exposure to cultural diversity, necessitating intercultural competence (ICC). Defined by Deardorff [3] as the ability to communicate and interact effectively across cultures through understanding, respect, and adaptation, ICC is vital for promoting mutual respect and fostering an intercultural helping tendency (IHT) that enhances collaboration and reduces self-segregation among students [4]. Furthermore, such IHT is also

reported as contingent upon societal mattering, the belief that one is significant to society which increases individuals' willingness to help others [1], [5].

As in this digital age, Generation Z or Gen-Z university students primarily learn about individual, societal, and cultural differences through internet-based new media platforms [6], the importance of new media literacy (NML), the ability to critically assess, create, and interact with digital media [7], NML equips students to evaluate information critically before accepting or sharing it [8] gains more significance in social life. Strong NML fosters respectful intercultural engagement and reduces prejudice and self-segregation, whereas its absence may hinder mutual understanding and collaboration [9]. Beyond digital exposure, Gen-Z students also gain intercultural experiences through in-person activities like Model United Nations (MUN), which many institutions promote to foster a global mindset [10]. MUN enhances participants' ICC the ability to interact effectively across cultures by engaging them in simulated United Nations (UN) conferences focused on international dialogue and problem-solving [11], [12]. Its structured, role-playing format also cultivates responsibility, empathy, and social engagement, contributing to the development of the IHT [13]. Past studies, as summarized above, suggest a hypothetical dynamic interrelationship among multiple variables to be tested in this study to answer the research questions whether IHT is a direct contribution of societal mattering or is it mediated by ICC, and whether the MUN involvement and NML moderate the hypothesized mediation.

2. LITERATURE
2.1. Intercultural helping tendency
IHT refers to the willingness and ability to support university peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, promoting mutual understanding and collaboration [12]. It is essential for effective teamwork and problem-solving in multicultural and globalized settings [14], especially in initiatives like virtual exchange programs that depend on shared goals and mutual support [15]. As digital connectivity drives modern interactions, students must develop IHT to navigate virtual and cross-cultural environments successfully [16]. Cultivating IHT helps counter cultural biases and supports productive collaboration in international academic and professional contexts [17]. A meta-analysis of 60 Southeast Asian studies found that 45 reported higher success in international collaborations when participants had stronger IHT, with many also highlighting the role of digital literacy in fostering IHT through better discernment of cultural information [16]. Similarly, a meta-analysis of 252 studies involving 12,500 European university students showed that those with higher ICC were more likely to help across cultural and ideological boundaries [11].

2.2. Intercultural competence
ICC refers to the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with people from different cultural backgrounds by understanding, respecting, and adapting to cultural differences [18]. ICC enhances collaboration, mutual respect, and understanding in multicultural educational and professional settings [19]. It also improves problem-solving in international teams by helping participants navigate cultural complexities [20]. Importantly, ICC predicts IHT, as it fosters empathy and support across cultural boundaries [12]. Low ICC is linked to communication difficulties, conflict, and self-segregation, limiting intercultural engagement and reducing the likelihood of helping others from different backgrounds [21], [22]. Moreover, students who feel they matter to others and society tend to develop stronger ICC, driven by intrinsic motivation to engage in diverse interactions [23]. This sense of value promotes reflective practices and self-regulated learning, key for ICC growth [11], while also enhancing empathy and the drive to bridge cultural divides [24].

2.3. Societal mattering
Societal mattering, the sense of being important, valued, and relevant to society was first conceptualized by Rosenberg and McCullough [25] to emphasize the psychological impact of feeling significant within a broader community. This perception fosters prosocial behavior, as individuals are more inclined to contribute when they feel their actions matter. In this study's context, societal mattering predicts ICC, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures, by encouraging empathy, reducing prejudice, and enhancing cultural understanding in multicultural settings [26]. Conversely, low societal mattering can hinder ICC development, limiting students' ability to engage empathetically and diminishing IHT [1]. In the digital era, this can manifest as polarization, cyberbullying, and "cancel culture", where differences are met with hostility rather than understanding [27]. Strengthening IHT among Gen-Z may therefore require enhancing both societal mattering and ICC. Moreover, ICC developed through MUN participation may differ from that developed by other means, as MUN uniquely fosters perspective-taking by simulating international roles [10].

2.4. MUNI as the first moderator variable

MUN is an academic simulation where students role-play as United Nations delegates, researching, debating, and resolving global issues from assigned geopolitical perspectives [19]. This experience fosters diplomacy, critical thinking, public speaking, and a deeper awareness of international relations and complex global challenges [13]. MUN activities culminate in collaboratively drafted resolutions, showcasing participants' problem-solving, negotiation, and consensus-building skills in multicultural contexts [11]. Research also shows MUN enhances ICC, enabling effective interaction across cultural boundaries [12].

Studies across countries report that MUN participants demonstrate greater adaptability and ICC, better preparing them for intercultural collaboration and unity [10]. We hypothesize that Model United Nations involvement (MUNI) interacts with societal mattering and ICC in shaping intercultural helping tendency (IHT); by enhancing societal mattering, MUNI may strengthen ICC, which in turn increases IHT by promoting empathy and reducing cultural biases [11]. Students with high societal mattering are more intrinsically motivated to engage in reflective and self-regulated learning, essential for developing ICC [23], and tend to show greater empathy, responsibility, and social engagement, which are key components of both ICC and IHT [13].

2.5. New media literacy as the second moderator variable

New media refers to the fusion of traditional media (e.g., films, images) with digital technologies, software-driven content, and interactive interfaces enabling users to both consume and produce information with minimal moderation [28]. The ability to critically engage with this content is known as NML. Gen-Z, largely represented by university students, tends to exhibit higher NML than previous generations, allowing for more discerning and ethical navigation of digital content. This skill enables Gen-Z to critically assess information before accepting or sharing it, fostering informed media use [6], [29]. Research shows that individuals with higher NML are more likely to demonstrate ICC, as their critical thinking shields them from politically driven biases [6]. This, in turn, promotes open, constructive engagement with cultural differences and reduces the perception of such differences as obstacles to relationships, collaboration, or helping behavior [30]. The aforementioned studies, including the ones from the previous subsections, led us to the hypothesis that societal mattering predicts intercultural helping attitude through improving ICC among the students, moderated by their participations in MUN activities as well as their NML. The hypothetical model to be tested is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates that the students' involvement in MUN activities might interact with the students' societal mattering, altering its contribution to the ICC and IHT of the students. Similarly, their NML played similar roles as MUN involvement, altering the contribution of societal mattering and ICC to the development of IHT. Our hypothesis can be expressed as that university students who believe that they matter to the general society would likely to be able to interact effectively with each other regardless of their cultural background, and are willing to help and collaborate with each other, especially when they are more involved in activities such as MUN and are critically selective in engaging themselves with digital or new media contents.
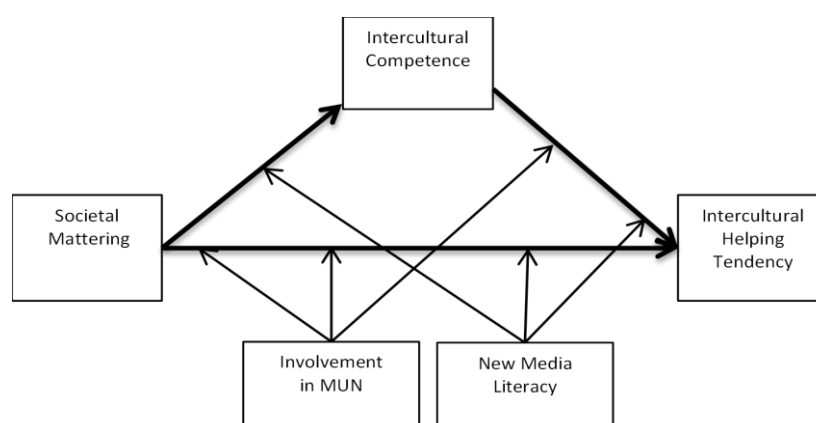

Figure 1. The hypothetical moderated mediation model

3. METHOD
3.1. Population and sampling

The population for this study consists of undergraduate students currently enrolled in university. We employed a purposive sampling technique to select individuals who met specific inclusion criteria. Eligibility for participation requires individuals to be actively enrolled as undergraduate students and at least 18 years of

age. Participants must also possess a proficient command of the English language to ensure accurate understanding and responses to the questions presented. Additionally, individuals diagnosed with any mental health condition during the data collection period were excluded from the study. The sample size was determined using G*Power 3.1.9.3, which calculated the required sample size as 89 participants. As a result, we recruited 97 participants (70 female, 24 male, 2 non-binary), which aligns with the recommendations for purposive sampling, where specific characteristics of the population are prioritized.

3.2. Measures

The variables included in this study were assessed utilizing the scales specified as the following. University mattering scale (UM-S) [31] to assess social mattering. This scale comprises ten items that evaluate variables including awareness, importance, and reliance. A sample item from this scale includes: *"The majority of people at my university recognize me."* The items are rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The scale exhibited a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.779 in our data. Items 5 and 6 were omitted from the analysis to guarantee the scale's reliability.

The cultural intelligence scale (CQS), developed by Dyne *et al.* [32] was utilized to assess participants' cultural intelligence. This scale incorporates 20 items distributed over four dimensions: CQ-strategy, CQ-knowledge, CQ-drive, and CQ-action. A sample item from the scale is: *"I enjoy living in cultures that are unfamiliar to me."* The items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. In our data, the scale demonstrated a high reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.939, indicating excellent internal consistency.

The new media literacy scale (NMLS) for university students [33], was utilized to evaluate students' NML. This scale comprises 35 items that assess the following four areas: functional consumption (FC), critical consumption (CC), functional prosumption (FP), and critical prosumption (CP). Exemplary item from the scale is: *"I can critically assess information I encounter online."* The items were evaluated using a 5-point Likert scale, from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The scale exhibited an exceptional reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.966, signifying robust internal consistency.

The helping attitude scale (HAS), originally developed by Nickell [34] in 1998, was adopted to assess intercultural helping behavior. The scale features 20 items, each evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5). A sample item from the scale is: *"Helping friends and family is one of the great joys in life."* The scale exhibited a reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) of 0.888, signifying strong internal consistency.

3.3. Analyses

Bootstrap analysis with 5000 samples in 95% confidence interval was employed to analyze the data. PROCESS Macro 4 Model 76 for moderated mediation model with two moderators, one predictor, and one outcome variable.

3.4. Procedure

Ethical approval has been cleared by the Ethics Review Board (ERB) of the Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences (FPSS) University of Cyberjaya with serial number of UOC/FPSS/2024(29). The data was collected spread via social networking platforms, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn as the most used social media platforms [35], [36] using our accounts to publicize the link to the online survey. Eligible individuals who satisfied the inclusion criteria were thereafter routed to a Google form including comprehensive information regarding the study's goal and their rights as participants. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, that their responses would remain anonymous, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. After reading this information, participants were obligated to give their approval prior to proceed the survey. Upon granting consent, participants completed the survey in ordered sections, first with section A (demographic information), then progressing to section B (NMLS), section C (UM-S), section D (CQS), and concluding with section E (HAS). The survey was intended to be finished in roughly 10 to 15 minutes. The data were subsequently examined utilizing the designated statistical techniques to evaluate the hypotheses of the moderate serial mediation model.

4.   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1. Results

The summary of the Bootstrap analysis of the moderated mediation model through PROCESS Macro Model 76 is depicted in Table 1 and Table 2. Table 1 depicts that both upper limit confidence interval (ULCI) and lower limit confidence interval (LLCI) of the direct contribution of societal mattering on IHT are never similarly positive or negative at all levels of MUN and NML, indicating that there the levels of societal

mattering (SMT) is not the significant predictor of IHT at any level of MUN exposure or NML. Table 2 depicts the conditional indirect effects. The Table 2 shows that the BootLLCI and BootULCI of the indirect contribution of societal mattering on IHT are similarly positive at the moderate and high levels of MUNI (2.0 and 3.0) and low levels of NML (112.0), and the effect is considered moderate at 0.187. It can be summarized that ICC significantly mediate the contribution of societal mattering to the IHT among participants who are moderately involved in MUN and have averagely low NML.

Table 1. Conditional direct effects of societal mattering on IHT

MUNI	NML	Effect	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
1.000	112.000	-.270	.260	-1.038	.302	-.788	.247
1.000	132.000	-.120	.227	.530	.598	-.572	.331
1.000	159.640	.087	.332	.261	.795	-.574	.747
2.000	112.000	-.332	.248	-1.341	.183	-.824	.160
2.000	132.000	-.182	.160	-1.136	.259	-.501	.137
2.000	159.640	.025	.240	.104	.917	-.452	.502
3.000	112.000	-.394	.313	-1.257	.212	-1.016	.229
3.000	132.000	-.244	208	-1.175	.243	-.656	.169
3.000	159.640	-.037	.219	-.167	.868	-.473	.399

Table 2. Conditional direct effects of conditional indirect effects of SMT on IHT through ICC

MUNI	NML	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
1.0	112.0	0.151	0.128	-0.049	0.456
1.0	132.0	0.063	0.087	-0.105	0.247
1.0	159.6	-0.003	0.077	-0.213	0.102
2.0	112.0	0.187	0.101	0.038	0.430
2.0	132.0	0.091	0.056	-0.002	0.218
2.0	159.6	0.015	0.038	-0.079	0.088
3.0	112.0	0.204	0.131	0.005	0.504
3.0	132.0	0.101	0.073	-0.017	0.270
3.0	159.6	0.013	0.043	-0.078	0.102

4.2. Discussion

This aligns with the suggestions of the past studies that individuals with high societal mattering are more inclined to bridge cultural gaps and exhibit higher ICC. It also supports the other studies that link higher ICC to stronger IHT [12], [20], [21], [24]. In intercultural university settings, ICC promotes empathy and enables students to overlook differences during collaboration. However, similar results may not occur in less-diverse institutions where the perceived need for ICC is lower.

Our findings on MUN involvement also reaffirm past research showing MUN fosters an international unity mindset [10] and enhances ICC [11], as its globally standardized procedures require participants to study and represent diverse nations while solving simulated issues [13]. We found that students with moderate to high MUN involvement showed a stronger link between societal mattering and IHT through ICC. However, our results diverge from studies suggesting that higher NML enhances ICC and IHT among Gen-Z students, particularly when societal mattering is elevated [6], [28], [30].

In our study, students with moderate or high NML (scores 132.0 and 159.4) did not exhibit the same mediating effect of ICC between societal mattering and IHT as those with lower NML (score 112.0), where the mediation was significant. Additionally, we found no significant direct effect of societal mattering on IHT, contrary to the findings of Milani and Portera [26] and Li and Guo [1], which advocated that the sense that one matters to the society directly contribute to their tendency to help people from different cultural backgrounds without developing any sense of comfort in intercultural environment. This discrepancy may be due to the moderating role of MUNI, which amplified ICC's contribution to IHT while reducing the direct effect of societal mattering. In essence, students who feel socially significant and are actively engaged in intercultural experiences like MUN are more likely to be culturally open and collaborative, regardless of their engagement with digital media.

4.2.1. Implications

Our findings highlight the significance of increasing the exposure and the involvement of younger generation towards intercultural and international activities, where they can learn that members of different subcultures, cultures, or nations are not against them and most probably have the same interests with them. In the era where geographical, cultural, and national gaps are getting smaller and blurred, attitude and behaviors that indicates lower ICC and IHT such as racism, feudalism, cronyism, or any form of discrimination would not bring any nation to any better places in the world map; instead, they might be left behind even further as

they deny or reject the idea that a fair and just intercultural-international collaboration is relevant and positive for every human being. Specifically, it can be suggested that academic institutions, such as universities or high schools to adopt intercultural-international activities such as MUN, visits to different countries, or intercultural communication without focusing too much on the differences and seek for more similarities. Such policy would be highly relevant and significant for countries with multicultural nature.

4.2.2. Limitations and suggestions

This cross-sectional study is limited due to several reasons; firstly, it was conducted among university students in urban areas of Malaysia and Indonesia, where most of the participants are well-exposed to intercultural and international differences among their peers. Their family background, as well as socioeconomic status (SES) might not vary too much among them; therefore, they might no-longer be alien to people from different countries, who speak with language they totally unable to comprehend. Urban communities are also more likely to have better access to the internet connection and have developed advanced understanding of new media content, algorithm, and other technological advantages that help them comprehend each other. Second, the study was conducted in manner of quantitative cross-sectional; therefore, while the finding might be able to show us the critical links among the variable, it might not be able to explain further about the reason such interrelationship occurred. Therefore, it is suggested to conduct similar studies in qualitative or mixed-method manner to obtain deeper understanding about the protective factors against marginalization and social discriminations in a larger scale. Other than that, it is suggested for future studies to include SES as one of the moderators to discern whether SES differences play significant role in humanitarian causes such as IHT and ICC. Still related to the population limitation, it is suggested for future studies to conduct the studies among individuals from different generations, different geographical locations, and different social exposure levels.

5. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that exposure to members of different cultural and national groups is highly significant in promoting more peaceful, inclusive, and collaborative culture among the members of different culture groups, and that the in-person exposure is considered more effective than internet-mediated exposures. Nevertheless, further exploration on the psychosocial and socio-cognitive experiences among individuals with regular intercultural interactions as it might be differed from individuals with irregular (despite frequent) intercultural interactions. Further exploration is also required to explain whether the habit of browsing international/intercultural digital platforms might contribute to different intercultural attitudes, such as intercultural prosocial tendency, intercultural hatred, or intercultural prejudice. It is suggested that the future research delve deeper into the phenomena as the digital technology advancement keeps decimating the intercultural boundaries.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : **C**onceptualization	I : **I**nvestigation	Vi : **Vi**sualization
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So : **So**ftware	D : **D**ata Curation	P : **P**roject administration
Va : **Va**lidation	O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft	Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis	E : Writing - Review & **E**diting	

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest related to financial matters or personal connections that might have influenced the research findings presented in this paper.

INFORMED CONSENT

All study participants provided informed consent. Individuals who participated were fully briefed on the study objectives and informed of their right to discontinue participation at any time.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The study adhered to all applicable national regulations and institutional policies in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration principles and received approval from the Faculty of Psychology and Social Sciences, University of Cyberjaya Ethics Committee, approval no. FPSS/23(2024).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [KDP]. Part of data that might contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

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