An Extension of the Integrated Model of Intercultural Communication Competence (IMICC) with Religiosity: An International Students’ Perspective

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Abstract
This study aims to extend and further test the integrated model of intercultural communication competence (IMICC) on a cultural context of Malaysia. Since previous researchers have pointed out the need to address religion during intercultural encounters; this study adopted IMICC, expanded it with religiosity, and tested it in Malaysian context. International students from multiple countries were considered as respondents. In this study, direct effects of empathy, sensation seeking, and ethnocentrism on intercultural communication competence (ICC) were addressed. In addition, moderating effect of religiosity and mediating effects of attitude toward other cultures (ATOC) and motivation to engage in intercultural communication (MTEIIC) on ICC were also examined. The findings show that empathy, sensation seeking, and ATOC directly influenced ICC. Findings empirically justified the moderating effect of religiosity and mediating effect of ATOC. The inclusion of religiosity into IMICC adds valuable theoretical insights. This study reconfirms the culture-general nature of variables and IMICC.

Keywords
Intercultural communication competence, Religion, Extended IMICC, Religiosity, International students, Malaysia.

Introduction
The integrated model of intercultural communication competence (IMICC) is one of the prominent contributions in literature of the culture-general models of intercultural communication competence (ICC). An effort by Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) regarding the identification of various culture-general variables that have potential to influence ICC on diverse cultural contexts, leads to the development of IMICC (Arasaratnam, 2006). The most recent versions of IMICC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Nadeem et al., 2020b, 2021) have discussed several factors that are important for predicting ICC of the individuals who belong to different cultural contexts. These factors include empathy, ethnocentrism, and sensation seeking as independent variables, motivation to engage in intercultural communication (MTEIIC), and attitude toward other cultures (ATOC) as mediating variables that influence ICC. In fact, few researcher (Arasaratnam et al., 2010a; Nadeem et al., 2020b) have made the call to enhance and further explore IMICC on various cultural contexts (Arasaratnam, 2006). Furthermore, a key variable namely, religiosity was overlooked or was not taken into consideration in the latest versions of IMICC.

Religion as a contextual variable has a unique importance in intercultural communication. It is argued that contextual variables (e.g., religion) have a strong impact on the ICC of individuals (Arasaratnam, 2016b). In addition, several researchers have noticed and addressed the importance of religiosity in their discourses on ICC, such as in Malaysia (Nadeem et al., 2020c), Iran (Ameli & Molaei, 2012), and Nigeria (Ajitoni, 2014). However, insufficient attention has been given to contextual variable, religion, in mainstream discourses on ICC (Holmes & O’Neill, 2012; Wrench et al., 2006). For this reason, these iterations of IMICC have a dominant Western perspective and focus on their own cultural factors (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011). As the Malaysian context is being considered in the present study, religion is one of the factors that contribute to the ICC (Mamman, 1995; Nadeem et al., 2020c) and intercultural scholars (Ameli & Molaei, 2012; Wrench et al., 2006) have strongly suggested addressing religion in influencing ICC. Hence, the importance of religion cannot be ignored in the
context of Malaysia, and it is crucial to examine the relationship between religion and ICC empirically. Responding to this call, this study re-examines and refines IMICC model (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Nadeem et al., 2020b, 2021) with religiosity (as a moderating variable) and aims to test it in the Malaysian context (Nadeem et al., 2017).

Even though most conceptualizations of ICC have been dominated by the Western perspective (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005; Gudykunst, 2005; Kim, 2002; Ting-Toomey, 1993), several other scholars have pointed out other cultural contexts of competence such as that of Malaysia (Dalib et al., 2017), Korea (Yum, 2012), and China (Yeh, 2010). Arasaratnam (2016b) pointed out that contextual variables matter in conceptualizing ICC. In the context of West, religion does not appear as an important contributor to ICC as compared to the other contexts such as Malaysia (Nadeem et al., 2020c), Iran (Ameli & Molaei, 2012), and Nigeria (Ajitoni, 2014). In the West, religion might not influence communication of individuals because it is considered as a “private matter.” However, in countries like Malaysia, communication is highly influenced by religion because individuals do not consider religion as a “personal matter” (Mamman, 1995). Furthermore, religion has a strong influence on the Malaysian culture (Mahmud et al., 2010) because Islam is the dominant creed in Malaysia and their interaction with strangers is based on the philosophy of Islam. Therefore, it is crucial to examine religiosity (commitment of an individual toward specific religion) influencing ICC in Malaysian context.

At this stage, the importance of context and contextual variables cannot be ignored. The recent versions of IMICC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Nadeem et al., 2020b, 2021) have not considered religiosity, possibly due to the influence of Western perspective. For that reason, this study incorporated the suggestions of earlier researcher and further extended IMICC with religiosity (moderating variable). As it is claimed that IMICC can translate well apart from different cultural contexts, therefore, this study further tested the extended version of IMICC on international students from Malaysia, and to reconfirm and validate culture-general nature of variables and IMICC.

Literature Review

Intercultural Communication Competence

ICC is defined as “the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioral orientations to the world” (Spitzberg & Chagonon, 2009, p. 7). In a similar vein, Deardorff (2004) referred ICC as “the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one’s intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 184). The appropriate and effective behaviors are the core conception of ICC that is demanded by the individuals during intercultural communication to be competent in intercultural communication (Lustig & Koester, 2003). In addition, there are certain requirements such as motivation, knowledge, skills, and attitudes that must be fulfilled by the individual to be interculturally competent (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

In terms of IMICC, an effort initiated by Arasaratnam, and her associates has contributed well toward developing a comprehensive model that is free from any cultural standpoints (Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). In the past, existing models, theories, and approaches were having some cultural bias elements that limits their universal application (Arasaratnam, 2007). Finally, the first version of IMICC was officially introduced by Arasaratnam (2006) that was having multiple culture-general factors that can impact ICC of the individual from diverse cultures. Over the years, several variables were added and eliminated from IMICC and were addressed on the cultural contexts of America, Australia, and Malaysia (Arasaratnam, 2006; Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Nadeem et al., 2020b, 2021). Until now, around seven versions of IMICC are available in the literature of ICC and further suggested to keep refining and addressing IMICC throughout the world (Nadeem et al., 2020b, 2021). Therefore, the current study has followed the same line and adopted the latest version of IMICC extended with religiosity and aims to address on the Malaysian context. The factors associated with IMICC are empathy, sensation seeking, ethnocentrism, MTEIIC, and ATOC (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Nadeem et al., 2020b, 2021). The mentioned factors of IMICC have tendency to impact ICC, directly, or indirectly. The following sub-sections discuss each factor associated with the most recent version of IMICC individually.

Empathy

Empathy is conceptualized by several researchers in the context of ICC such as Bennett (1979), who defined empathy as “intellectual and emotional participation in another person’s experience” (p. 418). In the context of intercultural research, Van Oudenhoven and Benet-Martinez (2015) defined cultural empathy as “the ability to empathize with the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors of individuals from a different cultural background” (p. 51). Among the different independent variables concerning ICC, empathy is one of the most popular. Empathy is an important factor that influences ICC. Empathy serves as the key contributor to communication competence by enhancing prediction, adaptation, and understanding (Redmond, 1989). Empathy, a skill in which an individual communicates in an appropriate manner with others, and it is important in intercultural and interpersonal interactions (Redmond & Bunyi, 1993).

In addition, empathy is a predictor of intercultural effectiveness that leads to ICC. Kim (1986) discovered that empathy is the utmost key predilection for effective cross-cultural communication. Another study by Matveev and Nelson
Sensation Seeking
A personality variable sensation seeking is usually connected with the risky behaviors of the individuals such as, thrill seeking, novelty thirst, and other risky activities (Zuckerman, 1983, 1994). Sensation seekers are mostly found of looking for new/unique experiences and having a need of adventurous activities (Zuckerman, 1994). Apart from various risky behaviors (Hoyle et al., 2002) they are also found of finding new ways to communicate with culturally different others (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2007, 2011). Furthermore, to be effective in intercultural interactions; sensation seekers are susceptible to such behaviors and ATOC that are promising for intercultural interaction. A study by Nadeem et al. (2020a) found that the international students of Malaysia hold sensation seeking trait that further influences their positive ATOC and it enables them to be effective in intercultural interaction. Another study by Fatemi et al. (2010) on the students in Iran examined the association among sensation seeking and the willingness to communicate in intercultural situations. The findings indicated that sensation seeking positively affects the communication with people of different cultural backgrounds. Recently, Nadeem et al. (2021) witnessed that sensation seeking is one of the significant indicators of ICC.

Ethnocentrism
Ethnocentrism is frequently noticed as perceiving an individual’s personal culture as dominant among all others as well as assessing different cultures grounded in personal standards. Neuliep and McCroskey (1997) referred to ethnocentrism as “ethnocentric groups see themselves as virtuous and superior while outgroups are contemptible, immoral, inferior, and weak” (p. 386). Gudykunst and Kim (2003) explained that “ethnocentrism leads us to see our own culture’s ways of doing things as right and all others as wrong” (p. 4). The researchers additionally claimed that extreme thresholds of ethnocentrism might cause an individual to misrepresent the denotation of the performance of somebody who belongs to a diverse culture because we mostly assess these deeds grounded to the viewpoint of our personal culture, possibly contributing to ineffective communication. Ethnocentrism denotes the perception of the individual about perceiving other individuals based on one’s own cultural values and norms and considering one’s own culture superior to others.

Research suggested that ethnocentrism influences intercultural interaction through emotions, cultural values, and actions presented in the interaction (Neuliep et al., 2001). The association among intercultural communication and ethnocentrism, exists when lower in intercultural communication and higher in ethnocentrism (Bennett & Bennett, 2004). In the same vein, ethnocentrism appears as a wall of intercultural communication (Chen & Starosta, 1996). Ethnocentrism is a variable that had a negative relationship with ICC as well as weakened the relationship between other variables that contribute to ICC (Arasaratnam, 2007). On the contrary, various studies found that ethnocentrism fails to impact ICC of the students (Nadeem et al., 2020b, 2021).

Attitude Toward Other Cultures
ATOC is described as an optimistic, non-ethnocentric characteristic of individuals that belong to different cultures (Arasaratnam, 2006). ATOC also explicates the openness of an individual concerning other worldviews and cultures. The description of ATOC by Arasaratnam (2006) regards the concept as “positive ATOC and is not ethnocentric” (p. 5). Nadeem et al. (2020b) found that individuals ATOC is having a strong influence on their ICC on an Asian context of Malaysia. Research by Lu and Hsu (2008) deduced that a friendly communication with positive ATOC helps to minimize communication anxiety of overseas residents. Additionally, it turns into the improvement of willingness for communication and intercultural relationships. Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) addressed five key influencers that contribute to ICC. ATOC is one of the five significant predictors with the tendency to influence ICC of the individual (Nadeem et al., 2019). Arasaratnam (2006) found that these variables had a positive association with ICC. Findings indicated a
positive association between ICC and positive ATOC. The ATOC is termed as the global attitudes in the initial research on the factors contributing to ICC. Later, the term changed into positive ATOC.

Motivation to Engage in Intercultural Communication

MTEIIC is usually denoted as the combination of such feeling that further push the individuals to participate in intercultural interaction (Deardorff, 2004). Arasaratnam (2006) defined MTEIIC “as the desire to engage in intercultural interactions for the purpose of understanding and learning about other cultures” (p. 94). Arasaratnam and Doerfel (2005) specified that knowledge, MTEIIC, and skills are the key factors of ICC. Gudykunst (1995) categorized six reasons that lead to intercultural adjustment, MTEIIC being one of the reasons. He also asserted that these variables are the competitors in the model of ICC. Yashima (2002) examined MTEIIC in learning the second language in the Japanese context. Results indicated that MTEIIC influences individual’s willingness to communicate during intercultural interactions. Hence, MTEIIC is a predictor of willingness to communicate as well as intensity of communication in a second language (MacIntyre & Clement, 1996). A study by Arasaratnam (2006) on the testing of a culture-general model of ICC showed that a significant relationship exists between MTEIIC and ICC. Another study about the contact seeking behaviors to form an intercultural friendship by Arasaratnam and Banerjee (2007) noticed the presence of significant association among MTEIIC and intercultural friendship. Results also indicated that when individuals have high levels of MTEIIC, they tend to have more intercultural friends.

These discussed variables are the part of IMICC. As discussed earlier, the previous section suggests extending and testing of IMICC on diverse cultural perspectives. Therefore, this study expanded IMICC with religiosity and addressed on the cultural context of Malaysia. The following section entails a review and importance of religiosity besides its introduction in IMICC.

Religiosity

Mokhlis (2008) referred to religiosity as “the degree to which beliefs in specific religious values and ideals are held and practiced by an individual” (p. 122). Johnson et al. (2001) described religiosity as “the extent to which an individual is committed to the religion he or she professes and its teachings, such as the individual’s attitudes and behaviors reflect this commitment” (p. 25). Religiosity is considered to have the role of religion in intercultural interactions because religiosity deals with the behavior or practice of individual according to a specific religion. Religion is usually considered as a demographic variable like age and gender (Mokhlis, 2009), and religion refers to the specific belief or faith of the individual. Besides, Worthington et al. (2003) defined religiosity as the “the degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs, and practices, and uses them in daily living. The supposition is that a highly religious person will evaluate the world through religious schemas and thus will integrate his or her religion into much of his or her life” (p. 85).

Intercultural interaction has a significant relationship with the religion of the foreigners in Malaysia, whether their upbringings are totally different from each other (Mamman, 1995). However, in the West, intercultural effectiveness does not have any emotional effect on the religion of the individual because in that context, religion is always a private matter of life (Mamman, 1995). On the other hand, in Malaysia religion is not considered as a private matter, it always influences one’s daily life matters. Ajitoni (2014) examined the relationship between religion and ICC in Nigerian school students. The findings indicated that religion positively influences the student’s ICC in the context of their classrooms. It is depicted that from an empirical standpoint, religion has a strong and positive influence on ICC in an educational setting.

Ameli and Molaei (2012) claimed that religion have a strong influence on effective communication between two different groups. They found that two religious groups were more inclined towards their similarities instead of dissimilarities. The researchers concluded that religion has the potential to influence effective intercultural interactions. A study regarding the evaluation of ICC by Holmes and O’Neill (2012) recommended to further explore the relationship between belief system and religious identities on ICC. Wrench et al. (2006) also addressed the relationship between religious fundamentalism and ICC and found religion was the contributor to intercultural communication. The researchers firmly suggested that religion is the strongest contributor of intercultural communication, and it must be addressed in upcoming studies. They also suggested that new scholars empirically examine religion and ICC. It indicates the lack of research practice regarding the relationship between religion and ICC which requires serious attention.

It is noted that religiosity is a potential moderator and has the tendency to strengthen or weaken the relationship between variables. Furthermore, it is evident that religiosity has an influence on ICC (Ajitoni, 2014; Wrench et al., 2006). Hence, religiosity is introduced as a moderating variable in the IMICC. It is proposed that religiosity can strengthen or weaken the relationship between exogenous variables (ethnocentrism, empathy, sensation seeking, MTEIIC, and ATOC) and endogenous variable (ICC) of the extended version of IMICC (see, Figure 1) because the findings of the relationship between the mentioned variables are not consistent in past studies and these relationships are primarily endorsed in Western cultural contexts.
**Methodology**

**Respondents**

The population of the current study were the international students, and the samples were drawn from a single university. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) is a public sector university that is situated in Sintok, Kedah which is the rural area of Malaysia. The university is known as an eminent management university of Malaysia. UUM hosts more than two-thousand international students from different cultural backgrounds in its campus. It ensures that a great cultural diversity in UUM campus where students from different cultural backgrounds can interact with each other regularly. International students enrolled at a university were considered as the potential respondents instead of national students, due to multiple reasons. Firstly, the model of the current study is culture-general and for this reason, a sample of culturally diverse people is required to address and validate the model. Secondly, a high cultural diversity is witnessed among international students at the campus. Thirdly, international students can better resonate with and explain intercultural experiences as compared to domestic students. Fourthly, most of the international students in Malaysia have come from the developing countries where dominant religion is Islam, and they hold a perception or belief that Malaysia is a Muslim country and its easy to resonate with Malaysian culture. Based on these discussed requirements, the current study has considered international student sample. The respondents were identified and approached through random sampling.

Various countries were represented by the respondents such as Egypt, Iran, Libya, Oman, Sudan, Uzbekistan, and so on. Most of the respondents who participated in the survey were males and a minimal participation from the females was witnessed, and their age ranged from 15 to 60, respectively. The international students were enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs, and they were living in Malaysia from 1 to 2 years (72%), less than 1 year (16%), and 3 to 4 years (12%). Most importantly, the religious affiliation of the respondents indicated that 74.7% respondents were Muslims, 13.7% were Christians, while 11.7% belonged to Others (i.e., Buddhists, Hindus, Atheists). It reveals that most international students were Muslims and stayed in Malaysia for less than 2 years.

**Measurements**

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was considered for this study to confirm the validity of data and test the hypotheses. The agreements of respondents were captured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) regarding factors influencing ICC.

*Empathy.* Respondents’ empathy was measured through adopting the 18 items (such as, “I enjoy other people’s stories” and “I sympathize with others”) Likert type scale developed by Van Oudenhoven and Van Der Zee (2002).

*Sensation seeking.* Sensation seeking was measured by adopting Hoyle et al.’s (2002) Brief Sensation Seeking (BSS)
scale comprising 8 items (e.g., “I prefer friends who are excitingly unpredictable” and “I like to do frightening things”).

Ethnocentrism. A scale developed by Neuliep (2002) and Neuliep et al. (2001) was considered in this study to measure ethnocentrism through 22 items (for instance, “I do not trust people who are different” and “I apply my values when judging people who are different”).

Attitude toward other cultures. ATOC was measured through adopting the 8 items scale (such as, “People of other cultures are equal in intelligence to people in my own group” and “People of other cultures should be treated the same as people of my own culture”) developed by Remmers et al. (1965).

Motivation to engage in intercultural communication. MTE-IIC was measured by adopting the MTEIIIC scale developed by Arasaratnam (2006) through its seven items (for instance, “I would seek out friendships with people from different cultures in order to learn about their culture” and “I enjoy initiating conversations with someone from a different culture”).

Religiosity. The religiosity of the individuals was measured by adopting the Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI) developed by Worthington et al. (2003, 2012). This scale comprised of 10 items (e.g., “Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life” and “I enjoy spending time with others of my religious affiliation”).

Intercultural communication competence. ICC was measured with 15 items (such as, “Most of my close friends are from other cultures” and “I feel that people from other cultures have many valuable things to teach me”) which were developed by Arasaratnam (2009).

Results

The relationship among exogenous and endogenous variables; and the results of five direct effects were assessed through regression analysis. A direct statistically significant relationship was found between ATOC ($\beta = .180, p < .05$), sensation seeking ($\beta = .165, p < .05$), and empathy ($\beta = .260, p < .05$) with ICC. On the contrary, MTEIIC ($\beta = .012, p > .05$) and ethnocentrism ($\beta = .003, p > .05$) did not have a statistically significant relationship with ICC.

For indirect effects, an approach by Preacher and Hayes (2004) was considered to look for the indirect effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) of the empathy, sensation seeking, and ethnocentrism on the ICC through the mediating variables, ATOC and MTEIIC on ICC. For the determination of significant mediation, it is necessary that indirect effect must be statistically significant and zero should not straddle between upper and lower bounds. The results show that the standardized indirect effects of ethnocentrism ($\beta = .023, p < .05$), sensation seeking ($\beta = .052, p < .05$), and empathy ($\beta = .061, p < .05$) were statistically significant and the lower and upper bound, which did not straddle at zero. Thus, the mediating effect of ATOC was established between ethnocentrism, sensation seeking, and empathy with ICC. On the other side, findings show that the standardized indirect estimates of ethnocentrism ($\beta = .000, p > .05$), sensation seeking ($\beta = .007, p > .05$), and empathy ($\beta = .002, p > .05$) were statistically insignificant while the lower and upper bound straddles at zero. Therefore, it was the indication of no mediating effect of MTEIIC between ethnocentrism, sensation seeking, and empathy with ICC.

The hierarchical regression technique was utilized to address the moderating effect of religiosity (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Frazier et al., 2004), three steps were employed for the determination of variance in the specific variable by other variables when they entered the regression analysis in a specific manner (Cramer, 2003). The significant interaction term indicated the existence of moderation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The interaction term of Sensation Seeking $\times$ Religiosity ($\beta = .095, p < .05$), Ethnocentrism $\times$ Religiosity ($\beta = .109, p < .05$), and ATOC $\times$ Religiosity ($\beta = .105, p < .05$) indicated a significant relationship with ICC. However, other interaction terms like, Empathy $\times$ Religiosity and MTEIIC $\times$ Religiosity leading to ICC remained statistically insignificant. For that reason, moderating effect of religiosity could not be established in these mentioned two paths. The following section involves a thorough discussion on the significant and insignificant paths (direct, indirect, and interaction effects) of the extended version of IMICC.

Discussion

The current study targeted to extend IMICC with religiosity and to further test IMICC on the context of Malaysia. The factors associated with IMICC are empathy, ethnocentrism, sensation seeking, ATOC, MTEIIC, and ICC. This study considered the fresh version of IMICC and expanded it with religiosity as the moderating variable. In terms of testing IMICC in a Malaysian context, the findings supported most of the established paths. Such as, ATOC, sensation seeking, and empathy were witnessed as direct predictors of ICC. ATOC established a mediating effect on the relationship between exogenous (ethnocentrism, sensation seeking, empathy) and endogenous (ICC) variables. However, this cultural context has not confirmed other established paths of IMICC such as, influence of ethnocentrism on ICC besides the direct and indirect effect of MTEIIC on ICC.

Due to certain reasons, other established paths like MTEIIC contributing ICC and mediating effect of MTEIIC on ICC, did not appear significant in this study. International students may have come to Malaysia with the perception that Malaysia would be culturally close to their home countries, perhaps, based on the religion. However, when they are exposed to Malaysia, they found that they are sharing a similar religion but a different culture where they are not only dependent on the Malaysians but also on other members of
different cultures. The dissimilarity of cultural norms, values, and traditions might have reduced their motivation level to interact with culturally different individuals in Malaysia.

In addition, previous studies on the context of Malaysia have also found that international student are not motivated for intercultural interactions (Nadeem et al., 2020b, 2021). The studies highlighted that the international students of Malaysia belong to developing nations where English is considered as a second language. Furthermore, they tend to experience numerous challenges: culture, adjustment, food, accommodation, confidence, etc. in Malaysia. All discussed factors might have reduced the motivation of international students to communicate with culturally different people. On the other side, the prior testing of IMICC was done in western cultural contexts where students are already motivated for intercultural interactions. As far as Malaysian context is concerned, the findings of this study indicated MTEIIC lacks to establish a direct and indirect effect on ICC. It can be concluded as context played a crucial role in establishing influence of MTEIIC on ICC.

Likewise, ethnocentrism also failed to contribute to ICC. For a reason, international students during their experiences abroad usually have lower levels of ethnocentrism and are high sensation seekers for seeking intercultural contact. The findings of this study have supported this claim and found international students are high sensation seekers and scored lower on ethnocentrism in communicating with individuals of other cultures. The discussed reasons have confirmed the causes behind the study’s findings not supporting the established paths of IMICC in the Malaysian context.

In the extended version of IMICC, two variables played a key role in terms of contributing towards the current body of knowledge. First, empathy in the model has led to noteworthy findings in comparison to former versions of IMICC. The findings revealed that an individuals’ empathy carries a direct significant impact on ICC. Previous versions of IMICC have found inconsistencies regarding relationship between empathy and ICC, prevails when mediated by ATOC. However, this study witnessed that empathy is a key player in determining ICC. In addition, the association among empathy and ICC also exists in presence of mediating variable ATOC. Despite of different cultural context (Malaysia) of this study, still findings indicated novel results. Second, the important addition to IMICC was religiosity. This study witnessed unique findings regarding this addition. The interaction effect of religiosity with ATOC, ethnocentrism, and sensation seeking had a strong impact on ICC. These significant interaction effects revealed religiosity as a potential moderator in terms of ICC and have strengthen the relationship of ATOC, ethnocentrism, and sensation seeking with ICC. This direction can be interpreted as international students’ ATOC, sensation seeking, and ethnocentrism interaction with their religiosity, bearing a strong impact on their ICC. Most interestingly, lower levels of ethnocentrism interaction with high levels of religiosity contributes to the competency of international students during intercultural interactions. It indicates that international students have kept their predispositions regarding superiority of culture on lower levels and possess higher levels of religiosity during intercultural communication.

Other proposed paths regarding interaction effect of religiosity, with empathy and MTEIIC, could not significantly affect ICC. For MTEIIC, it was obvious, because international students possess lower levels of MTEIIC in dealing with ICC. For this reason, the interaction effect of MTEIIC and religiosity could not significantly contribute to ICC. On the other side, it is worthy to discuss why interaction effect of religiosity with empathy could not be established significantly. The findings revealed that religiosity dampen the direct influence of empathy on ICC. Nonetheless, it provides new insights into international students’ levels of empathy not significantly interacting with their levels of religiosity to further impact ICC. Even though empathy is witnessed as a direct influencer on ICC in the extended version of IMICC, still findings of expanded version of IMICC are conspicuous.

The extended version of IMICC has contributed well to the existing body of knowledge by providing a novel mechanism to examine systematic influence of various factors on ICC. The factors of this study influenced ICC directly (ATO, sensation seeking, and empathy), indirectly (ATO, ethnocentrism, and sensation seeking with religiosity). This study has not only enriched the IMICC in terms of adding a predictor, but it has also enhanced the explanatory or predictive power of IMICC. For instance, empathy in IMICC showed that the international students of Malaysia possess empathetic attitudes that lead them to be competent in intercultural interactions. In terms of religiosity, it is observed as the strongest predictor in a context of Malaysia. Furthermore, interaction of religiosity with sensation seeking, ethnocentrism, and ATOC of international students played a key role in turning them into being interculturally competent. To sum up, the extended version of IMICC can predict ICC better than former versions of IMICC in the cultural context of Malaysia.

The current study faces several limitations. First, the responses of the international students may change with the passage of time as it is normally witnessed in social sciences research. Second, in this study, most of the international students were the Muslims and were sampled from the specific university located in the rural area of Malaysia. Therefore, the perspective of international students regarding ICC from urban areas of Malaysia (Kuala Lumpur and Penang) might be slightly different to this study. Third, there is a possibility that students have not shared their original stances and response about ICC from the fear of being judged. Lastly, as this study has not considered experimental research design, therefore, a transparent cause and effect might not be established in this regard.
Conclusion
This study has extended IMICC with religiosity and tested it in the context of Malaysia. The expanded version of IMICC is tested by incorporating SEM technique through multivariate analysis. The findings of present study have validated most of existing relationships (for instance, empathy, sensation seeking, and ATOC leading to ICC) dominated by Western point of view. However, two paths (ethnocentrism and MTEIIC leading to ICC) were not supported by the findings, possibly due to composition of diverse respondents and different context. Furthermore, mediating effect of ATOC is established by findings. However, the mediating effect of MTEIIC could not established in this study. Still, findings are considered as a significant contribution. An introduction of religiosity in IMICC provides the novel findings and interaction of religiosity with other factors results in strengthening their relationship with ICC. Finally, it can be interpreted as the overall findings of the study supported many paths except a few and reconfirmed that IMICC and associated variables are having a culture-general nature.

It is the initial attempt in which the factors of IMICC are considered in influencing ICC, particularly in Malaysian context. The interaction of religiosity with other contributing factors to ICC is investigated in this research. Even though this association is seen as an important aspect of this study, the path from religiosity to ICC is still in its early phases. The direct association between religiosity and ICC would be an important path that must be explored in future research on multiple cultural perspectives to validate findings of this study. The findings of current study, however, are promising apart from two insignificant paths. This exception must be considered in future research of ICC on other cultural contexts. The extended version of IMICC is not limited to the setting of Malaysia. This model can be adapted for other contexts where religion is a crucial element behind intercultural interactions. It can also be adopted by Western researchers for the determination of religion in terms of ICC in various Western contexts. There will be significant findings when this model is adapted for multicultural societies from different zones across the globe.

Informed Consent Statement
All participants provided informed consent prior to completing this study.

Data Availability
The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Ethics Statement
This research was in accordance with the ethical standards of the Department of Communication, School of Multimedia Technology and Communication (SMMTC), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM).

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