

EXPLORATION OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN DIGITAL MEDIA: A STUDY OF SMALL COMMUNITIES IN THE RIAU ISLANDS

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Abstract

In the digital era, intercultural communication has undergone significant changes, particularly within ethnically diverse small island communities such as those in the Riau Islands. This qualitative study explores the challenges and opportunities of intercultural communication through digital media among the Laut and Malay communities on Penyengat Island, Tanjung Batu Kundur, Galang, and Bintan, using documentation, observation, and in-depth interviews. The findings identify key challenges, including dialect differences, limited internet infrastructure, and cultural prejudice, alongside opportunities such as expanded perspectives, strengthened social relations, and support for cultural sustainability. The study shows that digital media functions not only as a communication tool but also as a space for negotiating cultural identity and social relations. Theoretically, this research contributes to intercultural communication studies by emphasizing the role of local socio-cultural and geographical contexts in shaping digital communication practices beyond urban-centered perspectives.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Digital Media; Cultural Identity; Small Island Communities; Sustainability

1. Introduction

As social beings and cultural actors, humans try to fulfill their needs and interests through communication. Communication has become a common word when people connect with each other, although they rarely use this word with a true understanding of its true meaning. Due to its routine, people who interact are often easily "lost" when using communication in everyday life, both in the same context and in different contexts (Tobing, 2024: 64). In this context, intercultural communication becomes important, an exchange of values, norms, and symbols between individuals or groups from different cultures (Samputra & Alfarizi, 2025). When someone enters a new environment, the process of intercultural communication is unavoidable because it becomes a bridge to recognize, appreciate, and unite cultural diversity (Nasir et al., 2025; Rohayati & Abdillah, 2024).

1.1. Background

There are various methods and approaches that humans can use to build intercultural communication. For those communicating with other individuals or groups, it is a form of cultural exchange and integration. Entering a new environment means engaging in intercultural contact and communication,

making intercultural communication inevitable. Therefore, intercultural communication has become an obligation for individuals to respect, recognize, learn, and even integrate these cultures.

At the same time, the world is experiencing significant changes along with the development of information technology. DataReportal (2024) shows that in early 2024, there were 185.3 million internet users in Indonesia, with penetration reaching 66.5%. Social media users reached 139 million, while active mobile communications reached 353.3 million. This surge indicates that Indonesian society has entered a phase of digital intensification, where communication is no longer bound by space and time (DataReportal, 2024). New technology-centered eras such as the Internet of Things (IoT) 5.0 and Society 5.0 are also changing the way humans build social interactions. IoT 5.0 encourages the use of sensor-based technology, intelligent connectivity, and human-centered systems that support equal access to information and communication (Nasir et al., 2025; Rohayati & Abdillah, 2024; Samputra & Alfarizi, 2025).

This condition is in line with the global agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 9 (digital infrastructure and innovation), SDG 10 (reducing inequality) (Dvulit et al., 2025), SDG 4 (digital literacy and quality education), and SDG 16 (social harmony and cultural inclusiveness) (Ministry of National Development Planning, 2019). Digitalization not only facilitates communication, but also becomes an instrument to reduce inequality and strengthen social cohesion in minority and remote communities (Ministry of National Development Planning, 2019).

Specifically in the Riau Islands, technological progress has been rapid, with the Riau Islands itself ranked seventh among investment destinations for the digital technology industry in Indonesia. According to Zuhendri, Head of the Riau Islands Provincial Communications and Information Office, in 2021, an increasing number of residents were found to be relying on the internet for work and business.

The Riau Islands, with its geographical characteristics of hundreds of islands and ethnic diversity, make it an interesting location to study the dynamics of intercultural communication in the digital age. Small communities in this region now have access to the wider world through digital media, but at the same time, they also face the potential for cultural clashes and communication misunderstandings.

In the era of globalization and rapid advances in information technology, intercultural communication has undergone changes, particularly with the advent of digital media. Therefore, with the advancement of technology, information and communication have transformed the way humans interact. Digital media has now become the primary platform for individuals and communities to connect, share information, and build relationships without geographical boundaries. However, this ease of access to global communication also brings new challenges, particularly in the context of intercultural communication. This phenomenon or incident occurs not only in urban areas but also extends to remote areas, including the Riau Islands. This region provides a unique context for studying the dynamics of intercultural communication, particularly between two ethnic groups that have long inhabited the region: the Sea People and the Malay People.

Riau Islands Province, whose capital is Tanjungpinang City, is a province with an area of approximately 8,201.72 km² and the second most populous province with approximately 2,025 islands, according to 2021 BPS data. Riau Islands Province is also rich in natural resources, particularly in oil, gas, and maritime sectors. The large number of islands in Riau Islands has led to the spread of many ethnicities and cultures across the Riau Islands Province, creating a rich cultural diversity. Riau Islands Province is one of the provinces with a significant number of ethnicities compared to others. With a population of 2,189,653 in 2019, the largest concentration is in Batam City, at around 56.47% or approximately 1.1 million inhabitants. Meanwhile, the smallest concentration is in Anambas Islands Regency, at 2.42%.

The Riau Islands are dominated by the Malay ethnic group. According to 2015 data, Malays comprised approximately 29.97% of the total population of the Riau Islands. The Riau Islands are not the only Malay ethnic group; there are also sub-dominant or indigenous tribes native to the Riau Islands, including the Sea tribe (Duano) in Karimun, the Orang Hutan tribe in Rempang, and the Akit tribe. The Malays are the first indigenous group in the Riau Islands Province. People sometimes assume they originate from Malaysia, when in fact, the majority of Malays originate from Indonesia, one of which is dominated by the Riau Islands community.

The Sea Tribe is also an indigenous tribe from the Riau Islands Province who live in areas around the sea. The Sea Tribe is also the oldest tribe in the Riau Islands, although the Sea Tribe is the oldest tribe and one of the indigenous tribes originating from the Riau Islands, the Sea Tribe is a sub-dominant tribe in the Riau Islands which numbers around 12,800 people spread across 44 locations in the Riau Islands, the data is based on the Kajang Foundation research team in 2020. The lack of adequate literacy regarding the origins of the Sea Tribe community in the protection of history, customary areas, and heritage objects has made the existence of the Sea Tribe community not surface in the 20th century.

This context becomes even more relevant when considering the conditions of the Riau Islands, a maritime province comprising more than 2,000 islands with diverse ethnicities and cultures. Riau Islands ranks seventh nationally as a promising region in the digital technology industry, and its people increasingly rely on the internet for work and business. As a region with extensive ethnic diversity, Riau Islands has two important groups: the dominant Malay tribe and the sub-dominant Sea Tribe (Duano), who have historically lived in water areas, some with a semi-nomadic lifestyle on canoes. The diversity of dialects, customs, and beliefs makes interactions between these two tribes challenging, especially when prejudice and stereotypes influence perceptions of each other.

The Riau Islands, with its rich culture and ethnic diversity, are an interesting research site to explore how digital media can influence and reshape patterns of intercultural interaction. The dominant Malay community, which lives on land, and the Sea Tribe community, although some still live nomadically on boats or "Kajang" or in coastal settlements, have different cultural backgrounds and lifestyles. However, the presence of digital media has opened

up new opportunities for these two communities to interact and understand each other.

Small communities in the Riau Islands now have access to the wider world through digital media. This opens up opportunities for them to promote local culture, exchange ideas with other communities, and participate in global discussions. However, at the same time, they also face challenges in maintaining their cultural identity amidst the constant flow of information. This article aims to explore in depth the challenges and opportunities that arise in intercultural communication through digital media, focusing on the experiences of small communities in the Riau Islands.

However, the development of digital media has opened up new spaces for interaction between these two ethnic groups. Social media, instant messaging, and other digital platforms have become not only means of communication but also tools for promoting local culture, sharing traditions, and expanding social networks across regions and countries. However, behind these opportunities lie challenges, including dialect differences that can lead to misinterpretations, cultural prejudices that can arise in online communication, and unequal internet infrastructure across small islands—a form of digital divide that has the potential to widen cultural and technological inequalities.

The Riau Islands, with their rich ethnic diversity, are an ideal location to examine how coastal and island communities utilize digital media within the IoT 5.0 framework and how these dynamics contribute to achieving the SDGs. The interaction between the Malay people, who live on land, and the Sea Peoples, some of whom still maintain their maritime traditions, is a clear example of how technology can unite or reinforce social distance if not balanced with adequate digital literacy.

Small communities in the Riau Islands now have access to a wider world, enabling them to learn about other cultures, showcase their cultural identities through digital platforms, and participate in global discussions. However, they also face the challenge of maintaining their cultural identity amidst the flood of global information. Furthermore, technologies in the IoT 5.0 era, with advantages such as adaptive networks, real-time connectivity, and marine sensors, have the potential to provide solutions to the long-standing geographical barriers faced by island communities.

1.2. Research Question

Based on the background and literature review discussed above, it is evident that digital media plays an increasingly important role in shaping intercultural communication, particularly within small and ethnically diverse island communities. The Laut and Malay communities in the Riau Islands experience unique communication dynamics due to differences in dialect, cultural values, social structures, and unequal access to digital infrastructure. While digital media provides new opportunities for interaction and cultural exchange, it also presents challenges that may affect mutual understanding and social sustainability.

Therefore, this study is guided by the following research question is;

“How do digital media shape intercultural communication practices between the Laut and Malay communities in the Riau Islands, and what challenges and opportunities emerge from this process?”

1.3. Purpose and Objective

Based on this context, this study aims to explore in-depth the challenges and opportunities for intercultural communication experienced by the Laut and Malay communities through digital media. This study examines how platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram bridge interactions between the two communities, how the digital infrastructure gap affects the quality of intercultural communication, and the extent to which this process can support sustainable development and digital transformation in the IoT 5.0 era. This research not only captures cultural interactions but also places them within the global landscape of moving towards an inclusive, sustainable, and connected society.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication refers to the process of exchanging messages between individuals or groups who come from different cultural backgrounds, involving differences in values, norms, language, and communication styles. Samovar and Porter (1995) explain that intercultural communication emphasizes understanding cultural diversity to minimize misunderstanding and conflict. Gudykunst (2002) further states that effective intercultural communication requires cultural awareness, sensitivity, and the ability to manage uncertainty during interactions.

In the context of island communities, intercultural communication tends to be more complex due to variations in dialect, speech tempo, and nonverbal expressions, which may lead to misinterpretation. These challenges highlight the importance of intercultural competence, especially when communication takes place through mediated platforms rather than face-to-face interaction (Gudykunst, 2002).

2.2. Digital Media (WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram)

Digital media refers to communication platforms that utilize internet-based technologies to enable users to interact, share information, and form social networks. According to Flew (2008), digital media transforms communication patterns by removing spatial and temporal limitations. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram have become dominant tools in everyday communication practices.

WhatsApp functions as an instant messaging application that supports text messages, voice notes, images, videos, and video calls. Facebook is a social networking platform that facilitates community building through posts, groups, and comment features. Instagram focused on visual communication through photos, videos, and interactive story features. Howard and Parks (2012) argue that social media platforms not only enable fast information exchange but also reshape social interactions and cultural expression.

In intercultural context, digital media plays a significant role in bridging geographical distance and enabling cross-cultural interaction. However, the lack of nonverbal cues in digital communication can increase the risk of misunderstanding, especially among communities with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Howard and Parks, 2012).

2.3. Ethnic Groups in the Riau Islands: Sea Tribe and Malay Tribe

The Riau Islands Province is characterized by rich ethnic diversity. The dominant ethnic group in the region is the Malay community, which has historically inhabited coastal and inland island areas. In addition to the Malays, there are several indigenous groups such as the Sea Tribe (Suku Laut or Duano), the Akit Tribe, and the Orang Hutan or Orang Darat communities (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2019; Kemdikbud, 2020).

The Sea Tribe is known for its maritime-oriented lifestyle, with some members living semi-nomadically on boats or in coastal settlements. Meanwhile, the Malay community generally resides on land and maintains social structures rooted in village life and Malay cultural traditions. These differences in lifestyle, language use, and social norms shape interaction patterns between the two groups and influence how intercultural communities occurs, both offline and through digital media (Kemdikbud, 2020).

2.4. Sustainability, SDGs, and Society 5.0

Sustainability in communication studies emphasizes the role of communication in maintaining social cohesion, cultural identity, and equitable access to information. Within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), digital communication is closely linked to SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), and SDG 16 (peaceful and inclusive societies) (Ministry of National Development Planning, 2019).

The concept of Society 5.0 places humans at the center of technological development, where digital technology is designed to support social well-being and inclusivity (Rohayati and Abdillah, 2024). Nasir et al. (2025) argue that human-centered digital transformation can enhance social resilience when supported by adequate infrastructure and digital literacy.

In small island communities such as those in the Riau Islands, digital media contributes to sustainability by preserving local culture, facilitating intercultural dialogue, and reducing geographical barriers. However, unequal internet access and limited digital literacy remain challenges that can hinder the achievement of sustainable intercultural communication (Rohayati and Abdillah, 2024; Nasir et al. 2025).

Existing studies on intercultural communication and digital media have predominantly focused on urban societies and large-scale communities, emphasizing issues such as globalization, identity negotiation, and digital interaction in metropolitan contexts. While these studies provide valuable insights, they often overlook the role of local socio-cultural and geographical conditions in shaping digital communication practices, particularly in small island and maritime communities.

Research in island communities tends to address cultural preservation or social cohesion separately, with limited attention to how digital media mediates intercultural communication between different ethnic groups. This study addresses this gap by examining intercultural communication between the Laut and Malay communities in the Riau Islands, where digital interaction occurs within distinct cultural, social, and geographical constraints. By adopting an interpretive and context-based approach, this research positions itself as a contribution to intercultural communication theory by highlighting the significance of local context in understanding how digital media shapes intercultural relations in small, ethnically diverse island communities.

3. Research Methods

In terms of the type of research, this research is considered field research, meaning that data collection is conducted in the field, such as within the community and community organizations. In other words, it can be interpreted as research conducted by going directly to the research location to observe and directly engage with the research object (Moleong, 2007: 4).

The approach in this research is a qualitative approach which will later in this research process will produce descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and actors who can be observed (Moleong, 2007: 4). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011) said that qualitative research is the right approach when researchers want to study things in their natural settings, trying to make sense or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning that people bring to the future. In addition, qualitative research also aims to describe and analyze social phenomena from the perspective of participants (people who are interviewed, observed and asked for data) by using words, not by using numbers.

Data collection in this study was conducted through documentation, observation, and in-depth interviews. According to Neuman (2014), documentation is commonly used as evidence that cannot be obtained interactively. Documents in the form of memos, articles, and others serve as other sources of information as data/evidence for a study. Meanwhile, observation is a data collection process in research where researchers systematically and carefully observe, record, and pay attention to certain behaviors, events, or phenomena without disturbing or influencing the subject or situation being observed. Babbie (2017), an expert in social research methodology, defines observation as data collection in a systematic manner that involves seeing, recording, and observing what happens in a situation. By conducting this observation, the researcher wanted to see and observe directly how digital media can become an opportunity for intercultural communication in the Laut and Malay communities in the Riau Islands.

The interview was conducted because the researcher wanted to observe and understand the challenges faced by the two ethnic groups in intercultural communication through digital media, as well as the opportunities for both ethnic groups in utilizing digital media. According to Neuman (2014), an interview involves sharing experiences to build trust between the interviewee and the interviewer. Experiences shared by the interviewee, if relevant to the topic being discussed, can be used as a focus for the interviewee. However, the questions asked should not be sensitive and should not pressure the interviewee to answer.

Before conducting the interview, there is a selection technique in choosing informants to be interviewed. The technique in selecting informants used in this study is the Snowball Sampling method. Where Snowball Sampling is a sampling technique in qualitative research where existing participants recommend or invite other participants to participate. This method is called "snowball" because the number of participants increases like a rolling and enlarging snowball. According to Babbie (2017), Snowball Sampling is a sample used in field research. Usually each person will be interviewed and asked to recommend others to be interviewed and is used when the desired informant is difficult to find.

In this research, the researcher used an interpretive paradigm. According to Stephen M. Croucher (2018), the interpretive paradigm is a scientific method in social science that emphasizes understanding and explaining the meanings humans give to social phenomena. The goal of this paradigm is to understand how humans give meaning to social phenomena and how these meanings shape social interactions. This approach assumes that social reality cannot be understood objectively but must be understood from the perspective of humans and their social context. The interpretive paradigm approach is often used in research related to topics such as personal experience, culture, language, and social construction.

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach within an interpretive paradigm to explore intercultural communication practices in digital media. The research was conducted in several locations in the Riau islands, including Penyengat Island, Tanjung Batu Kundur, Galang, and Bintan, which are characterized by ethnic diversity and small island socio-cultural dynamics.

Data were collected through documentation, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with members of the Laut and Malay communities who are actively involved in daily social interactions and digital communication practices. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of informants with relevant experiences related to intercultural communication in digital contexts.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, involving stages of data reduction, data categorization, data display, and conclusion drawing. This process allowed recurring patterns and meanings related to challenges and opportunities of intercultural communication to be systematically identified. To enhance data credibility, source triangulation was applied by cross-checking interview data with observations and documentation. Ethical considerations were addressed by obtaining informed consent from all participants and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

4. Results and Discussions

This Section presents the main findings of the study, followed by a discussion that interprets these findings in relation to intercultural communication theory and previous studies.

Research conducted on the Sea Tribe and Malay communities on Penyengat Island, Alai Island, Galang Island, Tanjung Batu Kundur Island, and Bintan Island shows that the process of intercultural communication through digital media is dynamic and influenced by social, cultural, and technological infrastructure factors. The research findings can be categorized into two broad aspects: the challenges and

opportunities of intercultural communication, which are then analyzed within the framework of sustainability, the SDGs, and the Society 5.0 paradigm.

The communication challenges and opportunities faced by the Malay and Sea ethnic groups in intercultural communication interactions in digital media can be summarized as follows. There are challenges of intercultural communication in digital media, such as: dialect differences, digital infrastructure limitations or digital divide, and cultural prejudice and bias in online communication.

4.1. Dialect Differences

Dialect differences between the Laut and Malay tribes are a key factor in causing miscommunication, both in face-to-face interactions and through digital media. Informants from both tribes acknowledged that differences in intonation, speaking speed, and vocabulary often trigger misunderstandings. In the context of social sustainability, this challenge demonstrates that digital communication does not automatically eliminate cultural barriers, highlighting the need for intercultural communication literacy as a prerequisite for achieving long-term harmony.

This analysis aligns with SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), which emphasizes the importance of reducing social conflict through increased cross-cultural understanding. Different dialects require a more intensive process of negotiating meaning, in line with the human-centered communication principle in Society 5.0, which places humans at the center of message interpretation.

This dialect difference is a challenge for informant one, namely Mr. Uli Krisna (UK), as a member of the Laut tribe, he feels that dialect is one of the main challenges. "When we communicate with Malays, let alone on digital media, even in everyday life without digital media, we often misunderstand each other because of the different accents".

However, the difference in dialect itself is not only felt by the Malay ethnic group, but also by the Laut ethnic group, this was said by the third informant, Mr. Sutarno (S),

"Sometimes we say "apak" which means for us Malays it's "what" but for them it's different, right. Sometimes that's a challenge for us, then when they want to speak it's fast, sometimes we don't want to understand what they're saying, because when we speak it's soft and very slow, right? When we're on the phone and sometimes we can't get network and then suddenly the phone goes off, we think they're angry and so do they think we're angry, right?" even though it's because of the network, right?"

4.2. Digital Divide

The limited and unstable internet connection was the second biggest challenge identified in this study. Informants from small islands complained of network congestion, especially during bad weather. This situation demonstrates the strong digital divide between urban and island areas, a structural gap that directly impacts the quality of intercultural communication.

From a sustainability perspective, this gap is closely related to SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), where the availability of equitable digital infrastructure is a prerequisite for inclusive digital transformation. Without adequate infrastructure, intercultural interactions through digital media cannot

function optimally and have the potential to widen social disparities between regions. Furthermore, in the IoT 5.0 era, unstable internet connectivity will hamper the implementation of sensor-based technologies and adaptive information systems that could help overcome the geographical barriers of island communities.

As experienced by the first informant, Mrs. Rahayu (R), who said, "Because in my area, it's difficult to get a network, it's also because of the weather". Not only R, the second informant, Mr. Uli Krisna (UK), also felt the same way: "On Alai Island, almost all of us have network problems, because the network is there and then it disappears, and it's like that".

4.3. Cultural Prejudice

Cultural prejudice emerged as a third barrier in this research. Both ethnic communities acknowledged that stereotypes, such as the perception that the Laut people speak too quickly or are impolite, and the perception that the Malay people are "arrogant" or reluctant to mingle, contribute to social distance. In the context of digital communication, these prejudices can be reinforced by the absence of nonverbal cues that typically help clarify the message.

This phenomenon is crucial in relation to SDG 10 (reduced inequalities), where reducing bias and discrimination is the foundation for building a more inclusive society. In Society 5.0, digital technology should serve to reduce prejudice through empathetic communication, not reinforce distances between cultural identities. These findings demonstrate the need for digital empathy and ethical communication as part of literacy in island communities.

As UK felt, the Sea Tribe people are often impolite when communicating. "They say we're impolite when we speak, and they say we speak quickly without thinking about who we're talking to. Since then, I've learned to be more polite. For example, when I want to make a phone call, I say hello first so they don't think that way anymore".

The fourth informant, Mr. Abun (A), apparently felt the same way, saying, "For example, if they talk too quickly about us, we're learning to be gentle, to learn to respect each other". It turns out that not only the Sea Tribe community experiences this prejudice; the Malay community also experiences it, as stated by the sixth informant, Mrs. Welendri (We), "For example, they say that the Malays are arrogant and don't want to invite people from canoes to join us, even though they say our ancestors were one people."

Besides all the challenges, there are also opportunities of intercultural communication in digital media, such as: digital media as a space for transforming cultural perspectives, increasing network capacity as a sustainable digital asset, digital technology as an eraser of geographical boundaries.

4.4. Digital Media as a Space for Transforming Cultural Perspectives

The findings show that existing digital media, especially WhatsApp, has become a significant space for cultural exchange. Both tribes utilize digital platforms to share traditions, rituals, pantun (rhymes), and traditional activities. This demonstrates a process of cultural sustainability, where local culture is not only maintained but also disseminated more widely through the digital ecosystem.

This activity aligns with SDG 16 (social harmony) and SDG 4 (improving cultural and digital literacy). Digital documentation enables the traditions of the Laut and Malay peoples to survive across generations, while reducing the risk of cultural practices being lost due to modernization. For example, they share or exchange information related to their respective traditions through WhatsApp, the main medium. R explained,

"We also have a community or group on Penyengat Island to disseminate Malay traditions. Even though Penyengat is a small island, we believe that it is through digital media that Indonesians learn about Penyengat Island."

Informant A even uses digital media to broaden his perspective on his culture by sharing on his social media platform, WhatsApp. "We share our own activities, like traditional ceremonies and everyday things, from videos to photos. Sometimes I also share them on my WhatsApp story".

But before posting anything, they are careful not to offend anyone. UK stated in an interview, "We have to post only good things, right? That's why I always share good information, whether in WhatsApp groups, using polite language so people can read it".

4.5. Increasing Network Capacity as a Sustainable Digital Asset

Despite the unequal distribution of digital infrastructure, communities have adapted by seeking out strong network hotspots or accessing public Wi-Fi. This pattern of adaptation demonstrates self-initiated resilience, the ability of communities to create independent solutions when faced with technological barriers.

Within the framework of SDG 9 and Society 5.0, improving network access is a crucial aspect of creating a sustainably connected society. As digital infrastructure develops, opportunities for intercultural interaction will expand and be better managed. This is evident in R and UK, who live on an island with limited internet access. R stated, "I overcome this by going to another place with a network so it's easier for me to communicate online".

Likewise, the UK said, "Go to a place with good network connectivity, or find a place with Wi-Fi, because Wi-Fi is the best network here."

4.6. Digital Technology as an Eraser of Geographical Boundaries

One of the biggest opportunities in this research is the ability of digital media to bridge communication distances. Informants mentioned that video calls allow them to interact with relatives and communities across islands in real time.

This phenomenon aligns with the principles of Society 5.0, which positions technology as a means of unifying social space. Increasingly efficient communication across distances contributes to social sustainability by enabling groups to maintain contact despite geographical separation. As R noted, he feels that digital media allows for video calls with distant family members and even long-lost friends.

"Like now, with video calls, we can have a group chat, joke around, and chat with our distant family and old friends. It's like a reunion. Even though we're far away, we can still talk".

The UK also expressed the same thing, saying, "The advantage is that there are no distance or time constraints. For example, we can contact distant friends or family via video call. Information reaches us and others quickly".

The results and discussion indicate that intercultural communication among the Laut and Malay tribes in the Riau Islands is not free from the challenges of dialect differences, social prejudice, and limited digital infrastructure. However, at the same time, digital media opens up significant opportunities for cultural sustainability, expanding social networks, and transforming cross-regional communication.

When analyzed through the perspectives of sustainability, the SDGs, Society 5.0, and IoT 5.0, it is clear that this intercultural communication process is not merely a social phenomenon, but part of the transition to an inclusive, human-centered, and sustainable digital society.

From an intercultural communication perspective, the patterns observed in this study demonstrate that digital media mediates cultural interaction in ways that reflect existing power relations, identities, and social norms.

Overall, the findings and discussions highlight that intercultural communication through digital media in small island communities is shaped by a dynamic interplay between technological access, cultural identity, and local structures.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research demonstrates that intercultural communication between the Laut and Malay communities in the Riau Islands continues to face significant challenges, including dialect differences, unequal internet access, and persistent cultural prejudice. At the same time, digital media provides opportunities for strengthening intercultural interaction through information sharing, social relationship building, and cultural exchange across geographically dispersed islands. Community adaptation strategies, such as utilizing public Wi-Fi and signal hotspots, reflect resilience in responding to technological limitations. From a sustainability and SDGs perspective, the development of digital communication contributes to reducing social disparities and expanding access to information, aligning with the principles of Society 5.0 that emphasize technology in support of inclusive human-centered development.

Based on these findings, several issues warrant attention. Equitable internet access needs to be accelerated to prevent small islands from becoming further left behind. Communities also need stronger digital literacy—not just about how to use media, but also how to communicate wisely and understand cultural differences without prejudice. Technology service providers can also play a role by ensuring services remain operational in areas with poor signal and providing accessible digital training. Collaboration between the government, local communities, academics, and the private sector will significantly contribute to creating a more equitable, open, and sustainable communication environment for the Sea and Malay tribes.

This research contributes theoretically to the study of intercultural communication by broadening the understanding of interethnic communication practices within the context of digital media in small island communities. The research findings indicate that intercultural communication in the digital space does not occur in a neutral or uniform manner, but is heavily influenced by the social, cultural, and

geographical contexts of the Sea Tribe and Malay communities. In this context, digital media serves not only as a means of information exchange but also as a space for negotiating identity, social relations, and cultural values between groups.

Furthermore, this study challenges the tendency of digital communication theory to view digitalization as a homogeneous process by demonstrating that digital communication practices actually reflect and reproduce local cultural dynamics. By presenting the relatively understudied context of an archipelagic society, this study enriches the theoretical perspective of digital intercultural communication, which has been dominated by studies in urban societies or global contexts. This theoretical contribution emphasizes the importance of a local context-based approach in understanding communication transformation in the digital era, particularly in maritime and multiethnic societies.

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