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# Negotiating cultural identity in the trans-digital space: a multi-scalar analysis of translingual ELF users' intercultural communication

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamic and interconnected practices of translingual and transcultural communication among users of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) within the emerging concept of the trans-digital space. This space blurs the boundaries between online and offline communication, where multiple intersecting scales, ranging from national and global to digital and physical, shape the negotiation of cultural identities. Using a multi-scalar analysis, the study examines how Algerian international students at a UK university employ a diverse range of linguistic, multimodal, and cultural resources to navigate these scales and construct their cultural identities. Through ethnographic methods, the research highlights the fluid and multilayered nature of cultural identity construction, as ELF users integrate various communicative practices across overlapping scales. It aligns with post-structuralist approaches by framing scales not as fixed endpoints but as dynamic, emergent phenomena, suggesting the need for further exploration into the role of language, culture, and technology in contemporary communication. This study offers new insights into the evolving landscape of intercultural communication in the digital age, contributing to broader discussions on the ongoing negotiation of cultural identities within fluid, multi-scalar environments.

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## Introduction

The extensive use of English as a lingua franca (ELF) globally for intercultural communication is now well-established (Jenkins, Baker, and Dewey 2018) and this extends into digital domains (Pineda and Bosso 2023). Given the ubiquity of digital communication and the extensive use of ELF in such settings, a greater understanding is needed of how such spaces are constructed and negotiated and the role of language, identity and community within this (Baker and Ishikawa 2021). To address this gap, this paper examines the fluid and complex practices of translingual and transcultural communication among speakers of ELF within the newly proposed conceptual framework of the trans-digital space. This innovative framework highlights how the boundaries between online and offline communication dissolve, creating new environments where cultural identities are constantly negotiated across intersecting scales such as national, global, digital, and physical.

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Focusing on Algerian international students at a UK university, this study employs a multi-scalar analytical approach (Blommaert, Westinen, and Leppänen 2015; Canagarajah and De Costa 2016) to explore how these participants draw on diverse linguistic, multimodal, and cultural resources to construct and navigate multiple identities. It aligns with post-structuralist approaches by viewing scales and identities as dynamic and emergent rather than fixed and hierarchical and ELF as part of translanguaging and transcultural communicative process. The study contributes to discussions in ELF research, translanguaging, and digital intercultural communication, through insights into the original notion of trans-digital space that we develop in this paper.

First, we review relevant literature on translingual/transcultural communication, cultural identity, and scales, focusing on frameworks that challenge traditional notions of linguistic and cultural boundaries. Next, the research context, methods, and participants are outlined, emphasising the innovative use of trans-digital ethnography (Androutsopoulos 2008; Varis 2016). The findings section presents key examples of how participants navigate and negotiate their identities across multiple scales, including temporal, spatial, digital, and global dimensions. Finally, the discussion and conclusion synthesise the implications of this research for understanding intercultural communication, digital literacy, and identity negotiation in a globalised, trans-digital world.

## Literature review

### *Trans theories: translanguaging and transcultural communication*

Much contemporary research into ELF and digital communication has made use of trans frameworks, including translanguaging, transmodality and transcultural communication (e.g. Baker and Sangiamchit 2019; Dovchin, Pennycook, and Sultana 2018; Li 2016). Trans perspectives, generally (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2019) and in specific relation to applied linguistics (Hawkins and Mori 2018), challenge the primacy of national conceptualisation of linguistic and cultural borders and the methodological nationalism which underpins much research. In contrast to national frameworks, trans- approaches focus on the way participants transcend, transgress and transform boundaries through communicative and other cultural practices, while at the same time recognising the ideological power that such boundaries poses. In regard to linguistics research and transience, Lønsmann, Hazel, and Haberland (2017) propose that

[o]ur objects of study are not treated as given, but as in a state of flux, emergent, in a state of being negotiated and shaped, of becoming stabilized (or not) or of losing traction and giving way to subsequent constitutions of social orderliness. (3)

Within these trans frameworks, this study will primarily draw on translanguaging and transcultural communication perspectives outlined below.

Following Li, we define translanguaging as ‘the fluid and dynamic practices that transcend the boundaries between named languages, language varieties, and language and other semiotic systems’ (2018, 9). Translanguaging accounts for the way in which multilinguals draw on their full communicative repertoire, including both linguistic and other semiotic resources, regardless of the ideological divides between named languages. Translanguaging, as Li notes, ‘drives humans to go beyond narrowly defined linguistic cues and transcend culturally defined language boundaries to achieve effective communication’ (2018, 24–25), aligning well with the aims of this paper in problematising linguistic and cultural borders. Moreover, through transcending colonial ontologies of national languages and cultures, translanguaging can be viewed as a critical political and decolonial project (Li 2022).

Adopting a similar perspective and applying it to intercultural communication, transcultural communication questions the traditional assumptions and boundaries in which participants are positioned as in-between national scale languages and cultures. We understand transcultural communication as participants moving ‘through and across, rather than in-between, cultural and

linguistic boundaries, thus, 'named' languages and cultures can no longer be taken for granted and in the process, borders become blurred, transgressed and transcended' (Baker and Sangiamchit 2019, 472). Thus, transcultural communication avoids the methodological nationalism that is embedded in much linguistics and intercultural communication research by exploring how communication and other cultural practices emerge from interactions. No a priori assumptions are made about which categories and boundaries are relevant to those interactions and, while national scales might be relevant, they are not assumed to be so and not the starting point for research. Instead, interactions are viewed as containing multiple overlapping scales simultaneously present, from the local, to the national, and the global.

### **Cultural identity**

Cultural identity is often a prevalent identity in intercultural and transcultural communication with core aspects being race, ethnicity, and nationality (Zhu 2019). Other aspects involve identification with diverse groups such as local 'small cultures' (e.g. families, friends), regional, heritage, and diasporic groups, and other globally connected groups (e.g. professions). Importantly, identities are constructed and negotiated in discourse, rather than 'fixed', and cultural identities can consist of a complex mix of different groups and scales (Baker and Ishikawa 2021, 316). Thus, cultural identities can be seen on a continuum from fluid negotiable identities to more fixed and less easily changed identities (Zhu 2019). Furthermore, the increased interconnectivity of globalisation has given rise to new spaces for identity construction. As Canagarajah writes, 'we are able to enjoy identities that transcend our native language, ethnicity, or place of birth' (2013, 198). In transcending and transforming linguistic and cultural boundaries through transcultural communication participants potentially open new spaces for identity construction. However, this does not mean we can construct any cultural identity we want; globalisation may also result in new structures that limit our choices (e.g. ideas of nativeness, neo-liberal discourses, access to technology) alongside already existing limitations (e.g. nationality, race).

In ELF research, participants have been observed using English, alongside other languages, to create and index multiple cultural identities and communities. This includes moving between local L1 identities and more global orientations; the construction of shared multilingual and multicultural identities; identification with dynamic communities of practice, virtual communities and transient communities; third-place identities 'in-between' cultures; and liminal and fluid identities that are not indexed to or 'between' any particular cultures or cultural identifications (see Baker and Ishikawa 2021; Jenkins, Baker, and Dewey 2018 for overviews). Nonetheless, there are still power issues, especially the 'pull' of native English speaker and Anglophone ideologies (Baker and Ishikawa 2021), as well as the continued prominence of national frameworks (Mendes de Oliveira 2023). Significantly, transcultural perspectives on identity are still a relatively under-explored area, despite the importance of this framework for understanding ELF and digital communication.

### **Scales**

Another crucial notion in understanding transcultural communication and one drawn on in the analysis and discussion in this paper is scales. As previously noted, transcultural communication typically involves the presence of multiple scales simultaneously (Baker 2022a). Scale at the most basic level can be viewed as way of conceptualising different aspects of context and how it is used to construct meaning, for example through referring to locally understood symbols and references (Canagarajah and De Costa 2016). Both Blommaert, Westinen, and Leppänen (2015) and Canagarajah and De Costa (2016) argue that scales should be brought into the realm of semiotics since context is part of a two-way semiotic relationship that is referenced and constructed by semiotic resources but also influences how other semiotic resources are used and understood. Another fundamental aspect of scales is time in that scales can be used to both refer to different places, spaces

and times and that scales also change over time. Thus, scales are typically seen as spatiotemporal (Blommaert, Westinen, and Leppänen 2015). Indeed, Bakhtin's (1986) earlier chronotopic framework refers to the interconnectedness of time (chronos) and space (topos) in framing and also shaping how people interpret and respond to communicative events. This means that interactions are deeply rooted in the specific temporal and spatial contexts they occupy. These contexts not only shape intercultural communication but also actively help in the negotiation of meaning. Other debates concern the extent to which scales are vertical or horizontal. On one hand there is value in approaching them as 'flat' and non-hierarchical so that, for example, the local is not seen as subordinate to the global (Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005). On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge power relationships and asymmetries in the ordering of scales, while also not being overly deterministic; people have the power to challenge and change scales (Canagarajah and De Costa 2016).

Globalisation complexifies scales considerably creating both new scales and 'complex forms of multiscalarity' (Blommaert, Westinen, and Leppänen 2015, 123) that go beyond simplistic local vs global distinctions. As Canagarajah and De Costa (2016) underscore, global and local scales are intertwined and influence each other. Blommaert (2010) introduces the notion of 'polycentricity' to account for these different interpretations of semiotic resources at different scales. In other words, the same communicative or other cultural practice or reference may be interpreted differently in different places and times, or by different participants, due to the constantly evolving, changing and multiple nature of scales and this has been amplified by the processes of globalisation. As both Pennycook (2007) and Appadurai (2010) discuss in relation to the global circulation and flow of cultural practices and their relationship to the local, the presence of multiple scales does not result in simple hybridisation of existing forms or one-way global local influences. Instead, 'we need to probe the cohabitation of forms, ... because they actually produce new contexts through their peculiar inflection of each other' (Appadurai 2010, 10). Appadurai goes on to propose that this dynamic interplay of multiple scales of time, space, place and speed results in disjunctions, differences and tensions and the need for negotiation, rather than hybridisation, at the local scale and '[i]t is this negotiation which creates the complex containers which further shape the actual contents of local practice' (2010, 11).

Given this dynamic and fluid nature of scales, Canagarajah and De Costa (2016) argue that they should be treated as a category of practice rather than of analysis. However, we believe that there is value in treating them as both i.e. in exploring how they are created and used in practice by participants but also in recognising that researchers may bring their own interpretations of scale. Nonetheless, as with all categories of analysis, it is important that the two are not conflated and researchers remain reflexive in their use (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

### ***ELF, trans and multi-scalar studies in digital communication***

As previously noted, there are a small but growing number of empirical studies that make use of trans frameworks and multi-scalar analysis to understand communicative practices through ELF in digital spaces. Li (2016) explored how the use of ELF and 'Chinglish' as part of wider translanguaging practices among Chinese internet users 'transforms its users and their subjectivities, creating new spaces for social relations, social structures, and social cognition' (2016, 21). Dovchin, Pennycook, and Sultana (2018) made use of a 'transglossic' framework in their study of the communicative practices of young adults in Bangladesh and Mongolia. They highlighted the creativity and freedom enabled by ELF and translanguaging in digital spaces but also inequalities through uneven access to digital and other resources, as well as limiting pre-existing social structures such as monolingual Anglophone ideologies. Wang's (2024) study of Chinese speakers' online intercultural communication also drew on ELF and translanguaging frameworks, particularly translanguaging space, to uncover how interactants deployed spatial repertoires for meaning making and identity construction. As Wang writes, 'the communications take place through translanguaging practices

and brings together online and offline contexts, ad-hocness and lastingness, and synchronicity and asynchrony' (2024, 14). Baker and Sangiamchit (2019), Baker and Ishikawa (2021) and Ishikawa and Baker (In press) all used trans frameworks to investigate the communicative practices of multilingual ELF users in digital spaces. Data underscored dynamic and complex linguistic and cultural practices where boundaries between languages, modes and cultures were frequently transcended and transgressed. Multiple scales were simultaneously referenced and constructed in the interactions, including spatial scales from the local, to the global, physical and digital, as well as temporal scales from recent to longer term historical interpretations of cultural and linguistic practices.

Beyond ELF research, scholars have increasingly used scalar analysis to examine globalisation, mobile digital literacy practices (Stornaiuolo and LeBlanc 2016), identities (Clonan-Roy, Rhodes, and Wortham 2016), and educational policy (Mortimer 2016). In teacher education, for instance, Stewart et al. (2021) utilised scalar analysis to explore how teacher candidate identities are constructed, contested, and rescaled within broader programme and policy discourses. These studies, alongside the research on ELF and translanguaging practices, highlight how new spaces for identity negotiation can emerge in/beyond both digital and educational contexts, offering a deeper understanding of the role that multiple and intersecting scales play in shaping intercultural communication, identity, and even context. Nonetheless, given the ubiquitousness of digital communication through ELF much more research is needed. In particular, we believe, that a greater understanding is required of how multiple scales are concurrently used to construct context in digital spaces, the inter-relationship between digital and physical spaces, and their role in cultural identity construction. Our analysis builds on and extends previous scholarship by investigating how scales are used in the construction of cultural identities and how they relate to what we term as 'trans-digital spaces'.

### ***Research context, methods, and research participants***

Facebook was chosen as the research site because it is the most popular SNS (Baker and Ishikawa 2021, 209) and it exemplifies a multilingual, lingua franca, and intercultural environment (Baker and Sangiamchit 2019). It is also a multimodal platform that provides users with a certain level of agency, freedom, and power to negotiate their identities through language choices (Darvin and Norton 2015); although with the caveat that, as with any social space, there are still restrictions and limitations both technological and social (Baker and Sangiamchit 2019). In addition to its ubiquitousness, Facebook was selected because: (1) it is a familiar platform for both the researcher and participants, which facilitated access for observation, and (2) Covid-19 restrictions limited in-person interactions, making digital spaces essential for social connection. The private Facebook group was created by Algerian students in the UK as a supportive digital space for socialising, sharing practical advice, and engaging in cultural dialogue during Covid-19 lockdown periods. It had 11 active users, including international students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The group functioned as an informal yet culturally significant site of interaction, often used to comment on everyday experiences, cultural events, emotional challenges, and humorous content. Its hybrid nature, bridging online and offline relationships, made it an ideal site for examining intercultural communication and identity construction in a trans-digital context.

While the Facebook group is the primary focus of this study, it is important to emphasise that interactions on Facebook are not viewed as entirely separate from offline interactions. Within the Facebook group, we observed participants' social dynamics in a digital space that is closely intertwined with their offline lives. This approach allows the researchers to examine how participants create 'trans-digital spaces' by bridging digital and non-digital communication, employing a mix of linguistic and other semiotic modes to interact with people from various backgrounds to construct multi-layered identities. The context of this research is, therefore, multilayered.

The primary participants were five Algerian international students residing in the UK, all female and aged between 23 and 25. In addition, six secondary participants from varied backgrounds, including Spain, Portugal, Argentina, Scotland, and China were included as part of the Facebook community. All primary participants resided in Scotland as international students living in the same student accommodation. Algerian participants were selected because their diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds reflected a multilingual and multicultural sociolinguistic context shaped by the interplay of different linguistic, sociohistorical and cultural influences such as Arabic, Tamazight, French, and English. Furthermore, as an Algerian, one of the researchers was able to leverage both linguistic and cultural familiarity to establish rapport with participants, facilitating access to more nuanced data. This positionality enabled a richer engagement with the community, aligning with the principles of ethnographic inquiry to immerse oneself in the participants' lived experiences. Nonetheless, as researchers, we acknowledge our dual positionalities (Corlett and Mavin 2018). The first author as an Algerian was able to adopt an insider perspective that enabled a deeper engagement with participant narratives. However, this also required conscious efforts to limit assumptions and maintain analytical distance. The second author, as an outsider to the Algerian and participant group's cultural context, contributed criticality and alternative interpretations during the analysis. This emic-etic collaboration fostered balance and reflexivity throughout the study, allowing us to co-construct a more nuanced understanding of identity negotiation in trans-digital spaces. A summary of participants' demographic information is provided in Table 1.

This study adopts a 'trans-digital ethnography' as an innovative approach to cope with the changing nature of twenty-first century social life including the unforeseen circumstances posed by the pandemic such as lockdowns and social distancing. Drawing on digital ethnographic perspectives (Androutsopoulos 2008; Varis 2016), we used approaches such as longitudinal participant-observation, selection of texts for analysis, and multiple interviews with the producers of the texts, with the aim of producing rich descriptions of social groups and the '[t]he complexities of the "global," the "local," and the "translocal,"' (Varis 2016, 64). Importantly, trans-digital ethnography approaches the digital context as neither 'virtual' nor 'disembodied' (Pineda and Bosso 2023, 6) from its physical and material context. Moreover, such methodology enables researchers to holistically capture phenomena at all scale levels such as the transnational global, and local.

The trustworthiness of this study lies in the longitudinal participant observation, interviews, and analysis of digital interactions, which allow for a holistic understanding of participants' experiences (Silverman 2020). While the study focuses on a specific group of Algerian participants in a private Facebook group, this context provides rich insights into the dynamics of identity construction across multiple scales. The participant observation occurred weekly over the 11-month period, both synchronously and asynchronously, with the researcher actively engaging in the Facebook group at least twice a week. Each observation session lasted approximately 1–2 h depending on the nature of the group activity. Their posts and comments were screenshots and kept in a digital

**Table 1.** Participant overview.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Nationality	Languages spoken	Degree field	Religious/Ethnic affiliation
Aisha	24	Female	Algerian	Arabic, French, English	MA Linguistics	Muslim-Arab
Zineb	23	Female	Algerian	Arabic, Berber, English	MSc Sociology	Muslim-Amazigh
Sarah	25	Female	Algerian	Arabic, French, English	MA Literature	Muslim-Algerian
Yasmine	24	Female	Algerian	Arabic, French, English	MSc Education	Muslim-Arab
Zahra	23	Female	Algerian	Arabic, French, English	MA Media Studies	Muslim-Arab

Each of these participants brought unique experiences shaped by their religious, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds within Algeria. Their varying relationships with language, faith, ethnic belonging and globalisation informed their digital practices and identity negotiation.

file. Some in-person observations also took place informally in the shared student accommodation and helped to contextualise online interactions.

The interviews with the five main Algerian participants were semi-structured and conducted in three phases. Each session lasted between 45 and 60 min. The first phase gathered demographic and background data, while the second and third phases used screenshots from the Facebook group to prompt reflection on communicative practices and identity negotiation. Sample questions included: ‘Why did you choose to post this?’, ‘How do you think others perceived this post?’, and ‘What does this say about your cultural or linguistic identity?’ As the interviews progressed in these phases, more information about the way the Algerian participants interacted and constructed their cultural identities with people with different backgrounds emerged and this became a core focus.

For digital data analysis, we employed thematic coding across multimodal Facebook posts and comments, focusing on language choice, intertextual references, and scale markers (e.g. local, global, digital, historical) (Androutsopoulos 2014; Seargeant and Tagg 2014). This was triangulated with participants’ explanations in the interviews, following an iterative process of data immersion, coding, and interpretation. We used an inductive approach, letting themes emerge from the data rather than starting with fixed categories (Silverman 2020). Then, we analyzed the data using multi-scalar analysis, connecting specific language and communication practices (like emojis, code-switching, or memes) to larger culture and identity issues. After that, we used axial coding to identify relationships between practices across different levels (such as digital and local, or historical and global), and to identify moments where identities were negotiated, aligned, or challenged.

Combining analysis of the screenshots from the Facebook group and extracts from the interviews, this paper attempts to provide a better understanding of how intercultural communication in the twenty-first century is dematerialised, untied to a specific context (physical/digital), and operates at different non-hierarchical scales made relevant by interlocutors in the construction of their cultural identities. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the following research questions:

- (1) How do Algerian ELF users’ linguistic and cultural resources shift across different scales to create and navigate trans-digital spaces in inter/transcultural communication?
- (2) How do Algerian participants construct and negotiate multi-scalar cultural identities within such trans-digital spaces?

## Findings

### *Dematerialising inter/transcultural communication: from a place to space*

#### *Problematising context*

The screenshots in example 1 are retrieved from a Facebook post shared by Aisha (all names are pseudonyms), a main participant, in the private Facebook group. In this post, Aisha brings ready-made content which consists of different pictures along with Arabic captions (text). Aware of the multilingual and intercultural nature of the Facebook group, she attempts to elicit comments from members of the group who neither speak Arabic nor understand it. Asking the members to

guess the meaning of the post implies her openness to receive various ways of thinking that are different from the original context.

### Example 1



8 Dec · 

Let us play a little guessing game, what does the pic say 🙋

إن كان لديك

وسقفت لبيتك	وطعام عليه المائدة	بعض الأصدقاء والاوفياء	عائلة تحبك
			

فأحمد الله ، فأنت أغني ما تتصور !

3 🙄 11 comments Seen by 12

Morning! I agree with  It should be what everyone needs: home, nutrition, friends and family support...

Although now post COVID trauma I'd say it is:  
Stay home, buy all what is necessary in advance, work as a team and take care of your family  
🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔  
I'm joking but it could be tho...

42 w Like Reply 2 🍌

's guess was the closest yeah but you make a point too  
🤔 covid changed our social life completely

42 w Like Reply 1 🍌

In the comments section, it is evident that a dynamic interplay between different scales of context is being negotiated. The original post presents an image that is likely rooted in a cultural or more specifically a religious theme which explicates foundational aspects of a balanced life for Muslims including family, shelter, and religious practice. This context aligns well and is linked with religious values because it contains text that is both written in Arabic (a language that is linked to Islam) and in a spiritual way 'فأحمد الله' which literally translates to 'praise God' and is used extensively by Muslims as a form of religious practice. However, the interpretation and relevance of this context is shifted and renegotiated as members bring in their own experiences, perspectives, and make reference to the global scale. As the time of data collection was during the Covid-19 crisis, Maria (pseudonym of a secondary participant) explains her understanding of the post with reference to a more global scale as to how the pandemic has changed social life emphasising the importance of staying home, stocking food in advance, and surrounding one's self with family and close people.

In fact, the temporal context which refers to the time of pandemic and the spatial context that is indicated through the global experience of lockdown diverge from the original religious cultural context and thus alter the interpretation of the post. What was originally a set of religious guidelines and values is renegotiated as advice on how to manage a pandemic. This demonstrates Bakhtin's (1986) idea of chronotopes where the spatiotemporal contextualisation interweaves and influences the understanding of intercultural communication. This relational, fluid, and emergent nature of context highlights how meanings shift depending on the specific circumstances in which communication occurs. In this case, what was originally framed within a religious context (such as religious guidelines or values) became less relevant when recontextualised during a global pandemic. This shift in meaning illustrates how certain contextual features, such as the temporal (Covid 19 pandemic) and spatial (lockdown and digital spaces) realities, precedes more abstract or less immediate influences, such as religious frameworks. As Canagarajah and De Costa (2016) argue, when context is actively considered in analysis, the features that are most visible, tangible, or directly relevant in the given situation are taken into significant consideration. In contrast, those influences that are

more abstract, distant, or invisible are often seen as less significant. This dynamism underscores the importance of perceiving context in shaping how communicative events are interpreted and how meaning is renegotiated depending on the shifting circumstances in which they occur. All in all, intercultural communicators in this example bring in multiple scales such as religious, global, temporal, and spatial to exemplify how context can be multi-dimensional and is neither fixed nor predetermined.

### *Problematising the relationship between the local and global*

#### *Examples 2 and 3*



The Facebook posts in examples 2 and 3 offer illustrations of how the relationship between local and global scales of reference can be non-linear and non-hierarchical. This means that the global is not necessarily more powerful or inclusive of the local or national (Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005).

First, in example 2 Zineb shares a picture of a burger which contains an ingredient that is famous in Algerian cuisine (sheep trotters) and asks other members of the group to mention their own 'local' or 'national' addition to a burger. On one hand, the global scale is represented through the burger which symbolises global food culture. On the other hand, the post also demonstrates how this global scale of reference is adapted locally to evidence how local customs, tastes, and cultures influence and renegotiate a globally known food. This reflects a 'flat ontology' (Marston, Jones, and Woodward 2005, 323) which rejects the 'top down' hierarchical distinctions between different entities. Following a flat ontology, all entities including global and local scales are considered equally significant and interconnected without any hierarchical structure. Hence, this means that

it is not always the case that the global shapes the local and is elevated in hierarchy. Instead, local references and practices renegotiate, reinterpret and customise the global to fit in a certain context. This interactive nature of the global and local suggests that it can be dynamic, reciprocal, and non-hierarchical with space for local agency.

Similarly, example 3 tackles the topic of wedding parties' clothing and traditional wear and explores preferences between traditional (local) and European styles. In this post, Sarah aims to elicit members' opinions about their preferences of wedding dresses. Clearly, we can see two scales at play; the global (European wedding clothing style) and the local (traditional dress that is specific to one nation, region, country, or locality) in the dress of the man and woman. However, it seems that both scales are positioned in a non-hierarchical order even though Sarah explicitly asks whether members of the group would choose a traditional dress over a European one. Rather, Sarah invites people to share personal and cultural preferences reflecting how individuals might navigate between these scales in a non-linear way. This understanding comes from the fact that Sarah herself brings a picture which showcases a mixture between traditional local and global scales. The woman in the picture is wearing an Algerian traditional dress known as 'Chedda' and is dancing a globally recognised dance (the twist) with a European man who is also a globally famous movie star (John Travolta). This hybrid combination between local and global scales of reference shows how local cultural practices can co-exist with global ones without necessarily being subordinated to them or dominated by them. Therefore, as Canagarajah and De Costa (2016) put it, 'seeing the relationship [between the global and local] as linear and one-directional, with the global [always] more powerful than the local' is misleading as power dynamics are not fixed and can be renegotiated according to different social contexts.

### ***Beyond place: the trans-digital space***

#### ***Example 4***

Researcher : Why do you use a lot of abbreviations on the Facebook group?  
 Zineb : I actually don't use them only online. Like, I say the word ASAP or OMG or LOL in my face-to-face interactions too. I don't know why, but it became a habit. I do it automatically. It saves time, and everybody knows it, so no harm.

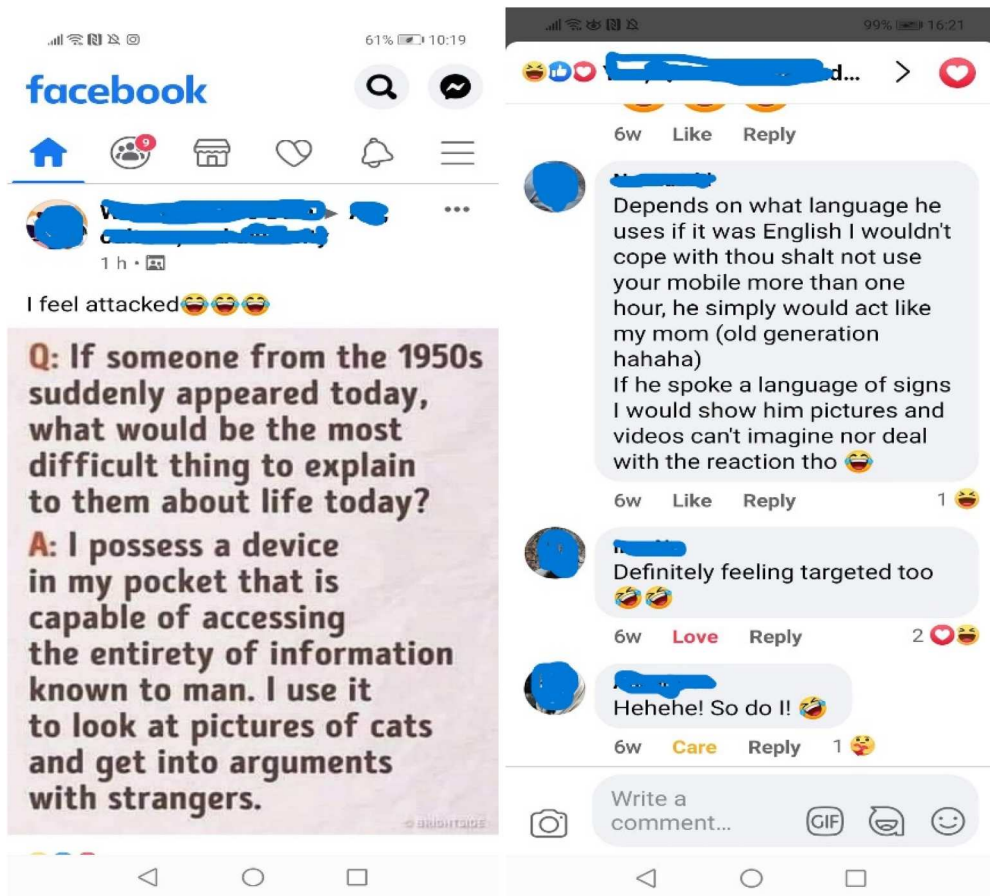
#### ***Example 5***

Yasmine: you know sometimes I do imitate some famous gifs, especially 'that one' the 'Phoebe one', when I am with my friends and we both get them. It's kinda cool and funny also had a friend of mine telling me LAUGHING EMOJI instead of actually laughing when I say a cringy joke. It's funny internet language is my favourite.

In examples 4 and 5, Zineb and Yasmine show how digital communication practices transcend their original online context and seamlessly integrate into face-to-face interactions, effectively bringing the digital scale of reference into the face-to-face scale. This explains how digital communicative elements could be materialised and brought into a more tangible/physical place. First, Zineb's use of online abbreviations in face-to-face interactions highlights how these abbreviations are no longer confined to text-based online communication but have become habitual expressions in spoken language, blurring the line drawn between online and offline linguistic practices. Second, Yasmine's imitation of a famous GIF (a Facebook GIF where Phoebe, a famous character from 'FRIENDS' TV show makes funny gestures) and the verbalisation of emojis in face-to-face interactions (e.g. saying 'LAUGHING EMOJI' instead of actually laughing) illustrate the fluid movement of digital visual culture into the physical interactions. These expressions have transcended their original context and digital scale of reference as online-only communicative tools and become performative elements of face-to-face interaction.

Both examples show how digital practices evolve beyond their initial technological purposes. They demonstrate the formation of a trans-digital space, where the online and face-to-face are no longer different entities but part of an integrated communicative environment. The following example illustrates more how this communicative environment is trans-digitalised enabling us to recognise the social and material effects of scales without exclusive focus on treating them as material entities.

### Example 6



In example 6, Luke (a secondary participant) shares a post (captioned by 'I feel attacked') and humorously reflects on how difficult it would be to explain the current twenty-first century life to a person from the 1950s. The first comment (on the right comments' section) is from Yasmine who attempts to address Luke's post and states that she would not be able to speak old English and that she would rather resort to digital devices (a mobile phone). This digital interaction highlights the de/materialisation of social interactions where communication is no longer confined to face-to-face contexts and a range of modalities enabled by digital devices (such as signs, pictures and videos) are part of her repertoire of communicative resources. The smartphone, a material object, opens up a blended trans-digital space where interactions and social engagements take place.

Nonetheless, following Canagarajah and De Costa's (2016, 2) insight into the importance of separating scales (digital/non-digital) from material entities, in this example the smartphone as a material entity, is less significant than the social space it helps in creating. This trans-digital

space is shaped by the interests and personal histories (including temporal and spatial contexts) of current social groups and individuals who navigate it in ways that reflect contemporary values, humour, and social conventions. Thus, the technological device's physicality is only one dimension of the dynamic social space it facilitates. Such spaces represent a shift from a focus on the materiality of the device to the possibilities of interactions and relationships it enables. By examining the dematerialisation of scales of reference such as physical location/devices, time, globality, and locality, this study demonstrates how contemporary intercultural communication occurs in what is known as trans-digital spaces. These spaces blur and ultimately dissolve the conventional boundaries between online and face-to-face interactions, revealing a more integrated, de/materialised, and fluid understanding of social engagement in the digital age.

### ***Translanguaging and multi-scalar cultural identity negotiation***

#### ***Example 7***



The post by Aisha above in example 7 invites individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to share how 'good luck' is expressed in their native languages. This introduces a local cultural scale, as the intention was that each participant can share a phrase from their specific named language and culture, contributing to a diverse exchange. The phrase 'Aloha guys!', with 'aloha' originally Hawaiian but now globally familiar as a greeting, combined with 'guys' reflects a global cultural scale that is common within online users. The post encourages participants to move beyond the default language (English) to explore other versions in other languages. This opens up a translanguaging scale, where multiple languages are brought into conversation each carrying unique cultural nuances and connotations.

This collective activity aligns with the notion of transculturality (Baker 2022a) and translanguaging space (Li 2018) where communication is not just about understanding others, but can also be about co-constructing a space of mutual recognition, respect, and symbolic equality. Participants do not merely display multilingualism for entertainment or novelty; rather, they engage in dialogic meaning-making that values diverse semiotic worlds. By inviting and valuing non-English expressions, the post subtly challenges English dominance and creates a dynamic communicative environment.

Aisha's use of the phrase 'Aloha guys!' and the use of the 'friendly face' emoji fosters a welcoming atmosphere, encouraging people to engage in an informal interaction. This highlights an interpersonal scale that can nurture relationships within digital and multicultural spaces like Facebook. Through a multi-scalar lens, this post exemplifies how digital platforms like Facebook facilitate not only intercultural exchanges across national and global cultural, linguistic, digital, and interpersonal scales, but also intercultural identity construction. It shows how individuals can come together in a trans-digital space to engage in translanguaging and transcultural communication,

creating a rich shared space for negotiating identities and connections similar to the transcultural ELF interactions shown in Baker and Sangiamchit (2019).

**Shaping cultural identity under linguistic hierarchies**

**Example 8**



In this post, Sarah brings a ready-made post from a public Facebook page (named N9olk tweets) to share her feelings about finding English more expressive for emotional topics than her native language, Arabic. In the comments section under the post, Zineb affirms a shared experience, suggesting that for some Algerian Arabic speakers, English allows for an emotional expressiveness they feel is lacking in their mother tongue.

Colonialism influences language perceptions and preferences, as post-colonial societies often grapple with identity and linguistic heritage in complex ways (Sandhu and Higgins 2016). In this case, Sarah seems to interpret and justify her preference in using English to express her emotions with her personal trajectory as being an Algerian and living in a country that has been colonised.

Zineb's agreement (in the comments section) that English better expresses her emotions reinforces how English allows them to construct a collective linguistic identity where using English for emotions is seen as valid and liberating.

The following interview extract (example 9) reflects the same scales of reference and illustrates how some scales (historical and linguistic) could overlap to reflect a multidimensional and multi-scalar complex negotiation of identities.

### Example 9

Zineb: Well, let us be clear first: the issue is the language, not the emotions. I have never seen any grown-up person expressing their emotions through Algerian; they might use French for that. So, it is the society that is not wired with the right language for expressing emotions. I believe that dates back to the period of colonisation, where our language became a mixture of Berber, Arabic, and French. We have to say it: the Algerian people at that time did not have much time to pay attention to their language. They were defending the land, fighting with whatever means they had, and that actually explains why we have very violent vocabulary, even when expressing emotions. "Nebghik rabbak" (I love you, oh your God); you see what I mean? But seriously, the coloniser robbed us of our beautiful emotions. Sometimes, they killed a father in front of his entire family and that is not something easy at all. Think of how those kids would grow up, and how they would raise their children to be even tougher. That is what is happening.

Zineb's response in Example 9 reflects her belief that English allows for better expression of emotions, linking her linguistic choice to Algeria's colonial history and its lingering impact on language use. She explains that during colonisation, Algerian society focused on resistance rather than developing its linguistic practices. This historical context created a hierarchical linguistic landscape, where boundaries and hierarchies between Algerian Arabic, Berber, French, and later, English emerged. Zineb's example, 'nebghik rabbak' (I love you, oh your God), highlights how, according to her, Algerian Arabic carries a blend of affection and aggression, shaped by the realities of colonisation.

On the surface, this interaction appears to be a straightforward example of code switching between linguistic choices driven by the functionality of the platform and the global nature of English as a lingua franca. However, as the Facebook discussion shifts away from its original digital context to the interview, a more complex socio-historical scale becomes evident to illustrate how these linguistic choices are deeply shaped by power relations such as colonial legacies.

The socio-historical scale emerges through Zineb's reflections on her emotional connection to English and her critique of Algerian Arabic's limitations for expressing emotions. Zineb explains that the dominance of French during colonisation disrupted the natural evolution of Algerian Arabic, creating a hierarchical linguistic landscape where different languages held unequal powers and functions. For her, English serves as a new alternative for emotional expression, particularly for young Algerians like Zineb and Sarah, who associate it with global culture and modernity. Unlike French, English is not directly tied to Algeria's colonial past, offering a sense of liberation and neutrality. The choice to use English in digital contexts, thus, reflects not only personal preference but also a broader and a more intricate negotiation of cultural identity shaped by historical power relations and global influences.

While many interactions in this study demonstrate open identity negotiation, there are also instances where linguistic choice was constrained rather than agentive. For example, Sarah and Zineb's reflections (see examples 8 and 9) on emotional expression reflect a gap between the expressive capacities of their local languages and the cultural expectations of affective communication. Rather than freely navigating their identities, they grapple with power relations and hierarchies that marginalise their native languages, highlighting how identity can be negotiated under conditions of constraint rather than empowerment.

Overall, the data illustrates how cultural identity is actively constructed and reshaped through everyday interactions that transcend fixed categories such as nationality or ethnicity. Participants

drew upon religious references, linguistic fluidity, global media content, and local customs to navigate and express their identities. Importantly, identity was not represented as a static or monolithic construct but rather as a process; shifting, layered, and contingent upon the communicative context. The trans-digital space provided a flexible arena for this negotiation, where cultural belonging was co-constructed with others and through semiotic resources across time and scale.

## Discussion

In sum, the findings of this study illustrate an innovative framework (the trans-digital space) that could help in interpreting the complexities of contemporary twenty-first century intercultural communication and cultural identities. Using a multi-scalar analysis, the study examines how Algerian international students at a UK university employ a diverse array of communicative resources, both digital and non-digital, to negotiate and express multiple cultural identities.

In answer to research question one ‘How do Algerian ELF users’ linguistic and cultural resources shift across different scales to create and navigate trans-digital spaces in inter/transcultural communication?’, adopting an ethnographic approach, the research reveals that inter/transcultural communication is inherently fluid. ELF and other linguistic and cultural resources operate across intersecting scales such as national, global, ethnic, religious, and regional, as well as digital and non-digital domains and multiple timescales. The findings highlight the dynamic, overlapping nature of scales of reference, which enable users to construct and navigate complex layered communicative spaces that transcend traditional boundaries.

Regarding research question two, ‘How do Algerian participants construct and negotiate multi-scalar cultural identities within such trans-digital spaces?’, by conceptualising cultural identity negotiation within the trans-digital space, the article provides fresh insights into the interplay between linguistic and cultural practices in an era shaped by digital connectivity. Findings show how both scales and in turn cultural identities are not fixed endpoints but continuous phenomena that transcend static interpretations of context, time, boundaries, borders and identifications. The research significantly contributes to the understanding of inter/transcultural communication by showcasing how cultural identities are constantly reshaped within these multifaceted and networked environments.

We argue that the concept of the trans-digital space emerges from this study as a critical lens to understand the evolving dynamics of intercultural communication in a digitally mediated world. Building on Bakhtin’s (1986) notion of chronotopes and Blommaert, Westinen, and Leppänen’s (2015) and Canagarajah and De Costa’s (2016) articulation of scales, the trans-digital space represents a hybrid communicative environment where temporal and spatial dimensions are dynamically negotiated across both digital and non-digital realms. In its simplest definition, a chronotope represents the interconnectedness of time and space in contextualising and framing interactions, while scales provide a framework for understanding how these contextualised interactions are constructed and referenced at a ‘layered simultaneity’ (Blommaert 2010), from the local to the global.

It is this fluidity of context allows ELF users to navigate the complexities of their cultural identities via intersecting layers of meaning (scales) that transcend traditional boundaries of place and medium. Furthermore, while a place is a geographically defined location, space is more fluid and is socially constructed by people through their interactions. Scholars such as Massey (2005) and Soja (2011) have critiqued definitions of space as static and fixed, emphasising that it is not merely a material entity, but rather an activity; something that is constantly ‘becoming’ through the interactions of individuals and groups. Wang and Canagarajah (2024) define space as an ongoing process and refer to it as ‘spatialization’, where space is shaped by human actions, movements, and the relationships that unfold within it. Space, in this sense, is always in flux, influenced by time, power, and the socio-historical context in which it exists. Therefore, the concept of space opens up the possibility of thinking about multiple, layered spaces that coexist and interact simultaneously.

Trans-digital space builds on this understanding by combining the physical and digital realms. It refers to the co-construction of spaces that exist simultaneously across both the digital and physical environments. In trans-digital spaces, digital interactions do not exist in isolation but are intertwined with physical places, such as classrooms, offices, or homes. These spaces are not simply the sum of their digital and physical components but are dynamic and layered, with each influencing and shaping the other. For example, students in a given institution may engage in online interactions or create online groups while physically present in the University such as the case in the current study. These digital interactions are not separate from their physical environment; they are part of a broader, interconnected trans-digital space where both digital and physical elements interact to create new social dynamics and identities. For instance, the re-use/interpretation of religious themed digital posts to refer to the circumstances of Covid 19 in example 1. In such spaces, communication occurs across multiple scales, local, global, digital, temporal and physical, and is shaped by both the technologies used and the physical place in which participants are situated (see also example 6).

All in all, the trans-digital space is a concept that recognises the fluid and dynamic nature of both digital and physical spaces, where the boundaries between them are not fixed but are shaped by human interaction, communication, and identity construction. It highlights how digital and physical spaces can coexist, influence each other, and are continuously co-constructed through participants' actions, creating new opportunities for meaning-making, social engagement, and even identity construction.

We also suggest that in trans-digital space, intercultural communication is de-materialized, moving beyond fixed physical locations to a fluid, interconnected network of interactions shaped by digital technologies. Digital and non-digital contexts are not viewed as separate but as part of a continuum where meaning-making occurs. For example, participants incorporate digital artifacts such as abbreviations, emojis, and multimodal elements into face-to-face interactions, blurring the lines between online and offline communication. A striking example is the use of originally online abbreviations such as 'ASAP', 'OMG', and 'LOL' and the imitation of GIFs in face-to-face conversations (examples 4 and 5). This illustrates how interactive elements originating in digital spaces permeate everyday face-to-face interactions and function effectively in both online and offline contexts, removing the need for their exclusive association with digital interactions. Therefore, these new social dynamics and cultural identities operate in an interconnected, fluid, and trans-digital space. This fluidity aligns with the shift from static, place-bound understandings of culture to dynamic, space-oriented processes where meaning and identity are continuously co-constructed (Baker 2022a).

Additionally, the trans-digital space provides fertile ground for negotiating multi-scalar cultural identities, as participants draw on diverse scales like national, ethnic, global, regional, and interpersonal simultaneously in their interactions. These scales are not hierarchically classified; instead, they coexist and interact dynamically, allowing users to construct layered and complex identities. For instance, ELF users in this study referenced global cultural practices alongside localised traditions, showcasing a complex interplay between the global and local (example 3). In the Facebook post about wedding dresses preferences, Sarah links a traditional Algerian dress, the 'Chedda', with a globally recognised European dance, sparking a discussion among participants. The posted image blends local and global cultural references highlighting how global and local scales can coexist non-hierarchically, with participants navigating and merging cultural elements to create hybrid, multi-scalar cultural identities. It underscores the reciprocal and dynamic relationship between both global and local scales. This negotiation illustrates how identities are shaped through the interaction of various temporal and spatial scales, reflecting the participants' histories, cultural repertoires, and social engagement.

Finally, we believe that the trans-digital space is deeply connected to the practices of ELF and translanguaging, both of which emphasise the fluid and transformative use of linguistic resources (Baker and Sangiamchit 2019; Li 2016; 2018). ELF users in the trans-digital space leverage the

flexibility of English to navigate and integrate diverse linguistic and cultural elements, creating a shared yet multidimensional and translingual communicative repertoire (Baker and Sangiamchit 2019). In Example 7, Aisha invites participants to share how 'good luck' is expressed in their native languages and cultures. She uses the phrase 'Aloha guys!' which is a combination of Hawaiian (globally known greeting) and informal English and a friendly emoji. This post encourages participants to move beyond English, prompting them to draw on their native languages and cultural contexts. This adaptability allows users to fluidly move across and merge scales, fostering a translingual and transcultural mode of interaction that defines the trans-digital space.

While many examples showcase straightforward identity constructions, they also reveal deeper dynamics of intercultural negotiation and identity. In the 'good luck' post (Example 7), participants go beyond displaying multilingualism; they engage in acts of transculturality (Baker 2022a), using language to foster mutual recognition and solidarity. This creates an inclusive translingual space where diversity is valued (Li 2018). However, it is not necessary that all expressions receive equal engagement, pointing to the possible subtle hierarchies of linguistic capital even in inclusive settings. Tensions emerge in reflections on emotional expression, where English is preferred over Arabic due to perceived limitations rooted in colonial history (Examples 8 & 9). These moments show that identity negotiation is not always empowering or agentive; it may involve restricting hierarchies (Zhu 2019). Thus, while translingual practices in trans-digital spaces offer opportunities for connection and self-expression, they are also shaped by sociohistorical constraints and uneven hierarchies.

While this study invites further exploration into the role of technology, language, and culture in reshaping intercultural communication and identity negotiation, it also carries significant implications for fields such as intercultural communication and digital literacy, intercultural language education, and language and education policies and platforms. The findings demonstrate the increasingly integral role of digital platforms in shaping how individuals communicate across cultural and linguistic boundaries. As users integrate both online and offline communicative resources, traditional distinctions between digital and non-digital spaces become less relevant. In practice, this means that digital literacy should not be understood solely as the ability to navigate technology but also as the ability to engage in trans-digital communication, where users must skilfully switch between, blend, and negotiate different linguistic, cultural, and semiotic resources (Gu, Huang, and Lee 2023; Gu, Huang, and Lin 2024). Therefore, educational programmes designed to enhance digital literacy should address the fluidity between online and offline communicative practices. By fostering awareness of how digital tools such as emojis, GIFs, or abbreviations intersect with face-to-face communication, educators can prepare students to navigate a broad range of communicative environments effectively (Jiang 2023). This is especially important in multicultural or multilingual contexts, where students may be negotiating various cultural norms and identities through digital platforms.

The study reveals that ELF and translanguaging practices allow individuals to move beyond the rigid confines of 'standard' or 'official' named languages. For educators, this suggests a shift toward more flexible, dynamic approaches to teaching English as part of multilingualism and embracing the full communicative repertoire of learners including non-linguistic communicative resources (García 2019; Li 2022; Sifakis 2019). By acknowledging and encouraging translanguaging and ELF, language instruction can better reflect the diverse linguistic landscapes of the globalised world, where English serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a bridge between multiple languages and cultures. Furthermore, the multi-scalar approach to cultural identity negotiation in this study underscores the importance of recognising the diverse factors that shape a language learner's identity (be it ethnic, regional, digital, historical, and global). In language classrooms, it is important to create spaces that allow students to express and explore these layered identities (Baker 2022b; Baker and Ishikawa 2021). Curriculum designs and teaching methodologies should reflect the fluid, evolving nature of identity in the digital age, offering opportunities for students to explore how language use intersects with their personal, cultural, and historical contexts.

As digital spaces become more integral to everyday life, it is crucial for policymakers to consider the implications of the blending of online and offline spaces. For example, digital platforms

designed for education, work, or social interaction should facilitate a more seamless integration of both modes of communication – acknowledging that language practices are not confined to any one realm and allowing the use of what is known as ‘internet language’ in physical contexts such as classrooms and assessment practices (Gu, Huang, and Lin 2024). There are now decades of research showing that through participating in collaborative internet-based projects, language learners report increased confidence and motivation to use the target language (Dooly 2017). This suggests that integrating internet language and digital communicative tools into classroom practices can positively impact students’ language development. Moreover, in the design of digital tools and resources, consideration should be given to the ways in which diverse users engage in intercultural exchanges (Ou and Malmström 2023). This could involve enhancing features that support varied linguistic practices and encourage interaction across different communicative scales through approaches such as telecollaboration (Helm 2024). By doing so, educational designers can create more inclusive, responsive platforms that cater to the needs of global users, enabling more fluid interactions that better reflect the reality of digital communication (Gu, Huang, and Lee 2023).

## Conclusion

This study explores the concept of ‘trans-digital spaces’, where digital and physical communication merge, enabling dynamic and multi-scalar cultural identity negotiation. It highlights how Algerian international students use ELF and other linguistic and cultural resources to navigate this hybrid environment, illustrating the fluidity of intercultural communication and cultural identity across national, global, digital, and physical scales. The findings emphasise the importance of understanding these spaces for digital literacy, language education, and policy development, advocating for normalising the integration of diverse communicative practices from both online and offline spheres in educational settings.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from one study of a small group and there are several important avenues for future research. As digital spaces continue to evolve, further exploration is needed to understand how the boundaries between online and offline communication continue to shift, particularly in relation to emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and social media algorithms. Future studies could also investigate how specific cultural, ethnic, or linguistic groups utilise digital spaces differently, looking at how identity negotiation varies across contexts and scales. Additionally, future research could explore the long-term impact of these trans-digital spaces on cultural identity, particularly in terms of how identity formation may shift as individuals become increasingly embedded in digital networks that transcend national or regional boundaries. This needed accumulation of research will help linguists, educators, and policymakers better anticipate and respond to the challenges of identity negotiation in a rapidly changing trans digital world.

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