

WERA 2026 Conference submission

English presentations: 800-word abstract; include Title, Research Overview (50 words), Purpose, Methods, and Results/Discussion.

Title: The Informational Mobility Paradox: Intercultural Learning and Engagement Among Generation Z in a Digitally Connected and Complex World

Research Overview

This mixed-methods study explores today's widespread access to global information through digital technologies. Our findings reveal that digital engagement can expand global awareness and aspirations, but limit deeper intercultural understanding. Our analysis explores this paradox and how it complicates the adoption of digital technologies in intercultural learning in higher education.

Purpose

Today's youth in Generation Z have grown up surrounded by digital technology and online platforms. They often use these tools to access global information and cultural content, which has significantly changed how they encounter and interpret intercultural differences. Yet their greater access to international information does not necessarily lead to meaningful intercultural understanding. While navigating these digital environments, students face challenges like information overload, algorithmically driven content, and varying levels of factual accuracy and critical engagement. We term this process of accessing global information through digital networks "Information Mobility," in contrast to physical mobility, which requires individuals to travel to gain international experiences and knowledge.

Currently, Japanese higher education policies and agendas in digital transformation and internationalization are increasingly intersecting. Thus, this research explores how digital engagement shapes students' intercultural learning and global aspirations, as well as its constraints. From a positive perspective, informational mobility reduces barriers to global engagement and helps drive aspirations to explore abroad. On the other hand, it can also reinforce shallow understanding, over-reliance on digital networks, and informational echo chambers, hindering deeper intercultural learning. This study uses the term "Informational Mobility Paradox" to describe these conflicting points. Our analysis extends conventional models of intercultural competence by examining not only outcomes, but also the processes and conditions that foster intercultural engagement in digital environments. This study seeks to clarify how educational institutions can help

digital natives to extend informational mobility into meaningful intercultural awareness, leading to reflection and further action.

3. Methodology

This study uses a concurrent mixed-methods design to investigate the Informational Mobility Paradox, capturing both broad patterns of student behavior and rich individual intercultural experiences. A large-scale quantitative questionnaire was administered to approximately 1,000 students enrolled in universities and colleges across multiple regions of Japan. The survey measured:

- Frequency and type of digital engagement (e.g., social media, news platforms, language learning applications).
- Global mobility aspirations.
- Intercultural competence using established measurement frameworks.

Digital engagement was analyzed conceptually as a form of informational mobility, enabling examination of how various engagement patterns with global information relate to students' intercultural awareness and aspirations. Statistical analyses were performed to determine correlations among levels of digital engagement, global mobility aspirations, and intercultural competence.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who participated in short-term study abroad programs to explore processes underlying these patterns. Participants were selected purposefully to represent a range of digital engagement levels and types. The analysis tracks students' experiences across three phases of their path to intercultural engagement:

- Aspirations: How social media and online content shape student expectations and perceptions of international information, culture, communication, etc.
- Engagement: How digital platforms support real-time international information transmission, learning, communication, and the maintenance of transnational identities.
- Impacts: How digital tools support lasting impacts in student self-reflection, sustained global connections, and how students derive value from them.

This process-oriented approach facilitated the identification of cases in which informational mobility supported intercultural adaptation and cases in which it constrained deeper engagement. By integrating mixed-methods data, quantitative and qualitative findings were refined to generate a comprehensive understanding of the digital and intercultural focal point. Our analysis combines statistical patterns with lived

experiences to better understand the role of informational mobility in intercultural learning.

4. Results / Discussion

Our study findings show that informational mobility and global engagement are mutually beneficial for Generation Z students. Students who frequently access international digital content often have stronger aspirations for language learning and overseas study. This suggests that informational mobility serves as a gateway with reduced barriers to engagement in global affairs. Students can use the vast amount of digital information to help them navigate, communicate, and better understand their intercultural experiences. Yet, unfortunately, we also found that this expanded access to information did not necessarily lead to deeper intercultural understanding. There are two key problems with digital information:

1. It generally lacks the depth and meaningful impact of immersive, firsthand experiences.
2. Algorithmically curated content may reinforce selective exposure and provide biased or incorrect information.

From these points, we can see how informational mobility brings both pros and cons to intercultural engagement. This study explores the need to examine both accessibility models and to develop critical and reflective engagement among students, both of which are needed for effective intercultural awareness.