

Identity negotiation and cross-cultural strategies of Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative participants

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ABSTRACT

Background: Existing research on face negotiation tends to overlook short-term leadership exchange programs, resulting in a limited understanding of how participants navigate the contrasting communication styles between Southeast Asian high-context cultures and the low-context culture of the United States. **Purpose:** This study aims to examine the intercultural communication strategies and identity negotiation practices of participants in the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) 2022–2025 cohort during their exchange in the United States, with a particular focus on how they manage self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns. **Methods:** Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with 11 participants representing 11 Southeast Asian countries and analyzed using Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory. **Results:** The findings indicate that self-face was primarily expressed through symbolic cultural representations rather than direct verbal confrontation, whereas other-face concerns were managed by avoiding sensitive topics to preserve interpersonal harmony. Mutual-face was achieved through inclusive and collaborative communication styles that emphasized group cohesion and shared understanding. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that Face Negotiation Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how individuals from collectivist cultures adapt in short-term intercultural exchanges, demonstrating that cultural identity can serve as a bridge rather than a barrier to effective communication. **Implications:** These findings have important implications for advancing efforts to reduce social inequalities, suggesting that program organizers should implement targeted pre-departure orientations focusing on intercultural communication styles to enhance participants' adaptability and foster more inclusive interactions.

Keywords: Intercultural communication; face negotiation theory; identity negotiation; YSEALI; cultural adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

Intercultural interaction within international exchange programs involves more than the circulation of knowledge and experience. It also requires participants to continuously negotiate their identities and manage social relationships across differing cultural norms (McAllester, 2024). Communication practices rooted in the high-context cultures of Southeast Asia often contrast with the low-context orientation that characterizes communication in the United States, creating subtle but persistent challenges in maintaining harmonious interaction and building equitable relationships. In such encounters, participants are not merely adapting to different communicative styles but are also navigating expectations related to self-presentation, relational sensitivity, and social legitimacy. Within this context, Face Negotiation Theory, as articulated by Stella Ting-Toomey, provides a useful conceptual framework for examining how individuals manage self-face, other-face, and mutual-face in intercultural communication.

Intercultural competence emerges not from the abandonment of cultural identity, but from the ability to interact across diverse interactional contexts (Jee, 2025). This perspective is particularly relevant to the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), a leadership-oriented exchange program that brings together

young participants from eleven Southeast Asian countries and places them in diverse social and institutional settings in the United States. Participation in such programs demands more than linguistic competence or cultural awareness. It requires strategic communication practices through which participants negotiate identity, manage interpersonal expectations, and sustain productive cross-cultural relationships.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in the YSEALI program, in which participants from Southeast Asia take part in a five-week exchange program in the United States. YSEALI program is managed by the U.S. Department of State through the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (BECA), which is an initiative aimed at developing leadership potential among Southeast Asian youth (YSEALI, 2020). This program is participated in by 11 Southeast Asian countries, including Brunei, Myanmar, Indonesia, Cambodia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Timor-Leste. During the program, participants are placed in their chosen fields and in agencies designated by the United States government (U.S. Department of State).

Hall (1976), introduced the concepts of high-context culture and low-context culture in his book by classifying 12 countries with different cultures, ranging from “high-context” to “low-context” countries. He concluded that most

English-speaking countries have low-context cultures, while many Asian countries have high-context cultures. Individuals from low-context cultures (LCC), where communication is generally direct and explicit, often struggle more to interpret complex messages (Rohani et al., 2025) necessitating efforts to enhance students' Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). On the other hand, high-context cultures (HCC) can typically decipher more complex messages in arguments because they depend on context clues and nonverbal cues within communication (Hornikx & le Pair, 2017).

High-context cultures, such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and many Southeast Asian cultures, rely on nonverbal cues, relationships, and social context to convey messages. Communication in high-context cultures is also generally indirect or carefully communicated, as they want to check or avoid the prospect of any interpersonal concern (Levitt, 2022). Societies that are low-context, such as the United States, value transparency, clarity, and explicit verbal communication (Nadiger et al., 2024). In most cases, an explicit or clear form of communication is considered a signal of honesty and professionalism (Setijadi, 2019). Tensions arise when individuals must assimilate into the expectations of a culturally different environment (Adraoui et al., 2025).

This tension can be framed in terms of the

Face Negotiation Theory introduced by Ting-toomey and Kurogi (1998). Face Negotiation Theory suggests that individuals manage their social image, or "face," in intercultural communication through three forms of concern: self-face (protection of one's own face), other-face (protection of the other's face), and mutual-face (protection of the relational harmony) (Gong & Tu, 2017). In Southeast Asia, there is a tendency for other-face and mutual-face to be prioritized in collectivist cultures, and these norms shape communication strategies that affirm harmony, avoid conflict, and foster sensitivity to others (Pinariya & Sutjipto, 2021) in the globalization era, education had reached a new stage where the process of knowledge exchange had crossed national borders. However, educational institutions were not fully prepared to accommodate these modern needs. Although the study of intercultural communication was not new, concern for new cultural diversity had only received great attention lately, wherein the end, the Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC). Individualistic cultures like the United States tend to place greater emphasis on self-face, resulting in a communication style that is often more direct, open, and argumentative (Azmi et al., 2023). Given that YSEALI participants are expected to initiate discussions, coordinate cross-national projects, and provide

critical feedback within multicultural settings, they must carefully navigate the protection of their own face as well as others' faces to achieve shared objectives. However, existing studies on face negotiation and intercultural adjustment have largely focused on international students' academic and social adjustment in university settings, including identity negotiation, friendship development, and facework strategies in cross-cultural academic environments (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013; Nguyen et al., 2020). Meanwhile, studies on short-term exchange programs have tended to emphasize intercultural competence development rather than the specific dynamics of face negotiation and identity management in leadership-oriented programs such as YSEALI (Zuo & Hu, 2022).

As a result, limited attention has been given to how short-term leadership exchange participants, such as YSEALI fellows, negotiate identity and manage face concerns in intercultural interactions. Unlike traditional international students, YSEALI participants function not only as learners but also as cultural ambassadors and emerging leaders, engaging in intercultural encounters beyond the classroom. This study addresses this gap by applying Face Negotiation Theory to examine how YSEALI participants develop adaptive communication strategies within a short-term, high-stakes international exchange setting. This study

addresses the phenomenon by identifying the main problem, which is how the participants of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Program, inside the United States, concern themselves (or manage) face concern strategies of the participants) while dealing with the problems of cross-cultural communications. The main interest is in the balance among self-face concern, other-face concern, and mutual face concern across varying communication styles between Southeast Asian high-context and U.S. low-context cultures. The study also intends to investigate the multifarious challenges/situations the participants face during their communication adjustment, the strategies they employ, and the effective, cross-culturally communicative relations these strategies are meant to facilitate.

In this study, the distribution of face-concern strategies in cross-cultural communication is lagged behind the principal focus of analysis, as cross-cultural communication and self-image adjustment (facework) are examined through the prism of Face Negotiation Theory, within the context of communication and the participants' faces. Developed by Stella Ting-Toomey in 1985, Face Negotiation Theory addresses the strategies people from different cultures use to negotiate and manage the 'faces' of participants in social relations, and, more specifically, in conflicts arising from cultural disparity. 'Face'

in this context is the image and the social categorization of an individual that the person intends to portray and preserve (Janík, 2017).

According to Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998), cultural differences register in the way people perceive and negotiate their face in the context of Face Negotiation. The theory articulates the various styles of conflict management in the face of differences and /or tensions, in this case, through the management of face. Among the many styles of conflict management, we have avoiding, accommodating, compromising, competing, and collaborating. Besides culture, Ting-Toomey points out other individual factors, such as past experience, level of education, and personality, that determine how one engages in facework (Hua, 2015). Face concerns are closely related to conflict styles: self-face tends to be associated with dominating styles, while other-face is more strongly related to avoiding and integrating styles in intercultural interaction (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

In this study, Face Negotiation Theory is considered relevant because of the challenges YSEALI participants face in adjusting to and integrating American communication styles with their own. The contrast between the high-context cultures of Southeast Asia, where most YSEALI participants originate, and the low-context culture of the United States creates

communicative challenges, particularly in expressing opinions, receiving critique, and developing social and professional relationships.

As a theoretical framework, Face Negotiation Theory offers analytical tools for understanding how individuals manage self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns in intercultural interactions, as discussed in prior scholarship (Li et al., 2021). Building on this framework, the present study focuses on how face-negotiation processes are enacted in practice, the challenges that emerge during these interactions, and the facework strategies developed to facilitate communication while allowing participants with multicultural backgrounds to preserve their cultural identities. Beyond its theoretical contribution, this study aligns with broader social objectives by advancing the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 10 on Reduced Inequalities, through its emphasis on equitable and respectful cross-cultural communication.

The research helps to understand improvements in social equity and advances in cross-boundary collaboration in Southeast Asia by gaining knowledge of cross-cultural communication strategies in the YSEALI program, and contributes to the growing global social equity and cross-border collaboration as they relate to social equality in Southeast Asia. Taking into account the cultural tension between

high-context Southeast Asian cultures and the low-context culture of the United States, this study aims to analyze the strategies participants employ to navigate this communicative tension. More specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions: How do YSEALI participants manage the three components of face concern: self, other, and mutual concerning interactions with American peers and cross-cultural participants? Furthermore, this study aims to examine the specific adaptive strategies and behaviors employed by YSEALI participants to effectively manage the cultural differences they encounter throughout their exchange program. In addressing these issues, the research is designed to yield a nuanced understanding of how Face Negotiation Theory operates in relation to modern-day international youth exchange programs.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the intercultural communication strategies and identity negotiation practices of YSEALI participants during their exchange program in the United States. A qualitative approach was selected to capture participants lived experiences and subjective interpretations of cross-cultural interactions in depth. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, with the following

criteria: (1) they were active participants in the YSEALI program between 2022 and 2025, (2) they had direct experience interacting within the U.S. cultural context, and (3) they were willing to participate in in-depth interviews. A total of 11 participants from 11 Southeast Asian countries were included to ensure diversity of perspectives across the region.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining consistency across key research themes. The interviews were conducted online via video conferencing platforms, lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. An interview guide was developed based on Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory, focusing on self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns, as well as participants' adaptive communication strategies. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase approach, including familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The coding process combined inductive and deductive approaches: initial codes were generated from

the data, while theme categorization was guided by the core constructs of Face Negotiation Theory. To enhance analytical rigor, coding was conducted iteratively, and emerging themes were continuously compared across participants. Data triangulation was applied by cross-checking interview findings with relevant program documents and participant reflections to ensure consistency and credibility.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and participants' identities were anonymized to protect confidentiality. All data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The section presents the study's findings on how YSEALI participants negotiate identity and manage face concerns during intercultural interactions throughout their exchange program in the United States. Drawing on Face Negotiation Theory, the analysis focuses on how self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns are enacted in participants' communication practices and on the adaptive strategies they employ to navigate differences in values, norms, and cultural expectations. The findings indicate that identity negotiation operates not only at the interpersonal level but also as a form of cultural diplomacy, reflecting participants' positioning

as national representatives and cross-cultural actors within a global exchange setting.

Three interviewees were very concerned about how they presented themselves when interacting with people from different cultures while in the US through the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI). This concern stemmed primarily from differences in language, values, social norms, and cultural expectations. The people interviewed mostly focused on demonstrating their cultural identity and national pride through interactions with people from other cultures while serving as national representatives of their respective countries. For YSEALI participants, being in the US provided an opportunity to represent their country and culture proudly; therefore, their identity was both a source of national pride and a means of communicating their culture diplomatically. Examples of cultural diplomacy included participants wearing traditional dress, sharing traditional foods, introducing their country's language(s), and demonstrating culturally relevant behaviors. Intercultural encounters in academic and exchange settings often involve differences in language, cultural habits, clothing, food, and everyday interactional norms, which require participants to develop adjustment strategies in order to reduce cultural gaps and communication barriers (Safi et al., 2022). One illustrative example of this practice

was demonstrated by HL (Cambodia), who employed several cultural identity markers during the YSEALI program, such as wearing his *krama*, bringing traditional snacks, and teaching fellow YSEALI participants basic Khmer expressions.

People usually think of Cambodia as just a country with a sad history, the Khmer Rouge, landmines, things like that. But there's so much more to us. So when I went, I brought a krama scarf, taught them how to say 'sok sabay?' (how are you), and even shared our local snacks like num banh chok. I just wanted to show that Cambodian youth can be smart, creative, and also global-minded (Personal communication with HL from Cambodia, June 20, 2025).

HL's statement reveals that cultural identity markers were not merely decorative but were intentionally used as a means of communication to foster self-esteem and national pride. This represents a self-face concern strategy as HL was attempting to challenge negative perceptions of Cambodia by promoting a positive self-representation.

As seen in Figure 1, a participant from Cambodia is wearing a krama scarf. Beyond wearing a krama scarf, HL also taught simple Khmer greetings and shared traditional Cambodian food as part of his effort to challenge



Source: Research Result, 2024

Figure 1 Cambodian representatives and krama scarves

negative views about his country. Through these everyday interactions, he presented a friendly and creative image of Cambodian culture, representing a confident and globally engaged young generation. Rather than emerging from direct conflict, this self-image concern stemmed from a desire to correct shared misperceptions through positive self-presentation.

Meanwhile, PM from Vietnam, a visually impaired YSEALI participant, faced challenges in a multicultural setting where first impressions and nonverbal cues are significant. To preserve his self-identity and gain social acceptance, he wore an áo dài, symbolizing cultural pride and personal dignity.

Besides wearing an áo dài, PM and other Vietnamese delegates also shared small items, such as keychains and postcards featuring Vietnam, with participants from other countries. These acts extended beyond just being hospitable to being able to create closeness, show others that they care, and demonstrate some of the positive aspects of Vietnamese culture, as PM explained:

Since I was from Vietnam and also the only participant with visual disability, I felt like... I had to show that I'm capable too, you know? And I also wanted to give a good impression of Vietnam, so I brought áo dài, our traditional dress, and gave small gifts to friends. That's part of our culture too, like to show care and build good relationships (Personal communication with PM from Vietnam, June 22, 2025).

PM shared personal stories from his family and life in Vietnam to help the audience feel more connected. By doing so, PM would portray an open personality with strong cultural ties; therefore, these stories served as a medium through which he built a positive image of himself. PM's cultural expression extended beyond symbols, manifesting itself in daily interactions. PM's ability to adapt and take initiative was demonstrated as he used his actions to create an inclusive environment for all people (as a result of his visual impairment). Additionally, a similar experience was witnessed in Indonesia with SR as she was able to continue practicing the same daily rituals and values during the YSEALI program. For example, SR would bring her own portable bidet and use her own chili spices (BonCabe) to feel comfortable and to avoid losing the culture she had established at home, despite being in a different country.

In a new setting, SR made an active effort to feel comfortable while trying to preserve ties to her original culture by retaining cultural practices she had known in her native land. Examples of this included publicly displaying pride as an Indonesian through her choice of attire (traditional garments) at cultural events and by encouraging other participants to share local customs and culture. By participating in these behaviors, SR was not only demonstrating



Source: Research Result, 2024

Figure 2 YSEALI participants from Indonesia at the University of Texas at Austin

her cultural identity; she was also indicating her desire to convey that she was an individual who would bear the responsibility of representing her country internationally. As seen in Figure 2, SR was traditional Indonesian attire at the University of Texas, Austin.

SR also encountered challenges associated with language and communication. She perceived that her English was less fluent than that of other participants, particularly those from the Philippines. As a result, she generally spoke infrequently and tended to listen more often than not. This was a coping mechanism to reduce the likelihood that she would feel

embarrassed or lose face for making an error. Whenever she prayed, no matter how small the space or how little time she had available, she still prayed. When she prayed, she did so very quietly so as not to disturb those around her. She did this to continue following her faith and beliefs, but also being respectful of those around her who may not be as comfortable with her practice as she was. At times, she adapted his private habits to the American way of doing things, including punctuality and politeness, which helped her preserve his identity while fostering her adjustment to American culture.

I'm in a new place, so I must follow their system. I didn't break the rules, I didn't bring noisy habits from home like talking too loudly or ignoring the time. They are very on time there. If they say 7.00 AM, you must be in the hotel lobby by then. Even if you haven't finished breakfast, they don't care. You just have to follow the schedule (Personal communication with SR from Indonesia, June 30, 2025).

This statement shows that SR consciously refrains from habits that may be considered rude or disruptive in other cultures. By choosing to adapt subtly, she protects herself from negative judgments and maintains her reputation as an international program participant who can behave appropriately in a new cultural context by not bringing Indonesian habits such as speaking loudly or calling friends by shouting from a distance, and also by trying to be late, as is the culture in the United States regarding

time.

However, although SR's communication strategy focuses on self-face concern, she also shows elements of other-face concern when communicating with Southeast Asian participants. This can be seen in her politeness when communicating with Southeast Asian participants, avoiding overly direct speech to avoid offending others. She also chooses to remain neutral in sensitive discussions such as LGBTQ issues and adapts to local culture without creating conflict, which will be discussed in the next sub-chapter on other-face concern. To facilitate the identification of interview results with sources, the following table presents the strategies and objectives of self-face concern of several participants.

Based on Table 1, participants from Cambodia, Vietnam, and Indonesia displayed

self-face concern strategies by expressing cultural identity and national pride.

From the three sources, it can be concluded that the self-face concern strategies that emerged in this study were more often expressed through participants' cultural identity than by directly maintaining personal attitudes. Participants more often emphasized their cultural origins by wearing traditional clothing, bringing food typical of their country of origin, introducing traditional dances or songs, and expressing pride in national values. Such expressions appear to be the main form of self-face, namely, a way to maintain one's image as a representative of one's country before other international participants.

This shows that, in the context of programs such as YSEALI, maintaining self-respect is more often achieved through symbolic means that reflect pride in national identity, rather

Table 1 Self-Care Concern Strategies

No	Informant	Country	Strategy	Communication	Reason / Cultural Motive
1	HL	Cambodia	Showcasing cultural identity through cultural symbols	Wearing traditional scarves, sharing local foods, and teaching the Khmer language to other participants	Seeking to change negative stereotypes about Cambodia and present an image of intelligent and global youth
2	PM	Vietnam	Affirming cultural values through gifts and clothing	Wearing an ao dai, giving small gifts (key chains, postcards), and sharing personal stories about life in Vietnam	Building a positive impression of Vietnam and showing that he is capable of socializing despite his disability
3	SR	Indonesia	Maintain personal comfort while incorporating cultural elements	Bring personal items (bidet, sambal), wear traditional clothing, continue to practice religion, adapt habits to US norms, and avoid speaking too loudly	Maintain an image of being cultured, religious, and adaptable without losing national identity

Source: Research Result, 2025

than by defending personal ego in interactions. In multilingual settings, identity negotiation is enacted through symbolic choices, including language use and cultural markers, rather than through explicit identity claims (Wahyuni et al., 2023).

In the context of cross-cultural communication, maintaining harmonious social relationships is an important aspect that cannot always be achieved by prioritizing direct self-expression. Furthermore, some participants used the other-face concern strategy, as demonstrated by a tendency to refrain from communicating, not because they lacked an opinion, but because they considered the social impact of what they would say.

The findings show that seven participants from Timor-Leste, Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Myanmar, and Indonesia demonstrated other-face concern strategies. Although Vietnam and Indonesia were previously discussed in relation to self-face concern, both also showed sensitivity toward others' feelings. As an example, the participant from Vietnam chose not to comment on the controversial political question about Myanmar, demonstrating an understanding of others' social reputations and an attempt to keep the interaction polite and friendly. Much the same, SR from Indonesia demonstrated a style of communication that is also other-face

concerned.

From these insights, it is evident that seven participants clearly exhibited the predominant use of the other-face concern strategy. The informants explicitly stated that they prefer to avoid overly direct communication to maintain comfort and harmony in interactions. To make it easier to identify the interview results, Table 2 presents the other-face concern strategies of several participants.

Based on Table 2, it appears that the other-face concern strategy emerged as a response by YSEALI participants to maintain social harmony and avoid conflict during cross-cultural interactions. Participants intentionally change their manner of communicating to respect the feelings and dignity of the people with whom they interact, notably in situations that may involve emotional or cultural sensitivity. Similarities among these patterns suggest strong collective cultural values in the self-identities of participants from various Southeast Asian nations, prioritizing social harmony and respect for others in their communication. These behaviors illustrate the considerable emphasis on developing and maintaining relationships (attention to socio-relational dynamics), as well as the recognition of cultural diversity in cross-cultural interactions, by using pleasantness, avoiding confrontation, and modifying one's communication style to avoid creating tension.

Table 2 Other Face Strategy Concern

No	Informant	Country	Strategy	Communication	Reason / Cultural Motive
1	DC	Timor Leste	Avoid direct statements	Use inclusive and neutral language during sensitive discussions	Avoid conflict and maintain a positive atmosphere
2	AN	Brunei Darussalam	Respond politely in sensitive situations	Answer gently, even if the question offends your beliefs	Don't want the other person to feel guilty or embarrassed
3	WW	Thailand	Avoid confrontation	Remain polite and do not interrupt, even if you do not understand the conversation	Maintain mutual comfort and social decorum
4	PM	Vietnam	Avoid sensitive topics	Do not bring up political issues or the personal history of the person you are talking to	Respect other people's emotional experiences and trauma
5	MH	Malaysia	Express differences subtly	Do not show surprise or judgmental attitudes	Avoid embarrassing others in public
6	MA	Myanmar	Indirect and thoughtful language	Choosing gentle words and avoiding arguments	Believing that words can hurt more than actions
7	SR	Indonesia	Adjust communication style	Be more cautious when speaking with Southeast Asian participants; don't be too direct	Avoid cross-cultural misunderstandings and maintain social connections

Source: Research Result, 2025

During the YSEALI program, the ability of the participants to foster cohesion and fit into the group's dynamic was evident due to their acknowledgment of establishing positive relationships with others who were different from them by not only offering their thoughts and feelings, but also being sensitive to the social feelings of those in the group. Most participants used a calm, non-confrontational, and open approach when expressing their perspectives and did not try to dominate or force their viewpoints on others. These types of interactions highlighted that the communication within the program was not only about transmitting information; it was also about building relationships between people of different cultures, creating social harmony, and

a feeling of emotional well-being to achieve a level of acceptance of each other's cultures. To facilitate the identification of interview results, the following table presents the mutual-face concern strategies of several participants.

Based on Table 3, the mutual-face concern strategies used by participants indicate that they can adapt to differences in values, customs, and communication styles across cultural backgrounds. In this case, harmony is not achieved by making everything the same, but by respecting differences and fostering open, inclusive interactions.

Based on the results of this study, the self-face concern strategies used by YSEALI participants were more symbolic and representative than confrontational or

Table 3 Mutual Face Concern Strategy

No	Informant	Country	Strategy	Communication	Reason / Cultural Motive
1	ST	Laos	Adapt to maintain mutual comfort	Study in the hotel lobby late at night so as not to disturb roommates	Respect privacy in shared spaces and maintain a harmonious atmosphere in a multicultural environment
2	GE	Filipina	Maintain harmony when receiving criticism	Respond calmly to harsh comments, then emphasize cultural differences	Avoiding open conflict and showing openness to different communication styles
3	DJ	Singapura	Building inclusive and equal communication	Encouraging passive members to speak up, dividing tasks fairly, and voting when there are differences	Creating a fair and mutually respectful group work atmosphere and minimizing domination by one party

Source: Research Result, 2025

aggressively defensive. Participants tended to show pride in their culture of origin through traditional clothing, local food, local language, or certain customs. None of the participants showed dominance in their interactions; instead, they preferred an approach that combined expressing their identity and maintaining good relationships, which, in face negotiation theory, is called the integrating or avoiding style. Such behavior can be attributed to the fact that most YSEALI participants come from collectivistic, high-context cultures that value social cohesion and group relations over individual expression.

This supports Stella Ting-Toomey’s position in Face Negotiation Theory, whereby people from collectivist societies deploy facework strategies focused on social relations, such as avoidance and integrating, to protect their face in a multicultural setting. Such strategies protect their reputation as polite and cultured people while also fostering cross-cultural social

cohesion. Furthermore, they tend to promote social harmony and avoid direct conflicts.

With respect to Face Negotiation Theory, this interdependent self-construal orientation strongly impacts self-face concern strategies of YSEALI participants. Participants seem concerned about retaining their self-image and cultural identity, but the means employed do not include robust self-assertion.

Rather, they show their identity in a figurative and symbolic way, indicating that the self-face concern strategies of YSEALI participants have a figurative dimension, as they seek to defend a collective identity that would neither embarrass nor sully the good name of the country they represent. The self-face concern strategy that has emerged from this study illustrates that YSEALI participants seek to retain their individual identity in a foreign milieu and to protect favorable impressions of their country and culture. They do not seek

to protect their faces only as individuals, but also as representatives of their community or country.

The self-face concern strategy used by YSEALI participants from Southeast Asia tends to be symbolic, representative, and non-confrontational. Furthermore, the communication strategy that stands out in interactions between YSEALI participants is the other-face concern. This is evident in many YSEALI participants from Southeast Asian countries admitting to holding back their opinions, refraining from directly addressing sensitive topics, or even diverting the conversation when there is potential for conflict. Identity negotiation in intercultural contexts can be understood as a discursive process through which individuals continuously construct and reposition their cultural identities in relation to others (Rashidi & Meihami, 2017).

The method of avoiding overt expression could also be interpreted as a contribution to safeguarding group harmony. According to Stella Ting-Toomey, people from collectivist cultures are very mindful of others' social face. The concept of interdependent self-construal, included in Face Negotiation Theory, describes attitudes toward the view that "self" cannot be separated from the community. Identity negotiation in overseas contexts is not only expressed through verbal adaptation but

also through the maintenance of cultural and personal markers while participants learn to navigate new social and academic expectations (Ali et al., 2022).

YSEALI participants from Southeast Asian countries often adopt other-face concern strategies as a form of self-adjustment in cross-cultural communication. According to Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory, this indicates concern for maintaining others' social face to avoid conflict and ensure harmony. This happens because they are shaped by a collectivist cultural background and a high-context communication style.

The symbolic self-face concern strategy continues in the form of other-face concern, which emphasizes social harmony; both complement each other in building mutual-face concern oriented towards cross-cultural cooperation. Identity negotiation often involves inhabiting an in-between position, where individuals manage ongoing tensions rather than resolving them into a fixed identity (Cohen & Kassin, 2018).

This is demonstrated by three participants from three different countries, Laos, the Philippines, and Singapore, who applied the mutual-face concern strategy in cross-cultural communication during the YSEALI program in the United States.

In Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation

Theory, mutual-face concern refers to an individual's simultaneous concern for their own social face and that of others. This means that individuals with this strategy not only try to maintain their self-image (self-face) but also ensure that others do not lose face or feel offended (other-face). This strategy is also often used by individuals from collectivist cultures, as social relationships and group harmony are considered more important than direct self-assertion. These results align with the core premises of the theory, as participants from Laos, the Philippines, and Singapore consistently exhibited a communication style that avoided conflict while also seeking to foster a safe and inclusive space for communication. In addition to avoiding conflict, mutual-face concern means associating it with an ethical, empathetic form of communication that is cognizant of sustaining relationships.

According to the research findings, the main overlooked conflict management styles in the practice of mutual-face concern were integrating and obliging. The integrating style emerged when participants encouraged collaborative solutions rather than simply downplaying others' opinions, even when they didn't completely agree. The third type of compliance displayed by the YSEALI participants was to adapt to meet the needs of others in the group as a means of creating group cohesiveness through

mutual support. These findings are consistent with Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory, which posits that individuals from collectivist societies tend to avoid direct confrontation to foster group harmony in interactions. The findings of this study are also similar to the theory of face-giving in Stella Ting-Toomey's Face Negotiation Theory (2017), in which participants not only try to maintain harmonious relationships with conflict-avoiding strategies, but they also help provide space and support for the social image of others. Similar patterns can be seen in intercultural student interactions, where communication accommodation becomes a strategy to reduce social distance, manage rejection, and support integration with members of the host culture (Andung et al., 2019).

The findings of this study are quite similar to those of a prior study by Yohana and Yozani (2017). In that study, the communication strategies of Afghan immigrants when interacting with the local community in Pekanbaru were investigated. To create social cohesion with their settings, the immigrants utilized communication accommodation techniques, such as altering their language use, clothing, and religious beliefs. This outline identifies a convergence strategy that seeks to adjust to reduce social distance and minimize the risk of cultural conflict. However, Syarizka et al. (2021) point out that self-image differences based on the

independent or interdependent self-image each individual has in a collectivist culture can lead to different practices for managing intercultural communication conflicts.

Living in an individualistic country does not diminish the implementation of a collectivist culture. Differences in conflict strategies are caused by the characteristics of self-image. Thus, self-image, image concerns, and a person's cultural background are very important in determining how a person resolves conflicts. Rather than assimilating into dominant norms, individuals often negotiate identity through selective adaptation and strategic self-presentation in intercultural encounters (Sung, 2022).

The relevance to this study is evident in the mutual-face-concern strategy demonstrated by YSEALI participants from Southeast Asia when interacting within the context of American culture. Participants also chose to adjust their communication style, avoid potentially offensive expressions, and create a fair communication space in order to maintain harmony and avoid cultural conflict. The strategies adopted emphasized maintaining social relations and others' comfort, as well as avoiding confrontation that could embarrass or disrupt the stability of interactions.

This research supports the achievement of SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), as evidenced

by YSEALI program participants from various Southeast Asian countries reducing social and cultural gaps through inclusive, equitable cross-cultural communication. By applying the self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns in the theory of face negotiation, the participants succeeded in fostering interactions of mutual respect amid cultural differences.

This study expands on Face Negotiation Theory, namely that YSEALI participants maintain their self-image not through direct statements, but through cultural symbols such as traditional clothing, local cuisine, and local languages. These expressions serve as a form of subtle cultural diplomacy and an effective way to maintain identity without causing conflict. This shows that self-face strategies in the context of short-term exchanges are more symbolic than verbal.

The findings on YSEALI participants' adaptive strategies and cross-cultural challenges offer several practical implications. For program organizers and partner universities in the United States, it is recommended to provide a more targeted pre-departure cultural orientation that emphasizes differences between high- and low-context communication styles and the balance among self-face, other-face, and mutual-face concerns. This helps participants adapt successfully by connecting communication directly (while also fostering social sensitivity

to promote group harmony).

Current and future exchange participants, especially YSEALI fellows, should think of readiness as more than academic readiness; emotional and intercultural readiness are necessary as well. Participants can balance expressing their own identity by using symbols like traditional dress, food, or language as types of non-confrontational cultural diplomacy (while pitstopping for club food). Participants can continue to use adaptive communication and code-switching to maintain relational harmony.

For educational institutions in Southeast Asia, and Indonesia especially, consider providing a mechanism for post-program sharing to help returning participants reflect on their adaptation experience. Also, this type of forum could increase awareness of challenges across, and foster better institutional support for participants in future exchanges.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study illustrate that Face Negotiation Theory remains a valuable framework for understanding how people from collectivist cultures navigate communication in intercultural contexts. The strategy that focused on self-face concern was illustrated through acts of cultural representation that symbolize traditional clothing, food, and stories as elements of national identity and as a function

of soft diplomacy. This finding expands Ting-Toomey's theorizing by showing that self-face concern in short-term exchange contexts can function both relationally and representationally.

The strategy of other-face concern was evident among participants from Brunei Darussalam, Timor-Leste, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Myanmar, showing that collectivist values of empathy and restraint served as proactive strategies rather than simply responding to the conflict. The mutual-face concern strategy demonstrates participants' ability to establish their individual identity in relation to the group identity through compliant and cooperative means of communication. Through mutual-face concern, multicultural contexts are reinforced not only by promoting harmony but also by demonstrating one's capacity to act effectively with regard to diversity, which is referred to as intercultural competence: the ability to balance thoughtfulness and assertiveness when dealing with cultural diversity. The findings of this study provide further evidence of Face Negotiation Theory in contexts beyond conflict and contribute to our understanding of cultural identity by examining how individuals symbolically represent their culture, as well as how they adapt emotionally and negotiate their identities in the global market. They also suggest that intercultural communication isn't appropriate through

assimilation, but through adaptive coexistence, in which cultural identity becomes a bridge to communication rather than a barrier. These recommendations indicate that organizers and YSEALI partner universities should offer deeper pre-immersion cultural orientation focused on differences in communication styles and the relationship among self, other, and mutual-face concerns. Participants should be encouraged to prepare themselves academically, emotionally, and interculturally by being aware of their choices in expressing identity and managing relational harmony. Educational institutions in Southeast Asia, especially those in Indonesia, should establish post-program forums for returnees to share good adaptation experiences and strategies to strengthen intercultural readiness among future participants. Finally, and in future research, it is advisable to engage a broader sample of participants as well as a program comparison of the long-term effects of facework strategies on leadership and intercultural competence development.

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