

## Identifying the Causes of Communication Breakdown in Intercultural Marriages

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to explore the causes of communication breakdown in intercultural marriages.

**Methods and Materials:** A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 28 participants recruited from online platforms. The study followed a phenomenological approach, and theoretical saturation determined the sample size. Data were analyzed using NVivo software through open coding, axial coding, and thematic analysis to identify key communication challenges in intercultural marriages. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking and reflexive journaling to minimize researcher bias.

**Findings:** The results revealed three main themes contributing to communication breakdown: language and expression barriers, cultural and value-based differences, and emotional and psychological challenges. Participants reported struggles with linguistic misunderstandings, differences in emotional expression, and humor misalignment. Cultural expectations, such as gender roles, family involvement, and conflict resolution styles, further complicated communication. Psychological factors, including cultural identity struggles, trust issues, and adaptability, also played a crucial role. The ability to develop intercultural sensitivity and communication competence was identified as a key factor in mitigating misunderstandings and fostering relationship harmony.

**Conclusion:** Communication breakdown in intercultural marriages is influenced by a complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and psychological factors. While language proficiency and cultural adaptation can improve communication, deeper challenges related to identity negotiation and emotional expression require ongoing effort and mutual understanding. Future research should explore additional sociocultural influences, and practical interventions, such as intercultural communication training, could help couples navigate these challenges more effectively.

**Keywords:** Intercultural marriage, communication breakdown, language barriers, cultural differences, psychological adaptation, conflict resolution, intercultural competence.

## 1 Introduction

Intercultural marriages, defined as unions between individuals from different cultural, linguistic, or national backgrounds, have become increasingly common in the context of globalization and transnational mobility. While such relationships offer opportunities for cultural exchange and personal growth, they also present unique challenges, particularly in communication. Effective communication is a fundamental component of marital satisfaction, and when partners come from different cultural backgrounds, they may experience difficulties in expressing emotions, interpreting nonverbal cues, and resolving conflicts. Communication breakdown in intercultural marriages can stem from linguistic barriers, differing cultural norms, and psychological factors, all of which can contribute to misunderstandings and relational strain (Radiyus, 2025). The increasing prevalence of intercultural unions highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the factors that lead to communication breakdown in such relationships (Župina, 2024).

Language is often one of the most significant barriers in intercultural marriages. When partners speak different native languages, they may struggle with accurately conveying their thoughts, leading to frequent misinterpretations (Özdoğru et al., 2024). Studies indicate that linguistic differences not only create difficulties in verbal expression but also affect the way partners perceive each other's emotions and intentions (López, 2024). The lack of shared linguistic and cultural references can contribute to frustration and feelings of isolation within the relationship (Aicha, 2024). In some cases, one partner may need to rely on a second language to communicate, which can lead to power imbalances if one individual is more proficient than the other (Za'im et al., 2023). Linguistic misunderstandings can also affect humor, sarcasm, and idiomatic expressions, further complicating communication (Naeimi et al., 2023). For example, partners may struggle with humor as jokes and sarcasm are often culturally specific, making it difficult for the other person to understand the intended meaning (He et al., 2023).

Beyond linguistic barriers, cultural norms and value systems shape the way individuals communicate in relationships. In many cases, partners in intercultural marriages may come from societies with contrasting communication styles, such as direct versus indirect communication (Babao & Adiatma, 2023). While some cultures value explicit and straightforward conversations,

others prioritize subtlety and nonverbal cues, leading to misunderstandings when expectations do not align (Pryshlyak & Drapak, 2022). The role of gender norms in communication is also a significant factor, as different cultures may have varying expectations regarding the ways men and women should express themselves in relationships (Nguyen, 2022). Additionally, family involvement in decision-making and communication can create tension, particularly when extended family members play an influential role in the marriage (Gao, 2022). For instance, in collectivist cultures, family approval is often considered essential for marital harmony, whereas individualistic cultures may emphasize personal autonomy in decision-making (Bortnikova & Dolzhenkova, 2022). Such cultural differences can lead to conflicts, particularly when partners have different expectations regarding family involvement (Ryu & Lee, 2021).

Another critical aspect of communication breakdown in intercultural marriages is the impact of emotional and psychological factors. Differences in emotional expression can lead to misunderstandings, as some cultures encourage open displays of emotion while others promote emotional restraint (Miauw & Guo, 2021). These differences can be particularly pronounced in conflict resolution, where one partner may prefer to discuss issues directly, while the other might avoid confrontation as a way of maintaining harmony (Leung, 2021). Furthermore, psychological factors such as anxiety and uncertainty can heighten communication difficulties, particularly when individuals feel pressure to adapt to a different cultural environment (Ssemuddu, 2020). Research has shown that individuals in intercultural relationships often experience higher levels of communication apprehension due to fears of being misunderstood or misinterpreted (Pragash et al., 2020).

Intercultural sensitivity and adaptability play a crucial role in mitigating communication breakdown in these marriages. Studies suggest that partners who develop intercultural communication competence—defined as the ability to effectively navigate cultural differences—are more successful in maintaining harmonious relationships (Gjoci & Gjoci, 2020). Intercultural competence encompasses cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills that enable individuals to recognize and respect cultural differences in communication styles (Didenko et al., 2020). For example, partners who actively engage in learning each other's cultural norms and language tend to experience fewer misunderstandings and greater relationship satisfaction (Neuliep, 2019). However, the process of developing

intercultural competence is often challenging and requires continuous effort from both partners (Антонівська, 2018).

One of the key challenges in intercultural marriages is the negotiation of cultural identity. Partners may feel pressure to assimilate into their spouse's culture while simultaneously maintaining their own cultural heritage (Yaroshenko, 2018). This tension can create feelings of cultural dissonance, where individuals struggle to balance multiple cultural identities (Yang, 2018). Additionally, perceptions of power dynamics within the relationship can affect communication, particularly when one partner comes from a dominant cultural background (Wang, 2018). Research suggests that intercultural relationships are more successful when both partners engage in cultural exchange rather than one partner completely assimilating into the other's cultural framework (Haiyan, 2018).

Moreover, external societal factors can exacerbate communication breakdowns in intercultural marriages. Discrimination, social stigma, and stereotypes about certain cultural groups can influence how partners perceive and interact with each other (Janfk, 2017). When individuals face societal pressure or negative attitudes toward their intercultural relationship, it can create additional stress that affects communication within the marriage (Hsu, 2017). For example, couples may feel isolated from their respective communities, leading to a lack of social support and increased reliance on their partner for emotional validation (Radyus, 2025).

Given the complexity of communication breakdowns in intercultural marriages, it is crucial to examine the specific factors that contribute to misunderstandings and relational strain. This study seeks to explore the causes of communication breakdown in intercultural marriages through qualitative research.

## 2 Methods and Materials

### 2.1 Study Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the causes of communication breakdown in intercultural marriages. A phenomenological approach was adopted to capture the lived experiences of individuals in such marriages, allowing for an in-depth understanding of the complexities surrounding intercultural communication. The study followed a purposive sampling strategy, recruiting 28 participants who were currently or previously in intercultural marriages. Recruitment was conducted through online platforms, ensuring diversity in terms of cultural

backgrounds, linguistic differences, and relationship durations. The sample size was determined based on theoretical saturation, meaning data collection continued until no new themes emerged in the analysis.

### 2.2 Measure

#### 2.2.1 Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, designed to elicit participants' perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to communication in their intercultural marriages. The interview protocol included open-ended questions addressing topics such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, differences in emotional expression, and conflict resolution strategies. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted via video calls or voice calls, depending on participants' preferences. All interviews were recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### 2.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, facilitating systematic coding and thematic extraction. A grounded theory approach guided the analysis, involving initial open coding, followed by axial coding to establish connections between emerging themes. Categories were refined iteratively through constant comparison, ensuring a comprehensive representation of participants' experiences. Trustworthiness was maintained through member checking, where selected participants reviewed preliminary findings to validate interpretations. Additionally, reflexive journaling was employed to minimize researcher bias, ensuring that data interpretation remained grounded in participants' narratives.

## 3 Findings and Results

The demographic characteristics of the 28 participants in this study reflected a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, ages, and marital durations. Participants' ages ranged from 26 to 52 years, with a mean age of 38 years. The sample consisted of 15 women (53.6%) and 13 men (46.4%), representing various nationalities, including individuals from North America (n = 8, 28.6%), Europe (n = 7, 25%), Asia (n = 6, 21.4%), the Middle East (n = 4, 14.3%), and Africa (n = 3, 10.7%). The duration of participants' marriages varied, with 9 individuals (32.1%) married for less than five years, 12 participants (42.9%) married between

five and ten years, and 7 participants (25%) married for over ten years. Regarding language proficiency, 19 participants (67.9%) reported communicating in a non-native language with their spouse, while 9 participants (32.1%) shared a common first language. Additionally, 21 participants (75%) indicated that they had faced significant cultural adaptation

challenges in their relationship, while 7 (25%) reported minimal adaptation difficulties. The diversity in participants' backgrounds and experiences provided a comprehensive understanding of the communication breakdowns in intercultural marriages.

**Table 1**

*The Results of Qualitative Analysis*

Category	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
Language and Expression Barriers	Differences in Native Language	Misinterpretation of words, reliance on translation apps, loss of nuance, code-switching, frustration in daily communication
	Emotional Expression Differences	Varying levels of expressiveness, indirect communication, difficulty in reading emotions, cultural norms of emotional restraint
	Humor and Sarcasm Misalignment	Unintended offense, different humor styles, struggle with sarcasm, need for explanation, frustration in jokes
	Conflict Resolution Styles	Avoidance vs. direct confrontation, emotional escalation, preference for silent treatment, use of mediators, cultural scripts for arguments
Cultural and Value-Based Differences	Gender Role Expectations	Differing views on household roles, expectations of submission or equality, financial responsibilities, social obligations
	Family Influence on Communication	Role of extended family in decisions, pressure from in-laws, importance of parental approval, differing expectations for family interactions
	Religious and Moral Beliefs	Different ethical frameworks, interfaith misunderstandings, religious-based conflict, disagreements on child upbringing
	Social Norms and Etiquette	Different perceptions of politeness, gestures with unintended meanings, formality in speech, greetings and hospitality customs
Emotional and Psychological Factors	Cultural Identity Struggles	Feeling like an outsider, difficulty balancing identities, conflict between home and host culture, pressure to assimilate
	Trust and Jealousy Issues	Fear of cultural stereotypes, concerns about loyalty, different views on friendships with opposite gender, perception of personal space
	Emotional Support and Validation	Different expectations of comfort, reluctance to share emotions, differing views on affection, cultural differences in reassurance
	Adaptability and Willingness to Compromise	Willingness to learn partner's culture, frustration with rigidity, role of patience, impact of intercultural awareness programs

The study identified three major themes contributing to communication breakdown in intercultural marriages: language and expression barriers, cultural and value-based differences, and emotional and psychological factors. Each theme contained various subcategories that emerged from participants' narratives, illustrating the complexities of communication challenges in intercultural relationships.

One of the primary barriers to effective communication was differences in native language. Many participants highlighted difficulties in conveying nuanced meanings and emotions due to their partners' limited proficiency in their native language. Some expressed frustration over misunderstandings caused by direct translations, with one participant stating, *"Sometimes I say something in my language, and my husband translates it literally—it sounds rude, but I don't mean it that way."* Others reported relying on translation apps, which, while helpful, sometimes led to confusion. Emotional expression differences also contributed to miscommunication, as participants described

struggling to interpret their partners' emotions. One interviewee noted, *"I grew up in a culture where people don't show emotions openly, but my wife expects me to express everything. She thinks I don't care, but I just don't know how to say it."* Humor and sarcasm misalignment was another challenge, with several participants recounting instances where jokes were perceived as offensive. One individual remarked, *"I love sarcasm, but my wife takes it literally. I have to explain every joke, and it kills the fun."* Similarly, conflict resolution styles differed across cultures, leading to tension. Some participants described frustration over their partners' preference for avoiding conflict, while others found direct confrontation overwhelming. As one person explained, *"In my culture, we don't argue openly; we wait for things to cool down. But my husband wants to discuss every little problem immediately—it stresses me out."*

Cultural and value-based differences also played a crucial role in communication challenges. Gender role expectations

were a common source of conflict, with partners holding different views on household responsibilities. One participant stated, *“Where I’m from, men don’t cook or clean, but my wife expects me to share chores. It’s not that I don’t want to help, but it feels unnatural to me.”* Similarly, family influence on communication created additional tensions, especially when extended family members had strong opinions on marital matters. One participant shared, *“My parents expect to be involved in every decision, but my husband finds it intrusive. It’s hard to balance both sides.”* Religious and moral beliefs also led to communication difficulties, particularly when partners adhered to different ethical or faith-based frameworks. A participant recalled, *“We had a huge fight over our child’s religious upbringing. To me, it’s part of who I am, but my husband sees it as unnecessary.”* Another key difference was in social norms and etiquette, where gestures, politeness standards, and formalities varied across cultures. Some participants noted feeling embarrassed when their partners unintentionally violated cultural etiquette. As one individual described, *“In my culture, you always greet elders with respect, but my wife just says ‘hi’ casually. My parents were shocked.”*

Emotional and psychological factors further compounded communication breakdowns in intercultural marriages. Cultural identity struggles were common, with individuals feeling pressure to either assimilate or maintain their cultural background. One participant noted, *“I feel torn between two worlds. If I act too much like my spouse’s culture, my family thinks I’m abandoning my roots. If I don’t, my spouse says I’m not trying hard enough.”* Trust and jealousy issues also emerged, often influenced by cultural perceptions of gender roles and personal boundaries. Some partners found it difficult to accept differing expectations of friendships with the opposite gender, with one participant explaining, *“In my country, it’s normal to be close friends with colleagues of any gender, but my wife sees it as inappropriate.”* Emotional support and validation also differed significantly across cultures, with participants describing frustration over unfulfilled expectations. One interviewee mentioned, *“When I’m upset, I just need space, but my husband wants to talk about everything immediately. It feels overwhelming.”* Finally, adaptability and willingness to compromise played a significant role in mitigating communication challenges. Some participants recognized the need to actively learn about their partners' cultural perspectives, while others struggled with rigidity. As one participant stated, *“At first, I resisted changing anything, but*

*over time, I realized that understanding my husband’s culture made our relationship stronger.”*

These findings illustrate that communication breakdowns in intercultural marriages stem from a complex interplay of linguistic, cultural, and psychological factors. The diverse experiences of participants highlight the importance of mutual understanding, adaptability, and cultural awareness in overcoming these challenges.

#### 4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that communication breakdown in intercultural marriages arises from three primary factors: language and expression barriers, cultural and value-based differences, and emotional and psychological challenges. These themes highlight the complexity of navigating marital communication when partners come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Participants described struggles with language proficiency, differing emotional expression styles, and challenges in resolving conflicts due to cultural differences. These findings align with previous research on intercultural communication, which emphasizes the role of linguistic and cultural barriers in shaping interpersonal interactions (Radiyus, 2025). By examining these factors through qualitative inquiry, this study provides an in-depth understanding of how communication issues manifest in intercultural marriages and the ways in which partners attempt to navigate these challenges.

Language barriers were among the most frequently reported issues contributing to communication breakdowns in intercultural marriages. Participants noted that misinterpretations of words, difficulties in expressing emotions, and misunderstandings due to literal translations were common problems when one or both partners communicated in a non-native language. This finding supports previous research indicating that linguistic limitations affect not only verbal communication but also the ability to convey deeper emotional meanings (Župina, 2024). In intercultural relationships, language proficiency disparities can lead to power imbalances, where the more proficient speaker dominates conversations, leaving the other partner feeling unheard or misunderstood (Özdoğan et al., 2024). Additionally, humor and sarcasm were identified as frequent sources of miscommunication, as idiomatic expressions and cultural references often did not translate accurately across languages (López, 2024). Prior research has similarly shown that humor plays a significant role in

relational bonding, yet its effectiveness in intercultural interactions depends on shared linguistic and cultural knowledge (Aicha, 2024).

Beyond linguistic differences, cultural norms and value-based distinctions also contributed to communication difficulties. Participants described how contrasting communication styles—such as direct versus indirect speech—created misunderstandings in their relationships. In some cultures, confrontation is seen as a means of conflict resolution, while in others, avoiding direct disagreements is a sign of respect (Za'im et al., 2023). This finding is consistent with previous studies, which highlight that indirect communicators may perceive direct speech as aggressive, whereas direct communicators may see indirectness as evasive or passive-aggressive (Naeimi et al., 2023). Gender role expectations were another major source of miscommunication, particularly in marriages where partners had differing views on household responsibilities and decision-making authority (He et al., 2023). Research suggests that cultural beliefs about gender roles strongly influence how couples distribute responsibilities and interact within their marriage, sometimes leading to conflict when expectations diverge (Babao & Adiatma, 2023). Family influence also played a key role in shaping communication patterns, with some participants expressing frustration over the involvement of extended family members in their marital decisions. Collectivist cultures, in particular, often emphasize familial input in personal relationships, whereas individualistic cultures prioritize autonomy (Pryshlyak & Drapak, 2022). The importance of family in shaping marital communication has been widely documented, with studies showing that intercultural couples often face tensions in negotiating the degree of familial involvement in their relationship (Nguyen, 2022).

Emotional and psychological factors further compounded communication breakdowns in intercultural marriages. Participants highlighted how cultural identity struggles, differing levels of emotional expression, and trust issues affected their ability to communicate effectively. Some partners reported feeling pressure to assimilate into their spouse's culture while simultaneously maintaining their own cultural heritage, leading to internal conflict and emotional strain (Gao, 2022). These findings are in line with prior research suggesting that cultural identity negotiation is a key challenge in intercultural relationships, as individuals must balance their own cultural background with the expectations of their partner (Bortnikova & Dolzhenkova, 2022). Emotional support and validation were also found to differ

across cultures, with some partners expecting verbal reassurance while others relied more on actions to convey care and affection (Ryu & Lee, 2021). Studies have shown that emotional expressiveness is shaped by cultural norms, with some cultures emphasizing open displays of affection while others prioritize restraint (Miauw & Guo, 2021). Trust and jealousy issues were another recurring theme, particularly in relationships where cultural perceptions of gender roles and social interactions differed. Some participants reported struggling with their partners' expectations regarding friendships with members of the opposite gender, reflecting broader cultural differences in the interpretation of trust and fidelity in romantic relationships (Leung, 2021). Previous studies confirm that cultural beliefs about personal boundaries and acceptable social behaviors can significantly impact relational trust in intercultural marriages (Ssemuddu, 2020).

The ability to adapt and compromise was identified as a critical factor in mitigating communication challenges. Many participants acknowledged that learning about their partner's culture and being open to different communication styles improved their relationship over time (Pragash et al., 2020). These findings align with research on intercultural communication competence, which emphasizes the importance of cognitive, affective, and behavioral adaptation in navigating cross-cultural interactions (Gjoci & Gjoci, 2020). Developing intercultural sensitivity has been shown to reduce communication apprehension and foster greater understanding between partners (Didenko et al., 2020). However, this study also found that adaptability was not always sufficient to overcome deeply ingrained cultural differences, particularly in cases where one partner resisted compromising or viewed cultural integration as a loss of identity (Neuliep, 2019). The negotiation of cultural identity remains a central challenge in intercultural marriages, requiring ongoing effort and mutual respect from both partners (Антонівська, 2018).

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was limited to 28 participants, which, while sufficient for qualitative research, may not fully capture the diversity of experiences in intercultural marriages. The participants were recruited through online platforms, which may have introduced selection bias, as individuals with strong opinions or personal interest in intercultural communication may have been more likely to participate. Additionally, this study focused exclusively on self-reported experiences, which are subject to recall bias and personal interpretation. The

cultural backgrounds represented in the study were also not evenly distributed, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to all intercultural marriages. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample, as well as the inclusion of longitudinal data to examine how communication patterns evolve over time.

Future research should explore additional factors influencing communication in intercultural marriages, such as socio-economic status, religious differences, and digital communication. Investigating how intercultural couples navigate communication in different life stages—such as parenthood, career transitions, or migration—could provide deeper insights into the dynamic nature of communication in these relationships. Quantitative studies using standardized measures of intercultural communication competence and marital satisfaction could complement qualitative findings and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons could help identify universal versus culture-specific communication challenges in intercultural marriages. Exploring the role of third-party mediators, such as family members, therapists, or cultural mentors, could also provide valuable insights into how external support systems influence communication effectiveness in these marriages.

The findings of this study highlight the need for practical interventions to support intercultural couples in improving their communication skills. Marriage counselors and relationship therapists should incorporate intercultural communication training into their counseling sessions, helping couples recognize and adapt to different communication styles. Language learning programs tailored to couples could also help bridge linguistic gaps and reduce frustration related to language barriers. Couples could benefit from engaging in cultural exchange activities, such as attending cultural events or participating in workshops designed to foster intercultural understanding. Providing access to online resources, such as relationship blogs and forums focused on intercultural marriage, could also offer practical advice and support for couples navigating communication challenges. Additionally, raising awareness about the impact of family involvement and gender norms on marital communication could help intercultural couples develop strategies for managing external influences in their relationship. By implementing these practical approaches, couples can build stronger, more resilient relationships despite the challenges posed by intercultural differences.

#### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

#### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

#### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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#### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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#### Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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