

Navigating Cultural and Linguistic Boundaries Online: A CAT-Based Analysis of a Multicultural Gaming Discord Community in Southeast Asia

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ABSTRACT

Keywords

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Online multiplayer games such as Valorant provide dedicated servers for Southeast Asian players, creating spaces where individuals from different regions regularly interact and collaborate toward shared in-game objectives. Many of these players extend their interactions beyond the game through Discord, forming communities that bridge geographical and cultural boundaries. While research on online communication has grown considerably, informal multicultural communities remain understudied, particularly in the Southeast Asian context. As technology continues to evolve, the study of intercultural communication has yet to be fully expanded to the digital realm, leaving questions about how cultural adjustments unfold online largely unaddressed. This study investigates communication accommodation patterns within a small Valorant Discord community comprising Indonesian, Malaysian, and Filipino members. Drawing on netnography and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Analysis followed an abductive approach, combining inductive thematic coding with deductive interpretation through CAT's framework of adjustment strategies. Findings reveal that members employ a range of accommodation strategies when navigating linguistic and cultural differences in this informal digital space. English emerges as the community's primary convergence strategy, functioning as both a communicative tool and a mechanism for social inclusion. Members also develop supplementary strategies including conscious and unconscious adoption of each other's linguistic expressions and mannerisms. However, accommodation is not uniform — native language use under emotional pressure or during co-national exchanges produces moments of non-accommodation and communicative exclusion. These findings extend CAT's application to a Southeast Asian digital gaming context, contributing to understandings of intercultural communication in informal online communities.

1. Introduction

In this developing digital era, communication has managed to transcend geographical boundaries, making computer-mediated communication (CMC) a popular method of communication for society and a popular topic for communication researchers. Communication is the foundation of society, ranging from business, politics, economy, and many other aspects including recreation.

Among the most expansive recreational spaces to emerge from this digital shift is the world of online multiplayer gaming. The existence of online multiplayer games has long existed in the online realm as a recreational activity for both young and older generations. According to Microsoft, gaming

is the third most common activity on its platforms, right after browsing the Internet and email (Freeman, 2018). Online games are games that are played online, either through a local area network (LAN), the internet, or other medium. As internet access has expanded and social networking has become increasingly embedded in everyday life, online gaming has evolved into a dynamic form of CMC — one that merges entertainment with simultaneous, real-time social interaction (Freeman, 2018).

The social significance of online gaming became particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, when players across the world turned to online multiplayer environments not merely for entertainment but as spaces for maintaining human connection. During the pandemic, the gaming landscape has opened many people's awareness regarding what games can do to bring people together, since games do not just allow you to compete with strangers on the internet, but also create close-knit bonds with other people (Lufkin, 2020). Alongside of the increase in social media usage, Gen Z has perfected the art of community-building in and around video games. Online multiplayer games have allowed players to communicate with each other, transcending geographical boundaries.

Within this broader landscape, Southeast Asia represents a particularly compelling context for the study of CMC in gaming communities. Recognizing the region's cultural and demographic complexity, game developers such as Riot Games have made deliberate efforts to understand and serve Southeast Asian players, whose origins span diverse national and cultural backgrounds. As Valorant's Game Director has noted, the internal development team pays close attention to how players in the region interact and engage with one another, precisely because Southeast Asian users constitute a uniquely heterogeneous player base (Zalamea, 2023). Valorant, a team-based tactical shooter, is itself a product of these regional investments, and has attracted large, active communities across Southeast Asia. Therefore, a community that was created for Valorant players has been chosen as a representative of an organic virtual community formed by members from different countries in Southeast Asia due to the unique communication pattern between players with differing cultures.

Virtual communication among Valorant players is very crucial for the players due to the nature and purpose of communication. Communication is needed to form strategies or provide information regarding the game or the opponents (Saputra & Sawitri, 2023). Communication can be achieved depending on the medium that each games provide. For games such as Valorant, asynchronous and synchronous communication medium are provided to ensure success in teamwork. These communication methods are provided in the form of 'voice chat' and 'text chat', but also in other forms such as 'agent callouts' or in-game body language. However, communication among players does not stop in in-game communication.

Since there has been a surge of online communities, a platform is needed to accommodate such communities. For many gamers, Discord is offered as a platform to form communities with shared interests. Discord is known to be a place to share strategies and tactics in-game as well as casually chatting among players and tightening their interpersonal communication (Sufah et al., 2023). Topics can vary; members can talk about games, memes, and funny anecdotes between each other while listening to music (Sufah et al., 2023).

Discord is an application formed in 2015, comprising of multiple communication channels, including voice and text channels, allowing people to converse synchronously or asynchronously. Discord was released to provide people a space for playing games and relaxing with friends, as well as building a worldwide community (Discord, 2026). According to the main web page of (Discord, 2026), Discord allows their users to customize group chats, share content through streaming, and join into a call without having the need to traditionally call anyone so the party chat lasts before, during, and after game sessions. These features enable various online communities to form their groups in Discord to be fully immersed in their respective online communities. Therefore, it is suitable to find a close-knit community in Discord to be studied.

This instance is part of a larger phenomenon happening in cyberculture: The rise of online virtual communities. Virtual communities act as a provider for diverse social interactions as they allow individuals to share and receive knowledge, interests, and experiences with other members of the community (Iswaratama, 2024). Virtual communities are often maintained through constant communication between members, either about interests or shared experiences. According to Iswaratama (2024), the foundations of virtual communities are shared hobbies or interests, constant

stream of interactions, a sense of identity, focus, social integration or similarity when conversing with one another, and easy access to information and commercial orientation. This phenomenon can be seen with Valorant communities formed in Discord, as members from different regions collectively gather because of shared hobbies or interests, making them a close-knit online society.

While there has been research discussing the usage of virtual communities for intercultural communities in formal spaces, there is a lack of study in intercultural communication in informal digital communities especially in Southeast Asia, which is detrimental considering Southeast Asia has been one of the focuses of many industries including the gaming industry. Furthermore, there have been studies that link intercultural communication with social development needs to be more highlighted (Daeng Patobo et al., 2025).

With the usage of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), this study investigates communication patterns within a small Valorant Discord community comprising Indonesian, Malaysian, and Filipino members. This Discord community is called "Tea Party" and is chosen as a representative of an organic virtual community formed by members who share similar interests and organic interactions with one another. Communication Accommodation Theory is used to explore and analyze how people from different regions adjust each other's diverse communication styles in voice calls only, relying on verbal cues to communicate with each other in order to understand how intercultural communication can be navigated in informal spaces.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in netnography, a methodological approach developed by Kozinets (2015) that adapts ethnographic principles to the study of online communities. Netnography was selected as the primary method due to its suitability for examining naturalistic communication behaviors in digital spaces, allowing the researcher to observe interactions as they occur within the community's native environment. As an established member of the Tea Party Discord server, the researcher occupies an insider position, which facilitated access to authentic interactions and enabled a deeper understanding of community norms and practices. A statement for reflection is warranted here: the researcher's insider status, while advantageous for data access, required ongoing awareness of potential bias in interpretation.

Data was collected from two sources. Primary data consisted of observation notes drawn from naturally occurring interactions among 13 members of the Tea Party Discord server, a multilingual gaming community comprising Indonesian, Malaysian, and Filipino members. Interactions were observed across both gameplay and casual socialization contexts within the server. Secondary data consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted with 8 participants across the three nationalities. These interviews served primarily as member checking: a credibility strategy in qualitative research where participants are invited to confirm, clarify, or elaborate on patterns identified through observation. Interview responses were not analyzed as a separate data source but were used selectively to validate and illustrate observational findings.

Data analysis followed an abductive approach combining inductive and deductive coding. In the first cycle, observation and interview notes were coded inductively, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data without predetermined categories. In the second cycle, raw codes were grouped into broader thematic clusters. These themes were then interpreted deductively through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), specifically drawing on Giles' framework of adjustment strategies to examine how members converge, maintain, or fail to accommodate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This two-stage approach ensures that findings are grounded in the data while remaining theoretically meaningful.

3. Result and Discussion

The results were analyzed based on the 13 participants being observed and 8 interview participants. The data collection process was done through a series of group observation in the community's voice calls for 30 days where the researcher focuses on group moments during gaming and socializing. Additionally, the researcher conducted a series of semi-structured interviews where each participant was given eight to ten questions after the observation notes were made.

Findings revealed that there are five different themes that were found in the observation and interview notes, which are 1. English as the Primary Tool for Inclusion, 2. Linguistic Expressions and Communication Mannerisms, 3. Keeping One's Identity, 4. Failure to Accommodate, and 5. Reaction to Exclusivity. These themes represent common interactions that happen in the online community. These themes are then analyzed through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory to understand the process of accommodation and accommodation strategies imposed by community members.

English as the Primary Tool for Inclusion

Analysis of communication patterns in the Tea Party Discord server revealed that English functions as the primary medium of interaction across all contexts, whether during gameplay or casual social exchanges.

Members rely on English to ask and answer questions, express frustration, share opinions, and inquire about each other's cultural backgrounds — using it not only as a practical communication tool but as a means of building interpersonal connection. This convergence toward English occurs regardless of members' native language backgrounds, as one member noted, those who do not speak English would likely not be as close to the group as they currently are. Another said that they do not face challenges when communicating in the community due to everyone speaking English, implying that English is the primary communication strategy needed for the group to thrive. Bibi & Hamida (2024) similarly found that linguistic gaps in multicultural settings lead to communication faults and misunderstandings, suggesting that English functions as a bridge across the linguistic differences between Indonesians, Malaysians, and Filipinos.

Through the lens of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), this pattern represents a collective convergence strategy where members jointly adopt English as a shared linguistic code to minimize social and linguistic distance. Speaking English is perceived as a welcoming gesture that signals openness to interaction regardless of nationality, fostering a sense of belonging within the community. When not speaking English, members find themselves feeling excluded or be less responsive. Half of the members concluded that speaking in English eliminated communication challenges between members.

However, since none of the members' first language is English, there is an internal struggle in some members when they try to express themselves through English due to the presence of English as a second or third language rather than the first. A study confirmed this, stating that bilinguals tend to switch languages when they are faced with situations that induced certain emotions (Williams et al., 2020).

Furthermore, another struggle is located on trying to understand one's fluency in English, as not all members are fully fluent in the language.

"Because of course English is not my first language. And of course, I have to think the English word for the Indonesian word that I want to convey to them. And there's also like... The other people from other nationalities, sometimes they don't also have like an English... Like they don't really speak English well either. So, I think sometimes there will be like a language barrier." (Interview Notes, 2026)

Despite this, members continue to converge toward English even when it requires additional cognitive effort, suggesting that the motivation to include and be included outweighs the difficulty of operating in a non-native language. As feelings of exclusion tend to appear when members use their own native languages in the voice calls, the usage of English is done as an act of prevention. The act of accommodating each other through English is relational and functional; people speak English to make sure everyone understands them.

Linguistic Expressions and Communication Mannerisms

The limitation of English as a communicative tool leads members to also develop secondary accommodation strategies, including changing their linguistic expressions and communication mannerisms.

Some members of the community change the terms they use when they communicate to accommodate other members in the group whether when they are playing Valorant or socializing. For example, by using 'bodoh' in Bahasa Indonesia instead of Bahasa Melayu in a voice call full of Indonesians, the non-Indonesian converges themselves to blend in with Indonesians. Some members also adjust their tone and communicate faster with other members of the community, and some copy their accent as a way to communicate in a joking manner with the others. This act is considered an accommodating move by members to feel closer around the other members; when they learn and participate in another person's identity and culture, the act serves as a relationship maintenance to keep each other close as friends.

"I think, because I kind of talked to my sister a couple of days ago and she thought that somehow the way I speak is different. Like I'm picking up more of your, like an Indonesian, I don't know, way of speaking, in a way." (Interview notes, 2026)

Picking up communication behaviors are done purposefully or subconsciously by the members. This goes represents a deeper form of accommodation as this is no longer done deliberately, but rather without intending to. When members have been talking to each other for years, they tend to adopt each other's slang, accents, or words. Most words that are adopted are words that induce excitement or laughter from other members, such as local phrases that are found funny when a non-native speaker says them.

"Yes, I have so many phrases. All of them are bad words from Indonesia." (Interview notes, 2026)

Some words that are frequently borrowed tend to be curse words from Bahasa Indonesia, Bahasa Melayu, and Tagalog. Basuki & Suhandoko (2024) stated that swear words tend to emerge when a person expresses intense emotional feelings, mostly found when gaming. Even though many members still use English swear words to express themselves, sometimes swear words from other languages are learnt and borrowed by non-natives when native speakers found themselves saying the words without realizing. This act is considered as convergence as well, despite borrowing curse words from other languages not being mandatory but rather just for the sake of group enjoyment and fun, since members of the community find it amusing when non-natives use borrowed terms when gaming or socializing.

In other instances, certain words or phrases from the three languages mentioned earlier can be included as inside jokes. Linguistic expressions can be turned into inside jokes between natives and non-natives, emphasizing on the accent or delivery being the amusing part of the joke. This convergence focuses more than just functional convergence but rather a relational one, where members are willing to learn and adopt how other people say for the sake of amusement and relationship maintenance between the members.

Keeping One's Identity

Despite the amount of convergence strategies made by the members to ensure relational and communication inclusion, many members of Tea Party use their original communication patterns, often blending in their English with their regional accents rather than trying to achieve neutral accents. This is often done to lessen any communication friction between English and their native languages; speaking in their own accent is easier than trying to sound more neutral since other members can already understand what they are saying with accents.

"Because some of the people, like because you guys, like there's a vibe, Indonesian vibe, and then also I want to introduce Malaysian vibe, something like that." (Interview notes, 2026)

"I'm not sure, like, what's the good real, like, definition of communication style, but I would say for me, I think, like, the way I talk and the way I, um, chit-chatting would be quite similar, yeah." (Interview notes, 2026)

There are two motivations present: One represents the need to state their nationality when foreigners are present, while the other represents the lack of needing to blend in further because English is already enough for the community. The results suggest that when the community communicates with one another, they do not feel the need to tone down their accents and tones to be

understood by other members. As Howard Giles mentioned in his book, convergence and divergence can happen simultaneously, this is what they call unimodal adjustments, because some people will not adjust on all available variables and dimensions (Giles, 2016). Despite English being the primary tool for inclusion purposes, members of the community do not have the need to converge fully to socialize with each other because English is sufficient enough for them to converse with each other. This finding contradicts another prior study where Latinos or individuals with heavy accents are less accommodated by white officers than those with heavy accents (Bibi & Hamida, 2024). Due to the diversity of the group and the casual nature of the community, the community engages with everyone regardless of accents. However, it is good to note that the prior study was traditional ethnographic research done face-to-face rather than online.

During socialization or casual talk, members often speak in their native language when non-foreigners can understand what they are saying, especially Indonesians and Malaysians due to the language similarity. While there are some differences in the languages, both parties can still converse by using either Bahasa Indonesia or English simultaneously. However, for the majority of the time, members tend to refrain from using their native language and just reserve to using one-line phrases or words when communicating, usually when expressing thoughts to themselves. This often leads to people picking up some words to be referenced later in other conversations for the sake of amusement or for language learning purposes. Some members have stated that they pick up some words due to native speakers using them in conversations occasionally.

Researcher also noted how members of the community tend to talk in their own native language if the non-native speakers present are fluent in their native language enough to understand. These instances happen frequently between Indonesians and Malaysians, where Indonesians ask questions or express themselves in Bahasa Indonesia and Malaysians answer in English. Asking questions in their native tongue and getting answers in English from native speakers and non-native speakers, or the opposite, is common among the friend group due to efficiency purposes. As some members noted, sometimes they know how to express themselves in English better and sometimes they know how to express in their own language better. This is what Giles call partial accommodation strategy where members of the community will only partially accommodate non-speakers because efficiency and spontaneity are prioritized over accommodation (Giles, 2016).

Failure to Accommodate

While members of the community converse in English majority of the time, there can be sudden language switches happening in the voice calls. Sometimes members speak in their own native tongue when they want to talk to another member with the same nationality.

This often occurs during gaming when there is surprise elements present that catch the members by surprise, such as when abrupt moments like dying in game happens in less than a few seconds and they have to communicate to the other person directly. If the person happens to be from the same country, then they will talk in their own native language to communicate faster.

Sometimes, members will also express thoughts, mainly frustration, through their own language when other members from the same country are present. This can either occur simultaneously or purposefully, however the result is evident: When intense moments happen during games, members tend to fail to accommodate non-native speakers in the voice call to prioritize efficient communication rather than inclusivity.

"Like if I want to say something, but I for some reason cannot translate it into Indo, I will speak English. If I don't know how to explain it in English, I would speak Indo. It depends on the situation. Sometimes it happens like that." (Interview notes, 2026)

This instance is labelled as non-accommodation due to the cause of the failures. While divergence happens to stay true to one's own identity, non-accommodation happens when someone does not adjust accordingly without taking account of their own identity. Most of the time, this occurs when members are not given enough time to elaborate their own thoughts in English, causing them to speak in their own native tongue to prioritize time and efficiency. This aligns with a prior study done to assess why bilinguals code-switch when they are emotional; bilinguals tend to switch from a

language to another in a single conversation due to negative emotional arousal that reduces cognitive control and may trigger sudden code-switching (Williams et al., 2020).

Furthermore, during socialization, mentioning foreign words due to failure of accommodation can also happen. Sometimes members tend to speak in English with a few foreign words in them when they are expressing themselves, mostly due to the spontaneous nature of the expressions.

“Oh my god, I was going to get my payung but it's gone for some reason.”

“Oh wait, you guys also say payong?” (Observation Notes, 2026)

This happens when speakers are not able to thoroughly express themselves in English, causing them to say the first word that comes up to their minds. However, this non-accommodating move often leads to a neutral or positive outcome due to other members being able to learn about how to express themselves in another language. Therefore, not all non-accommodating moves have negative impacts towards non-native speakers.

Reaction to Exclusivity

Despite the community's collective tendency toward English as a convergence norm, there are instances where accommodation breaks down and exclusion comes in as a feeling coming from members.

Members of the Tea Party Discord server report feeling included when English is maintained as the primary communicative medium. However, exclusion emerges when this norm is disrupted — most commonly when members switch to their native language mid-conversation. This exclusion is not limited to language alone; topic-based exclusion also occurs when members discuss country-specific events, culturally specific humor, or references that are only meaningful to co-nationals. In some instances, simply being the only foreigner in a voice call is enough to produce a sense of marginalization.

A common response coming from members when other members do not use English is silence. When there are members talking to each other in their own native tongues or a member expressing themselves in their native tongue, many non-native speakers withdraw from the conversation, defaulting to silence rather than disrupting the exchange. The main reasons for silence are due to them not knowing what to say and the tendency to mind their own business. The group seemingly has a collective agreement that when someone does not speak English in the voice call, the topic is irrelevant to non-native speakers in the call.

Another common response is to ask questions. Members of the community ask questions about the meaning of the conversation if they are curious enough. A member reported that sometimes they wonder if they are being talked about, but others ask questions to fulfil their curiosity. Another response is for them to assimilate with the native speakers' responses; if laughter is found, then non-native speakers may also laugh to assimilate.

Within CAT, these responses represent reactions to non-accommodation rather than accommodation strategies themselves. Members are not adjusting their own communication but rather navigating the social consequences of others' failure to converge.

4. Conclusion

This study examined how members of the Tea Party Discord server, a multilingual Southeast Asian gaming community, employ communication accommodation strategies when navigating linguistic and cultural differences in an informal digital space. Findings reveal that accommodation in this community is neither uniform nor unconditional, but rather a dynamic and context-dependent process shaped by relational motivations, situational pressures, and identity considerations.

Five key patterns emerged from the analysis. First, English functions as the community's primary convergence strategy, collectively adopted as a shared linguistic code that enables inclusion across national boundaries. Second, members develop supplementary accommodation strategies including

the conscious and unconscious adoption of each other's linguistic expressions, mannerisms, and accents — reflecting convergence operating at the cultural and relational level beyond mere language choice. Third, members selectively maintain their native linguistic identities through accent retention and bounded L1 use, demonstrating that convergence toward English does not require the erasure of cultural identity. Fourth, accommodation is not always sustained; sudden switches to native language under emotional pressure or during co-national exchanges produce moments of non-accommodation, resulting in exclusion and communicative withdrawal among non-speakers. Fifth, members default to silence or asking questions when non-accommodation is being done in the group.

These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on communication accommodation in digital spaces by demonstrating that CAT's core mechanisms: convergence, maintenance, and non-accommodation, and operate meaningfully in informal multilingual online gaming communities. Notably, this study extends CAT's application to a Southeast Asian context, a region underrepresented in communication studies research. The findings suggest that accommodation in such communities' functions less as an individual communicative choice and more as an emergent community norm, sustained collectively through prolonged interaction and shared relational investment.

Future research could explore how accommodation patterns shift across different digital platforms or gaming genres or examine whether nationality-based differences in accommodation strategies emerge in larger and more diverse multilingual communities. Longitudinal studies tracking accommodation over time within the same community would also yield valuable insights into how digital friendships shape linguistic behavior.

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