

MANAGING INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION GAPS IN THE MALAYSIAN SERVICE INDUSTRY: PATHWAYS TO IMPROVED CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This conceptual paper develops an integrated framework to address intergenerational communication gaps within Malaysia's service industry and their impact on customer experience (CX).

Method: Drawing on a thematic synthesis of recent literature (2019–2025), the study integrates Generational Cohort Theory (GCT), Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), and Organisational Control Theory (OCT) to construct a multi-level explanatory model.

Findings: The proposed framework positions generational cohort traits as antecedents influencing communication accommodation behaviours, with organisational control systems acting as contextual moderators shaping communication climate. Communication accommodation serves as a mediating mechanism linking intergenerational interaction to CX outcomes, particularly customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. The model highlights how supportive control climates enhance communicative flexibility, while rigid structures may suppress adaptive behaviours, especially among Gen Z employees.

Originality: This study contributes to Malaysian service-sector literature by integrating interpersonal and structural perspectives within a culturally grounded framework. The model offers practical guidance for HR policies, communication training, and service excellence strategies in multigenerational workplaces.

Keywords: Intergenerational communication, Generation Z, Communication Accommodation Theory, Organisational Control, Customer Experience, Malaysian service industry

1. INTRODUCTION

The Malaysian service industry is a key driver of the country's economy, accounting for a sizeable share of gross domestic product (GDP) and employment (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOSM], 2023). In this wide range industry that includes hospitality, healthcare, retail, fitness, and many other customer-driven operations, the quality of human interaction is crucial to maintaining business success and competitive position. However, even as service excellence increasingly hinges on interpersonal connectivity across organizations, people in these organizations are experiencing numerous challenges in effectively communicating across multiple generations.

The challenges of digital transformation and demographic transition are causing further changes at the workplace in recent years. The ongoing influx of the younger generation, notably Generation Z (those born from 1995 to 2010), has created new ways of communicating and communication styles and expectations that do not always match what happens to older generations. As a result, organizations are forced to review their internal communication models, leadership styles, and CX strategies in order to uphold cohesion and service uniformity among their heterogeneous teams of ages (Ng & Parumasur, 2021; Rahman et al., 2022).

There is great potential for service innovation with Gen Z's proficiency, creativity and digital flexibility, but employers are finding it more difficult when their younger

workers are working alongside multigenerational managers and teams that include Millennials, Gen X and Baby Boomers. Differences in communication strategies, professionalism norms and values related to hierarchy and feedback frequently lead to organizational clash and poor service quality (Yusoff & Shuhidan, 2023). Such intergenerational communication difficulties due to differences in socialisation habits that are mediated by organizational culture can lead to reduced employee engagement, trust and customer satisfaction that has the adverse effect of reducing service loyalty and organisational reputation (Chen & King, 2021; Zaiton et al., 2024).

In Malaysia's collectivist, high power distance environment, social norms of respect, deference, and harmony also shape communication. Misunderstandings worsen when younger workers use informal or digital forms of communication that conflict with seniors' need for structure and courtesy (Hofstede Insights, 2022). The service industry's competitiveness is increasingly predicated on delivering CX with emotional intelligence and responsiveness, so bridging these intergenerational gaps has become a strategic imperative. Although extensive research is available worldwide on generational divide, little empirical work has been conducted on the communication processes that relate generational interaction to CX outcomes within the case of Malaysia's service context. For example, extant literature only accounts for Western corporate environments or the effect of generational motivation and leadership within a corporate or employee culture but does not account for how this internal communication alignment influences the customer experiences. This lack highlights the importance of a culturally sensitive, theory-based approach that takes account of organisational control mechanisms, and interpersonal mechanisms of adjustment.

Thus, this research proposes a joint framework integrating Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), Generational Cohort Theory (GCT), and Organisational Control Theory (OCT) regarding how Malaysian service organizations can address and improve intergenerational communication. The research focuses on the identification of communication trends that either impede or facilitate CX outcomes and create a bridging framework that guides HR policies, service-training frameworks, and youth-employment promotion. This research addresses cultural changes and its relationship with sustainable CX management through the frame of communication dynamics in the Malaysia multigenerational service ecosystem, with a view to enhancing both theoretical perspectives and managerial frameworks for practicing sustainability management in this domain.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Communication effectiveness has long been recognised as a cornerstone of organisational success, particularly in service-based industries where customer experience (CX) is shaped by human interaction (Prentice & Nguyen, 2020). However, as global markets evolve through digitalisation and workforce diversification, communication dynamics within organisations have become increasingly complex (Ng & Parumasur, 2021). Among these complexities, intergenerational communication, how employees of different age group interact, interpret messages, and respond to workplace expectations has emerged as a critical component of both employee engagement and service quality (Rahman et al., 2022).

Fewer Malaysian studies have directly examined how generational identity influences workplace communication, with most focusing on leadership or motivation (Amin & Hassan, 2022; Yusoff & Shuhidan, 2023). Western-centric models dominate existing literature, limiting the understanding of how collectivist values, respect for hierarchy, and power distance influence communication accommodation in the context of Malaysia's service workplaces.

This chapter, therefore, focuses on bridging that gap by exploring how intergenerational communication patterns impact CX outcomes, guided by three

intersecting theoretical lenses, Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), Generational Cohort Theory (GCT), and Organisational Control Theory (OCT). The scope of the review is restricted to empirical and conceptual studies published between 2019 and 2025 with the focus on communication, generational differences, and CX within the service sector in Malaysia. It excludes purely technological or Western-only workforce analyses that lack cultural contextualisation.

This chapter highlights five key themes, namely, intergenerational communication in the service industry, generational cohort theory and workforce diversity, communication accommodation theory, organisational control theory, and theoretical integration leading to the proposed conceptual framework. This structure establishes a coherent pathway to position this study within Malaysia's multigenerational service context.

2.2 INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE SERVICE INDUSTRY

Communication across generations continues to pose significant challenges in service-based organisations, where employee–customer interactions largely determine overall business success. In such environments, effective service encounters depend heavily on employees' ability to adjust their tone, language, and empathy to meet diverse customer expectations (Sahu & Dwivedi, 2020). However, these adaptive skills are often tested by generational differences in communication style. Younger employees tend to emphasise speed, informality, and digital convenience, whereas senior colleagues prioritise etiquette, thoroughness, and face-to-face engagement (Tan & Ismail, 2021). As a result, these contrasting preferences can undermine the perceived warmth and consistency of service, two qualities central to customer experience (CX) excellence.

Within the Malaysian service landscape, these tensions have become increasingly visible with the growing influx of Generation Z employees (Rahim & Kassim, 2022). While Millennials once served as a transitional bridge between traditional and digital communication norms, Gen Z's stronger reliance on fast-paced, visual, and social-media-based interaction has further widened the communication gap. Consequently, senior managers often perceive these behaviours as inattentive or lacking in professionalism, whereas younger staff interpret hierarchical communication protocols as overly rigid and outdated. This misalignment not only disrupts internal team cohesion but also shapes customers' perceptions of brand authenticity and service credibility (Lee & Low, 2023).

2.3 GENERATIONAL COHORT THEORY (GCT)

According to this theory, individuals belonging to the same historical period share formative experiences that shape their values, communication preferences, and work orientations (Mannheim, 1952; Costanza et al., 2017). In the Malaysian context, Baby Boomers and Gen X matured during periods emphasising loyalty, stability, and deference, while Millennials and Gen Z developed under rapid digitalisation and global exposure. Consequently, Gen Z values immediacy, inclusivity, and authentic feedback (Lim & Yap, 2020). Studies suggest that these contrasting mindsets drive communication breakdowns, especially when organisations fail to adapt internal communication strategies to accommodate generational preferences (Hashim et al., 2023).

However, empirical studies in Malaysia remain limited. Most available research centres on leadership style or intergenerational motivation rather than communication processes directly tied to customer service (Amin & Hassan, 2022). This highlights a literature gap where few studies link GCT's generational identity dimensions to communication behaviour within service interactions, particularly how cohort-based expectations influence CX delivery. Addressing this gap helps contextualise Malaysia's evolving workforce diversity in a way that informs both training and HR policy.

2.4 COMMUNICATION ACCOMMODATION THEORY (CAT)

This theory explains how individuals adjust their communication styles to reduce social distance, enhance mutual understanding, or assert personal and social identity (Giles, 1973; Gallois et al., 2015). Within multigenerational workplaces, such accommodation typically appears in two forms, namely ‘convergence’, which involves adopting another person’s speech or behavioural style to promote connection, and the other being ‘divergence’, which maintains distinct communication cues to reinforce individuality or hierarchy. Research indicates that convergence generally fosters empathy, cooperation, and teamwork, whereas divergence can reflect power assertion or cultural defence mechanisms (Coupland & Jaworski, 2019).

In the Malaysian service context where harmony and respect for seniority are deeply emphasised and valued, excessive divergence between age groups can easily be perceived as disrespectful or confrontational. This misinterpretation may erode employee morale and weaken the consistency of customer experience (CX) delivery (Rahman & Tan, 2021). However, most Malaysian studies have applied CAT primarily in linguistic terms, such as exploring English–Malay code-switching among employees and customers. While useful, this overlooks the broader behavioural dimensions of accommodation, including tone, empathy, and communicative responsiveness across generations. Addressing this gap, the current study extends CAT beyond language choice to examine how different generations adapt or fail to adapt in daily workplace communication, thereby influencing both team cohesion and customer perceptions. Integrating CAT with Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) therefore provides a complementary framework. GCT explains why generational cohorts differ, while CAT clarifies how these differences manifest in real-world interactions that ultimately shape customer experience.

2.5 ORGANISATIONAL CONTROL THEORY (OCT)

This theory provides a macro-level perspective that complements interpersonal communication frameworks by explaining how workplace structures, norms, and monitoring systems shape employee communication behaviour (Cardinal et al., 2017). In service-based industries, such control mechanisms, ranging from formal policies to supervisory and technological systems, aim to standardise service quality and reinforce brand consistency (Jaworski & MacInnis, 2020). Yet, when applied too rigidly, these systems can restrict authentic employee expression, intensifying generational frustration and limiting adaptive communication (Hassan & Noor, 2023). In contrast, a supportive control climate, one that balances autonomy with constructive feedback, encourages employees to communicate more confidently and tailor their responses to customer needs (Low & Chong, 2021).

Although international research has connected OCT to broader organisational outcomes, Malaysian studies rarely explore how such control mechanisms influence intergenerational communication within service teams. Human resource reports (TalentCorp Malaysia, 2022; PwC Malaysia, 2023) highlight persistent generational misalignment but seldom address how managerial oversight or digital performance monitoring affects younger employees’ ability to communicate authentically. This gap underscores the need to examine how organisational design either constrains or facilitates communicative adaptability, thereby shaping customer experience outcomes.

2.6 THEORETICAL INTEGRATION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The current study integrates three complementary theories, GCT, CAT, and OCT to construct a multi-level explanatory model of intergenerational communication and its impact on customer experience in Malaysia’s service industry. Each theory contributes a distinct analytical layer, as summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: A Summary of Integration of Theoretical Perspectives

Theory	Key Focus	Relevance to Intergenerational Communication	Contribution to CX Framework
Generational Cohort Theory (GCT)	Shared experiences and values within generational groups	Explains why employees from different cohorts hold distinct communication expectations and attitudes	Identifies generational values that shape communication norms influencing customer interaction quality
Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)	Interactional strategies of convergence and divergence	Describes how individuals adapt or fail to adapt their tone, language, and behaviour across generations	Clarifies how adaptive communication fosters empathy and trust, improving CX outcomes
Organisational Control Theory (OCT)	Influence of structures, systems, and norms on behaviour	Situates interpersonal communication within broader organisational controls and feedback mechanisms	Shows how control climates can either constrain or enable communication flexibility essential for CX consistency

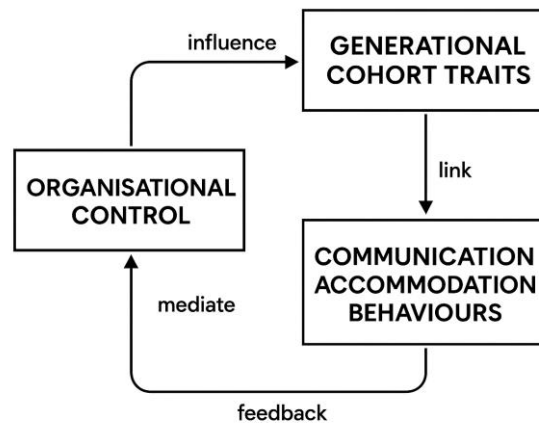


Figure 1: A Proposed Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed conceptual framework positioning Organisational Control as the contextual layer influencing communication climate within service organisations. Generational Cohort Traits act as antecedent variables shaping employees’ communicative expectations and behaviours, while Communication Accommodation Behaviours serve as mediating mechanisms linking intergenerational interaction to Customer Experience (CX) outcomes, namely satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. Feedback loops indicate that positive CX reinforces organisational learning, promoting more adaptive communication cultures over time.

Together, the theories capture both individual and structural determinants of communication effectiveness. This integration directly addresses the literature gap where most studies isolate either personal or institutional factors without analysing their interaction impact on CX.

3. CONCEPTUAL METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a conceptual research design grounded in theory integration and thematic literature synthesis. Rather than collecting primary empirical data, the study systematically analyses existing scholarly work to construct an integrated framework explaining how intergenerational communication influences customer experience (CX) within Malaysia's service industry. Conceptual and theory-building approaches are appropriate when addressing fragmented literature and developing structured explanatory models (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2022).

Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles and industry reports published between 2019 and 2025 were reviewed. Inclusion criteria focused on studies addressing (i) generational differences in workplace communication (Amin & Hassan, 2022; Yusoff & Shuhidan, 2023), (ii) applications of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) (Gallois et al., 2015; Rahman & Tan, 2021), Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) (Costanza et al., 2017; Lim & Yap, 2020), and Organisational Control Theory (OCT) (Cardinal et al., 2017; Hassan & Noor, 2023), and (iii) research linking communication processes to customer experience outcomes (Sahu & Dwivedi, 2020; Chen & King, 2021). Emphasis was placed on Malaysian or culturally comparable service-sector contexts to ensure cultural relevance (Hofstede Insights, 2022).

A thematic synthesis approach was employed to identify recurring constructs and research gaps across the literature (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Key themes including generational identity, communication accommodation (convergence/divergence), organisational control climate, and CX outcomes were extracted and systematically grouped. These themes were then mapped onto the three theoretical perspectives to construct a multi-level conceptual framework.

The resulting model positions generational cohort traits as antecedents (GCT), communication accommodation behaviours as mediating mechanisms (CAT), organisational control systems as contextual moderators (OCT), and customer experience outcomes (satisfaction, trust, loyalty) as organisational consequences. By integrating micro-level behavioural processes with macro-level structural influences, this framework addresses the gap in Malaysian service-sector literature where interpersonal and organisational determinants of CX are often examined in isolation (Low & Chong, 2021; Lee & Low, 2023).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 CONCEPTUAL FINDINGS

Due to the nature of the paper being conceptual, the integration of CAT, GCT, and OCT predicts the below expected results. Generational identity significantly affects communication accommodation. Gen Z employees exhibit higher convergence in digital and informal contexts but lower convergence under rigid hierarchical control. Organisational control moderates the link between communication and CX whereby supportive control climates enhance accommodation. On the contrary, coercive climates would suppress it. This implies that Human Resources (HR) divisions need to re-evaluate their existing supervisory and performance-monitoring practices to foster communicative flexibility and improved psychological safety among multigenerational teams. Effective intergenerational communication positively influences CX outcomes, particularly in areas of customer trust and perceived empathy, leading to greater loyalty.

These propositions align with prior findings that communication alignment enhances service satisfaction (Sahu & Dwivedi, 2020) and that psychological safety mediates generational performance (Low & Chong, 2021).

4.2 THEMATIC SYNTHESIS OF LITERATURE

Given the nature of this study, findings are derived through a thematic synthesis of existing literature on intergenerational communication, organisational behaviour,

and customer experience. The analysis identifies converging themes that support the proposed integration of Generational Cohort Theory (GCT), Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), and Organisational Control Theory (OCT). Table 2 summarises these key themes, highlighting how previous studies collectively inform the framework's predicted relationships.

Table 2: A Thematic Synthesis of Literature on Intergenerational Communication and CX

Themes	Identified Gaps
Intergenerational Communication in Service Contexts	Most studies highlight stylistic differences but seldom measure effects on CX (Tan & Ismail, 2021; Lee & Low, 2023).
Generational Cohort Theory Applications	Research focuses on motivation and leadership and is limited on communication adaptation (Amin & Hassan, 2022).
Communication Accommodation Theory	Few Malaysian studies operationalise convergence/divergence behaviours in workplace settings (Rahman & Tan, 2021).
Organisational Control Theory	Sparse evidence linking control systems to communication climate (Hassan & Noor, 2023).
Integration and CX Outcomes	Few studies have attempted to interlink these theories to prove how generational communication impacts CX within Malaysia's collectivist culture.

This table shows consistent evidence that communication accommodation mediates the link between generational values and CX outcomes. However, limited Malaysian studies have connected these micro-level behaviours with organisational control structures, reinforcing the conceptual gap addressed in this paper.

4.3 DISCUSSION

The proposed framework positions communication accommodation as the behavioural bridge between generational identity and customer outcomes. When organisations incorporate a more balanced control system, offering autonomy while upholding service standards, employees adapt communication more effectively, ensuring consistent CX quality. On the contrary, having excessive control limits spontaneity and emotional intelligence, particularly among Gen Z employees accustomed to participative digital cultures (TalentCorp Malaysia, 2022).

Integrating GCT and OCT clarifies why interventions must operate at both individual and structural levels. Generally, training programmes focused solely on soft skills will overlook systemic barriers such as outdated reporting structures or lack of feedback mechanisms. Similarly, policies emphasising control without understanding generational values risk disengagement. The framework thus supports dual-level strategies, namely communication-skills training informed by CAT principles and organisational-design reforms inspired by OCT.

In summary, the findings are synonymous with the purpose of this study which is to identify communication trends that either impede or facilitate CX outcomes and create a bridging framework that guides HR policies, service-training frameworks, and youth-employment promotion.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This study advances a theoretically integrated framework for understanding intergenerational communication within Malaysia's service industry. By synthesising Generational Cohort Theory (GCT), Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), and Organisational Control Theory (OCT), the paper demonstrates how generational traits, adaptive communication behaviours, and organisational control climates collectively

shape customer experience (CX) outcomes. The framework highlights communication accommodation as the critical behavioural bridge linking generational identity to customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. It further emphasises that organisational control systems can either enable or constrain communicative flexibility, particularly in culturally high power-distance environments such as Malaysia.

The conceptual contribution lies in integrating micro-level interpersonal processes with macro-level organisational structures, addressing a gap in Malaysian service-sector research where these dimensions are often examined separately. Practically, the framework provides guidance for HR leaders and service managers in designing communication training, revising control mechanisms, and fostering psychologically safe, multigenerational workplaces. Future research should empirically validate the proposed model across different service sub-sectors and examine additional moderating factors such as digital literacy, cultural intelligence, and leadership style.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge with heartfelt gratitude the guidance of the Universiti Malaya-Wales research supervisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr Nurul Nisa Omar, and the significant insights of service-industry practitioners who inspired and contributed to this conceptual study.

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