

Raising University Students' Level of Academic and Professional Readiness through Teaching Intercultural Communication and Digital War

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Abstract

In this qualitative action research study, the purpose was to explore if the integration of an intercultural communication component (ICC), and its relation to the area of digital war into an undergraduate English course in Kuwait could improve the preparation of students for their future studies and jobs. The study focused on the insufficient acceptance of cultural diversity, besides its relation to the students' misconceptions about digital war. Areas focused on in this study included; 1) improvement of ICC knowledge, skills, and values of students as well as their understanding of digital war; 2) students perceived the incorporation of the ICC component into English courses with special emphasis on the digital war topic as educational and eye-opening; 3) improvement of intervention methods to ensure results; and 4) student-perceived impact, if any, of the ICC module on student attitudes and behaviours toward other ethnic groups. The *Deardorff (2011)* model of intercultural competence was used to guide the study. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and field notes, after content and thematic analysis was conducted.

Keywords

Communication, Intercultural Communication, Cross-Cultural Communication, Digital War, Globalization, Interculturalism

1. Introduction

As an expat instructor chiefly for Kuwaiti students, I have witnessed a general lack of intercultural competence and misperceptions related to digital war among many students in situations and encounters involving multi-cultural dimensions. The limited literature conducted in the context of Kuwait in relation to intercul-

tural communication and digital war shows the importance of developing IC component and digital war modules to be integrated into the Foundation English Program in Kuwait due to its diverse culture and focus on developing English language literacy and acquisition of intercultural communication competence and on understanding the basics of digital war. Additionally, the necessity of developing IC and its relation to the area of digital war in English language education in the context of Kuwait highlighted in the previous research rests on the deficiency resulting from a reliance on traditional teaching methods prevalent in the region, with a focus on memorization and repetition, rather than skills that are more desirable in the current workplace environment, such as collaboration and intercultural competence (Erguvan, 2015). Integrating a module discussing digital war topics is essential to improve the intercultural communication level of competence of the students. Students and society could benefit from new approaches to cross-cultural learning; however, steps have not been taken to create better conditions (inside and outside) in the classroom. As a researcher, it became my role to examine what adjustments should be made to facilitate cross-cultural learning. The curriculum of the English Foundation Program Unit (FPU), designed by the Program Review Advisory Committee, was a teacher-book-centered program that stressed language learning through the improvement of reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary skills. The intervention though introduces areas that are related to intercultural communication and to digital war like; hacking, cyber spying, digital defence, social media, science fiction, and information manipulation, which can be described as sharing false and misleading information, programming, and cyber threats are also areas that are important to be discussed in class discussions with the students who are introduced to the intercultural communication course. Regular meetings of the Program Review Advisory Committee members saw a selection of the most appropriate resources to meet the FPU students' English needs. The consensus was that the ICC concept could be defined as the "ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations to shift frames of reference appropriately and adapt behaviours to cultural context" (Deardorff, 2006). Digital war can be defined as the methods by which digital technologies and media are transforming how war is fought, experienced, lived, represented, reported, known, conceptualised, remembered, and forgotten.

2. Theoretical Background and Previous Research

Deardorff's (2011) model of intercultural competence was used to guide the research. Deardorff developed a model based on extensive research consisting of four components, **Figure 1**: 1) intercultural competence and development is an ongoing process, individuals must be given chances to reflect on and assess their own intercultural competence development over time; 2) critical-thinking skills play a crucial role in a person's ability to acquire and evaluate knowledge needed to improve their level of cultural competence; 3) attitudes act as the basis of the

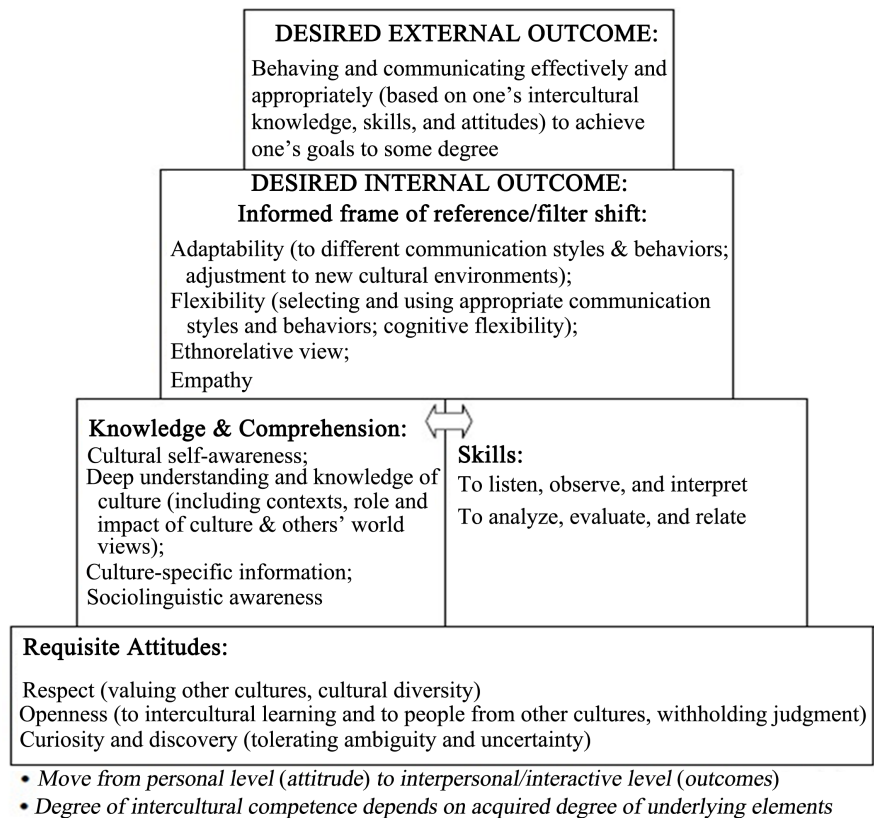


Figure 1. Deardorff's model of intercultural competence.

model and impact on all other aspects of ICC competence, specifically respect, which is demonstrated differently in cultures, in addition to openness and curiosity, which are essential to the process; and 4) the ability to take others' perspectives is essential, with one having a more inclusive, contextual understanding of culture, including in particular historical, political, and social contexts. [Deardorff \(2011\)](#) argued that developing intercultural competence has become increasingly important based on the diversity and multicultural nature of modern society.

Intercultural competence was defined by [Deardorff \(2009\)](#) as an individual's ability to appropriately and effectively interact in intercultural situations on the basis of their intercultural comprehension, knowledge, and attitudes. Deardorff's model of intercultural competence is circular, indicating an individual's intersections between comprehension and knowledge, attitudes, external outcomes, and internal outcomes associated with intercultural competence ([Deardorff, 2011](#)). Deardorff viewed intercultural competence as a process that involved the awareness of existing in a specific cultural context, the generation of general strategies for cultural adaptation, and appreciation of differences along the cultural lines as argued by [Paige & Goode \(2009\)](#). Deardorff agreed with previous researchers that cultural competence involved possessing the ability to be sensitive with respect to systems of culture and the capacity to approach those from other cultural groups without threat or insecurity ([Knight, 2012](#)). Thus, Deardorff's work is

situated within existing research while expanding it.

In the context of this study, the model is applied within the characteristic of a collectivistic non-western society undergoing a transformation in the contemporary globalized world. The process of globalization involves cross-cultural encounters and those who are able to interact in such situations effectively have an advantage over those who are not (King et al., 2011). Specifically, multinational companies operating across different cultural contexts must be able to generate strategies that help them adapt to these different cultures in order to attain competitiveness (Knight, 2012). Further, individual employees working in a multicultural and multi-ethnic work environment must be able to collaborate with those from other cultures, which can be done effectively through the development of an appreciation of cultural differences (King et al., 2011). The awareness of existing within a specific cultural context helps both those employees who are from cultural majority groups and those from cultural minority groups collaborate with each other effectively. As such, Deardorff's model of cultural competence is especially relevant to the needs of the globalized world of which Kuwait is an important part.

In alignment with the theoretical framework, to address the lack of acceptance of cultural diversity among university students and the misperceptions of the basics of the digital war, four research questions guided the study: 1) How did the level of ICC knowledge with a special emphasis on digital war, skills, and values of the participants improve from the pre-interviews until the post-interviews?; 2) How did the participants perceive the concept of integrating the ICC component and the basics of digital war into their English course?; 3) How can the intervention techniques used in the intervention be improved to ensure results?; and 4) What impact, if any, did participants perceive the ICC component and the basics of digital war, as having on their attitudes and behaviours toward other ethnic groups?

3. The Significance of the Theoretical Background

I chose Deardorff's (2011) model of intercultural competence for the current study because it was found to be more comprehensive than the other theories that were considered, while also being more suitable to the research purpose. The intercultural adaptation model developed by Yoshikawa's (1987) double-swing model of intercultural communication was found to be too specific for the purposes of the current study, given their focus on perceptions of individuals and communication centered around dialogue, respectively. Additionally, the identity management theory developed by Cupach & Imahori (1993) was found to be too broad, given its focus on the development of personal cultural identities in the long term. In contrast, Deardorff's (2011) model of intercultural competence was found to be neither too specific nor too broad in relation to the present study's focus. Furthermore, two of the three factors that Deardorff (2009) found to comprise intercultural competency included skills, knowledge, and comprehen-

sion. These factors were relevant to the current study as the focus in the present study was on better preparing students for their future studies and jobs through refining their intercultural communication skills and knowledge as well as enhancing their understanding of digital war topics. The ICC and digital war syllabus developed in the current study was focused on enhancing students' comprehension. The third factor, attitudes, was relevant to the current study's methodology, since the researcher focused on the attitudes of the students both in the first and the last stage, in the form of pre-intervention and post-intervention interviews in which the students shared their experiences. Finally, the original study in which Deardorff's model was conducted in the context of education (Deardorff, 2009), is similar to the current study.

4. Methodology

A qualitative methodology was deemed as the most appropriate methodology for the purpose of this study, to explore the influence of the self-designed intervention on the students' intercultural communication competence as well as their digital war's overall understanding level. An action research design was used to meet the purpose of this study. In-depth data were collected to meet expectations to 1) increase the level of acknowledgment among the participants using self-evaluation to, 2) improve their intercultural communication competence and digital war's overall level of understanding, and 3) to be exposed to cultural and digital war topics that are presented as a component that would be considered as an eye-opening experience to areas that they may have not experienced before but possibly had difficulty articulating clearly.

5. The Selection of the Research Subjects

The selection of the intercultural communication and digital war modules was based on the need for such specific nature related to explicit areas of study for the successful progression of the intervention. The researcher was meticulous in electing the subjects that are designed to be introduced to the undergraduates. It was essential to teach these areas in a form of two separate modules for one hour each to ensure better and deeper understanding of the core of these two different components. Indicating the themes has been conducted professionally in regards to the chosen exercises and activities. The selected research themes have been chosen carefully to ensure that the intervention accommodates the students' needs and requirements to enhance their level of understanding of the intercultural communication and digital war components. The delivery structure has been straightforward to allow the researcher to represent two themes related to intercultural communication and digital war separately.

It was necessary for the researcher to be genuine and sumptuous when choosing intercultural communication and digital war topics. The selection of the topics was also based on referring to supplementary materials derived from textbooks on intercultural communication and digital war. The researcher has selected

topics that consolidate the students' overall understanding of such two areas of study.

The process of selecting research subjects commenced by brainstorming those subjects to best choose the most appropriate themes to teach each module. After the selection of the topics, the researcher conducted preliminary research about each subject. The delivery structure schedule was designed to organize the teaching of these two different modules separately.

6. The Integration of the Digital War Module into Intercultural Communication Component

Introducing intercultural communication and digital war together is extremely important to break down barriers and build awareness of cultural and digital norms, besides, enhancing self-awareness and communication as well as digital skills. This form of integration allows individuals to adapt their skillset to meet the intercultural collaboration needs that global educational values.

When I taught through an integrated curriculum of intercultural communication and digital war, the undergraduates showed higher signs of retention at an increased rate than when an integrated module was not implemented. The reason for this is that they were able to more closely relate to content and make real-world connections in integrated course approaches.

Participants not only connect and create more real-world connections in integrated classrooms, but they are also more actively engaged. Creating an integrated course means that teachers are charged with having to create challenging, educational, meaningful tasks that help participants connect to intercultural communication and digital war module's information.

One final key benefit of an integrated course is the ability for students to see the development of their intercultural communication and digital war skills multiple times. The successful progression of their development can be easily noticed by observing the participants' responses to class discussions, group work, pair work, and Socratic seminars as well as activities.

The intervention course was intended to be conducted in the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. The course content was categorised into two different fields; please see **Table 1** below for more information:

After the reflection of the first cycle, I had to revise the plan to refine the research methodology if needed.

7. Participants and Context

The Kuwaiti at Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST) aims to provide the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary to earn a degree to students. The sample for this study included GUST undergraduate students. The average number of the Foundation Program Unit (FPU) students per semester was 360, according to the registration department. The average foundation class size usually included 18 students. Research cycle one was surveyed in fall 2018,

Table 1. The delivery structure of the intercultural communication and digital war modules.

Week	Intercultural Communication Topics	Digital War Topics
2	Exploring Culture	Hacking
3	Culture and Language	Cyber Spying
4	None-Verbal Communication	Digital Defence
5	Culture and Identity	Social Media
6	Cultural Shock & Cross-cultural adjustment	Science Fiction
7	Communication	Information Manipulation
8	Communication Skills	Programming
9	Intercultural Communication Videos	Cyber Threats
10	Questions and Answers	Questions and Answers

and cycle two was surveyed in spring 2019.

8. Pedagogical Approach and Procedures

The students enrolled in my English courses participated in this study by incorporating an intercultural communication module and a digital war module into an undergraduate English course. Participation in the IC and digital war modules was voluntary, and nonparticipation did not influence the students' academic performance or grades. The students' ages varied from 17 to 25 years of age because students entered university after completing high school, while some of the students only enrolled in the Gulf University for Science and Technology after the completion of other studies. The fall class consisted of 11 females students while the spring class consisted of 16 male students. Both cycles included a pre-and post-assessment of ICC and digital war skills through face-to-face interviews with participants. The two cycles were identical regarding instructional methods and materials. Conducting the classes over two semesters enabled me to include both females and males in the sample since the genders attend classes separately.

I designed the modules to raise participants' levels of intercultural communication competence as well as digital war understanding level. Intercultural communicative competence refers to one's ability to understand cultures, including an individual's own culture, and using this understanding to successfully communicate with people from other cultures. This course combined the intercultural communication part and the digital war part as it aimed to develop the participants' communicative skills, as it equipped them with the essential skills, values, and knowledge to function successfully in multi-cultural encounters. I delivered the course three times a week for 9 weeks, classes each lasting two hours. I taught the intercultural communication part in one hour and the digital war part

in another hour. The evaluation of the success of the course did not count toward the students' overall grades.

Classes were structured informally to allow for maximum interaction between students. Questionnaires to elicit opinions and YouTube videos introducing culture, norms, and customs were implemented to create awareness and stimulate interaction. YouTube video topics like hacking, cyberbullying, and science fiction was represented. During class, groups of students discussed and introduced the supplementary materials and related them to their own experiences. A summary of the discussions was presented to the class by the groups. An innovative mixture of instructional material and approaches ensured that classes were interactive and communicative. Each of the eight themes covered in the syllabus was introduced using different techniques, ensuring variety, and eliciting reactions and comments from the students. All the sessions provided discussion and feedback time as well as opportunities to relate the new information to the students' personal experiences. The intercultural communication & digital war syllabus targeted the development of the following skills:

- 1) Comprehend the basic concepts of intercultural communication and digital war;
- 2) Scrutinise the differences between Kuwaiti culture and other cultural behaviours and values of different countries and their reactions to digital war difficulties;
- 3) Study different ideas about relationships, customs, and digital war themes;
- 4) Learn useful cross-cultural communication techniques & digital war aspects;
- 5) Develop a deep awareness of experiences to increase intercultural competency and understanding of digital war;
- 6) Determine own level of cultural self-awareness, other culture awareness, and the dynamics that arise in interactions between two cultures and relate this to the exposure of the digital war module;
- 7) Determine own level of understanding of digital war topics;
- 8) Understand the correlation between communication processes belonging to different cultures;
- 9) Identify challenges arising because of cross-cultural situations encounters, digital war, and
- 10) Acknowledge the impact this course could possibly have on my own intercultural competence and digital war topics perception.

9. Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data were collected through semi-structured pre-and post-intervention interviews, which were conducted through the participation of English FPU students before and after the intervention, field notes, focus group discussions, and the researcher's reflective self-critical notes.

I used face-to-face semi-structured interviews, conducted in English, in the

implementation of the first and second cycles of the research. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The pre-interviews focused on establishing students' background knowledge of intercultural communication and digital war. The post-interviews were focused on obtaining feedback and perspectives of students about their general experiences and impressions after the addition of integrated intercultural communication and digital war modules in their foundation program course. Semi-structured questionnaires were designed for class discussions held after each lesson.

Conducting pre- and post-group-focused discussions was effective to enable the researcher to determine the students' overall opinions regarding the intervention designed to improve their intercultural and digital war skills. Class discussions invited the participants to express their opinions freely and spontaneously. Methodologically, the pre-and post-intervention interviews, in combination with the researcher's self-reflective notes and represented by the responses of the focus group discussion, were ideal for obtaining reliable data and achieving the most efficient results (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

Other data collection methods included field notes and reflective notes. My main role as a researcher was to document the students' feedback and to be a keen observer of the participants' views to record their feedback diligently. I also encouraged inactive contributors to reflect on their experiences critically. If needed, I rephrased questions to give participants a chance to reflect thoroughly to facilitate collecting accurate data. Building rapport with the participants was an essential factor to ensure proceeding smoothly. The classroom atmosphere had to be comfortable enough to ensure the semi-structured interviews were conducted smoothly.

The observational notes contained careful reflection of the students' verbal and nonverbal cues, as suggested by researchers (Hall, 2002; Solomon & Schell, 2009; Thomas & Peterson, 2016). These notes benefitted me in conducting the data analysis thoroughly and determining whether the students met the objectives of the course and learned the material. The researcher wanted to assess the development of the intercultural communication skills and digital war students' understanding within the duration of the course. I documented the observational notes after each session, highlighting ways in which participants might have benefited from the intervention. I underlined the level of their understanding of the subject matter in these notes.

10. Data Collection Tools

In the present study, two forms of data collection sources were used, namely pre-and post-intervention interviews and the researcher's self-reflective observational notes (Edwards-Groves & Kemmis, 2015). I used semi-structured interviews in the implementation of the first and second cycles of the research. The observations were documented and recorded after the completion of the study in both fall 2018 and spring 2019.

11. Semi-Structured Interviews

I used semistructured interviews in the implementation of the first and second cycle of the research. Pre-and post-intervention semistructured interviews were administered to the participants using closed and open-ended questions. The pre-intervention interviews specifically focused on determining the students' background knowledge of intercultural communication and digital war. The responses to the questions determined the level of intercultural communication and digital war knowledge of the students before undergoing the intervention. The post-intervention interviews were focused on eliciting feedback and perspectives of students about their overall experiences and impressions after the addition of an integrated ICC and digital war component into their Foundation Program course. After conducting the first cycle of the research following the semistructured interviews, I incorporated the method of unstructured interviews in spring 2019.

Building rapport with the participants was one of the most essential factors to ensure proceeding smoothly prior to conducting the study. The atmosphere of the classroom needed to be comfortable enough to ensure smooth sessions for the semistructured interviews. During the interviews, I encouraged the participants to reflect on their experiences critically. During the interviews, if needed, I rephrased questions to give the participants a chance to think thoroughly to facilitate the collection of accurate data. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in English with The Foundation Program Unit participants. The semistructured pre-and post-intervention interviews were each 45 to 60 minutes long.

12. Observational Notes

I used qualitative data collection tools exclusively, as they provided the in-depth data about students' reflections and attitudes that were necessary to address the research questions. Although quantitative data collection tools, such as a questionnaire measuring intercultural communication competence and digital war, would have added more diverse data, such data were ultimately considered not necessary, as the focus of the study was on the attitudes of the students before and after the implementation of an ICC and digital war components, and quantitative tools would not have provided sufficient depth or open-ended responses to understand students' views.

I made self-reflective observational notes in the form of a field journal to record the improvement in the level of intercultural communication competence as well as the understanding of digital war topics, the body language that the students used to express their ideas, and the behaviour of the participants toward the topics discussed during conducting the intercultural competence and digital war class sessions. The notes described the participants' feedback before and after the pre-planned integration of the ICC and digital war components to the traditionally taught Foundation Program Unit. Specifically, the students' attentiveness, enthusiasm, and willingness to participate during the delivery of the prescheduled intercultural and digital war topics that I designed were observed. I fo-

cused on the nature of the communication taking place between the participants. These observations were documented and recorded after the completion of the study in both fall 2018 and spring 2019. I evaluated the level of awareness and ability of students regarding intercultural communication toward the end of the study utilizing thematic analysis as the data analysis technique. I ensured that I documented the observational notes after each session. I also highlighted the ways in which the participants might have benefited from the intervention. I underlined the level of their understanding of the subject matter in my notes. The observational notes included attentive reflection of the students' verbal and nonverbal cues, as suggested by researchers. I used these notes as an additional source of data for conducting data analysis and determining whether the students met the objectives of the course, learned the material, and improved their intercultural communication and digital war skills within the duration of the course based on my observations.

13. Data Collection Procedures

The research was conducted in two cycles. Eleven female students participated in the first cycle of the study, which was taught in fall 2018. Sixteen male students participated in the second cycle of the study, which was taught in the spring 2019. I delivered the Foundation English course for 4 hours in both courses from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and I introduced the intercultural communication module for 1 hour, three times a week. Moreover, I have introduced the digital war module for an hour every day from Sunday to Thursday. The content of the participation information sheet was explained in a class discussion to female students. I asked ENGL 09805 students to sign the consent form. The content of the consent form was explained thoroughly to the students before they signed. After that, all students signed the consent form.

For the first cycle, I delivered the course three times a week for 9 weeks. Each class was designed to take 1 hour. The evaluation of the success of the course did not count toward the students' overall grades. I conducted the pre-interview at 1:00 p.m. in W5-203 at the Gulf University for Science and Technology. I guided the participants with questions to give detailed information about their understanding of the word "culture" and "digital war". All participants' ages were 18. The pre-interview part of the research was held in a form of a class discussion.

For this cycle, I kept a journal to make self-reflective observational notes in the fall of 2018. In the second week of the course, the topics of exploring culture and hacking were covered in three different sessions for an hour three times a week. In Week 3 of the course, I introduced students to the relationship between culture and language as well as cyber spying and discussed these subjects for 3 hours a week. In Week 4 of the course, the students were introduced to the topics of culture and nonverbal communication as well as the digital defence in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 5 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of culture and identity as well as social media in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 6 of the course, the students were introduced to the topics of cultural

shock and cross-cultural adjustment as well as science fiction in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 7 of the course, the students were introduced to the topics of communication as well as information manipulation in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 8 of the course, the students were introduced to the topics of communication skills as well as programming in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 9 of the course, the students were introduced to intercultural communication videos as well as cyber threats in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 10 of the course, I conducted question and answers sessions on intercultural communication and digital war. Next, I conducted the post-interview protocol in fall 2018 and gave clear recommendations to guide the students to give detailed answers to the questions and support their answers by giving detailed examples.

I introduced the cycle 2 intervention in spring 2019. The Foundation English course was intended to be taught in 4 hours from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m., and the ICC and digital war components were scheduled to be presented in an additional hour three times a week for each module. The Participation Information sheet was clarified at the beginning of the course. Sixteen male students enrolled in ENGL 09853 cohort when it commenced on spring 2019. I explained the important details related to this study by underlining the main aims of intercultural communication and digital war integration. This course introduced students to the fields of intercultural communication and digital war. The course was designed to be delivered three times a week for 9 weeks. Each class was designed to take 1 hour. After that, the students were briefed that they would be interviewed the next day to make sure that their attendance was complete. The next day, the students were present and ready to be interviewed. Students were encouraged to answer the questions thoroughly and in detail to support the data analysis process. Students were guided to comment on their classmates' answers and to reflect by sharing their own experiences. Afterthought, the pre-interview was conducted at 1:00 p.m. in W5-204 at the Gulf University for Science and Technology in Kuwait.

For this cycle, I kept a journal to make self-reflective observational notes in the spring of 2019. In the second week of the course, the topics of exploring culture and hacking were covered in three different sessions for an hour three times a week. In Week 3 of the course, I introduced students to the relationship between culture and language as well as cyber spying and discussed these subjects for 3 hours a week. In Week 4 of the course, the students were introduced to the topics of culture and nonverbal communication as well as the digital defence in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 5 of the course, the students were introduced to the topic of culture and identity as well as social media in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 6 of the course, the students were introduced to the topics of cultural shock and cross-cultural adjustment as well as science fiction in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 7 of the course, the students were introduced to the topics of communication as well as information manipulation in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 8 of the course, the students were introduced to the topics of communication skills as well as programming in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 9 of the

course, the students were introduced to intercultural communication videos as well as cyber threats in three 1-hour sessions. In Week 10 of the course, I conducted question and answers sessions on intercultural communication and digital war. Next, I conducted the post-interview protocol in the spring of 2019 and gave clear recommendations to guide the students to give detailed answers to the questions and support their answers by giving detailed examples.

14. Trustworthiness of Data

The semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and the researcher's field notes based on self-critical classroom observations facilitated the triangulation needed to ensure data validity for qualitative studies (Denzin, 2012; Mulhall, 2003). I observed several aspects of ICC during classroom activities which were noted in the self-evaluative observational notes. These include students' body language while participating in discussions and their management of topics that addressed cultural differences. Furthermore, I noted the level of students' enthusiasm, participation in-class activities, and willingness to deliver opinions on prescheduled intercultural topics. These observations focused on the nature of the communicative interaction between the participants. Documented observations were made to support the accuracy of the data analysis that followed, as suggested by Yin (2015). Using data triangulation, I trusted that analysing interview data and the field notes for supporting and contradicting information would result in a more objective and consistent reflection of reality (Cho & Trent, 2006; Trent et al., 2006).

15. Data Analysis

Data collected was subjected to content analysis using NVivo 10 software and thematic analysis. The thematic analysis focused on identifying themes and patterns of behaviour from transcribed data (Aronson, 1995) and was conducted in three rounds (Krippendorff, 2013). First, transcribed data from interviews, and observational notes, were analysed, one line at a time, and were coded as emerging patterns arose. The interview data were coded first, thereafter, all the other data were classified. Data were marked that was related to all the patterns that emerged, and these patterns were expanded on to gather themes (Aronson, 1995). Any phrases or sentences suited for a specific pattern were identified and linked with the correct pattern (Aronson, 1995). Constant comparisons were conducted with the other coded data to establish similarities or differences with already existing codes (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2015; Snyder, 2012).

Open coding was used in round two, entailing a close examination of the data, breaking the data down into sections, making comparisons, and questioning these data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Thereafter I commenced collecting indicators and developing a coding scheme. Indicators were coded using a coding scheme developed using small amounts of data and from that coded data, groups were developed. From the groups, themes, and possible affinity between and

among the themes were established. Relationships between coded categories or patterns were linked to developing a larger picture of the themes (Houghton et al., 2015; Snyder, 2012) derived from the participants' perspectives. Themes were combined to form an idea of the collective experience (Aronson, 1995); and patterns were further extrapolated, combined, and categorised to produce sub-themes (Aronson, 1995). In round three, invariant elements were grouped under thematic categories, which aligned with the research questions of the study. Once themes were specified and finalized according to the literature, theme statements were developed for a storyline that had merit (Aronson, 1995).

16. Results

Data analysis produced four themes 1) pre-intervention: culture, ICC, and digital war as an interpersonal conflict without holistic contextualization; 2) post-intervention: enhanced perspective-taking and attitude; 3) post-intervention: better engagement with cultural out-groups; and 4) increased inquisitiveness about other cultures and the students' understanding of digital war.

Subthemes that emerged include the following; Theme 1: Defining cultural differences in personal terms, defining cultural differences in interpersonal terms, defining culture and digital war without contextualization, cross-cultural communication and digital war without contextualization, ICC defined in terms of nonverbal communications, and the level of confidence in understanding cultures and digital war.

Theme 2: Improvement in perspective taking, attitudes, and enhanced reflectiveness on the concept of culture and digital war. Theme 3: Increased engagement in ICC and digital war understanding, increased confidence in understanding intercultural communication and digital war, increased cross-cultural comfort level, and increased nonverbal ICC competence.

Theme 4: Cuisine, language, micro-expressions, other cultures' textures, religion and values, social relationships, interactions, hacking, cyber spying, digital defence, social media, science fiction, and information manipulation, that can be described as sharing false and misleading information, programming, and cyber threats.

Theme 1: Pre-intervention: Culture, ICC, and Digital War as an interpersonal conflict without holistic contextualization; please see **Table 2** for more information on Theme 1.

Theme 2: Improvement in perspective taking, attitudes, and enhanced reflectiveness on the concept of culture and digital war; please see **Table 3** for more information on Theme 2.

Theme 3: Post-intervention: Increased engagement with cultural out-groups and its correlation with digital war; please see **Table 4** for more information on Theme 3.

Theme 4: Increased curiosity about other cultures and digital war topics; please see **Table 5** for more information on Theme 4.

Table 2. Culture, ICC, and Digital War as an interpersonal conflict without holistic contextualization.

Theme 1	Example (direct quotations)
Pre-intervention: Culture, ICC, and digital war as an interpersonal conflict without holistic conceptualisation	
1a	<p>Defining cultural differences and digital war in personal terms</p> <p>The word culture was mentioned in our Islamic studies. Islam taught us how to respect other religions and cultures. Kuwaiti education cares about Islamic studies, which represent the culture of Kuwait (cycle two student).</p> <p>A student from cycle one defined the term digital war incorrectly, as she referred to the digital war as fighting on Instagram, Snapchat and/or Facebook.</p>
1b	<p>Defining cultural differences and digital war in interpersonal terms</p> <p>I used to work in groups with students who come from England; these students were looking at me in a strange way despite speaking with them in English. I felt they were so judgmental and judging me because I am an Arab. (cycle one student)</p> <p>Another student from cycle one talked about hacking her computer and losing all the information that was saved. She accused one of her friends of doing that without having evidence. (cycle one student).</p>
1c	<p>Defining culture and digital war without contextualization</p> <p>Culture... shows us how the country itself is... how they lived and what they ate and how their soul was (cycle two student)</p> <p>Another cycle two student received many negative comments on her Instagram account, and that was her way to describe the term digital war without contextualization. She thought that in this way she defines digital war. (cycle one student).</p>
1d	<p>Cross-cultural and digital war communication without contextualization</p> <p>I could not deal with Germans because of their language. It was so difficult for me to learn German, and they do not speak English (cycle one student).</p> <p>Another student from cycle one talked about hacking her computer and losing all the information that was saved. She was unable to define or conceptualize the term digital war (cycle two student).</p>
1e	<p>Intercultural communication in terms of nonverbal communication</p> <p>I had a situation with a Saudi Arabian guy. He was staring at me I think because I was not fully covered like Saudi Arabian ladies. I did not like it, and it was very negative (cycle one student).</p>
1f	<p>Level of confidence</p> <p>I (a student) do not deal with people but my family when I travel outside Kuwait. My brothers deal with them if there is a need (cycle one student)</p> <p>I can communicate using different programs like Instagram and Facebook without any problems. (cycle one student)</p>

Summary Analysis of Theme 1

- Overall, students had a skewed image of ICC & digital war before the intervention. They often conflated culture with cultural manifestations (e.g., cuisine, language, and religion).
- In the same way, they conflated ICC & digital war with interpersonal incompatibility and conflicts (e.g., language barriers and verbal or nonverbal communication interpreted as offensive).
- Some struggled to see culture apart from religion.
- Some struggled to see the difference between digital war and social media.
- Students comprehended ICC in relation to their reactions in situations where ICC was required. However, there was no perception that negotiation or compromise was required. Rather, the expectation was that the out-group would compromise and adopt the culture of the in-group.
- In general, students were not able to define culture, ICC, and digital war in any specific or accurate way.
- The digital war topic was new to most of the students before the intervention. However, most of them considered it as an area where they need to strengthen their background.
- The introduction of two terms of intercultural communication and digital war topics was considered to be an eye-opening experience as both are significant in developing the academic progression of the students in the Foundation Program Unit.

Analysis of Theme 1.

Table 3. Theme 2: Improvement in perspective taking, attitudes, and enhanced reflectiveness on the concept of culture and digital war.

Theme 2		Example (direct quotations)
Post-intervention: Improved perspective-taking and attitude and enhanced reflectiveness on the concept of culture and digital war.		
2a	Improved perspective-taking (non-judgmentally understanding cultural differences)	I understand now that dealing with people from other cultures is different from dealing with people from the same culture; they think differently and see the world differently (cycle one student).
2b	Improved attitudes	I liked one video about how to say hi in different languages. It made me like to learn about other languages, instead of wishing everyone could speak English (cycle two student). Other student shared that 'I am happy to be educated about the topics of digital war as they are so educational, and I learnt some techniques to protect my gadgets' (cycle two student).
2c	Enhanced reflectiveness on the concept of culture and digital war	I know I have to understand how other people think if I want to communicate well with them (cycle one student) I now know the feelings of people who attack you with cyber spying and bullying. Their mindset is programmed that attacking, violating, and harming are acceptable and would not cause any damage. (cycle one student)

Summary Analysis of Theme 2

- Post-intervention students improved their competence in terms of ICC in line with [Deardorff \(2011\)](#).
- Students often added the qualifier that the other person should be able to speak English.
- Students exhibited a more positive attitude toward an understanding of digital war and respect for other cultures.
- Students showed a newfound interest in other cultures and digital war topics.
- Students displayed improved perspective-taking and realized that those from cultural out-groups may have different perceptions about interculturalism and digital war.
- Students recognized that the assumptions of their own culture were not universally held nor valid.
- Students indicated an improved ability to understand their own ICC competence. According to [Deardorff \(2011\)](#), this ability to reflect is crucial for improving ICC competence and understanding of digital war terms.

Analysis of Theme 2.

Table 4. Theme 3: Increased engagement with cultural out-groups and its correlation with digital war.

Theme 3		Example (direct quotations)
Post-intervention: Increased engagement with cultural out-groups and its correlation with digital war		
3a	Increased engagement in ICC	I become friendlier with people who come from different cultures. I like to talk to them online, and I do not get offended so easily (cycle one student). I did not want to talk in class, but now I see that I can say things if other people can say them (cycle two student).
3b	Increased confidence	After I took the intercultural communication course, I know how to deal with people from different cultures and how to deal with digital threats and issues confidently (cycle two student).
3c	Increased ICC and the understanding of digital war comfort level	Students said they had gained ICC awareness and comfort through learning about "facial micro expressions and how the features of the face change", "eye-contact and facial expression", and "using less words and use more nonverbal communication". (cycle one) "After I took the intercultural communication course, I know how to deal with people from different cultures and how to deal with digital bullying and problems comfortably". (cycle two)
3d	Increased nonverbal ICC competence	The course helped me to understand the facial expressions of people from other cultures and helped me communicating with them (cycle one student).

Continued

Summary Analysis of Theme 3

- Students reported an increased willingness and ability to engage with cultural out-groups positively and non-judgmentally.
- A number of students noted being offended less often than before.
- Students were more confident in ICC and in understanding digital war situations.
- Students' own use of nonverbal communication in ICC situations had improved.
- Students noted that their ability to interpret verbal and nonverbal communication had improved.
- This willingness stemmed from a greater confidence in ICC competence.
- The level of the students' awareness and understanding of digital war has improved.

Analysis of Theme 3.

Table 5. Theme 4: Increased curiosity about other cultures and digital war topics.

Theme 4		Example (direct quotations)
Post-intervention: Increased curiosity about other cultures and digital war topics		
4a	Cuisine	I would like to learn about the food of the other countries and how it is cooked (cycle one student).
4b	Language	It would help to be able to talk to people from other countries if I knew more words in their languages. I like talking to people from other places now, so I think this would be useful (cycle one student).
4c	Microexpressions	I need to learn how to understand facial microexpressions better as I am still confused as it is difficult to understand what people mean by facial microexpressions (cycle one student).
4d	Other cultures' textures	It is very important to experience cultures regularly, as this would enhance his intercultural communication experience. Traveling is the best way to inspire curiosity about other cultures, but you can also have exposure to different cultures by visiting different kinds of restaurants or districts in another city. (cycle two student)
4e	Religion and values	I like to learn about values and the beliefs of different cultures. This would help me to talk more with people from other countries, and to be more confident when I talked to them (cycle one student).
4f	Social relationships and interactions	I want to know what families are like in other cultures, such as who live together, and how they treat their families. I would also like to know how students talk to their teachers and each other at school (cycle two student).
5g	Curiosity to learn more about digital war	I wish to be introduced to the ways to protect myself and my family from digital threats and attacks. They thought that the course could be enhanced by presenting those protection techniques to feel more secure about their information and to make sure of the confidentiality of the data they own. (cycle one student)

Summary Analysis of Theme 4

- Students noted an increased curiosity and enthusiasm about other cultures without being completely satisfied. This is as researched by [Deardorff \(2011\)](#).
- This curiosity was spread over a wide array of topics.
- This curiosity contrasted with the pre-intervention attitudes where students were superficial in their manifestations and responses were overtly pejorative.
- The curiosity displayed by students may point to future improvements to the ICC intervention.
- The curiosity to learn some techniques to protect the students' personal information and data to ensure its confidentiality.

Analysis of Theme 4.

17. Discussion

The discussion is represented through the interpretation of the findings of the study, and it is based on the research questions:

RQ1. How did the level of intercultural communication & digital war knowledge, skills, and values of the participants improve from the pre-interviews until the post-interviews? Two themes emerged during data analysis to answer the research question, these were 1) students displayed limited knowledge of intercultural communication and digital war at the beginning of the course, and 2) students testified to greater expertise in ICC and digital war at the end of the course. Interpretation of these themes indicated that the intervention was effective in dealing with expanding participants' knowledge in line with the findings, who noted the importance of focusing on intercultural communication studies to discuss the complexity of intercultural interactions due to positionality with a specific emphasis on digital war.

RQ2. How did the participants perceive the concept of integrating the intercultural communication component and the digital war topics into their English course? Concerning the second research question, the participants perceived the ICC component and the digital war topic as interesting, fascinating, and useful. In the same way, they understood ICC and digital war topics as a useful contribution to skills development, as suggested by researchers [Belhiah & Elhami \(2015\)](#). Resulting from these themes, the participants in this study now appreciated the significance of learning how to interact with people from other cultures. This finding aligns with the theory put forward by [Hall \(2002\)](#) and with the research conducted by authorities such as [Rothlauf \(2014a\)](#), who concluded that understanding ICC requires an accurate perception of what one has communicated in the nonverbal mode. Post-intervention, students cited nonverbal communication most frequently as exciting and useful with some students in both cycles reporting that they now enjoyed and benefited from the topic. In addition, participants welcomed the nonverbal learnings because they understood that one could never assume that a familiar gesture in one culture meant the same thing in another culture. For instance, in Kuwait and the Arabian Gulf, Kuwaitis use a set of locally cultivated gestures, which people could interpret differently when coming from other cultures ([Hackney et al., 2014](#); [Mwesigye & Muhangi, 2015](#); [Rothlauf, 2014b](#)). I used this intervention for participants to comprehend how their culture might be similar or different from the culture of other nations. According to cycle one and cycle two students, learning the digital war topics was eye-opening and educational. However, they wished to learn about some techniques to protect the confidentiality of their data.

RQ3. How can the intervention techniques used in the intervention be improved to ensure results? When focusing on the third research question, it became apparent that the positive social impacts of the intervention had to be properly analysed to ensure future interventions. One theme showed how one could improve the results in future interventions. The participants already felt

that the current topics were helpful but learning more would aid in developing an increased understanding of the matter. The findings here align with the theory developed by Hall (2002) and with those of Leavitt et al. (2016), for example. These theorists recognized that cross-cultural communication included both verbal and nonverbal communication and that participants had to focus on building more skills in interpreting the nonverbal aspect of ICC. They believed that the results of the ICC component would be improved if an intervention included more information about micro-expressions. This notion is supported by others such as Solomon & Schell (2009). Few students from both cycles one and two indicated that they wish to be introduced to the ways to protect themselves and their families from digital threats and attacks. They thought that the course could be enhanced by presenting those protection techniques to feel more secure about their information and to make sure of the confidentiality of the data they own.

RQ4. What impact, if any, did participants perceive the intercultural communication component as having on their attitudes and behaviour toward other ethnic groups? Overall, the participants perceived an impact of ICC on their attitudes. Concerning their behaviour, the participants pointed to an increased curiosity about the cuisine and customs of other cultures. These findings could be said to align with the theory of in-groups and out-groups developed by Sumner (2019) and with work that focused on ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism was arguably present amongst the students before the intervention. For instance, Neuliep & McCroskey (1997) explained that the tenets of ethnocentrism were typified by behaviours and attitudes toward in-groups *versus* out-groups. The reality is that the characteristics of the behaviour and attitudes of both the in-group and the out-group are biased in a positive manner toward the in-group at the expense of the out-group (Neuliep & McCroskey, 1997).

As indicated in Theme 2, above, the data indicated that the intervention assisted students to expand their ICC competence in ways described by Deardorff (2011). Participants displayed an enhanced ability to realise that members of cultural out-groups may approach interactions with a different set of assumptions. Constructive relationships that transcend the differences and focus on how to deal with other cultures effectively are possible in a culturally heterogeneous environment (Ferdenzi et al., 2017). Therefore, when dealing with ICC, one should consider attitudes and beliefs as influenced by an individual's unique upbringing (Hackney et al., 2014). Students indicated an improved ability to reflect on their own levels of ICC competence, with reflectiveness being a capacity that Deardorff identified as crucial to the development of ICC competence.

18. Limitations of the Study

Some limitations to the study included that in a study conducted over two consecutive semesters, participants might only have represented the level of the students' ICC and the understanding of digital war during a specific time of the

year. In addition, the demographic characteristics of the sample may not have represented the general population, for instance, the participants were all Kuwaiti. Since this study only focused on a specific number of participants aged from 17 to 25, the sample population might not reflect the views of all FPU students. A universal analysis of the effects and impacts of ICC would have been apparent if student perceptions encompassed those of students from different cultures. The study was furthermore limited to the cultural environment surrounding them and was not multi-cultural since the participants all belonged to the same political and ethnic background. Finally, gender representation might also be considered a limitation. This was likely because the number of female participants in the study varied from the number of male participants. This difference in the number of female participants and male participants was because the research had to be sensitive to the gender segregation in the region.

19. Conclusion

As an educator and resident of Kuwait for 38 years, I conducted qualitative action research to concentrate on the importance of ICC and digital war module to the future studies and careers of students and to discover whether the integration of an ICC component and digital war component into an undergraduate English course in Kuwait could better prepare students for their future studies and jobs through refining their ICC skills and knowledge. The study's problem focused on the insufficient acceptance of cultural diversity and its influence on university students. Four research questions on ICC guided the study and **Dear-dorff's (2011)** model of intercultural competence was used to frame the research. Semi-structured interviews, document reviews, and field notes were used to collect data, which were then analysed using content and thematic analysis. Data analysis produced four themes: 1) pre-intervention: culture, ICC and digital war as interpersonal conflict without holistic contextualization; 2) post-intervention: enhanced perspective-taking and attitude; 3) post-intervention: better engagement with cultural out-groups; and 4) increased inquisitiveness about other cultures and other digital, and the students' understanding of digital war. Based on these findings, the goal of this study was achieved because it successfully explored the influence of the intervention on the ICC and digital war knowledge, values, and skills of the students.

The findings of the study contributed to the existing literature and policy frameworks in multiple ways. I recognized that the context of globalization is central to the future employability of the students. It was not known how the integration of an ICC component into an undergraduate English course could in this regard help better prepare students for their future studies and jobs through refining their intercultural communications skills and knowledge in the context of Kuwait. The findings of the study, therefore, helped understand whether the ICC component and digital war module affected or did not affect the intercultural competence of individuals in Kuwait, and the results indicated that the un-

derstanding of the culture of the participants differed significantly after the course-work and intervention. The findings of the study contributed to theories considered in the literature. For instance, the findings of the study provided evidence to the claim of conversational constraint theory that in collectivistic societies, such as Kuwait, individuals are more preoccupied with reducing imposition and hurting the feelings of other people, while those from individualistic societies are more likely to place emphasis on clarity (Kim, 2018). The integration of an ICC component into an undergraduate English course in Kuwait led to the students becoming more curious about other cultures. The students accommodated the cultural differences when exposed through videos by appreciating nonverbal communication in some cultures as funny. The appreciation of the students of such nonverbal gestures in a manner defined by positivity and curiosity provided support for the communication accommodation theory.

While various researchers had sought to expand the focus on the literature on intercultural communication from its foundation in American and European experience by including African and Asian perspectives, there was a lack of research in which intercultural communication has been understood in the context of Arabic cultures. Thus, an important contribution of the present study was to expand the existing trend of a more inclusive understanding of human communication patterns.

The study is also significant because its findings helped educators and other stakeholders in the country's future obtain an understanding of bettering the prospects of students through interventions aimed at developing intercultural competence levels and digital war level of understanding. In this regard, I recommended that there was a need for broader integration of intercultural communication and digital war within education, which is especially relevant in light of the globalized economy. Another recommendation made was for stakeholders to consider using ICC as a tool for increasing student awareness regarding their own ethnocentrism and increasing tolerance and understanding of cultural diversity, which is necessary not only in the workplace but in general. Educating the students about digital war will raise the awareness to protect the confidentiality and protect the information of the students. The study also contributed to the existing literature through recommendations for research methods including using the mixed method or a quantitative study, focusing on students who have enough travel experiences with different cultures, studying the impact of language to intercultural communication, and focus on the speech acts of participants as well as focusing on understanding the issues related to digital war.

20. Proposal for Practical Recommendations and Measures for the Future Research Studies

While various researchers had sought to expand the focus on the literature on intercultural communication and digital war from its foundation in the American and European experience by including African and Asian perspectives, there

was a lack of research in which intercultural communication and digital communication has been understood in the context of Arabic cultures. Thus, an important contribution of the present study was to expand the existing trend of a more inclusive understanding of human communication patterns. The study is also significant because its findings helped educators and other stakeholders in the country's future obtain an understanding of bettering the prospects of students through interventions aimed at intercultural competence and digital war.

In this regard, I made recommendations based on the findings of the study that provide an important contribution to the existing literature. For instance, it was recommended that there was a need for broader integration of intercultural communication and digital war within education, which is especially relevant considering the globalized economy. The findings could be used by educators and other stakeholders with students as well as Kuwait's future projects that can be implemented across universities to make students more competitive in the globalized economy. The results of the study showed the significance of integrating ICC and digital war for bettering the skills of the students for working in a diver's environment, as the findings suggested that the integration of an ICC and digital war made students more familiar as well as curious about other cultures, strengthening their intercultural competence and digital war background, which is beneficial for their future employability.

Another recommendation made was for stakeholders to consider using ICC and digital war as tools for increasing student awareness regarding their own ethnocentrism and increasing tolerance and understanding of cultural diversity, which is necessary not only in the workplace but in general. The results of the study contributed to positive social change by making students aware of the proper nonverbal approach when dealing with people from different cultures. All students who participated in the study enthusiastically agreed that they would recommend the course to their friends. Because of the findings of the study, future students could learn what benefits can be derived from having strong and foundational coursework focused on intercultural communication and digital war skills. The study also contributed to the existing literature through recommendations for research methods including using the mixed method or a quantitative study, focusing on students who have enough travel experiences with different cultures, studying the impact of language on intercultural communication, digital war, and focusing on the speech acts of participants.

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to explore whether the integration of an ICC component and its relation to digital war into an undergraduate English course in Kuwait could better prepare students for their future studies and jobs through refining their intercultural communication and digital war skills and knowledge. The findings indicated the understanding of the culture of the participants differed significantly after the coursework and intervention. Further, based on the specific themes from the analysis, I made recommendations for both theory and future research as well as policy. I promoted positive social change because I focused on the importance of intercultural com-

munication and digital war, which were important topics in the current borderless world. I also provided directions for future studies, including different methodologies and focus points. Implications included that leaders could become more familiar with students' perceptions of the kinds of intercultural communication and digital war interventions that were beneficial.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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