

Independent and Interdependent Self-construal on Communication Styles among the Malaysian Young Adults

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Abstract

Understanding the relationship between self-construal and communication style is important because it allows for a better comprehension of how cultural values and individual perspectives shape communication behaviors. This leads to a more effective cross-cultural interactions and improved mutual understanding. Therefore, this study was conducted to determine the relationship between self-construal and communication styles among public university students in Klang Valley. A total of 380 students have participated in this study with a self-administered questionnaire was used in collecting the data. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents had moderate level independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal meanwhile majority of the respondents had high level of communication styles. Independent self-construal was correlated with friendly, impression leaving, relaxed, argumentative, attentive, animated, dramatic, open, and dominant, meanwhile, interdependent self-construal was correlated with friendly, impression leaving, argumentative, attentive, animated, open and dominant. Moreover, the regression analysis showed that interdependent self-construal was the strongest predictor in all types of communications. From this study, self-construal has a significant impact on communication styles, influencing how individuals express themselves, interpret messages, and engage in interpersonal interactions within their cultural context. This knowledge can help minimize miscommunication, enhance collaboration, and promote successful interpersonal relationships in diverse cultural contexts.

Keywords: Independent Self-Construal, Interdependent Self-Construal, Communication Styles, University Students, Malaysian Context

Introduction

Communication plays a critical role in human interactions, enabling the exchange of ideas, feelings, and thoughts. It involves more than the simple transmission of information. Communication is an intricate process that encompasses interpreting messages, understanding the intended meanings, and reacting accordingly (Chen, 1997). The process of communication is influenced by various factors, including individual traits, social contexts, and cultural norms, which in turn shape the way we perceive and engage with others and the world around us.

A fundamental aspect of this communication process, particularly among young adults is the concept of self-construal. Self-construal is the way individuals perceive, comprehend, and interpret themselves in relation to others and their social environment (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It includes two primary orientations: independent and interdependent self-construal. Independent self-construal which is more prevalent in individualistic societies, emphasizes on personal goals, uniqueness, and autonomy. In contrast, interdependent self-construal where more commonly in collectivist societies, stresses social roles, relationships, and harmony with the group (Cross et al., 2011). These self-views significantly influence communication styles and behaviour among young adults.

Despite significant research on communication styles, there remains a considerable knowledge gap concerning how these styles manifest and function among young adults within multi-ethnic societies. Young adults are at a critical juncture in their identity development and are profoundly influenced by their socio-cultural environments (Arnett, 2007). The complexity of multi-ethnic environments, with their varied cultural norms and expectations, may lead to a rich diversity in communication styles. However, current research does not sufficiently illuminate how these young individuals navigate these complex communicative landscapes whereby resulting in a lack of understanding about how cultural diversity influences their communication behaviors (Kim, 2017).

Furthermore, studies have shown that differing communication styles can lead to misunderstandings, cultural clashes, and conflicts, particularly in multicultural contexts (Claus & Nguyen, 2020). Among young adults in multi-ethnic societies, these challenges can hinder their social interactions, identity development, and overall well-being. Despite the importance of this issue, limited empirical research has been conducted to explore the unique challenges young adults in multi-ethnic cultures face regarding their communication styles. Additionally, there is a dearth of research examining potential solutions or interventions that could help them improve their communication skills and adapt to the diversity of their environment (Jaenes, et. al., 2021). Hence, there is an urgent need for research that focuses on this critical intersection of communication styles, young adulthood, and multi-ethnic societies.

Importance of Communication in a Multi-ethnic Culture of Malaysia

Norton (1978) proposed an influential model of communication styles that has since been applied and expanded upon in a variety of contexts. This model encompasses nine dimensions that form three broad clusters: appealingness, credibility, and involvement. According to Norton, these communication styles function as filters through which messages are sent and received. People tend to adapt their communication style to fit the context, the relationship they share with the listener, and the goals of the interaction. Essentially, Norton's framework

seeks to demonstrate the inherent intricacy of communication by highlighting that it encompasses more than just the content of the message but also the manner in which it is conveyed (Norton, 1978).

Communication styles play a pivotal role in multi-ethnic societies like Malaysia, serving as crucial conduits for interpersonal understanding and societal cohesion. Each communication style represents a unique mode of interaction, shaped by individual characteristics, cultural norms, and societal expectations. They help individuals express their thoughts, emotions, and intentions, foster relationships, and navigate social situations (Matsumoto, 2006). In a multi-ethnic context, diverse communication styles reflect the rich tapestry of cultural influences within the society, promoting cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect.

In a country like Malaysia, where Malay, Chinese, Indian, and numerous indigenous communities coexist, diverse communication styles facilitate effective intercultural communication. They enable individuals to navigate cultural differences, build rapport with people from different ethnic backgrounds, and foster interethnic harmony (Chua, 2015). For instance, an understanding of different communication styles can help individuals adapt their communication approach when interacting with people from different communities, thereby reducing misunderstandings and promoting effective dialogue. Furthermore, in an increasingly globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries is not only a valuable social skill but also a significant asset in the professional sphere (Gudykunst, 2003). Therefore, the importance of communication styles in a multi-ethnic culture like Malaysia cannot be overstated.

Self-construal and Communication Styles

Self-construal, or self-concept, refers to an individual's perception of their connection to others and the extent to which they see themselves as distinct from and related to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Self-construal encompasses an individual's beliefs, emotions, and behaviors concerning their relationship with others and their separation from them (Singelis, 1995). Kelly (2021) explains that self-concept affects a person's thoughts and feelings about themselves, their understanding of social norms, their perceptions of others, and even the language they employ in communication with others.

An independent self-construal, as described by Hackman et al (1999) emphasizes emotional self-focus, self-sufficiency, autonomy, and self-guidance, reflecting an individualist understanding of the self. Such individuals view themselves as distinct and separate, attributing thoughts, emotions, actions, and abilities to themselves. For those with a strong independent self-construal, self-esteem is achieved through engaging in straightforward communication and openly expressing their beliefs and emotions, which align with their internal traits and associated feelings.

Conversely, an interdependent self-construal emphasizes collectivist self-orientation, valuing harmony, tradition, empathy, interdependence, and connectedness, as described by (Hackman et al., 1999). Individuals with interdependent self-construal are more inclined to engage in in-depth processing related to evaluating social relationships. This self-construal is evident in a person's adaptability and ability to blend in with others and their surroundings. For example, in the United Kingdom, a society that generally promotes autonomous relational norms, individuals with higher independent self-construal reported more positive emotions in their daily interactions than those with lower independent self-construal (Nezlek et al., 2008; Kafetsios et al., 2017).

Collectivist cultures have been found to exhibit a positive association with interdependent self-construal and a negative association with independent self-construal (Singelis & Brown, 1995; Hackman et al., 1995). Kafetsios et al (2017) found that in Greece, a collectivist culture, the negative emotions experienced in social communication were more weakly associated with the quality of social communication for individuals with higher interdependent self-construal compared to those with lower interdependent self-construal. This suggests that Greek culture perceives its people as experiencing negative emotions in social communication (e.g., feeling accepted and understood), while in Germany (an individualistic culture), people tend to experience positive emotional outcomes, such as perceived acceptance and understanding. In countries like Malaysia, it is timely to examine and further investigate identity in relation to self-construction. This gap in research could be addressed by focusing on how Malaysian culture expresses independent and interdependent self-construal.

Method

Population and sample selection

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design, focusing on public university students in the Klang Valley aged between 19 and 27. The choice of this design was due to its efficacy in capturing variables of interest at a specific point in time. The sample for this research comprised undergraduate students from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and Universiti Malaya (UM), deliberately chosen to encompass diverse ethnic backgrounds, academic years, and programs of study for representative sampling.

The sample size of 380 respondents was arrived at using power analysis calculation, providing a precise estimate of population parameters with a satisfactory level of statistical power. This figure was drawn from a total pool of 44,467 Malaysian undergraduate students in the aforementioned universities. Data collection was performed using a structured questionnaire distributed via an online survey platform, optimizing reach, maintaining participant anonymity, and enabling efficient compilation of responses for subsequent data analysis.

Data Collection

Measures

Self-construal. The self-construal measurement was developed by Singelis (1994) with 20 items that measure the assemblage of ideas, feelings, and behaviors. There are two categories of self-construal; independence and interdependence that measured by 10 items each with 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Example of items are; "I enjoy being unique and different from others in many respects", "I do my own thing, regardless of what others think", "I respect people who are modest about themselves", "It is important for me to act as an independent person". The reliability was $\alpha = 0.93$.

Communication styles. The Communicator Style Measure (CSM) had been employed to gauge nine communication styles: friendly, attentive, impression leaving, animated, dramatic, argumentative, relaxed, dominant, and open. The CSM, originally crafted by Norton (1978), spanned a range from 'strongly agree' (1) to 'strongly disagree' (5). Examples of items included; "I readily express admiration for others", "What I say usually leaves an impression on people", "I have some nervous mannerisms in my speech". The reliability of the measure stood at $\alpha = 0.86$.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows that the independent self-construal among the respondents were moderate (53%) to low (27.3%). Independent self-construal refers to a concept of self that emphasizes independence, individuality, self-reliance, and personal achievement. People with high independent self-construal view themselves as separate entities from others and focus more on personal goals, desires, and internal attributes. From this study, it indicates that when a group of university students display a moderate to low level of independent self-construal, it suggests that their sense of self is less centered around individual autonomy and more inclined towards interpersonal relationships and group affiliations. This doesn't mean they lack individualism or personal ambition; rather, their identity and decisions are influenced more by social context, shared goals, and group norms. In the university context, students with moderate to low independent self-construal might be more cooperative and collaborative in group work, sensitive to others' feelings and feedback, and inclined towards conforming to social expectations or norms. They may prioritize maintaining harmony within their group or community over personal gains or desires. Their academic and social decisions might be more influenced by their peers, family, and societal expectations.

Meanwhile, the result shows a moderate (58%) to high (28.2%) level of interdependent self-construal. Interdependent self-construal pertains to a view of the self that emphasizes social roles, relationships, and collective responsibilities. Individuals with a high interdependent self-construal see themselves as part of a larger social network and consider their actions in terms of the impact on others and the group as a whole. From the context of university students, a moderate to high level of interdependent self-construal indicates that the students largely define themselves in the context of their relationships and roles within their communities. Their sense of self is tied to their affiliations — be it familial, friendship, or academic groups. They tend to value cooperation, group harmony, and societal norms.

Such students may put a greater emphasis on group projects and collaborative learning environments. They might be more comfortable working in teams, be more sensitive to group dynamics, and often strive to maintain harmony within their academic and social circles. Their decision-making process is likely to heavily consider the opinions and expectations of others, and they might prioritize collective success over individual achievement. However, it's important to note that individuals usually exhibit a blend of both independent and interdependent self-construal, and the degree to which they display each can vary depending on various factors such as the specific context, cultural upbringing, and personal experiences.

Table 1

Level of independent self-construal, dependent self-construal and communication styles.

Level	n	%	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Self-construal						
<u>Independent self-construal</u>			1.93	.682	1	5
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	109	27.3%				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	212	53.0%				
High (3.68 – 5.00)	79	19.8%				
<u>Interdependent self-construal</u>			2.145	.632	1	5
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	55	13.8%				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	232	58%				
High (3.68 – 5.00)	113	28.2%				

In contrast, Table 2 reveals that all respondents demonstrated moderate proficiency in each of the communication styles. The prevalence of the nine communication styles, as categorized by Norton (1983), among Malaysian public university students can be traced back to various cultural and educational influences. To start with, the unique Malaysian culture which embodying a blend of collectivist and individualist values, cultivates a distinctive environment that encourages diverse communication styles. The societal focus on unity, deference, and mutual agreement, that customary in collectivist cultures may possibly encourages communication styles like attentive and relaxed.

Conversely, an increasing emphasis on individual autonomy and self-expression that typical of individualistic cultures might stimulate styles such as argumentative and open communication. Additionally, the university environment is a rich breeding ground for a wide spectrum of communication styles. Academic settings generally foster intellectual discourse, motivating students to articulate their arguments (argumentative), exhibit enthusiasm (animated), adjust to varying social circumstances (impression-leaving), and candidly voice their ideas (open). Furthermore, the requirement for collaborative work in numerous academic disciplines nurtures the development of attentive, relaxed, and friendly communication styles, which are vital for teamwork and consensus building.

Finally, the diverse demographic makeup of Malaysian universities, with students from varied ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, necessitates a broad range of communication styles. In such a multifaceted environment, students adapt to become more open, dramatic, friendly, and dominant that varies with the social scenario. Consequently, the broad presence of all nine communication styles among Malaysian public university students reflects the dynamic interaction between their cultural landscape and educational environment, which in turn shapes their communication skills in a uniquely multifaceted manner.

Table 2

Level of communication styles

Variable	N	%	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<u>Friendly</u>						
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	71	19.0				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	189	50.0	2.6691	0.84357	1	5
High (3.68 – 5.00)	120	31.0				
<u>Impression Leaving</u>						
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	95	25.0				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	185	49.0	2.9954	0.77230	1	5
High (3.68 – 5.00)	100	26.0				
<u>Relaxed</u>						
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	81	21.0				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	199	52.0	2.9980	0.72518	1	5
High (3.68 – 5.00)	100	26.0				
<u>Argumentative</u>						
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	61	16				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	218	57	3.0711	0.78778	1	5
High (3.68 – 5.00)	99	27				
<u>Attentive</u>						
Low (1.00 – 2.33)						
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	102	28				5
High (3.68 – 5.00)	179	47	2.6743	0.79558	1	
	99	25				
<u>Animated</u>						
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	91	24				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	199	52	2.5112	0.74307	1	5
High (3.68 – 5.00)	90	24				
<u>Dramatic</u>						
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	87	23				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	219	58	3.0151	0.55763	1	5
High (3.68 – 5.00)	74	19				
<u>Open</u>						
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	85	22				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	216	57	3.0263	0.50456	1	5
High (3.68 – 5.00)	79	21				
<u>Dominant</u>						
Low (1.00 – 2.33)	42	11				
Moderate (2.34 – 3.67)	245	65	3.1737	0.82413	1	5
High (3.68 – 5.00)	93	24				

Table 3 illustrates a significant negative correlation between independent self-construal and the communication styles of being friendly ($r = -.114$, $p < .05$), relaxed ($r = -.293$, $p < .05$), argumentative ($r = -.301$, $p < .05$), animated ($r = -.243$, $p < .05$), dramatic ($r = -.272$, $p < .05$),

impression leaving ($r = -.436, p < .05$), open ($r = -.533, p < .05$), and dominant ($r = -.507, p < .05$). This correlation suggests that the less students tend to perceive themselves as autonomous entities, the more they are likely to embody communication styles that are friendly, relaxed, argumentative, animated, and dramatic. On the other hand, the study reveals a positive significant correlation between independent self-construal and the attentive communication style ($r = .292, p < .05$).

A significant negative relationship between independent self-construal and the mentioned communication styles in the context of Malaysian public university students indicates that as students' perception of themselves as independent entities increases, the frequency or intensity of these communication styles tends to decrease. This relationship can be understood in light of cultural, social, and individual aspects of communication behaviour. In terms of cultural context, Malaysia being largely collectivistic, values social harmony, respect for others, and group consensus. This societal framework may influence the communication styles among university students especially when they identify themselves as independent individuals (Oyserman et al., 2002). For instance, students with a high independent self-construal may feel less inclined to engage in friendly, relaxed, or dramatic communication styles that often involve accommodating others' needs and perspectives, maintaining social harmony, or performing for the audience's sake.

On a social level, the university environment itself characterized by intellectual exchange, diversity, and group work that may impact how students with high independent self-construal communicate. Independent students may prefer styles that reflect their autonomy, personal beliefs, and distinctive viewpoints which can be at odds with argumentative, open, and dominant styles that involve defending one's position, candidly expressing thoughts, or controlling conversations (Kim et al., 1996).

From an individual perspective, independent self-construal is linked with an emphasis on personal goals, self-reliance, and internal attributes. Consequently, students with high independent self-construal might not engage as much in impression-leaving communication which involves adjusting one's behaviour to make a desired impression on others. Instead, they might focus more on expressing their authentic self or individuality which can lead to less emphasis on the impression they leave on others (Cross et al., 2011). Therefore, the negative relationship between independent self-construal and these communication styles suggests that students who see themselves as independent individuals may communicate differently in ways that align more with their personal beliefs, values, and self-concept whereby even if it means less use of communication styles that are commonly valued or expected in their cultural and social context.

Meanwhile a positive significant relationship between independent self-construal and attentive communication style in the context of Malaysian public university students suggests that students who perceive themselves as autonomous entities are more likely to exhibit attentiveness in their communication. This could mean that as these students become more self-reliant and prioritize their personal goals, they may pay closer attention to their interactions, reflecting their desire to understand, process, and respond effectively to the information they receive.

Table 3

The relationship between Independent self-construal, dependent self-construal with communication styles.

Variables	Self-construal			
	Independent self-construal		Interdependent self-construal	
	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Communication Styles				
Friendly	-.114**	.000	-.420**	.000
Impression Leaving	-.436**	.000	-.660**	.000
Relaxed	-.293*	.000	-.048	.346
Argumentative	-.301**	.000	-.440**	.000
Attentive	.292**	.000	.164**	.000
Animated	-.243**	.000	-.611**	.000
Dramatic	-.272**	.000	-.372**	.000
Open	-.533**	.000	-.316**	.000
Dominant	-.507**	.000	-.298**	.000

Note: *** Level of significant is at $p < 0.001$

Additionally, from table 3, the findings show that there is negative correlation between interdependent self-construal and impression leaving ($r = -.660, p < .05$), animated ($r = -.611, p < .05$), friendly ($r = -.420, p < .05$), argumentative ($r = -.440, p < .05$), dramatic ($r = -.372, p < .05$), open ($r = -.316, p < .05$) and dominant ($r = -.298, p < .05$). Meanwhile there was a positive significant relationship between interdependent self-construal with attentive communication style ($r = .164, p < .05$).

A significant negative correlation between interdependent self-construal and various communication styles, such as friendly, impression leaving, argumentative, animated, dramatic, open, and dominant, holds significant implications in the context of public university students in Malaysia. This relationship suggests that as students perceive themselves more closely aligned with the collective, they are less likely to employ these specific styles of communication.

Within the cultural fabric of many Asian societies including Malaysia, there's a strong emphasis on interdependence, consensus-building, and harmony (Singelis, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This cultural backdrop can influence communication patterns, which are reflected in the results. For instance, argumentative, dramatic, open, and dominant styles of communication might be perceived as potentially disruptive to group harmony. Therefore, students with a higher degree of interdependent self-construal might steer away from these styles to maintain societal balance and cohesion.

The reduced use of the 'friendly' and 'impression leaving' communication styles could be interpreted as a cultural practice where humility, modesty, and indirectness are valued (Hua, 2018). In an interdependent context, overt friendliness or attempts to leave a strong impression might be viewed as self-promotion, which contradicts the norms of modesty. As for the 'animated' style, it is possible that in a collective context, less emphasis is placed on individual emotional expressivity which leads to a less animated communication style. Ultimately, the correlation underscores the intricate relationship between cultural self-views and communication practices, and the necessity to consider cultural context when examining communication styles.

Meanwhile, a significant positive correlation between interdependent self-construal and attentive communication style particularly in a Malaysian public university context points to

a tendency for students who perceive themselves as integral parts of a collective to be more attentive in their communication. The trait of attentiveness aligns with the values of interdependence as it involves consideration of others, active listening, and understanding, fostering group harmony and cooperation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It suggests that these students are more inclined to listen carefully, respect others' opinions, and pay greater attention to the group's needs and dynamics (Kim & Markus, 2002). This correlation underscores the influence of cultural values on communication, underscoring the importance of understanding cultural context in communication studies.

Significance of Self-Construal on Communication styles among Young Adults

In the realm of communication, self-construal influences how young adults that includes the age of university students express themselves, interpret others' messages, and navigate their social interactions (Kashima et al., 1995). For instance, individuals with an independent self-construal might focus more on direct, assertive communication styles to achieve their personal goals. On the other hand, those with an interdependent self-construal may prefer indirect, harmonious communication approaches that maintain group cohesion and respect for others (Gudykunst et al., 1996).

Therefore, understanding self-construal is essential for appreciating the complexity and nuances of young adult communication. As they navigate their transition to adulthood, young individuals are shaped by their self-construal, influencing their communication patterns and their perception of their roles in social contexts (Schwartz et al., 2011). By acknowledging the impact of self-construal on communication, we can better comprehend the interpersonal dynamics among young adults and effectively support them in their developmental journeys.

The impact and implications of the psychological factors on sleep quality

Both cultural individualism-collectivism and self-construal have direct influence on individual's communication style. Malaysian is known as a collectivistic culture society, nevertheless, the element of individualistic has slide in after modernization since 1980s. The self is interdependent in collectivist societies, which implies that people feel connected to others in their core group. Park (2012) mentioned that they prefer to communicate in an oblique manner. However, with globalization since 1980s, this involved a shift in values toward free-market ideology which might result in a change into individual beliefs. In individualistic culture, they favour to communicate in direct manner and independent societies, which that their identities are on their self alone. Both knowledge of individualism-collectivism and self-construal on communication styles are significant since they may be applied to understand the complexities of intercultural communication. As a result, it is critical to develop a suitable communication style in order to live and grow with dignity, self-esteem, and to collaborate with one another in order to acquire mutual respect. Hence, it is relevant to examine the individualism-collectivism and self-construal orientation among the three ethnic groups, as there is lack of empirical evidence on predominant communication styles.

Conclusion

Self-construal and communication styles hold significant importance in the Malaysian multiethnic context due to its diverse population comprising Malays, Chinese, Indians, and indigenous groups. Understanding and appreciating the various self-construal orientations within Malaysia's multicultural society contribute to effective intercultural communication and fostering harmonious intergroup relations. The way individuals perceive themselves in relation to others (independent or interdependent self-construal) influences their

communication behaviors and cultural values, impacting interethnic interactions. Recognizing and respecting diverse communication styles prevalent among different ethnic groups allows for better cross-cultural understanding and facilitates effective communication, promoting mutual respect and cultural sensitivity. Effective communication styles, such as active listening, empathy, and respect for diverse viewpoints, play a crucial role in bridging cultural divides, fostering interethnic understanding, and maintaining social harmony within the Malaysian multiethnic context. By embracing the significance of self-construal and communication styles, individuals can foster positive intergroup relations and build a cohesive society in Malaysia.

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