

## The Differences in Ethnic and Gender on Communication Styles among Public University Students in Klang Valley, Malaysia

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### Abstract

Understanding the differences in ethnic and gender communication styles in the Malaysian context is crucial for fostering inclusive and effective communication, promoting cultural sensitivity, and reducing potential biases or misunderstandings that may hinder successful interpersonal interactions. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to determine the differences in communication styles between gender and ethnic group among public university students in Klang Valley, Malaysia. 380 students have participated in this study involving three Malaysian public universities by stratified sampling. A self-administered questionnaire was used in collecting the data and it was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) by employing t-tests and correlations. The result shows that the Malay respondents perceive themselves as dramatic, open, and dominant meanwhile Chinese respondents perceive themselves as being attentive, animated, yet argumentative. Meanwhile, the differences in communication styles among gender show that female respondents perceive themselves as more dramatic, open, and dominant. Understanding the impact of gender and ethnic differences in communication styles within the Malaysian context promotes harmonious relationships, cultivates cultural empathy, and facilitates effective communication, leading to a more inclusive and cohesive society. This knowledge helps bridge cultural gaps, fosters mutual respect, and enables individuals to navigate diverse perspectives with sensitivity and understanding.

**Keywords:** Gender, Ethnic, Communication Styles, Multiethnic, Malaysian Context

**Introduction**

Culture equips individuals with unique communication patterns that tend to be distinct from those of people from different cultures. Ethnic identities often carry varying cultural values, creating unique communication styles that are typically different from those of other cultures. Importantly, even within a single culture, differences among individuals persist. For instance, while it's common for Malays to hug and shake hands when greeting people, not everyone in the same culture exhibits this behavior. Although cultural socialization is not identical across individuals, personal traits like personality cause variations. This means that the impact of culture on an individual will not be uniform (Park, 2012).

Malaysia, located in Southeast Asia, is a multicultural nation with a rich ethnic diversity comprising primarily of Malays, Chinese, and Indians, along with smaller ethnic groups and indigenous peoples (Azlan et al., 2018; Chang & Kho, 2017). Multicultural societies present a broad spectrum of cultural and demographic features (Korol, 2017). Despite differences in cultural values, each individual can have a personal communication style preference. Malaysians are influenced by their diverse cultures, which offer different worldviews and experiences (Nordin et. al., 2017). Malaysia's historical context, in which different ethnic groups were geographically, socially, and economically segregated during British rule, affects people's perspectives of other ethnicities and limits their intercultural interactions (Azlan et. al., 2018).

According to Liu and Zhang (2014), intercultural interactions can not only enhance knowledge about others but also deepen understanding of one's own culture. Prejudice, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation may lead to different cultural communication patterns and techniques (Dang, 2016). Hence, immersion in diverse cultures and widening understanding of other people's lifestyles are key to fostering better cultural understanding (Kleshchina, 2018). Consequently, it is significant to explore the predominant communication styles among the ethnic groups in Malaysia, as there is a dearth of data regarding the communication styles of Malays, Chinese, and Indians.

Adding to the rich tapestry of cultural influence, gender also plays a pivotal role in determining communication styles within diverse cultural contexts. Gendered communication can be influenced by societal norms and expectations, and often these norms are shaped by cultural context (Tannen, 1990). For instance, within the multicultural spectrum of Malaysia, the communication style of men and women may differ across and within different ethnic groups like Malays, Chinese, and Indians. This difference could be rooted in the distinct cultural heritage, religious practices, and traditional gender roles within these communities. Thus, the intertwining of gender and culture may result in a complex mix of communication styles among the population. In essence, culture and ethnicity heavily influence communication styles in Malaysia, but the individual's gender and personal traits add further layers of complexity. Interactions among these variables can produce a wide range of communication patterns, demonstrating the need for comprehensive research on how cultural, gender, and personal factors shape communication in Malaysia's diverse society.

**Intercultural Communication**

Intercultural communication is exchanging information or ideas between people from different cultures (Zakaria, 2017). As studied by Simcox and Hodgson (2019), in intercultural

communication, communicators must meet the communication demands and needs of multicultural members. Although numerous studies investigate cross-cultural similarities and variations in beliefs, perceptions, and behavioral results, there is little study on how communication style differences and similarities contribute to intercultural contact.

Along with that, studies on intercultural communication in universities are scarce. As studied by Al Ramiah et. al (2017), Malaysia's three major ethnic groups, Malay, Chinese and Indian were found to have very little meaningful connection with one another and a poor interaction with each other's cultures. Also, the dynamics of ethnic group interaction and the attitudinal effects of these interactions were low. Nevertheless, despite the little interaction among these ethnic groups, most individuals were comfortable communicating with others from the same ethnic in-groups. Ketab et al (2016) stated that individuals of different ethnic groups can have a better understanding of their individual and cultural rights through interaction and education, resulting in better relations. With that being the case, Kleshchina (2018) mentioned that the key approach for improving understanding between different groups is to interact with individuals from various cultures and broaden one's awareness of other people's ways of life. Malaysian Malay culture is known as high context culture. According to Noraini et. al (2018), Malays often communicate with deliberate messages, hoping that others would comprehend it.

Universities play an important role in molding the worldviews of future generations by providing a platform for multicultural students to create new connections and networks. Students are the backbone of a country's modernization efforts and the hope for future progress. As a result, their thoughts and attitudes toward the subject of national unity have a direct effect on the society (Othman et al., 2021). In universities, students gain the willingness and competence to live in a multicultural society and provide the framework for a flexible adaptation of intercultural tolerance (Tregubova et al., 2019). Simultaneously, students will learn to avoid interpreting other students from their own culture, instead they will be aware of the presence of cultural variety and embrace the differences from other cultures while engaging in intercultural interaction (Shukshina et al., 2017). Students have more opportunities to meet and socialize with members of diverse ethnic groups, particularly in higher education institutions and workplace environments (Noraini et. al., 2018).

However, recent studies found that intercultural communication among university students were weak. According to Tamam and Kraus (2017), intercultural communication among Malaysian university students were found to be inadequate. This is caused by the students hesitating to communicate with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Taman and Waheed (2017) also mentioned that the frailty of intercultural interactions in Malaysian society is even more visible among multicultural students at Malaysia's public institutions. Despite the fact that university policies have been redesigned to play a significant role in encouraging national integration, current research has found that intercultural involvement among university students is disturbingly low. Thus, this study opts to examine if there would be any differences between ethnicity in their communication styles.

### **Gender and Communication Styles**

A study by Leaper and Ayres (2007) found that women tend to use more affiliative and attentive language, correlating with Norton's attentive, open, and friendly styles. Women are generally more cooperative in their communication and are more likely to use language that

fosters connection and relationship-building. On the other hand, men tend to use more assertive language, aligning with Norton's dominant and contentious styles. Men often use communication as a tool to exert control and establish status.

More recent research from the past few years further echoes these findings. A study by Franklin et al (2019) found that women were more likely to use language that created social bonds and expressed support, corresponding with Norton's friendly and open styles, while men were more likely to engage in contentious and dominant speech, especially in competitive contexts.

In Malaysia, gender and communication styles may be influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations. Generally, Malaysian society is hierarchical, collectivist, and values harmonious relationships. These factors can impact communication styles and gender roles within the culture. Traditional gender roles in Malaysia often emphasize a clear division of labor and responsibilities, with men being expected to display assertiveness, independence, and dominance, while women are encouraged to be nurturing, submissive, and cooperative. These traditional gender roles can influence communication styles, where men may engage in more direct, assertive, and authoritative communication, while women may adopt a more indirect, cooperative, and nurturing approach. As there is a literature gap in understanding the differences in gender on communication styles, thus this study will answer to this limitation.

## **Method**

### ***Population and sample selection***

The current study implemented a cross-sectional research approach, specifically targeting students aged 19 to 27 from public universities in the Klang Valley. The selection of this research design was rooted in its ability to effectively seize variables of interest within a particular time frame. The research participants included undergraduate students from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), and Universiti Malaya (UM). These institutions were intentionally selected to reflect a wide range of ethnicities, academic levels, and study programs for a balanced sampling.

A total of 380 respondents were chosen based on power analysis calculations to accurately estimate population parameters while maintaining an acceptable degree of statistical power. These participants were part of a population of 44,467 (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2023) Malaysian undergraduate students enrolled in the specified universities. A structured questionnaire was disseminated through an online survey platform for data collection, which ensured wide coverage, preserved participant confidentiality, and facilitated an efficient assembly of responses for subsequent analysis.

## **Data Collection**

### ***Measures***

*Communication styles.* Communicator Style Measure (CSM) developed by Norton (1978) was used to measure 9 communication styles: friendly, attentive, impression leaving, animated, dramatic, argumentative, relaxed, dominant, and open. CSM ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5) with 4 items for each communication style. Example of items and its Cronbach alpha are; friendly: "I readily express admiration for others", "To be friendly, I habitually acknowledge verbally other's contributions", ( $\alpha = .79$ ); attentive: "What I say

usually leaves an impression on people”, “I really like to listen very carefully to people”, ( $\alpha = .81$ ); impression leaving: “I have some nervous mannerisms in my speech”, “I leave a definite impression on people”, ( $\alpha = .83$ ); animated: “My eyes reflect exactly what I am feeling when I communicate”, “I tend to constantly gesture when I communicate”, ( $\alpha = .77$ ); dramatic: “I dramatize a lot”, “I very frequently verbally exaggerate to emphasize a point”, ( $\alpha = .85$ ); argumentative: “When I disagree with somebody I am very quick to challenge them”, “I am very argumentative”, ( $\alpha = .76$ ); relaxed: “I am a very relaxed communicator”, “I have some nervous mannerisms in my speech”, ( $\alpha = .78$ ); dominant: “I have some nervous mannerisms in my speech”, “I am dominant in social situations”, ( $\alpha = .81$ ); open: “Usually I do not tell people much about myself until I get to know them well”, “I am an extremely open communicator”, ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

## Results and Discussion

In the present study, it was noted that males made up 34.2 percent ( $n = 130$ ) of the participants, with females representing the remaining 65.8 percent ( $n = 250$ ). The age of the respondents ranged from 19 to 45, with the most sizable group, 48.7 percent ( $n = 187$ ), being 23 years old. The ages of 24 and 27 both had equal representation, accounting for 8.2 percent ( $n = 31$ ) each. Looking at ethnicity, the largest ethnic group was Malay, making up 85.6 percent ( $n = 326$ ) of the total. This was trailed by Indian participants who represented 7.6 percent ( $n = 29$ ) and Chinese participants who accounted for 6.6 percent ( $n = 25$ ). As for their university affiliations, the majority of the respondents, 67.9 percent ( $n = 258$ ), were from Universiti Putra Malaysia. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia was represented by 21.8 percent ( $n=83$ ) of the participants, while Universiti Malaya made up 10.3 percent ( $n = 39$ ) of the study group.

Table 1

*The differences in ethnicity and communication styles*

Communication styles	Ethnicity						F	Sig.
	Malay		Chinese		Indian			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Friendly	2.65	.84	2.91	.76	2.72	.84	1.182	.308
Impression Leaving	2.97	.79	3.33	.38	2.96	.82	2.538	.800
Relaxed	3.02	.76	2.86	.13	2.85	.57	1.1201	.30
Argumentative	3.07	.79	3.44	.51	2.72	.79	5.693	.04
Attentive	2.64	.79	3.30	.63	2.50	.74	9.069	.00
Animated	2.47	.73	3.08	.38	2.48	.95	8.140	.00
Dramatic	3.05	.59	2.99	.09	2.66	.16	6.878	.01
Open	3.08	.47	2.40	.43	3.03	.64	28.357	.00
Dominant	3.22	.85	2.83	.38	2.97	.66	3.632	.03

The results from the table 1, MANOVA analysis of communication styles among Malay, Chinese, and Indian respondents highlight significant differences in the six communication styles. These styles are argumentative [ $F(2,377) = 5.693, p < .05$ ], attentive [ $F(2,377) = 9.069, p < .05$ ], animated [ $F(2,377) = 8.140, p < .05$ ], dramatic [ $F(2,377) = 6.878, p < .05$ ], open [ $F(2,377) = 2.538, p < .05$ ], and dominant [ $F(2,377) = 3.632, p < .05$ ]. On the other hand, no significant differences were discovered for the friendly [ $F(2,377) = 1.182, p > .05$ ], impression

leaving [ $F(2,377) = 2.538, p >.05$ ], and relaxed [ $F(2,377) = 1.1201, p >.05$ ] communication styles.

The analysis of the study reveals more similarities than differences in the communication styles of the three ethnic groups under consideration, possibly due to shared cultural characteristics. The lack of significant differences in the styles of being friendly, impression-leaving, and relaxed suggests that Malaysians generally see themselves as embodying these traits. Malays, in particular, tend to be more relaxed, seeking environments that promote peace, harmony, kindness, flexibility, and mutual respect (Balakrishnan, 2022). Yet, each ethnic group tends to favor its unique communication style during interactions. The styles showing significant differences among the three groups include being argumentative, attentive, animated, dramatic, open, and dominant.

Asians, including Malaysians, tend to see themselves as more dramatic compared to Americans. Although Malaysian cultural values highlight social harmony and relationships, there is a tendency for the Chinese to be argumentative, and for the Malays to be open and dominant. Previous research suggested that Malays were more argumentative than Chinese university students (Arina, 2018). However, the current study's findings indicate that Chinese respondents are, in fact, more argumentative than Malays. In the digital age, the influence of the West seems to have made Malays more open-minded and dominant in their communication.

Table 2

*The difference in gender and communication styles*

Communication styles	Gender				t	Sig.
	Male		Female			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Friendly	2.78	.84	2.61	.76	1.835	.67
Impression Leaving	2.85	.78	3.07	.76	-2.740	.06
Relaxed	2.92	.42	3.04	.84	-1.605	.11
Argumentative	3.01	.79	3.10	.79	-1.028	.35
Attentive	2.70	.93	2.66	.72	.419	.68
Animated	2.55	.70	2.49	.76	.87	.42
Dramatic	2.84	.40	3.11	.60	-4.621	.01
Open	2.82	.54	3.13	.45	-6.033	.00
Dominant	3.00	.64	3.27	.89	-3.027	.03

The results of the MANOVA from Table 2, exploring communication styles between male and female respondents, revealed significant differences in three communication styles: dramatic [ $t(378) = -4.621, p <.05$ ], open [ $t(378) = -6.033, p <.05$ ], and dominant [ $t(378) = -3.027, p <.05$ ]. This affirms that gender influences the extent to which individuals are dramatic, open, and dominant. However, no significant differences were found for friendly [ $t(378) = 1.835, p >.05$ ], impression leaving [ $t(378) = -2.740, p >.05$ ], relaxed [ $t(378) = -2.740, p >.05$ ], argumentative [ $t(378) = -1.028, p >.05$ ], attentive [ $t(378) = 0.419, p >.05$ ], and animated [ $t(378) = 0.87, p >.05$ ] styles.

The study's analysis suggests that similarities in communication styles between genders are more prevalent than differences, possibly because both genders share similar communication styles. The six styles with no significant gender difference reveal that both genders see themselves as friendly, impression-leaving, relaxed, argumentative, attentive, and animated. This shows more parallels than contrasts between males and females. Although past research (Barnett et. al., 2021) found that males tend to be more relaxed, these findings show that females also embody a relaxed communication style. Similarly, while previous findings indicate that women score somewhat higher on conscientiousness (argumentative) and are more attentive, these differences were not found to be significant in this study.

Conversely, females perceive themselves as more dramatic, open, and dominant. Previous research suggested no significant gender differences on Openness at the domain level, yet this study indicates that females are more open than males. Furthermore, despite the conventional view that men tend to be more dominant and display higher levels of these traits, this study shows that females can also be more dominant than males, challenging Richmond and McCroskey (2012) argument about males' perceived independence, dominance, and task roles.

### **The Significance of Ethnic and Gender Differences in Communication Styles from Malaysian Perspective**

This study highlights certain differences in communication styles between males and females. Males tend to be more oriented towards being friendly, attentive, and animated. Conversely, females are perceived to be more impactful in leaving impressions, relaxed, argumentative, dramatic, open, and dominant than males. The communication style differences observed between Malaysian males and females could be attributed to various sociocultural factors. Males being more friendly, attentive, and animated may be a result of societal expectations and traditional gender roles in Malaysia. Society often expects men to initiate and maintain social interactions, therefore fostering more "outgoing" communication traits such as friendliness and attentiveness (Thomas & Chess, 1981). The animation in their communication style could be a cultural adaptation to express emotion and enthusiasm more vividly in social contexts (Matsumoto & Juang, 2016).

On the other hand, Malaysian females exhibiting more impact in leaving impressions, being relaxed, argumentative, dramatic, open, and dominant could be linked to changes in societal dynamics and expectations towards women. Women across the globe, including Malaysia, have been continually challenging traditional gender roles and demonstrating their capacities in various domains. This shift may explain why they are seen as more impactful in leaving impressions and more dominant. They might use these communication styles to establish their presence and navigate their roles effectively (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Being argumentative and dramatic may also be a reflection of their increased assertiveness and willingness to express emotions openly (Gartzia & Lopez-Zafra, 2014).

Being more relaxed and open could be associated with their nurturing role in society. Traditionally, women are viewed as caregivers and are expected to create a warm, welcoming environment (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This perception could have influenced the observed relaxed communication style. The openness could be a sign of a growing trend where women are encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas freely. However, it is essential to remember that these interpretations might not apply universally to all individuals and are significantly

influenced by their individual personality traits, upbringing, and experiences (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000).

In addition, each of the three major ethnic groups has distinct dominant communication styles.

Malays are commonly seen as relaxed, dramatic, open, and dominant. Chinese individuals tend to exhibit styles that are friendly, impactful in leaving impressions, attentive, animated, and argumentative. However, Indians appear to lag behind Malays and Chinese in their communication skills. This phenomenon is likely due to the fact that an individual's cultural perspectives and attitudes towards others are shaped by their social and familial environments in Malaysia.

The communication styles among Malaysian ethnic groups can be influenced by a variety of factors including cultural norms, societal expectations, and historical contexts. Malays, who form the majority ethnic group in Malaysia, are known to value harmony and community cohesion highly. This cultural orientation may explain their relaxed communication style, as they may prioritize maintaining a peaceful, harmonious environment characterized by kindness, flexibility, and mutual respect (Merkin, 2009). Their dramatic, open, and dominant styles might stem from a tradition of story-telling and an openness in expressing themselves, coupled with the dominant position they hold in society (Krauss et al., 2014).

Malaysian Chinese, on the other hand, have cultural roots in Confucianism, which emphasize respect, diligence, and propriety. These values might contribute to their friendly and attentive communication styles, as they seek to show respect and attentiveness towards others (Chua, 2012). The higher level of animation could be linked to a greater emphasis on expressiveness and display of emotion, and their argumentative style might be a reflection of the value placed on debate and intellectual exploration (Kim & Markus, 2002). The impact in leaving impressions could be related to their emphasis on face-saving and presenting a favourable impression to maintain social harmony (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

### **The impact and implications and future directions**

The implications of these findings highlight the profound influence of cultural and societal norms on communication styles within different ethnic and gender groups in Malaysia. They underscore the importance of considering these factors when designing communication strategies, interventions, or programs in diverse Malaysian communities. For instance, businesses, educators, and policymakers could use this knowledge to tailor their messages to align with the communication styles prevalent in their target audiences. Similarly, healthcare providers could adapt their communication approach to ensure that they convey important health information in a culturally sensitive and effective manner.

However, the study also brings to light potential stereotypes or biases that may be present in society. For instance, the perception of Indian Malaysians lagging behind in communication skills could indicate existing biases and stereotypes that need to be addressed. More research and interventions may be needed to challenge these stereotypes and promote greater understanding and respect for the diversity within the Malaysian society.

For future research, it would be useful to delve deeper into the factors influencing these communication styles. For example, how do socio-economic factors, education, or exposure



to different cultures affect one's communication style? Understanding the impact of these factors could provide a more nuanced understanding of communication styles. It would also be valuable to investigate how these communication styles affect various outcomes, such as job success, relationship satisfaction, or health outcomes. Lastly, longitudinal studies could provide insights into how communication styles evolve over time in response to changes in societal norms or cultural influences. This could shed light on the dynamic nature of communication styles and their adaptability to changing societal contexts.

### **Conclusion**

Conducting research on gender and ethnicity in communication styles is crucial due to its significant implications in many areas of society. Understanding these differences can lead to more effective communication, enhancing interpersonal interactions, conflict resolution, and education. It allows for the development of tailored communication approaches that respect cultural norms and individual preferences, promoting more effective dialogue and understanding within diverse societies. Additionally, this research can reveal potential biases or stereotypes, enabling a more nuanced discussion around these issues and fostering inclusivity and respect for diversity. Overall, these insights contribute towards a more empathetic and inclusive society that values and leverages its rich cultural diversity.

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