

## Communication Competency and Cultural Impact

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**Abstract:** The focus of this study sets out to address issues, such as whether the Sri Lankan Sinhalese speaking students in traditional communities better develop interdependent concept than the Sinhalese speaking students living in a different cultural context, and to what extent a cultural context affects the Students' perceptions of self-concept on interdependence and independence. This research compares a sample of 40 Sinhalese students living in Colombo in Sri Lanka and a sample of 20 Sinhalese students living in New Delhi in India. The respondents were asked to complete a structured self-completion questionnaire emailed to them. The findings seem to suggest that culture teaches one how to think, conditions one how to feel, and instructs one how to act, especially how to interact with others. It concludes that both the Sinhalese speaking students in Colombo and in New Delhi have well-developed interdependent self-concept and independent self-concept. It is also suggested that the traditional cultural values brought with the native Sinhalese students have been well-preserved even in a different cultural context.

**Keywords:** Self- Concept, Communication Competence, Interdependence and Independence.

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of communication competence is recognized universally by philosophers and scientists of human interaction and has been extensively researched in the West, especially in the US (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 1989). Due to the rapid development of communication technologies, the world is becoming smaller and various cultures are surging ahead in this "global village" (Guan, 1998). Due to the growing international economic and intercultural exchanges, multicultural and multiethnic interactions and "clashes" are unavoidable. As a result, researchers and scientists of human interaction are being motivated to develop the human aspects, such as knowledge and communication skills (Chua, 2013). In order to share in the "global village" and to achieve effective interpersonal communication, people have to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills (as indicators of communication competence defined by Hammer, 1989), the "human aspects", so that they can better understand, empathize, collaborate, and interact among people from within and between cultures (Miyahara, 1998).

Although numerous studies have been conducted on communication both from cultural and cross-cultural perspectives, most analyses of communication, however, ignore the relationship that "communication and culture mutually influence each other. The culture in which individuals are socialized influences the way they communicate, and the way that individuals communicate can change the culture they share over time" (Gudykunst, 1997, p. 327). It is this gap in the relationship between communication and culture that the researcher expects to focus on in this study. This research investigates in what ways the Sinhalese traditional values influence their perceptions of communication competence and style. In addition, a sample of Sinhalese undergraduates living in New Delhi in India is compared to a sample of Sinhalese undergraduates living in Colombo. This will provide information on the possible influence of different cultural context on Sinhalese students. In general, it is intended to gain an insight into cultural impact on Sinhalese students' self-concept on communication competence in two different religio-cultural contexts.

The main purpose of the study sets out to address issues, such as whether the Sinhalese students in Sri Lanka better develop interdependent self-concept than the Sinhalese students in India, and to what extent Indian cultural context affects the Sinhalese students' perceptions of self-concept on interdependence (collectivistic) and independence

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(individualistic). The study also sets out to address the issue, such as whether the traditional cultural values brought with the Sinhalese students are well-preserved while the dimensions of independence in them are well-developed due to the influence of the Indian cultural context in which they are socialized.

### **Definition of Communication Competence**

Hewstone (1988) defined communication as message exchange between two or more participants which is characterized by the intentional, conscious (at some level of awareness) use of mutually intelligible symbol systems. Sarbaugh (1988) preferred to define communication as the process of using signs and symbols that elicit meanings in another person or persons for whatever intent, or even without conscious intent, on the part of the person producing the symbols or signs. Hammer (1989, p. 247) pointed out that “communication competence has been examined by scholars from a variety of academic disciplines under such diverse linguistic umbrellas as interpersonal effectiveness, social competence, fundamental competence, rhetorical competence, and linguistic competence”. Hammer believes that these five communication skills more or less influence people’s communication behaviours. Van Ek’s (1986) model of “communicative ability” comprises six competencies—linguistic competency, sociolinguistic proficiency, discourse competency, strategic competency, socio-cultural competency, and social competency.

Wiemann (1977) proposed a model of competency with five components—empathy, affiliation/support, social relaxation, behavioral flexibility, and interaction management. In his model, communicative competency is defined as the ability of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviours in order that he/she may successfully accomplish his/her own interpersonal goals while maintaining the face and line of his/her fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation (p. 198). According to Lustig and Koester (1999), although there is still some disagreement among communication scholars about how best to conceptualize and measure communication competence, there is increasing agreement about certain of its fundamental characteristics. The following definition of communication competence illustrates the key components of their approach: Competent communication is interaction that is perceived as effective in fulfilling certain rewarding objectives in a way that is also appropriate to the context in which the interaction occurs. Communication competence involves interactants making social judgments concerning the “goodness” of self and others’ communicative performances (Spitzberg & Coupach, 1984).

### **Interdependent and Independent Self-Concept**

Gudykunst (1997) had identified three individual-level factors that mediate the influence of cultural-level. They are values, personality orientations, and self-concept. In this section, self-concept are focused and explicated. The prototypical view of self in North American and Asian cultures varies markedly (Singelis, 1994). Markus and Kitayama (2020) had delineated these two views of the self in relation to the collective. They propose that people in the West hold an independent view of the self that emphasizes the separateness, internal attributes, and uniqueness of individuals (the independent self-concept) and that many non-Indian people hold an interdependent image of self-stressing connectedness, social context, and relationships (the interdependent self-concept). Singelis (1994) contended that like independent and interdependent self-concept (individual difference variables), individualism-collectivism (a cultural variable) is concerned with the relationship of the individual to the collective. The central meaning of individualism is giving priority to personal goals over in-group goals. Collectivism places an emphasis on subordinating personal goals to those of the in-group (Triandis, 1988). According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), individualism has been associated with most northern and Indian regions of Europe, North America (especially the United States), and Australia. Cultures in Asia, Africa, South America, and the Pacific islands region have been identified as collective. These are respectively the same regions where independent and interdependent self-concept are prototypical views of self. The independent construal of self takes the view that an individual’s self is a unique, independent entity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Having the goal of independence “requires construing oneself as an individual whose behaviour is organized and made meaningful primarily by reference to one’s own internal repertoire of thoughts, feelings, and actions, rather than by reference to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others” (p. 226).

The important tasks for people emphasizing an independent self-concepts are to be unique, strive for their own goals, express themselves, and to be direct. Those with well-developed independent self-concept will gain self-esteem through expressing the self and validating their internal attributes. The independent self tends to express itself directly and to say what it thinks. It is one’s inner attributes that are most salient for the independent self-concept in “regulating behavior and that are assumed, both by the actor and by the observer alike, to be diagnostic of the actor” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 227). An interdependent self-concept is defined as a “flexible, variable” self that emphasizes: (a) external, public features, such as positions, roles, and relationships; (b) belonging and fitting in; (c) occupying one’s proper place and engaging in appropriate action; and (d) being indirect in communication and “reading others’ minds” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Singelis (1994) argued that it is proposed that individuals (in any culture) have both independent and interdependent self-concept. However, the more collectivistic an individual’s culture is, the stronger his or her interdependent self-concept are and the weaker his or her independent self-concept are. Given the ontological

difference between individuals with independent and interdependent self-concept, the meanings and values that people attach to what appears to be the same communication behaviour greatly vary.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Questions

As outlined in the introduction, this research is generally concerned with the cultural impact on Sinhalese undergraduates' self-concept on interdependence and independence. To summarize, given the arguments presented in the literature review and the basic aim in the introduction, there are three research questions:

RQ 1. What is the relationship between perceptions of oneself as interdependent vs. independent (cultural self-concept) and perceptions of communication competence?

RQ 2. Does education in Indian context influence Sinhalese undergraduates' perceptions of self and communication competence?

RQ 3. Do the perceptions of self and communication competence of the Sinhalese undergraduates in India differ from that of the Sinhalese undergraduates living in Sri Lanka?

### Participants

The most convenient cultural informants were university students (Babbie, 1995), as collaborators in this study were all Sinhalese students studying in universities to serve this research purpose. The procedure was to collect responses online from 60 participants from any class level, but from as wide a range of majors as possible. The subjects were 60 Sinhalese students chosen from two universities' population. One sample of the Sinhalese students ( $N = 40$ ) was randomly selected from Sri Jayewardenepura University in Sri Lanka, who were all undergraduate students, and the other sample of Sinhalese ( $N = 20$ ) was selected from Delhi University in India, who were all undergraduate students.

Biographical data gathered from the questionnaire revealed that the average age of the two overall samples ( $N = 59$ ; one missing) was 22.75 years ( $SD = 4.63$ ), the youngest was 18 years and the eldest was 41 years (see Table 1); 50% ( $N = 30$ ) of whom were women, and 50% ( $N = 30$ ) of whom were men. In addition, 58.3% ( $N = 35$ ) of the total respondents' majors were Natural Sciences and Engineering, and 40.7% ( $N = 24$ ) of whom were Liberal Arts & Social Science; 53.3% ( $N = 32$ ) were first-year undergraduates, 30% ( $N = 18$ ) were second-year undergraduates, and 16.7% ( $N = 10$ ) were third-year undergraduates. In the two samples, 50% ( $N = 30$ ) of whom were the only child in their families with one missing ( $SD = 0.50$ ), and 48.3% ( $N = 29$ ) were not so.

**Table-1: Descriptive statistics for respondents' background information**

	Age	Gender	Major
Youngest	18	30 (M)	35 NSE*
Eldest	41	30 (F)	24 LASS*
Average	22.75		
Range	23		
SD	4.63	0.50	0.49
Total	59	60	59

NSE\* = Natural Science and Engineering.

LASS\* = Liberal Arts & Social Sciences.

\*\* = Including one graduate student.

In the Sample 1 (the Sinhalese students living in Sri Lanka), the average age was 20.45 ( $SD = 1.17$ ), the youngest was 18 years and the eldest was 23 years (see Table 2), 45% ( $N = 18$ ) of whom were women, and 55% ( $N = 22$ ) of whom were men. In addition, 72.5% ( $N = 29$ ) of the respondents' majors in the sample were Natural Science & Engineering ( $SD = 0.45$ ), and 27.5% ( $N = 11$ ) of whom were Liberal Arts & Social Science; 42.5% ( $N = 17$ ) were first-year undergraduates, 32.5% ( $N = 13$ ) were second-year undergraduates, and 25% ( $N = 10$ ) were third-year undergraduates ( $SD = 1.17$ ), and the standard deviation was 0.81. In Sample 1, 57.5% ( $N = 23$ ) of whom were the only child in their families with one missing ( $SD = 0.49$ ), and 40% ( $N = 16$ ) were not.

**Table-2: Descriptive data for sample 1 background information**

	Age	Gender	Major
Youngest	18	22 (M)	29 NSE*
Eldest	23	18 (F)	11 LASS*
Average	20.45		
Range	5		
SD	1.17	0.50	0.45
Total	40	40	40

NSE\* = Natural Science and Engineering.

LASS\* = Liberal Arts & Social Science.

\*\* = Including one graduate student.

In the Sample 2 (the Sinhalese students living in India), the average age was 27.58 with one missing ( $SD = 5.46$ ), the youngest was 21 years and the eldest was 41 years (see Table 3), 60% ( $N = 12$ ) of whom were women, and 40% ( $N = 8$ ) of whom were men ( $SD = 0.50$ ). In addition, 30% ( $N = 6$ ) of the respondents' majors in the sample were Natural Science & Engineering (one missing), and 65% ( $N = 13$ ) of whom were Liberal Arts & Social Science ( $SD = 0.47$ ); 75% ( $N = 15$ ) were first-year graduates, 25% ( $N = 5$ ) were second-year graduates, and the standard deviation was 0.44. In sample 2, 35% ( $N = 7$ ) of whom were the only child in their families ( $SD = 0.48$ ), and 65% ( $N = 13$ ) were not.

## MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

Due to the geographical hurdle, individual interviews were not considered in this research, although such a qualitative research survey is of great importance for sociologists and social anthropologists who want to find out how different cultures (or sub-cultures) work (Gillham, 2000), and especially it can help to complement and cross-validate the data gathered from the questionnaire survey. Based on Gillham's (2000) summarized eight advantages of questionnaires, the researcher decided, therefore, that the questionnaire seemed to represent an appropriate tool for the present survey, and that students might be reasonably assumed to have a personal interest in the subject, thus provoking a worthwhile response.

**Table-3: Descriptive data for sample 2 background information**

	Age	Gender	Major
Youngest	21	8 (M)	6 NSE*
Eldest	41	12(F)	13 LASS*
Average	27.58		
Range	20		
SD	5.46	0.50	0.47
Total	19	20	19

NSE\* = Natural Science and Engineering.

LASS\* = Liberal Arts & Social Science.

\*\* = Including one graduate student.

Babbie (1995) observed that questionnaires need to be carefully developed, tested, and debugged before they are administered on a larger scale. Initially, therefore, a pilot study was carried out among 10 Sinhalese students from both countries, who were not subsequently included in the survey. This was principally to determine the length of time taken to complete the questionnaire and to reveal any difficulties or ambiguities in question wording. As a result, some instructions were modified for clearer interpretation by respondents, some statements were re-phrased and some difficult terms in some statements were translated into Sinhalese so that they could be more easily understood.

To answer the research questions, the research survey was conducted by means of a structured self-completion questionnaire online with closed questions to the data expected. The questionnaires were emailed to the undergraduates taking their email addresses through personal contacts. Then, the completed questionnaires were sent back to the researcher by e-mail. The items in the questionnaire were developed to measure the pattern of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour composing independent and interdependent self-concept as described previously. Twenty-four items were culled from Singelis' (1994) 45 SCS items. In addition, the questionnaire included five items drawn from the scale used by McCrosskey (1982); three items drawn from the scale used by Duran (1983); one item from the scale used by Wiemann (1977), and three items from Putnam and Wilson (1982). Some items were rewritten to

make them more suitable for a student sample. Altogether, 48 items were included in the final self-conception communication competence.

Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the items in a 7-point Likert type format taking between 10 and 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of: background information, style and feelings about communication, interdependent items, communication behaviour, and independent items, which in fact are three separate scales preferred. The order of the overall items was purposely counter-balanced, so that this would not bore the respondents.

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In this section, the results and data analysis are presented in several steps. To analyze the data collected, some specific statistical techniques were employed. With the help of SPSS version 22.0, Cronbach's alpha reliability was calculated to measure the reliabilities of the three subscales in the questionnaire. In addition, bivariate analysis, the independent, and related *t*-tests, were used to reduce and summarize data, and find out the possible significant differences and correlations between variables.

### Reliability of Items on the Three Scales

As Bryman and Cramer (1997, p. 63) said, the reliability of a measure refers to its consistency, which is often taken to suggest two separate attributes—external and internal reliability. In this section, internal reliabilities of the three subscales were tested by computing Cronbach's alphas in this study. Cronbach's alpha for Communication Competence Scale was 0.81 ( $N = 60$ ), which was judged adequate, at the 0.8 criterion (Bryman & Cramer, 1997). This subscale was in fact internally reliable since the alpha coefficient was 0.81, which was regarded as internally reliable for the purpose of this research. Therefore, Cronbach's alpha reliability was satisfactory for this subscale. All items included on this scale that emerged clearly reflect individuals' communication beliefs, feelings, and behavior.

The Cronbach's alpha for Interdependence Scale was 0.72 ( $N = 60$ ), and one item was deleted, since it did not belong to the group. The finding was considered adequate, though this was just short of the 0.8 criterion (Bryman & Cramer, 1997). This subscale was in fact internally reliable as the alpha coefficient was 0.72, which was regarded as internally reliable for the purpose of this research. Finally, Cronbach's alpha for Independence Scale was 0.68 ( $N = 60$ ), which was considered moderate and adequate, though this was just short of the 0.8 criterion (Bryman & Cramer, 1997). This subscale was in fact internally reliable since the alpha coefficient was 0.68, which was regarded as internally reliable for the purpose of this research. Therefore, Cronbach's alpha reliability was acceptable for this dimension of self-concept, which is consistent with Markus and Kitayama's (2020) conception of independent self-concept.

### Relationship between Perceptions of Interdependent vs. Independent Self-Concept and Communication Competence

To answer the Research Question 1 (What is the relationship between perceptions of oneself as interdependent vs. independent self-concept and perceptions of communication competence?), the independent samples *t*-test and bivariate analysis were utilized. The aim was to find out their differences and relationships respectively for this research purpose. The independent samples *t*-test was performed between the two samples. The Sample 1 was the Sinhalese students in Sri Lanka and the Sample 2 was the Sinhalese students in India. The *t*-test indicated that there was no significant difference between the Sinhalese students and the Sinhalese self-concept on interdependence scale ( $t = 0.589$ ) and communication competence scale ( $t = 0.854$ ). The comparison of means showed that the two samples scored very close on the items loaded on interdependence (S1:  $M = 5.16$ ; S2:  $M = 5.04$ ) and competence (S1:  $M = 3.53$ ; S2:  $M = 3.31$ ) scales. The findings disclosed that interdependent self-concept did not correlate with communication competence and self-concept.

### Independence vs. communication competence

The independent samples *t*-test showed that there were no significant differences between the two sets' self-concept on independence aspect ( $t = 0.824$ ,  $df = 58$ ,  $p = 0.41 > 0.05$ ) and communication competence aspect ( $t = 0.854$ ,  $df = 56$ ,  $p = 0.39 > 0.05$ ). An analysis of means indicated that the two samples recorded very close on the items packed on independence (S1:  $M = 4.60$ ,  $N = 40$ ; S2:  $M = 4.41$ ,  $N = 20$ ) and competence (S1:  $M = 3.53$ ,  $N = 38$  with two data missing; S2:  $M = 3.31$ ,  $N = 20$ ) scales. From the correlations obtained from bivariate correlation, we learned that there was a moderate correlation between the two dimensions. The findings disclosed that independent self-concept negatively correlated with communication competence self-concept, for instance,  $r = -0.346$ ,  $N = 60$ ,  $p = 0.008 < 0.01$ .

### Self-Perceptions of Communication Competence

Research Questions 2 and 3 questioned if Indian cultural context would impact on the Sinhalese students' perceptions of communication competence, and if their perceptions would differ from the Sinhalese students in Sri

Lanka. This was assessed by calculating the differences between the two samples' perceptions of the communication competence dimension, and thus the independent *t*-test was run.

**Table-4: Independent t-test (Average Mean Scores): Self Perceptions of Communication Competence**

Item	Sample 1	Mean	Sample 2	Mean
Tense Q6	40	3.33	20	3.40
Nervous Q7	40	3.66	20	3.65
dislike discussion Q8	40	3.15	20	2.85
Feel nervous Q9	40	3.35	20	2.95
Afraid Q10	40	3.23	20	2.95
Hesitate Q11	40	3.68	20	3.35
Not like to share Q12	40	2.88	20	2.20
Personal relations Q17	40	2.10	20	2.35
Seem different Q30	40	3.85	20	3.85
Shy away Q31	40	4.60	20	4.45
Keep quiet Q33	40	3.60	20	3.65
Avoid Q34	40	3.45	20	2.95

The findings indicated that there was no significant difference between the two samples' self perceptions of the competence ( $t = 0.854$ ,  $df = 56$ ,  $p = 0.397 > 0.05$ ). Table 4 summarized the results of means attained from each of the respondents' reports, which revealed that the two samples recorded very close on the competence aspect (S1: the lowest:  $M = 2.10$ , the highest:  $M = 4.60$ ; S2: the lowest:  $M = 2.20$ , the highest:  $M = 4.10$ ). Hence, we may deduce that Indian cultural context did not clearly influence the Sinhalese' perceptions of communication competence.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In answering Research Question 1, the findings of the two independent samples *t*-tests propose that there are no substantial differences between the groups' self-concept on interdependence aspect and competence aspect, independence dimension, and competence dimension.

The first independent samples *t*-test shows that there are no significant differences between the two samples' self perceptions of interdependence aspect and communication competence aspect. Moreover, the bivariate correlation indicates that there is no significant correlation between the two dimensions. In other words, interdependent self-concept do not correlate with communication competence self-concept. The findings suggest that the traditional values of the students (interdependence dimension) do not affect their communication competence. For example, the two samples score very high on item 19 on interdependence aspect (The item was "It is important for me to maintain harmony within my group"): S1:  $M = 6.38$ ,  $N = 40$ ; S2:  $M = 6.10$ ,  $N = 20$ . Comparably, they score high on item 31 on communication competence aspect (Item was "I shy away from topics that are sources of disputes"): S1:  $M = 4.60$ ,  $N = 40$ ; S2:  $M = 4.45$ ,  $N = 20$ . This supports Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey's (1988) and Gudykunst's (1997) argument that the culture in which individuals are socialized influences the way they communicate. It also supports L. L. Chu's (1988) position that to maintain harmony, people always try to avoid dissenting opinions carefully, and conversations are not only carefully worded but also calculated. In addition, the findings have refuted Klopff's (2019) argument that many Asians, less conversational and assertive in interpersonal circumstances than their Indian equivalents, have been categorized as communicatively concerned (as cited in Dharmawardene *et al.*, 2020). The independent samples *t*-test further reveals that there is no significant difference between the two groups' self-concept on independence aspect and communication competence aspect. Although this *t*-test displays no significant difference between the two samples' self perceptions of the two extents (independence and competence), the bivariate analysis indicates that there is a slight correlation between the two aspects. The results show that independent self-concept negatively correlate with communication competence self-concept.

The results suggest that the independence of Sinhalese students in India is also well-developed, and when the competence items are overturned scoring them, those students also score high on communication competence, they consider they are competent. This indicates that independence influences the individuals' communication competence. Further, the respondents' means clearly reflect the Sinhalese students living both in Sri Lanka and India being independent, unique. The results are consistent with Singelis' (1994) argument that Asian students have both well-developed interdependent self-concept and independent self-concept.

The findings for Research Question numbers 2 and 3 reveal no significant differences between the two samples' perceptions of the communication competence based on their mean values. We can suggest that an Indian cultural context did not influence the Sinhalese' perceptions of communication competence such as communication styles and beliefs. But most of the Sinhalese may be confronting with the difficulty adjusting them to new cultural context, which is in fact central to the acculturation process (Singelis, 1994). Besides, the period of time they have stayed in India and how often they communicate with the native speakers are all the key areas that are beyond this study and need further examination in the future study.

To conclude, this study investigated the relationship between communication and culture. It has explored in what ways the Sinhalese traditional values which are defined as cultural self-concept, influence Sinhalese students' perceptions of communication competence and style. In addition, it may help stakeholders to obtain an understanding into cultural impact on Sinhalese students' self-concept on communication competence in the traditional Sri Lankan cultural context and Indian cultural context.

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