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## Cultural Dichotomy In Communication Preferences: Unveiling The Dynamic Interplay Between Secular And Islamic Contexts

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### Abstract

*This study investigates the contrasting perspectives on language and communication between Islamic and secular cultures, shedding light on how these differences shape the construction of persuasive messages and effective communication strategies. Employing various frameworks for analyzing cultural variations, we develop a comprehensive chart delineating the "cultural communication preferences" of Islamic and secular societies.*

*In Islamic culture, communication emphasizes form over function, effect over accuracy, and image over meaning. This emphasis reflects broader cultural values and norms, where the aesthetics of language and the emotional impact of communication hold significant sway. By contrast, secular societies often prioritize clarity, precision, and transparency in communication, placing a premium on conveying explicit meaning and logical coherence. Recognizing these divergent cultural orientations is crucial for fostering effective cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding. By understanding the cultural nuances that underpin communication preferences, both Islamic and secular societies can navigate interactions more adeptly, particularly in written and oral communication contexts, public relations initiatives, and considerations of professional ethics.*

*This study underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness in facilitating successful intercultural communication. By acknowledging and respecting the distinct communication styles and preferences of different cultures, individuals and organizations can foster more meaningful and productive exchanges, ultimately contributing to greater harmony and cooperation in an increasingly interconnected global landscape.*

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background of the Study

Scholars have increasingly emphasized the necessity of a theoretically grounded examination of cultural differences to enhance practitioners' cultural awareness. This study specifically addresses the incorporation of intercultural communication dynamics into practical applications. It delves into<sup>1</sup> the distinct preferences of Islamic and secular cultures in structuring persuasive and engaging messages, highlighting the implications for practitioners operating in both contexts.

Although these cultural preferences vary significantly, many differences remain latent, existing beneath individuals' conscious awareness. Without a deliberate effort to understand the distinctions between cultures, individuals may perceive differences through the lens of their own cultural framework, leading to the phenomenon of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism results in the interpretation of cultural differences as inherently negative

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rather than neutral, as noted by Norman Daniels, who observed that differences, when unrecognized, are often judged as right or wrong.

Through a cross-cultural rhetorical analysis, this study aims to raise awareness of the cultural disparities between Islamic and secular rhetorical styles. By bringing these differences to the forefront of practitioners' consciousness, the study seeks to foster greater understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity, ultimately facilitating more effective intercultural communication practices.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In broad terms, this study sought to investigate the distinct preferences of two cultures - Islamic and secular - regarding the construction of persuasive and captivating messages. More specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research inquiries:

1. What characterize the communication preferences within Islamic culture?
2. What define the communication preferences within secular culture?
3. In what ways do these respective cultural communication preferences diverge?

### **Objectives of the Study**

The principal aim of this research is to undertake a rigorous analysis of the existing albeit restricted, and occasionally contradictory, body of research on cultural communication patterns prevalent in Muslim societies. The scholarly inquiry into communicative phenomena has been notably deficient within the realm of intercultural communication, failing to comprehensively encapsulate the nuanced dynamics of human interaction. The ensuing meta-analysis and comprehensive assessment aspire to catalyze additional and more expansive intercultural research endeavors characterized by inclusivity and methodological rigor.

In particular, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Define the term "Muslim" and establish clear parameters for discussing communicative phenomena within this context.
- Undertake descriptive and empirical investigations of communication patterns within Muslim culture, drawing insights from various interdisciplinary perspectives.
- Conclude by proposing strategies to bridge the gap between Islamic and secular cultural communication patterns, thereby fostering better understanding and communication between these two domains.

### **Theoretical Lens**

To grasp the disparity between these two cultures, it is imperative to first discern the fundamental distinctions between them. Many scholars in the field of intercultural studies perceive Islamic and secular cultures as diametrically opposed. Various theoretical frameworks have been proposed by intercultural scholars to delineate these differences:

#### **High-context and Low-context:**

One of the most renowned cultural continuums is Hall's high-context and low-context cultures. Hall posits that meaning and context are intricately intertwined. In low-context cultures, such as the secular culture, meaning predominantly resides in the language code rather than the context. Consequently, communication tends to be specific, explicit, and analytical. Conversely, in high-context cultures, meaning is deeply embedded in the context, necessitating an understanding of contextual cues for full comprehension.

#### **Indirect and Direct:**

Scholars have also distinguished between direct and indirect communication styles in Islamic and secular cultures. Levine introduced the cultural dichotomy of directness versus indirectness and clarity versus ambiguity in communication patterns. Secular culture

typically favors clear and direct communication, while ambiguity and indirectness are more prevalent in Islamic culture, where emotional richness takes precedence over precision.

#### **Doing and Being:**

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck proposed another significant cultural dichotomy: the orientation towards activity versus being. The secular culture tends to prioritize "doing," emphasizing achievement and measurable accomplishments, whereas "being" cultures, such as Islamic culture, place greater value on an individual's essence rather than their actions.

#### **Oral and Literate:**

Anthropologists have long examined the distinctions between oral and literate dominant societies. Literate cultures prioritize factual accuracy and reasoning, while oral cultures emphasize emotional resonance and audience involvement. In oral cultures, style and audience relations often supersede the informational aspects of a message.

#### **Linear and Non-linear:**

Similar to the oral/literate framework, intercultural scholar Carey Dodd suggests a distinction between linear and non-linear thought patterns. Linear cultures present information sequentially, focusing on beginnings and ends, while non-linear cultures feature multiple themes and process information simultaneously, often relying on images rather than words.

These theoretical frameworks offer valuable insights into the cultural differences between Islamic and secular societies, providing a foundation for understanding their distinct communication preferences and patterns.

### **METHODOLOGY**

This section is divided into three primary sub-sections, encompassing discussions on: (1) the individuals constituting the research sample; (2) the diverse instruments utilized to obtain our findings; and (3) the methodologies governing the administration of these instruments.

#### **Subjects**

The participants in this study were drawn from two distinct populations: Fifteen (15) non-Muslim technical writing instructors from Cotabato City State University, and fifteen (15) male Maguindanaon Ustadz (Islamic scholars) who graduated from the Islamic University in Madina, Saudi Arabia, and currently reside in Cotabato City. The fifteen technical writing instructors responded to and reviewed the vignettes in English, as anticipated, while the Ustadz provided their responses to English vignettes translated into Maguindanaon.

It is pertinent to provide insight into the specific characteristics of the two universities attended by the participants, as it holds significance for our research. The Islamic University of Madina, situated in a Middle Eastern context, was initially chartered and accredited by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1863. Over time, it transformed into a non-denominational institution of Islamic education, welcoming students from diverse backgrounds. Its graduates are esteemed as Muftis or reputable figures knowledgeable in Islam, and are often found in prominent positions within Islamic communities.

Cotabato City State University adopts English as the medium of instruction, reflecting a secular influence evident in various aspects of the institution, including student clubs, governance structures, curriculum, and overall organizational framework. The university primarily offers education influenced by secular principles, particularly emphasizing effective communication practices in accordance with contemporary models.

The participants from Cotabato City State University were predominantly English teachers, specifically those specializing in technical writing subjects. Among them, there were 10 females and 5 males, totaling 15 individuals. It's worth noting that gender distribution across all samples was not uniform, as the researcher opted to work with classes rather than

selecting and matching subjects, aiming to achieve a randomized sample. As anticipated, Cotabato City State University adheres to the typical profile expected of state universities with a focus on practical and applicable education.

### **Research Instrument**

In this study, we devised ten (10) original vignettes to serve as the primary instrument. Each vignette was crafted to depict a specific scenario reflecting distinct stances associated with various communication theories. These situations were meticulously constructed to elicit responses from the participants, presenting clear and thought-provoking circumstances.

The ten (10) vignettes revolved around five fundamental themes: (1) high and low context culture, (2) direct and indirect communication styles, (3) value orientation encompassing "doing" and "being," (4) oral and literate forms of communication, and (5) linear and non-linear cultural patterns.

The purpose of employing this instrument was to assess cross-cultural disparities in communication patterns between Islamic and secular communities through the lens of different theoretical frameworks. The development of the instrument involved a systematic process, wherein the respondents were instructed to review each vignette and indicate which scenario they deemed more relevant to their cultural context. These vignettes were meticulously crafted to portray a range of situations aligned with the aforementioned five themes, enabling a comprehensive examination of cross-cultural communication dynamics.

### **Vignette Development**

Our initial step involved selecting topics for the vignettes. The rationale guiding this selection was the likelihood that such scenarios would effectively provoke strong responses highlighting cross-cultural differences in communication styles among subjects from each culture.

### **Procedure**

The participants recruited for this research consisted of university teachers and learned individuals of Islam, primarily acquaintances of the researcher's father residing predominantly in rural areas. Arrangements were made with the respective participants before the commencement of the research. Upon the designated day, the researcher arrived early at the location to set up the necessary equipment.

At the outset, the researcher was introduced by a fellow professor invited for the occasion, who briefly explained her presence. Subsequently, the researcher provided specific instructions to ensure that all participants received identical information. Following this, written vignettes were distributed among the participants.

After each vignette was read aloud, participants engaged in one-on-one discussions with the researcher, expressing their cultural perspectives on each theme depicted in the vignettes. Each participant was allotted ten (10) minutes for these exchanges, a timeframe selected to encourage spontaneity and authenticity in their responses, given the brevity of the interaction period.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Cultural Perspectives on the Role of Language:**

Cultural factors, along with socio-historical influences, play pivotal roles in shaping message design. The two cultures under examination demonstrate fundamentally divergent perspectives on the role and function of language, which in turn, underscore their distinct persuasive preferences.

### **Sibr Halal (Lawful Magic): Creating a Social Experience:**

In contrast, Arabic language's role in Islam has been significantly influenced by its association with art, religion, and identity. Arabic is revered for its artistic qualities, particularly in poetry, where its melodic sounds and imagery evoke profound emotional responses. Additionally, the language holds religious significance, being the language of the Quran and Prophet Muhammad. Arabic is also intertwined with contemporary nationalism, defining Muslim identity. These socio-historical forces imbue Arabic with symbolism, making it a participatory and subjective social experience, distinct from the utilitarian function of written language.

**Cultural Differences in Message Design:**

These cultural disparities result in markedly different views on effective communication. Notable differences include:

- Repetition versus Simplicity: Repetition is valued positively in Islam but may be perceived negatively in secular cultures.
- Accuracy versus Imagery: Islamic speakers engage in creative storytelling and metaphors to evoke emotions, contrasting with the factual approach of secular cultures.
- Exaggeration versus Understatement: Islamic cultures may employ exaggeration for vivid imagery, while secular cultures tend towards understatement.
- Words versus Action: Words hold significant power in Islamic cultures, whereas secular cultures prioritize actions aligning with words.
- Vague versus Specific: Islamic cultures prefer indirect and vague communication for social harmony, while secular cultures prefer direct and specific communication for clarity.

These cultural nuances are crucial considerations for practitioners working in cross-cultural public relations, as they impact message design and reception.

The primary communication preferences of Western and Islamic cultures are delineated in Table 1.

**CULTURAL VARIATIONS OF MESSAGES IN ISLAMIC AND SECULAR COMMUNICATION PREFERENCES**

	ISLAMIC	SECULAR
<b>Cultural Influences</b>	Poetic Expressions	Official Documentation
	National Identity	Archival Practices
	Symbolic Depictions, Emotional Appeal	Emphasis on Precision
	Abstract Concepts	Technical Specifications
<b>Language Role</b>	Language Facilitating Social Interaction	Language Transmitting Information

**Hall (1976)**

High-Contextual Communication	Low-Contextual Communication
Contextual Interpretation	Direct Message Interpretation
Implied Meaning	Explicit Meaning
Contextual Detail Relevance	Message Detail Relevance
Listener-dependent Comprehension	Speaker-dependent Comprehension

**Levine (1985)**

<b>Implicit</b>	<b>Direct/Explicit</b>
Indirect, Circumlocutory	Straightforward
Ambiguous	unambiguous
Elaboration Appreciated	Simplicity Valued

<b>Implicit</b>	<b>Direct/Explicit</b>
Subjective (Emotionally Charged)	Objective (Neutral)

**Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck (1961)**

Existence and Transformation	Engagement and Action
Emphasis on Social Dynamics	Emphasis on Tangible Performance
Linguistic Impact on Social Dynamics	Integration of Speech and Action

**Dodd (1982)**

Non-sequential	Sequential
Varied Themes	Single Theme
Loose Organization	Structured Introduction and Conclusion
People-Centric and Event-Oriented	Object-Centric

Oral Tradition	Literate Tradition
Emphasis on Oral Communication	Individualized Experience
Focus on Imagery and Sound	Emphasis on Factual Precision
Appeal to Emotions	Rely on Logical Structure
Emotional resonance	Logic and coherence
Interconnected Speaker-Audience Dynamics	Separated Speaker-Audience Relationship
Intuitive Thought Process	Analytical Thought Process
Collective Participation	Analytical Thought Process

**Cultural Preferences for Message**

- Islamic: Redundancy, Figurative Language, Hyperbole, Symbolism
- Secular: Conciseness, Precision, Underemphasis, Deeds

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

As noted by anthropologist Norman Daniels, intercultural differences often become polarized as either "right" or "wrong" when they are not recognized as merely different. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced when cultural disparities remain concealed beneath the surface of awareness. This study delves into the variances in how Islamic and Western cultures perceive the role of language, thus shedding light on the strategies employed in crafting persuasive messages.

Utilizing various frameworks for analyzing cultural diversity, a comparative chart of cultural communication preferences was developed for Islamic and secular societies. In secular culture, language serves primarily as a means of transmitting information, prioritizing functionality and, consequently, accuracy and substance. Messages are typically valued for their content rather than stylistic elements. Conversely, within Islamic culture, language functions as a social instrument for societal cohesion. Here, emphasis is placed on form over function, effect over accuracy, and image over meaning. Consequently, the social impact of a message often outweighs its content.

Given the recent establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, there is a potential for increased interaction between individuals influenced by secular and Islamic cultures. The study underscores specific considerations for non-Muslim professionals engaging with Muslim clients in the region. While understanding cultural preferences is crucial for message design and client relations, it can also facilitate non-Muslim practitioners in effectively elucidating the nuances of secular cultural norms in written and oral communication, public relations initiatives, and professional ethics.

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