

The Influences of Collectivism On Vietnamese Communication Style

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Abstract: Being considered under Hofstede’s 6-D model, one of Vietnamese cultural typical dimensions is collectivism. This dimension comes to exist as time goes by because of the natural environment where the Vietnamese work and live together, and the history of defending the country through wars, contributing to shaping the identity of Vietnamese people with typical characteristics reflected in culture of villages, farming, and festivals and folk games. Especially, such a dimension has clear influences on the Vietnamese communication in terms of both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Keywords: influences, collectivism, communication.

1. Introduction

According to Country Comparison (Hofstede Insights, 2021), the fundamental issue addressed by individual dimension is “the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members. It has to do with whether people’s self-image is defined in terms of “I” or “We”. ... In collectivist societies people belong to ‘in groups’ that take care of them in exchange for loyalty.”

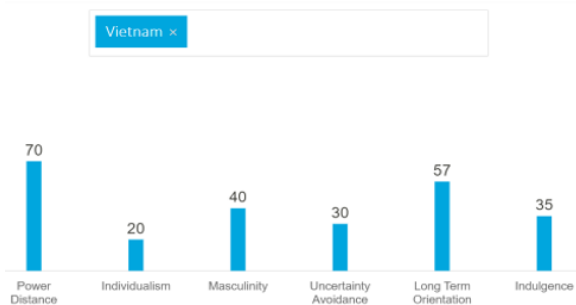


Fig. 1. Country comparison: Vietnam
Source: Country Comparison, 2021

It can be seen from figure 1 “Vietnam, with a score of 20 is a collectivistic society. This is manifest in a close long-term commitment to the “member” group, be that a family, extended family or extended relationships.” (Country Comparison, 2021)

The dimension of collectivism in Vietnamese culture plays such an important role in the formation and development of Vietnamese lifestyle as well as communication style.

2. Literature Review

Professor Geert Hofstede defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others” (National Culture, 2021).

In their research, Hofstede et al suggest the six-dimension model of national culture (table 1) which has been applied worldwide in not only academic but also professional management settings.

Table 1
The 6-dimension model of national culture by Hofstede

Power distance index (PDI)	The degree people are comfortable with influencing upwards. Accept of inequality in distribution on power in society.
Individualism versus collectivism (IDV)	How personal needs and goals are prioritized vs. the needs and goals of the group/clan/organization.
Masculinity versus femininity (MAS)	Masculine societies have different rules for men and women, less so in feminine cultures.
Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI)	How comfortable are people with changing the way they work or live (low UA) or prefer the known system (high UA)
Long term orientation versus short term orientation (LTO)	Long-term perspective, planning for future, perseverance values vs. short time past and present oriented.
Indulgence versus restraint (IVR)	Allowing gratification of basic drives related to enjoying life and having fun vs. regulating it through strict social norms.

Ting-Toomey, 1988; Althen, 1988; Samovar & Porter, 2001; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005 suppose that cultures can be divided into collectivism and individualism.

Country Comparison (Hofstede Insights, 2021) indicates that Vietnam scores 20 in the individualism index, so it is a collectivistic society. “Such a society fosters strong relationships, where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group”.

Ting-Toomey (1988) figures out that in collectivistic cultures, group goals, group concerns and collective needs are over individual goals, individual concerns, and individual needs, respectively. She also indicates that in collectivistic cultures, people would rather like politeness strategies to meet every person’s positive face want whereas they realize that keeping self’s face is as important as maintaining the other’s

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face. Absolutely, these characteristics of collectivism have strong influences upon people's preferred communication style.

Research questions:

1. What are key factors leading to collectivism formation in Vietnamese culture?
2. What are typical traditional collectivistic characteristics?
3. What are the influences of collectivism, especially on Vietnamese communication?

3. Methodology

Qualitative analysis and contrastive analysis are applied through collecting, analysing, and synthesising a limited number of previous studies to handle the issues designated above. Besides, expert interview is employed to gain a comprehensive look at the issues.

4. Result and Discussion

Research question 1: What are key factors leading to collectivism formation in Vietnamese culture?

A. Natural environment

According to Professor Trần Quốc Vượng (2006), in terms of geography, Vietnam belongs to Southeast Asia with a lot of great mountains such as Himalaya which is the beginning of big rivers like the Hong River or the Mekong River, which build up fat deltas. In addition, the hot and humid climate with high amount of rain and monsoon also promotes the growth of various plants and animals. As a result, this natural condition is extremely convenient for the development of farming with typical wet rice. Because the farming needs stabilization as well as much human strength and crops depend on the weather and season changing, farmers need to collaborate to do farming and irrigation. Moreover, together with the advantages, such a kind of natural environment also brings about lots of difficulties to farmers, for example, floods, storms, epidemic diseases to all human beings, animals, and crops, etc. This requires people to consolidate strongly to confront dangers and conquer the nature, serving their own life. "The resilient struggle to natural challenges through thousands of years has been tempering the unyielding character and closely-united spirit within communities of Vietnamese people." (Trần, 2006).

B. National defence

Vietnamese people have spent a thousand of years building and defending the country from foreign enemies because Vietnam has a variety and diversity of natural resources and minerals along the great convenience in terms of geographic position "lies in the central of Southeast Asia" and "the crossroad of residents and civilizations", according to Trần (2006). Since the breaking dawn of nation building under King Hung's leadership, Vietnamese people had to fight against different forces from the north of the country such as Han Dynasty, Song Dynasty, and so forth (China nowadays). In the modern age, it took the Vietnamese nearly one hundred years to win independence from French colonization (1858 - 1954) and nearly thirty years to fight against American colonizers (1954 - 1975). Whenever wars happened, all the people

solidified and put all material and mental strength to fight for the justice and achieved well-known triumphs. For example, the three historic triumphs in the age of Trần Dynasty against Mongolian aggressors or the great victory of Vietnamese people and army in battle of Điện Biên Phủ (1954), etc. have manifested the collectivism.

Research question 2: What are typical traditional collectivistic characteristics?

A. Culture of villages

The most important collectivistic characteristic of Vietnamese culture is showed through "culture of villages" with comprehensive cognition of community. "Villages have important position, role and power in conserving traditional values against foreign enemies" (Thái Vũ, 2019). According to Trần (2006), Vietnamese society is an agricultural one, so it owns an agricultural culture. In such society, families, and relatives together with villages (the place where a community live harmoniously and help together) create the basic social unit. Therefore, a nearly immutable underlying was formed that "all familial and communal values are placed before individual values" (Trần, 2006). Thus, the "self" has little or no place in the community. For instance, since his childhood, a person is educated to think as "we" but "I". An individual is immersed in his community and if being separated from the community, he becomes meaningless to the society. This is totally opposite to Western cultures because while Vietnamese culture, as other Oriental cultures, appreciates the communal role to society, Western cultures pay attention to individual role. "It is interesting and 'surprising' to a European eye, that still today all Vietnamese refer to their 'hometown' – where they go for Tết or holidays – even if they were not born in their 'hometown'. This is almost unknown now in European cultures, even more in America (personal talk with Professor Jacques M. A. Martin, 2013).

In Vietnamese culture, the interest of group prevails and the integration in communities is tight. For example, Vietnamese people have proverbs as "Một con ngựa đau cả tàu bỏ cỏ", "Môi hở răng lạnh" (when a member in group gets trouble, all the others will give helping hands) which mean solidarity and that all individuals in a family or a community take care of each other, sharing sorrows or difficulties together. In sum, the culture of villages creates and upholds the cohesiveness, or collectivism in other word, in the Vietnamese community.

B. Farming

Beside the culture of villages, because of the characteristic of farming with different crops following different seasons in a year, farmers are required to highly cooperate with each other to plant, cultivate and harvest crops at the right time so that they can take advantage of good weather and avoid bad weather. For example, in the centre of Vietnam, the best crop (winter-spring) is from Lunar November to February. At that time, the weather is very convenient for wet rice with enough rain, appropriate temperate and moisture, etc. Therefore, it requests farmers to concentrate to cultivate on large areas at the same time. So, they need to joint hands to get the job well-done. This also naturally

increases the collectivism in the communities.

C. Festivals and folk games

Due to the seasonal characteristic of farming, after harvesting crops, the farmers have spare time to enjoy their life. Thus, they create a lot of festivals to celebrate abundant crops or to pray for good weather and good crops and so on. Additionally, organizing festivals needs a lot of people to join and requires good teamwork. Moreover, in festivals there are always interesting folk games with many players at the same time. For instant, the festival “Ok Om Bok” of Khmer people on 15th Lunar October is to worship the Moon (The moonlight symbolizes the shine of Buddha.), celebrate cultivating season (when the raining season has gone) and farewell the old year. In this special occasion, people have the opportunity to enjoy festival “Um Tuk Ngo” (Ngo boat racing) (Figure 2) – a competition among local boat racing teams (Vân-Hồng, 2019). This game requires great sportsmanship and effective teamwork among the participants. In brief, the festival and folk game contribute to promoting the spirit of solidarity in the community and certainly consolidating the collectivism of Vietnamese culture.



Fig. 2. Ngo Boat Racing to celebrate Ok Om Bok
Source: Lễ hội Ok Om Bok và Văn Hóa của Người Khmer, 2019
(Ok Om Bok Festival and Culture of Khmer People, 2019)

Research question 3: What are the influences of collectivism, especially on Vietnamese communication?

D. Influences on identity

With a collectivistic culture mentioned above, the Vietnamese’s identity is affected and determined by collectivistic characteristics. “Collectivism represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A society’s position on this dimension is reflected in whether people’s self-image is defined in terms of ‘I’ or ‘we’.” (National Culture, 2021) The community’s benefits must be taken first, so each individual lives and acts for his community and the community is representative for the individual. Therefore, the achievement is the common result, not a certain individual’s one. This sense of identity helps people unite well and try together to gain the common goal.

However, the identity derives from collectivism also creates certain negative issues. Typically, when a person makes

mistakes, he tends to blame it for his group’s responsibility and he himself does not feel very faulty. In parallelism, because people think that results always belong to the group, someone supposes others’ efforts are also theirs. In contrast, the ones with real abilities or proficiencies feel unsatisfied because their efforts are not highly appreciated. As a result, this reality demotivates good individual and decreases the development of communities.

E. Influences on communication style

1) Appreciation of communication

Vietnamese people with the collectivistic characters always depend on each other, so they appreciate relationships with other members in their community. This benefits them in many situations when they are in need. That is the reason why they appreciate communication which helps them create relationships and good affections among people. The Vietnamese have a proverb “Thêm bạn bớt thù” (More friends, less enemies), which means they pay attention to building good relationships. Moreover, “communicative competence is one of the top standards to evaluate a person” (Văn hóa ứng xử - Sức mạnh mềm của thành công, 2019). The Vietnamese have a saying “Chuông kêu thử tiếng, người ngoan thử lời” (A bell’s sound reveals its quality. A person’s communication reveals his quality.) which means that a person’s education level and social status can be considered through the way that person communicates.

2) Enjoyment of communication

For the appreciation of communication, Vietnamese people really like communicating. This is manifested in two aspects: like of paying visits and hospitality. According to Nguyễn (2016), different from Westerners, who often meet for their work requirements, Vietnamese people often visit each other just because they really want to meet and share some talks or sorrows and happiness. Moreover, the Vietnamese also think that paying a visit is a normal issue, so they almost do not have the habit to inform each other in advanced. It is like by chance they come and visit a certain friend or relative. This is opposite to the Westerners who have tendency to plan their timetable clearly and specifically. Furthermore, Vietnamese people are very hospitable. They always welcome visitors and behave in friendly manners and attitudes. Especially, although the host is poor or rich, they always treat visitors with the best things such as good food, good bed to rest and sleep, etc. Many families prepare the room for guests only.

However, it seems to be opposite with enjoyment of communication, Vietnamese people are careful to communicate, too. In fact, enjoyment of communication and being careful to communicate is two sides deriving from “collectivism and self-ruling” of Vietnamese culture (Trần, 1999). In their familiar community where collectivism exists, they feel confident because they understand their community clearly and have no fear or danger. But outside of their community where self-ruling has a chance to be promoted, they feel unsafe for strange things and strange contexts. As a result, they tend to keep a distance from such strange situations and behave in a carefully thought way. The Vietnamese proverb “Đi

với Bụt mặc áo cà sa, đi với ma mặc áo giấy” (Behaviour is up to context.) shows the flexible treatments to the context changes.

3) *Communicative principle*

Because of collectivism, the Vietnamese live and treat together both affectionately and reasonably. However, the affection is always highly appreciated. The Vietnamese tend to behave with affection. This is totally against with the Western style which pays more attention to reasons. To Vietnamese people, although everything is lost, affection is the last thing that remains. When it is necessary to consider between affection and reason, the affection almost always prevails (Nguyễn, 2016). Vietnamese people have many proverbs saying about this such as “Một bỏ cái lý không bằng một tí cái tình” (Affection is much more important than reason). Also, “in the respect of communication, it is interesting to note how all or most of these sayings and proverbs are expressed in a balanced way – yin yang – both in the phrasing and the meaning” (personal talk with Professor Jacques M. A. Martin, 2013).

4) *Communicative habit*

Just because Vietnamese people self-recognize that they must care about people around in their communities, Nguyễn (2016) indicates that they often want to know some information about the person who they are communicating with such as asking questions about age, schooling level, social position, marital status, children, etc. that the Westerners often suppose private things and do not want to unveil anyway. To the Vietnamese, they think it is normal and reveals their care of those who they are talking to while the Westerners claim it curiosity. Additionally, the Vietnamese distinguish pairs of social relationship clearly and specifically, for example, “anh - em” (older brother – younger brother/sister; husband – wife; the older – the younger; person with higher social status – person with lower social status; etc.). Therefore, it is necessary for them to have enough information to have the suitable way to call each other in communication (Nguyễn, 2016).

5) *Appreciation of honour*

According to Trần (1999), Vietnamese people appreciate private honour in communication. Their conception is that honour is shown through communicative competence. So, every saying remains certain influence, creates fame (or ill fame) and is conveyed to hearers. Thus, the word “tiếng” with the first literal sense “language” becomes “products of language” and furthermore, “effects of speech” which makes fame and honour or sometimes becomes ill repute for the speakers. Vietnamese people say that “Hùm chết để da, người ta chết để tiếng” which means literally after death, a tiger leaves behind its skin, a person leaves his reputation for the next generations. Similarly, “what you say is what you are”, as said in some European cultures. So, people should beware what they say! The saying reminds people of living in good manners so that their family, relatives and even the next generations can be proud of them. This is a good lifestyle because it encourages people to live in truthful and untarnished way, for example “Chết vinh hơn sống nhục” (Death in honour is better than life in dishonour).

Nevertheless, due to too much appreciation of honour, the

Vietnamese sometimes have a “disease” of “face” – too much care of honour to compete for minute things such as “Một miếng giữa làng bằng một sàng xó bếp” - fighting for a little food in public places just to show the social position, not for hunger.

6) *Communicative manner*

In communication, Vietnamese people highly appreciate tact, considerateness, and harmony because of collectivism dimension.

Due to favour of being tactful in communication, the Vietnamese do not often go straight to the point (beating about the bush). This shows the high-context culture. People often do not mean what they say and, hearers often infer from the context to understand the meanings behind the sayings. For example, to know the marital status of a woman, people will ask her “Whether your husband is worried if you go home too late?” In communication process of Vietnamese people, the context plays such an important role to help hearers perceive right senses.

Nonetheless, this indirect communication sometimes leads to misunderstanding among speakers, for example, too deep inference loses track of real meanings. Additionally, to start a talk, people often ask each other about house, family, parents, children, etc. And, to create a comfortable atmosphere, they often invite one another to chew betel in the past; nowadays, betel is replaced by tea, or some beer. Especially, the Vietnamese businesspeople almost always invite their partners to parties first, and later dealing with the contract. It is unhealthy, money-consuming, and even sometimes gives no benefit to their work, but it has become a “rule” and they have to obey. In comparison with American style, there is a big difference because the Americans have low-context culture, they mean what they say and vice versa, so the speakers point out their opinions directly in sayings and hearers are easy to understand the meaning based on the words, no need to infer anything from the context, no need to pay attention to the context.

The indirect communication together with the habit to know about each other forms habit of “greeting-asking” – greeting goes along with asking. The speaker makes a question to greet the other one but do not need to receive the exact answer from the hearer, for example, the question “Where are you going?” does not mean to ask for the place. So, the hearer can answer by the same question or simply respond “Yes. Hello, how are you?” and the asker is totally satisfied with such an answer.

Furthermore, the tactful and considerate communication is the result of a lifestyle which appreciates affection and relationships among people. This reminds people of thinking or considering carefully before speaking anything such as “Biết thì thưa thốt, không biết dựa cột mà nghe” – just speaking when understanding comprehensively. However, this also has negative effect that makes people lack determinedness. In this case, people often avoid making decisions or hurting the others by smiling. Smile plays a key role in communication.

Mentality of appreciating harmony makes people often bear or tolerate other ones. For example, “Chồng giận thì vợ bớt lời/ Cơm sôi bớt lửa chẳng đời nào khê” - when the couple gets into

trouble with each other, one of them should put up with the rest one to live in peace together. However, this also has two sides. On one hand, it helps people live together in a friendly relationship. On the other hand, it forces people to suffer from what they do not like or do not agree, and do not dare to give their own opinions if they are against with the others. For instant, wives have to bear husband; employees have to bear employers, etc.

7) *Communicative ritual system*

The Vietnamese language has various pairs of pronouns to indicate different pairs of relationships such as “anh – em” (mentioned above); “chú - cháu” (uncle – niece/ nephew; or much older men – much younger people); “chị - em” (older sister/ women – younger sister/women).

According to Trần (1999), this system reveals the three meanings as follows. First, that is informal manner. Everyone considers each one of the others as family members or relatives, such as “chú/bác – cháu (uncle – niece/nephew); cô – cháu (aunt – niece/nephew)”. They treat together affectionately. Second, it shows socialization. Addressing follows age, career, social position, time, and space. Finally, it indicates the hierarchy in communication: speakers respect hearers. For instant, two women have the same position in their relationship, but one addresses the other one “chị - em” (older sister – younger sister).

Verbal communication and non-verbal communication

Vietnamese people have various and diverse verbal and non-verbal communication which reflect the Vietnamese culture's values. The verbal communication has been mentioned a lot above in terms of collectivism's influences on the culture. Additionally, we would like to discuss non-verbal communication which is special in a high-context society like Vietnam.

The Vietnamese convey respect and other traditional values through nonverbal gestures such as gentle bows, smiles, nods, and by avoiding direct eye contact. Children are educated to avoid looking at older people directly and those of higher status (Trần, 1999), unless it is considered impoliteness. Nodding has lots of meanings such as greeting, agreement, or just listening to the speakers (without agreement or disagreement). Especially, smile plays an important role. (Besides, it conveys greeting, friendliness, agreement, or disagreement, etc. depending on the context. Other gestures can be considered as inappropriate or rude consisting of winking (especially when directed at the opposite sex), beckoning someone with the index finger, placing hands in pockets or on hips while talking, patting

a person's back, and pointing to other people while talking. Additionally, touching someone's head is viewed as disrespectful because head is the holy part of a person in Vietnamese conception. However, adults can touch children's head in a friendly way to show love.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, a very natural environment and long-lasting history of building and protecting the country against much more powerful foreign forces have contributed to forming collectivism, one of the Vietnamese typical cultural dimensions. This dimension has influences on shaping Vietnamese's sense of identity with the great spirit of solidarity and “We”- community, coming before “I”- individual. Furthermore, such a dimension also influences on Vietnamese verbal and non-verbal communication style through seven items: Appreciation of communication; Enjoyment of communication; Communicative principle; Communicative habit; Appreciation of honour; Communicative manner; Communicative ritual system.

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