

Communication Strategy from a Multicultural Perspective

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Abstract: Cultural diversity has created a social environment and a media ecosystem characterized by varied cultural actors - each differing in informational needs, value orientations, and feedback mechanisms. Based on the impact of cultural diversity on information reception, communication agents must build and implement strategies that reflect ethnic and national cultural distinctions. This article employs methods of economic and historical analysis, assuming other factors as constant, to explore communication strategies from a multicultural standpoint - aiming to optimize communication effectiveness.

Keywords: strategy; communication; culture; multiculturalism.

The concept of multiculturalism has been proposed in response to global cultural monoculture or homogenization. First, it emphasizes the diversity of global cultures in form and content. Second, it underscores the importance of mutual respect and tolerance between different cultural traditions. Culture is not an independent variable - it is always influenced by environment and history. Nor is it an isolated entity; rather, the determinants of communication effectiveness are complex and multidimensional. Confronting the diversity of global cultures and cultural themes, researching and designing culturally differentiated communication strategies is both a theoretical necessity and a practical imperative.

1. Culture, Multiculturalism, and the Diversity of Cultural Subjects

a. Culture

The word văn hóa originates from Sino-Vietnamese. In Chinese, the character “văn” (文) carries rich meanings, used to denote cultural phenomena, ritual systems, music, and moral governance in society⁽¹⁾; “hóa” (化), as a verb, means to transform, to enlighten, or to educate⁽²⁾. The combination of văn (文) and hóa (化) first appeared during the Han Dynasty, conveying meanings related to civil governance and moral education. In the West, the English word culture, translated into Vietnamese as “văn hóa”, originally referred to cultivation. The concept of culture can be traced back to Ancient Rome. The philosopher Cicero used the phrase cultura animi in his work Tusculan Disputations ⁽³⁾, which meant the cultivation of the soul or intellect. With

this expression, culture began to be used in non-agricultural contexts. Later, Samuel Freiherr von Pufendorf⁽⁴⁾ adopted this expression in a modern context, emphasizing that culture means the refinement and enhancement of individual quality. By the 18th and 19th centuries, the concept of culture had taken on a social nature, meaning the spirit or ideology of a society or nation.

From the 20th century onward, the concept of culture has become a subject of scholarly interest. Today, culture is understood in two ways. In the broad sense, culture refers to the sum of material and spiritual values created by humans throughout the development of human society. Therefore, culture encompasses diverse characteristics due to differences in lifestyles among nations, ethnicities, and historical periods. E. B. Tylor⁽⁵⁾ defined culture as the totality of human experience and lifestyle of members of a society, including knowledge, belief, morals, laws, as well as capabilities and habits⁽⁶⁾. Clark Wissler⁽⁷⁾ stated that culture is an accumulated structure developed through reflective human thought. Cultural accumulation is expressed through behavior, language, and objective material aspects⁽⁸⁾. Hồ Chí Minh wrote: *“For the sake of survival and the purposes of life, humankind created and invented language, writing, ethics, law, science, religion, literature, art, tools for daily living in terms of food and shelter, and methods of usage. All of those creations and inventions are culture”*⁽⁹⁾. In 1994, UNESCO provided a definition of culture. In the broad sense, “culture is a complex whole - a totality of spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional characteristics that define the identity of a community, family, village, region, nation, or society”. In the narrow sense, “culture” refers to a system of symbols (signs) that govern behavior and communication within a community, giving that community its distinctive traits.

Culture is a social and historical category, closely associated with the existence and development of human society. Culture both reflects and influences the political and economic systems of a given society.

b. Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a term proposed in response to the trends of global cultural unification or cultural homogenization. In the first sense, multiculturalism refers to global cultural differences in genre and content; in another sense, multiculturalism emphasizes the importance of diversity among different cultures. Based on the definition of culture, the essence of multiculturalism lies in ideological heterogeneity, expressed in the diversity of cultural groups in behavioral patterns, daily customs, social practices, and cultural products. Since the 1980s, international community has convened many discussions on the development of global cultural diversity. Notable international dialogues

include: “The New World Information and Communication Order” (NWI-20, 1980), the “Cultural Exception Debate” (GATT, 1993)⁽¹⁰⁾, and the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, also known as the UNESCO Convention (WSIS, 2005). After two years of negotiation, in October 2005, 148 UNESCO member countries voted to adopt the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. The original intent of the Convention was to strengthen the legal binding force of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) with respect to cultural products and services. However, for governments and organizations in developing countries, the Convention on Cultural Diversity serves as a favorable mechanism to protect and promote the development of multiculturalism⁽¹¹⁾. International consensus on multicultural ecology, along with a series of follow-up conventions, affirms that human civilization is composed of many cultures. It emphasizes the importance of cultural diversity among ethnicities worldwide. This is an objective reality that governs the activities of external communication entities and affirms the objective existence of global cultural and ecological diversity.

c. The Diversity of Cultural Subjects

Multiculturalism is not only the result of the cultural behavior of various cultural subjects but also the origin of the formation of diverse cultural subjects themselves. In other words, the diversity of cultural subjects stems from fundamental differences in deep cultural structures. Profound structural differences in culture lead to diversity among cultural groups. On the other hand, culture plays a role in promoting the formation of individuals’ social comparisons and their awareness of shared values. Different cultural, political, and social contexts create different social environments and media ecologies, thereby forming diverse audience groups with varying needs for information, preferences, understanding, memory, modes and content of feedback, as well as differing preferences for content and value judgments regarding information.

2. The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Information Reception

First, it determines differences in information needs.

Information needs are the first stage of information consumption and serve as the internal motivation for information-use behavior. According to Maslow’s theory of need satisfaction, information needs correspond to the five levels of human needs: physiological, safety, social belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. From the perspective of cognitive process theory, information needs arise from the individual’s cognitive process. For example, Brenda Dervin pointed out that information needs arise from human knowledge

gaps and discontinuities; Carol Kuhlthau supported the principle of cognitive uncertainty; and Belkin believed that information needs stem from the state of personal knowledge⁽¹²⁾. Differences in information needs are related to the social environment, cultural accumulation, and knowledge structures of cultural subjects. When different cultural groups are confronted with the influence of foreign cultures, they respond seriously and selectively based on their own needs for information, knowledge, and adaptive capacity.

From the perspective of economic history, the land-based “Silk Road” between China and the West during the Han dynasty reflected the demand from Western regions for Chinese material culture. According to Chinese historical records, during the Spring - Autumn period and Warring States period, silk was traded only domestically. By the early Western Han, some merchants sought to export silk to neighboring countries. By the Eastern Han, the “Silk Road” had formed, extending some 7,000 miles from Xi’an through Central Asia and North India to Rome. When the land-based “Silk Road” came to an end, the “Maritime Silk Road”⁽¹³⁾ opened in the 15th century, connecting the East and the West thanks to advances in maritime technology - with Vietnam as an important link⁽¹⁴⁾. Likewise, the “Book Road” along maritime trade routes between China and Japan during the Sui and Tang dynasties reflected Japan’s enthusiasm for Chinese classics. The “*Eastern fever*” that gripped continental Europe for nearly a century, beginning in the 18th century, further demonstrates the differentiated information needs of European countries.

The social penetration theory suggests that every individual and social group naturally has a need to connect with other people or social groups⁽¹⁵⁾. For instance, Jesuit missionaries paid close attention to engaging and integrating with indigenous cultures - building trust, avoiding conflict between foreign religions and local beliefs, and spreading Western culture to the East. Simultaneously, through their missionary work, they collected information on Eastern political and socio-economic systems, paving the way for colonialism. From a modern economic perspective, Vietnam’s trade partners who sign economic cooperation agreements tend to pay greater attention to political information and economic data.

Second, it determines the information selection behavior of receivers.

Studies in mass communication psychology show that, due to existing attitudes, viewpoints, and preferences, most information recipients develop psychological filtering mechanisms during the information reception process: (1) Selective attention, meaning a tendency to focus on information consistent with one’s existing viewpoints; (2) Selective perception, meaning a tendency to

interpret information in a personalized way based on one's own values, thinking, and perspectives; (3) Selective retention, meaning the tendency to retain information perceived as useful or personally relevant. At the individual level, demographic characteristics, social identity, and life experiences are key factors in creating differences in these psychological selection mechanisms. At the group level, the cultural diversity factor accumulates to form differing selection mechanisms across cultures. In the process of external communication, when cultural subjects are exposed to information from other cultures, their own cultural identities reinforce their psychological filtering mechanisms.

Third, identifying differences in forms and content of feedback

Feedback refers to the response of audiences to received information, based on symbolic systems, communication practices, and real-life contexts. Feedback serves as a powerful tool to express the reaction of recipients toward the communicating subject. The diversity in cultural identity among recipients may generate different types and contents of feedback.

Differences in feedback modes in external communication are reflected in the variance of response latency. Accordingly, feedback can be categorized into two modes: immediate feedback and delayed feedback. The immediate feedback model reflects short-term, perceptible reactions from groups after receiving cultural information - reactions that may result from misunderstanding, cultural barriers, or resonance, and even from the attractiveness of a particular culture. The most notable example of this model is the cartoon crisis involving caricatures of Muhammad. A series of satirical editorial cartoons of Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten triggered a wave of indignation across the Islamic world, immediately leading to crises and diplomatic conflicts between the Muslim world and Europe. The delayed feedback model refers to the process whereby a cultural group accumulates information from another culture, within their own cultural framework and experiential system, thereby forming an overall understanding of the foreign culture. This understanding is later reflected in future value behaviors. For instance, the increase in exports of cultural products, the rise in the number of foreign tourists, or changes in international public opinion toward Vietnam are all examples of delayed feedback. In addition, feedback may differ in terms of intensity. Based on that, feedback can be classified into strong feedback, limited feedback, and weak feedback.

Differences in feedback content toward communication are reflected in the differences in attitudes and behavioral tendencies of recipients, including both positive feedback and negative feedback. Positive feedback includes

examples such as the increase in tourist flows from one country to another, rising demand for products, favorable media coverage in the official press of other countries, and increased international discourse. Negative feedback may manifest as product boycotts, a surge in negative public opinion, or the cooling of diplomatic relations.

3. Strategic Communication Orientation from a Multicultural Perspective

To some extent, cultural diversity leads to differences in information needs, information selection, and feedback models and content across cultural subjects. Based on the reality of cultural diversity and its impact on communicative acceptance, communicative actors must construct differentiated strategic communication plans.

First, understanding the diversity of audiences in cultural differences. The audience, as the subject of different cultural systems, often demonstrates various levels of difference influenced by cultural accumulation. The key to understanding the audience is to distinguish cultural value differences. Cultural values are understood as dominant values within an entire cultural system, serving as the internal driving force shaping individuals' cognitive models and behavioral patterns within that culture. According to Geert Hofstede's dimensional cultural theory, cultural values can be classified along the following dimensions: (1) Individualism vs. Collectivism (whether a nation values collective or individualistic principles); (2) Uncertainty Avoidance (whether a nation prefers uncertainty and flexibility, or prefers certainty expressed through codified rules); (3) Power Distance (whether a society tends to oppose social hierarchy and inequality, i.e., low power distance, or the opposite, high power distance); (4) Masculinity vs. Femininity (the varying degrees of gender roles in social interaction and role performance among members of society). Based on collected and analyzed theoretical data and empirical research, the findings are as follows: Developed countries in Europe and America - such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States - display high individualism and a preference for uncertainty and power; Countries in South America such as Chile, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Venezuela, and others show high collectivism, a tendency to avoid uncertainty, and large power distance; Southeast Asian countries, influenced by dual cultural traditions, are characterized by collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and large power distance; Indian culture is marked by an emphasis on hierarchy and power; Vietnam accepts a hierarchical system in which everyone has their place. The cultural values of other countries often show a unipolar

tendency. For example, Japan exhibits a “high degree of uncertainty avoidance” (consistent with Japan’s nature as an island nation); Pakistan displays “a high level of individualism”; and Vietnam is described as a “collectivist society”. The dimensional value model in Hofstede’s theory proves particularly useful for building communication strategies and for conducting national classification and research.

Second, in order to understand different audiences, one must identify cultural identity. Cultural identity is the self-perception of an individual based on the mainstream culture (knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, and lifestyle) transmitted within the community in which that person lives. Cultural identity has a certain influence on one’s attitude toward external cultures.

Third, understanding diverse audiences is linked to the media culture environment. Media culture is the result of accumulated practices that reflect a nation’s social communication, political culture, and information needs. The audience is an organic component of media culture. Differences in media culture produce different media environments - for example, habits in using various types of media, the ability to access and process information, and so on.

Fourth, disseminate appropriate content, grasp cultural context, and use polysemous language. The design and selection of media content must answer the question: Does the communication activity meet the public’s information needs and preferences, and can it elicit feedback from the audience? Content design and selection are related to the effectiveness of information encoding and the relevance of the content. Communicating entities must have an understanding of symbolic systems and cultural content based on their grasp of different cultural contexts. The symbolic system includes linguistic and non-linguistic symbols within a cultural complex. Cultural context or socio-cultural environment is the setting in which activities occur, reflecting behavioral habits and the psychology of members of society.

Fifth, utilize integrated communication channels. Communication channels are the pathways through which information is disseminated and circulated - allowing communicators to deliver and audiences to receive information. Based on the nature of communication, these channels can be divided into official, semi-official, and private channels. Traditional communication has largely been dominated by official channels. As globalization becomes a prevailing trend, international flows of people grow more frequent, and exchanges in commerce, culture, academia, and international cooperation between organizations have become crucial channels for expanding external relations. Integrating

various channels of communication is one of the solutions for building robust communication infrastructure.

Sixth, strengthen interaction and feedback. In response to different feedback from cultural subjects, identifying differences in feedback from the perspective of the media environment and media culture is of significant importance. Communicating entities must actively collect and respond to feedback in a timely manner, while also improving communication methods and content. There are two main channels for receiving immediate feedback: First, a positive feedback channel, which involves interaction with the audience. Feedback collection formats include surveys, forums, blogs, etc., established on official media websites; second, a feedback channel to understand audience opinions, which relates to international public opinion in news coverage of emergencies and major events by collecting online comments related to those situations.

From the perspective of communication about cultural diversity, several theoretical issues have been addressed, including concepts and related matters such as culture, multiculturalism, and the diversity of cultural subjects. From there, the impact of cultural differences on communication acceptance is analyzed to clarify cultural diversity in communication and to outline strategies for optimizing communication effectiveness. Through the analysis of economic and historical events, the author argues that cultural diversity leads to differences in information needs and information selection among cultural subjects, as well as differences in modes and content of feedback. Therefore, communication entities must implement differentiated communication strategies from fundamental dimensions./.

(1) Chinese Academy of Linguistic Sciences (2010), *Xinhua Dictionary* (新华字典), Commercial Press, Beijing, China, p. 504.

(2) Chinese Academy of Linguistic Sciences (2010), *Xinhua Dictionary* (新华字典), Commercial Press, Beijing, China, p. 192.

(3) *Tusculan Disputations* is a five-volume work written by Cicero around 45 BCE.

(4) Samuel Freiherr von Pufendorf (1632–1694): German jurist, political philosopher, economist, and historian.

(5) Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917): British anthropologist, founder of cultural anthropology. His most important work is *Primitive Culture* (1871), which developed the theory of cultural evolution from primitive to modern forms. He was one of the first to introduce the concept of “culture” that later became widely used in cultural studies.

(6) Edward Burnett Tylor (2001), *Primitive Culture* (translated by Huyền Giang), *Journal of Culture and Arts*, p. 13.

(7) Clark Wissler (1870–1947): American anthropologist. He developed the concept of cultural areas based on fieldwork with Native American tribes in North America.

(8) Clark Wissler (2004), *Humans and Culture* (人和文化), Chinese edition, Commercial Press, pp. 5–6.

(9) Hồ Chí Minh: *Collected Works*, the Truth National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, 2011, Vol. 3, p. 458.

(10) The concept originates from French – *l'exception culturelle* – introduced by French politicians during negotiations of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), proposing that culture should be treated differently from commercial goods.

(11) See Article 1, Objectives of the Convention, UNESCO (2005), *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, UNESCO Office in Vietnam.

(12) Dong Lu (chief editor) (2019), *Core Theories and Concepts of Communication Studies* (传播学核心理论与概念), Peking University Press, pp. 206–220.

(13) Archival records from various countries show that silk was not the primary commodity of the Silk Road. Main traded goods included spices and ceramics from the East exchanged for gold, gemstones, and glass from the West.

(14) Vũ Linh (2003), “The Maritime Silk Road and Vietnam’s Position”, *Xưa và Nay Magazine*, Issue 131, pp. 19–20.

(15) Nguyễn Văn Dũng (chief editor) (2018), *Communication – Theories and Basic Skills*, Information and Communications Publishing House, Hanoi, p. 232.