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ARE THE MALAYS REALLY FRIENDLY?
CONTESTING NORTON'S CONSTRUCT OF A FRIENDLY COMMUNICATOR

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the prevalence of the friendly-Malay notion that is based on Norton's communicator style measurement (CSM) and seeks to contest the constructs used to measure friendly style from the Malay cultural perspectives. The data were collected in a field experiment where 21 pairs of the Malay-Chinese participants were individually asked to fill out a set of five 40-item questionnaire. The descriptive statistics and Pearson-Moment correlation test were used and the bases for contesting Norton's construct of a friendly style are discussed.

1.0 Introduction

Various literatures have it that the Malays are often perceived as friendly. This trait, although not unique to merely the Malays, is usually one of the most common traits used to describe the Malays (Faisal *et al*., 2010) especially when pitched against other races i.e. Chinese, Indian, etc.

There have also been various attempts to explain this characterisation by attributing it to several concepts such as *jaga hati* and *adab* (Asma, 1996), and high-context communication (Lailawati, 2005). Asma (1996), for example, has also elaborated that the Malays are often *noted for their conformity, loyalty and obedience, but are less likely to come across as articulate, forthright and bold in their viewpoints.*

In Lailawati (2005), such a trait with which the Malays are labelled is attributable to the collectivistic nature of the Malay culture. To avoid generalisation of the Malay communication for all Malay communities in different geographical regions e.g. Vietnam, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Hainan (China) and South Africa (Lailawati, 2005), this study specifies the Malays to be the Malaysian Malays.

Most criteria used for attributing the Malays as friendly are based on the manner in which the Malays would generally or expectedly respond to another communicator within a dyadic or group communication.

Based on the information which could be derived from the literature traceable to as early as the *Swettenham's Malay Sketches era*, the communicative behaviours (includes the mentality) of the Malays, either as dyads or members within any communication phenomenon, are almost always predictable. Such communicative behaviours could be seen as either the manifestation or representative of the 'friendly' trait. It is therefore valid to liken this trait to the friendly communicator style.

Communicator styles have various contents and dimensionalities (de Vries *et al.*, 2009) and to measure these general styles, one may choose from a multitude of instruments e.g. Burgoon & Hale, 1987; Gudykunst *et al.*, 1996; Norton, 1983, to mention a few.

Among the studies that have utilised the above-mentioned instrument are Wong's (2002) and Segumpan *et al.*'s (2007). Both studies adopted Norton's (1979; 1983) CSM constructs. Wong, who conducted his study among a group of university students found the Malays to be friendlier than the other ethnics. On the contrary, in their study among a group of graduate students Segumpan *et al.* found no significant difference among different ethnics in the friendly style. This could possibly be due to the composition of the ethnics considering the location the study was conducted at.

In Norton's CSM, nine styles can be measured with four items for each style. The items used to measure the friendly style are:

1. *I <u>readily express admiration</u> for others*

2. *To be friendly, I <u>habitually acknowledge verbally</u> others' contributions*

3. *I am always an <u>extremely friendly</u> communicator*

4. *Whenever I communicate, I <u>tend to be very encouraging</u> to people*

Within the context of Malay culture, the underlined verbs and adjectives in each item above bring forth two questions; Firstly, are these constructs appropriate to characterise the Malays as friendly? Secondly, with a similar scale, will the 'friendly-Malay' notion prevail within a setting that involves the new (younger) generation of Malays?

The reason to believe that it might not prevail is based on several literatures which shall be discussed in the later part of this paper. The present study therefore seeks to contest the prevalence of the 'friendly-Malay' notion using Norton's CSM and the aptness of the items used to measure friendly style within the Malay cultural context.

2.0 Design and Procedure

In a field experiment which was conducted within a classroom setting involving 42 Malay (n=24) and Chinese (n=24), the participants (with $\bar{x}$ age of 19 and consisting of 22 males and 20 females) were asked to rate the following on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree):

  i.   Perceived friendly style of oneself

 ii.   Perceived friendly style of the Malays

iii.   Perceived friendly style of the Chinese

 iv.   Perceived friendly style when communicating with the Malays

     v.   Perceived friendly style when communicating with the Chinese

All scales were adopted from Norton (1983). The four items for measuring the friendly style were later analysed using descriptive statistics (mean) to determine the level of predominance of the friendly style, t-test to determine the significant difference between items in each set and the Pearson-Moment correlation was used to determine if there is any significant relationship between items ii and iv.

The Cronbach alpha values for the four items in each set of questionnaire are i) α=.324, ii) α=.432, iii) α=.403, iv) α=.209, and v) α= .589. In comparison with Norton's (1978) reported internal reliability (α=.37), the alpha values stated above were rather anticipated. Although Norton (1978) suggested adding 15 parallel items to boost the reliability to .70, the researcher has decided to maintain the number of the items due to the choice of the research design for the present study. Furthermore, several studies in the past (Wong, 2002; Segumpan *et al.*, 2007), in which CSM was adopted, did not report any addition of the parallel items to the friendly style.

3.0 Findings and Discussion

The Malay participants, in reporting their own communicator style, are found to be less friendly when compared with the Chinese. This is depicted in the Table 1 below in which the mean for each reported item is lower for the Malays as compared to that for the Chinese.

For the item '*I am always an extremely friendly communicator*', the Malays ($\bar{x}$ = 4.05) were expected to have scored higher than the Chinese ($\bar{x}$ = 4.14). However, it turned out to be the contrary. One possible explanation for this serendipitous finding is the accommodation effect. In believing that the Malays are friendly, the Chinese might have converged into the friendly style. This assumption, however, is valid if and only if the Chinese are not friendly or at least perceived as not friendly.

As mentioned earlier, the literature (see, for examples, Asma, 1996 & Asmah, 2005) offered the reasons to believe that the friendly trait may not prevail among the younger generation of the Malays in this country. Asmah (2005) pointed out that the Malays, in Fauconnier's eye, were still polite even when they were angry as seen through their use of *imagery and symbolism lay in the need to compensate a lack* (e.g. in *pantuns*). Most young Malays nowadays view *pantuns* as being outdated and are not able to appreciate the beauty of it. While Asma (1996) strongly felt that the Malay culture is of high-context, Lailawati (2005) saw a gradual shift of the Malay culture from high-context to low-context. These are the reasons to believe that the Malays will not remain friendly following the common attributes above, which is supported further by the figures in the Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Mean of Perceived Friendly Style of Oneself (*n*=42)

Item	Malay (*n*=21) $\bar{x}$	Chinese (*n*=21) $\bar{x}$
Whenever I communicate, I tend to be very encouraging to people	3.48	3.52
I readily express admiration for others	3.29	3.3
I am always an extremely friendly communicator	4.05	4.14
To be friendly, I habitually acknowledge verbally other's contributions	3.43	3.57

As shown in the Table 2 for the item "*The Malays readily express admiration for others*", the Malays scored a higher mean ($\bar{x}$ = 3.52) than the Chinese ($\bar{x}$ = 3.52). The act or characteristic of readily expressing admiration for others bears two possible connotations;

i) a mode for complimenting;

ii) a conversation starter/filler;

which are both expressed openly and, in both cases, the concepts of *halus* (refined) and *rasa* (intuitive inner feeling) are violated. For both concepts, elaborated rituals or standardised forms of courtesy (see Asma, 1996 pp. 26-27) might be required. This is so especially because the Malay culture is categorised as a high-context culture and therefore directness in verbal remarks would be seen as a violation of the values.

The Chinese participants in the present study perceived the Malays to be extremely friendly communicators ($\bar{x}$ = 3.71) more than what the Malays would perceive themselves to be ($\bar{x}$ = 3.62).

To become 'an extremely friendly communicator', the equally apparent use of both verbal and nonverbal codes would be a requisite. This again contradicts the Malay cultural values where the use of less verbal codes (indirectness) would be expected.

Lailawati (2005) offers an explanation to this phenomenon in which she argues that "In social interactions, Malay communication has become more low-context" (p.9). This, according to Lailawati, "is a result of global mobilisation." (p.9)

Table 2: The Mean of Perceived Friendly Style of the Malays (*n=42*)

Item	Malay (*n=21*) $\overline{X}$	Chinese (*n=21*) $\overline{X}$
Whenever the Malays communicate, they tend to be very encouraging to people	3.48	3.86
The Malays readily express admiration for others	3.52	3.19
The Malays are always extremely friendly communicators	3.62	3.71
To be friendly, the Malays habitually acknowledge verbally other's contributions	3.33	3.52

While the Chinese perceive the Malays as *extremely friendly communicators* ($\overline{X}$ = 3.71) more than the Malays perceive themselves to be ($\overline{x}$ = 3.62), Table 3 below shows that the Malays perceived the Chinese the same way ($\overline{X}$ = 3.67) more than the Chinese would perceive themselves to be ($\overline{X}$ = 3.57).

Table 3: The Mean of Perceived Friendly Style of the Chinese (*n=42*)

Item	Malay (*n=21*) $\overline{X}$	Chinese (*n=21*) $\overline{X}$
Whenever the Chinese communicate, they tend to be very encouraging to people	3.14	3.29
The Chinese readily express admiration for others	3.19	3.38
The Chinese are always extremely friendly communicators	3.67	3.57
To be friendly, the Chinese habitually acknowledge verbally other's contributions	3.43	3.67

It is interesting to note (in the Table 4 below) that the Chinese and Malays participants perceived themselves as equally friendly when communicating with other Malays ($\overline{X}$ = 3.95) but when it comes to communicating with other Chinese, the Chinese participants perceived themselves as less friendly. This was perhaps a reflection of their perceived friendly style of the Chinese which was discussed earlier.

Table 4: The Mean of Perceived Self Friendly Style When Communicating with Other Malays (_n=42_)

Item	Malay (_n=21_) $\bar{x}$	Chinese (_n=21_) $\bar{x}$
Whenever I communicate with other Malays, I tend to be very encouraging to them	3.38	3.81
I readily express admiration for other Malays	3.05	3.19
I am always an extremely friendly communicator with other Malays	3.95	3.95
To be friendly, I habitually acknowledge verbally other Malay's contributions	3.33	3.52

The Table 5 below shows that the Malays ($\bar{x}$ = 3.86) are friendlier than the Chinese ($\bar{x}$ = 3.81) when communicating with other Chinese. This could possibly be one of the reasons why the Malays are generally perceived as friendly compared to the Chinese.

Table 5: The Mean of Perceived Friendly Style When Communicating with Other Chinese (_n=42_)

Item	Malay (_n=21_) $\bar{x}$	Chinese (_n=21_) $\bar{x}$
Whenever I communicate with other Chinese, I tend to be very encouraging to them	3.43	3.71
I readily express admiration for other Chinese	3.19	3.14
I am always an extremely friendly communicator with the Chinese	3.86	3.81
To be friendly, I habitually acknowledge verbally other Chinese's contributions	3.24	3.43

A run of the Pearson-Moment correlation test shows that there is a significant and nearly strong relationship (_p_ = .000, _r_ = .665) between the perceived friendly style of the Malays among the participants and their perceived friendly style when communicating with other Malays. Both the Chinese and Malays think of themselves as friendlier than other Malays and become less friendly when communicating with the other Malays (see the Tables 1, 2 and 5).

Table 6: The Correlation between Perceived Friendly Style of the Malays and When Communicating with Them (*n=42*)

Variables	Perceived friendly style of the Malays	
	p	*r*
Perceived friendly style when communicating with the Malays	.000	.665

3.1 Contesting the CSM Construct for Friendly Style within the Malay Cultural Context

As discussed earlier, the construct for the friendly style is contestable within the Malay cultural context due to the violation of the Malay cultural values. Based on the various concepts of the Malay cultural values mentioned earlier, to generalise the Malays as friendly by perceiving them as readily expressive of their admiration for others and habitually acknowledge others' contributions verbally, is to assume an adoption of the low-context cultural values. This is not what the Malays really are.

The Malays' way of talking as described by Fauconnier (in Ravi, 2003) is like a game of leap-frog between the concrete and the abstract (p. 92). One reason that leads to this strategy as suggested by Fauconnier is modesty. The Malays are known to place a screen over their thoughts and feelings. This supports the belief that the Malays, to some extent, would naturally refrain themselves from being readily or habitually expressive verbally. This is also supported by the finding in the Table 1, where the scores for these two items are lower ($\bar{x} = 3.29; 3.43$) than the other two ($\bar{x} = 3.48; 4.05$).

The fact that the CSM has to be more sensitive to the cultural differences in which the communicator's style is enacted differently is supported by Sallinen-Kuparinen (1992). This supports the contestation of the CSM construct being used to label the Malays as friendly by some researchers in the past. Furthermore, the CSM, as Sypher (1980) puts it, *is memory-based and therefore not a true indicator of actual behaviour* (p. 84).

4.0 Limitation of Study

The present study is not without limitation because the scope of 'friendliness' or 'being friendly' is not fully demystified. Had this been done, the arguments put forth in this paper would have gone beyond the evident communicative behaviours i.e. communicator style, as the qualifier to becoming a friendly person.

Based on the concepts of the high and low-context culture, the researcher believes that there are reasons to believe that friendliness may, in relevant contexts, be impalpable yet pertinent to members of a specific culture. This position therefore allows recommendation for future study.

5.0 Conclusion

The focus of this paper is not on the argument whether the Malays are friendly or not but the basis of such labelling when Norton's CSM is used. The construct for the friendly style in CSM requires further refinements especially when there is a clash of cultural values.

In a nutshell, if the Malays are said to be friendly based on CSM, the answer to the question of the topic in this paper should be, 'NO, the Malays are not really friendly'.

Note: This paper is a portion of a PhD dissertation entitled '*Predicting Interethnic Accommodation Strategy with Norton's Communicator Style Constructs; a Case Study within an Educational Setting*'. It is currently being pursued by the corresponding author and researcher of this paper at Universiti Putra Malaysia under the supervision of the co-authors. (Editor).

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