

Gender-based Interpersonal Communication Behavior: When Women No Longer Muted

Lontar: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi, 2025
Vol. 13 (1), 2025
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DOI: 10.30656/lontar.v13.i1.10288
<https://ejournal.lppmunsera.org/index.php/LONTAR/article/view/10288>

Article History
Submission: March 31st 2025
Revised: June 21th 2025
Accepted: June 22nd 2025

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ABSTRACT

In the era of content development on social media today, more women can be found emerging to tell about themselves and their preferences for something, compared to the previous time when those who spoke were public figures. Especially in the aspect of relationships. By relying on this pattern, researchers want to explore the actual dynamics in the social environment regarding the shifting behavior in women. This research was conducted to focus on the act and the way of perceiving signs from their interlocutor in a romantic context. This study uses interview methods and focus group discussions with 22 females and 14 males in Pekanbaru City, in Riau Province. Their answer was then categorized and contemplated with systematic literature reviews. In an environment that supports the form of communication in the passive category, contemporary women today are gradually using the assertive category, especially in the context of romantic interpersonal relationships. Previously, in this category, women were expected to behave passively. The problem is positioned on the change in communication between women in the past and present. In the explanation, muted group theory, patriarchal culture, and the emotional intelligence of women will also be touched on to better understand the change in communication in contemporary conditions.

Keywords: *gendered communication, muted group theory, assertive communication*

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, and it is significantly shaped by gender. In that matter, research also indicates that communication styles often differ between men and women, influenced by socialization processes, cultural norms, and psychological factors.

Cultural differences can also impact communication behavior. Some aspects are affected directly by the culture people are exposed to, especially in their communication behavior, which can be seen through communication style, for example, the tone, volume, and speed of speech. A culture can influence the appropriate scale to these, whether loud, fast, or expressive speech delivered by the communicator in that culture (Think Cultural Health, 2025). Thus, some cultures would consider speaking loudly as the norm, while others would perceive it as rude. There is also eye contact, the use of pause and silence, facial and emotional expression, self-disclosure, formality, directness, context, and orientation to self or others.

On of the aspects mentioned above, one of them would be discussed further in the study, that is, "directness" in a cultural context. Gudykunst et al., in their writing about cross-cultural found

that women from collectivist cultures may exhibit more indirect communication styles, while those from individualistic cultures tend to be more direct (Samochowiec & Florack, 2010). This phenomenon, rooted in patriarchal discourse, has been extensively studied in sociolinguistics. Tannen (1990), with her Genderlect Theory, highlights how traditional gender roles have shaped communication, with women often socialised to adopt a more accommodating and indirect communication style (Simon, 2021). This process is reinforced by cultural norms that value assertiveness in men while discouraging it in women, leading to a *muted group* dynamic where women's voices are less heard (Syawal et al., 2024). In addition to patriarchal, recent studies have found that contextualised religious norms and teachings provide this silence insights into female (Adisa et al., 2024)

In Indonesia, there is a stereotype that says, "*Diamnya perempuan berarti setuju*," which means a woman's silence means a yes. This applies when women are asked to join romantic relationships and marriage. This is so common, as if it is a societal agreement that today, there are still studies that interpret women's silence as not necessarily an agreement (Argadinata, 2024). Dissecting how this emerged into something that is believed in together in Indonesian society is another matter. The point, in this case, is that researchers bring an example that it is true that culture in Indonesia generally supports a passive speaking style in women, as stated in previous research above.

Recent research, however, suggests a significant shift in this paradigm. A study by (Manian & Sheth, 2021) women in contemporary society are increasingly rejecting traditional passive communication styles in favour of assertive communication. In romantic relationships during the socialization process, communication dynamics can shift dramatically based on situational factors, such as the presence of peers, the nature of the relationship, and the emotional stakes involved. It emphasizes that the context can constrain or liberate individuals' communication styles, particularly in gendered interactions. For instance, women may feel more empowered to express themselves when they perceive their partner as supportive and attentive.

That, then, contrary to Muted Group Theory, which was initially proposed by Edwin Shirley Ardener, posits that certain groups, particularly women, are often silenced or rendered invisible within communication systems dominated by more powerful groups, primarily men (Syawal et al., 2024). This theory highlights the socio-cultural dynamics that shape communication behaviors and the resultant perceptions of passivity or aggression in women's communication styles. This study would add a unique perspective to the contemporary landscape of women's communication behavior through the lens of MGT, focusing on recent studies.

In conclusion, context is critical in shaping gender-based interpersonal communication behavior. Socialization processes, cultural norms, and psychological factors influence women's assertiveness and expressiveness in response to romantic attention. Understanding these contextual elements is essential for comprehending the complexities of gender communication in romantic relationships.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach, and data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Thus, the results are discussed with systematic literature reviews. Data collections were done by interviewing 22 females and 14 males aged 20-22 years, students from *Fakultas Ilmu Komunikasi* at *Universitas Islam Riau*. There is no particular reason for choosing informants from said university other than a matter of access. As this is an initial study, for this step, the study would like to focus on the male and female responses and perceptions of communication behavior when engaged in a romantic context, the indicator of informants was those who are *in* and *was* in relationship. So, a specific variable such as their ethnicity, at this phase, will be ignored, and the elaboration will be carried out based on the majority culture in Indonesia that is recorded in Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions.

In the field, informants were asked about the main questions, "What do you do about your feelings?" and "How do you know someone likes you?" regarding romantic relations. The eligibility criteria were that they had had an encounter or relationship before.

They were interviewed one by one with open-ended questions and then followed up with a focus group discussion for each group: females and males. Their answers were recorded and categorized accordingly, with content similar to others'. Their answers were then combined with a systematic literature review to find the connection between before and contemporary studies.

RESULTS

a. Self-Act in Responding to Feelings by Female and Male Informants

Of the fourteen males in a group discussion, twelve stated to not express their feelings verbally and avoided expressing them through non-verbal means, one willingly expressed interest in a female encounter, and one chose not to answer. When the answer about not expressing their feelings was followed further, the male said, "... preferred to keep it quiet," or in other words, they wanted to keep it to themselves.

However, the researcher concluded that their decision to *keep quiet* and *keep it for themselves* was not an act of ignoring their feelings but rather of taking things slowly or being too careful. When it was confirmed to them by the follow-up question, "So you just let it go until the feeling goes away?" two of them (from twelve) added, "*I like to observe the girl more...*" and "*I enjoy seeing the girl I like- (without being interrupted by hard conversation)*" while the all fourteen male informants show agreeableness by giving smiles and nods to the statements.

In the discussion of the way decision making in men, cultural norms significantly influence how men express emotions. Asian cultures, encompassing a diverse range of countries and societies, often emphasise collectivism over individualism. According to Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, Asian countries typically score high on the collectivism index, suggesting that decisions are frequently made with the group's welfare in mind (Country Comparison Tool, 2025). This cultural backdrop influences how men from collectivist cultures like Indonesia may experience greater pressure to conform to certain decisions, often leading to a more deliberative and consensus-driven process.

In this matter, for instance, in Japan, there is a concept of "nemawashi" that refers to the informal process of laying the groundwork for a decision by consulting with various stakeholders before any formal action is taken (Sagi et al., 2015). This practice highlights the importance of harmony and group consensus, often resulting in delayed decision-making as individuals seek to gather input and avoid conflict. As a result, its own set of pressures, as men may feel the need to consider not only their preferences but also the expectations of their families and communities, would probably lead to their hesitation in expressing their feelings or preferences for women they like.

Expectations of men in asian cultures tend to be an order out of their capabilities in which makes them cross their feelings that then resulting in hardship in life as they are expected to "man up" with the *Silent and Making Decision* as their identity (*IN FOCUS: "Be a Man", Do the Right Thing? Not so Simple, Say Some in Singapore - CNA*, n.d.). This is following the Asian Development Bank's findings on "Men, Masculinities, and Gender Equality in South East Asia", 74.8% compared to 64.1% for women, men dominate the property ownership and decision-making within the household, which reflects greater expectations on men (Development Bank, 2024). Thus, reflects on the reasons for the delayed decision on men expressing their preferences in this study.

In contrast, for the twenty-two females, there were three different acts. Four of them said they would keep their feelings inside, one chose to internalize the energy and write it down in a diary, and the rest of the group (sixteen informants) would give signs to their male encounter to catch the signals.

The same as the male group, each participant got a follow-up question so that the researcher could see the communication behavior closest to their actual behavior. The females who chose to keep their feeling inside said "*would rather harbor their feelings*" instead of stating it out, but actually in the hope that they would eventually be discovered by the male they like, and they also wait for the male to make *more* moves as they said in their language, "*ya masa perempuan duluan yang mulai*" which can be understood as their hesitation to be recognized as someone who makes a move and they want to be pursued. These females did not want to be seen as aggressive - for them, this act was perceived as aggressive.

The one female who said she would rather use her emotional reaction to an act of writing in a diary made it clear that she wanted nothing in the way of being in a relationship. She understood and admitted that she liked someone, but she chose not to pursue it and handle the emotional reaction by executing it through writing. She said it doesn't matter whether it is she who has the feeling or she got a confession. She is not willing to be in it.

Sixteen female informants who answered that they would show a sign for the male, mentioned a list of actions *when* or *if* they were making the move: they would introduce themselves, visit the male's social media, make eye contact, and try to be part of (any) conversation. However, the follow-up question concluded that all of the signs given were purposely designed to lead the male to confess; they stated firmly that, above all the signs the confession would not come from them.

Traditionally, many Asian societies have been patriarchal, placing men in dominant roles while relegating women to subordinate positions (also as mentioned above, this discussion). In that sense, societal expectations often dictate that women should focus on family responsibilities rather than pursue leadership roles, which have a decision-making aspect to them. Whilst expecting to make great decisions, women also have their expectation that is not to make a wrong decision, which is known as the 'saving face' concept in many Asian cultures. Despite this, there has been a notable shift in recent years, as shown in this research. Research records that women these days show themselves to be more practical decision makers, especially if they have the educational background and actively engage in social media discussions.

b. Perceived Communication Cues by Female and Male Informants

In this part of the study, researchers categorized the answer to the question, "How do they know when the counterpart has an interest in them?"

All the male informants agreed to understand the cue by assessing the female's appearance when they held a meet-up. They said, "*If the girl is dressed up (on a date)*" or "*When she uses makeup.*" In addition, they would know that the female has feelings for them when they were *being asked for comments* or, even further, involved in the process of dressing up.

Other than appearance, the male group also mentioned that they would understand that the female is interested in them by their "behavior": "*When the girl maintains eye contact with me,*" and "*When they do something for me.*" In this group, there is no response indicating that they need a verbal statement to understand that the female is interested in them.

As for the female group, they relied on the way words were spoken by the male. They said, "*If he is interested in me, I will notice it through his talk*" or "*voice intonation*". For them, the softer the voice when the male talks, the more they feel loved. After that, they pay attention to eye contact as well. So, when the males talk softly whilst looking at their eyes, the more these female informants agree that they will confirm that these males are interested in them. As for the aspect of the topic or content, they expect positive and affirmative words.

Research constantly indicates that men and women adopt different communication styles. Men tend to be more direct and assertive, so it is usually prioritize task-oriented communication, which is then in line with the informant's statement that they notice the intention when women do something for them. In contrast, women are generally more relational and empathetic, focusing on connection and maintaining harmony, which is reasonable with informants' preference for a soft voice.

DISCUSSION

Historically, women's communication has been framed within a patriarchal discourse that values male communication styles over female. Recent studies have provided evidence that women who have faced challenges in being heard have illustrated the ongoing irrelevance of MGT in contemporary society. For example, female informants were used in this study, and some findings were found in previous studies done by other researchers. Moreover, when women feel and get support from their male counterparts, they will naturally become more confident, which then causes their communication style to become more assertive. This is related to the shift

towards empowerment and access to information because of the technology and the internet these days.

According to a study (Wani, 2023), perceived partner responsiveness is linked to increased self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness in women. When women receive attention from their partners, they will likely reciprocate with assertive communication, reinforcing the relational bond. This reciprocity challenges the notion of women as passive communicators, illustrating how context can empower them to adopt a more active role in interactions.

Additionally, the emotional context of romantic interactions can significantly influence communication behavior. A study highlights that women are often more attuned to emotional cues and may respond with heightened expressiveness when they perceive romantic interest. A significant factor influencing women's communication behavior in romantic contexts is their partner's responsiveness. The context in which communication occurs plays a pivotal role in shaping interpersonal interactions. This emotional engagement can lead to more assertive communication, as women feel validated in their experiences and are encouraged to articulate their feelings openly (Qiu et al., 2022; Sonsino et al., 2023).

Assertiveness is critical to effective communication, particularly in romantic relationships where clear expression of needs and boundaries is essential. Traditionally, women have been socialized to adopt more passive communication styles, often prioritizing harmony over assertiveness. However, recent studies indicate a shift in this dynamic (Cohen, 2020), with women increasingly embracing assertive communication when engaging with romantic partners. According to a survey by a previous study, women who practice assertive communication report higher levels of relationship satisfaction, highlighting the importance of this behavior in romantic contexts (Tyas et al., 2023).

Research by Moss (2021) suggests that assertiveness in communication is linked to positive relational outcomes. Women who express their needs and desires openly are more likely to foster mutual understanding and respect in their relationships. This assertiveness challenges the traditional notion of women as passive communicators, demonstrating that they can actively shape the dynamics of their romantic interactions. For instance, a case study of couples seeking therapy revealed that women who practiced assertive communication were more successful in negotiating relationship boundaries and resolving conflicts effectively.

Furthermore, the societal perception of assertiveness in women can influence their willingness to adopt this communication style. A study by ADB found that women who exhibit assertive behavior are often perceived negatively, facing backlash for deviating from traditional gender norms (Development Bank, 2024). However, as societal attitudes evolve, women are increasingly empowered to embrace assertiveness without fear of social repercussions. This shift is particularly evident in younger generations, which found that young women are more likely to advocate for themselves in personal and professional contexts (Girsang, 2020).

In romantic relationships, assertiveness can manifest in various ways, including expressing preferences, setting boundaries, and addressing conflicts. Women who communicate assertively are better equipped to navigate relational challenges, leading to healthier dynamics. This ability to assert oneself enhances relationship satisfaction and promotes individual well-being, as women feel more in control of their romantic experiences.

In conclusion, assertiveness is vital to effective communication in romantic relationships. As women increasingly embrace assertive communication styles, they challenge traditional gender norms and foster healthier relational dynamics. Understanding the importance of assertiveness in romantic contexts is essential for promoting positive communication behaviors and enhancing relationship satisfaction.

a. Emotional Intelligence on Women's Assertive Communication (Psychological Factors)

Emotional intelligence (EI) is vital to interpersonal communication, particularly in romantic contexts where emotional dynamics are at play. Research defines emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others. This skill set is

particularly pronounced among women, who often utilize their emotional intelligence to navigate relational interactions (Chadijah et al., 2024). A study found that women generally score higher on measures of emotional intelligence than men, which can influence their communication styles in romantic relationships (Syawal et al., 2024).

The heightened emotional intelligence among women allows them to be more expressive in their communication. According to a study on gender differences in interpersonal communication that discloses behavior, benevolence sensitivity, and workplace implications, women are more likely to engage in self-disclosure and emotional sharing, which can foster intimacy in romantic relationships (Qiu et al., 2022). This expressiveness is not merely a reflection of emotional vulnerability; it also serves as a tool for assertiveness. Women who effectively communicate their feelings are often perceived as more confident and engaged, challenging the stereotype of passivity.

Moreover, emotional intelligence facilitates better conflict resolution in romantic relationships. Research indicates that women with high emotional intelligence are adept at recognizing and addressing emotional conflicts, leading to healthier communication patterns. This ability to navigate difficult conversations assertively allows women to express their needs and boundaries more effectively, further reinforcing their role as active participants in the relationship (Manian & Sheth, 2021).

Emotional intelligence enhances expressiveness and contributes to empathy in communication. Women are generally more empathetic than men, which can influence their communication behavior. In romantic contexts, this empathy allows women to respond to their partners' emotional cues, fostering a deeper connection and understanding. As a result, women may adopt a more assertive communication style when they feel their emotional needs are being met, reinforcing the importance of emotional intelligence in shaping gendered communication behaviors.

b. Feminism on Women's Assertive Communication (Cultural Norms)

Feminism is a social and political movement that aims to achieve gender equality and fight for women. Feminism not only focuses on issues of gender inequality but also encompasses various aspects of women's lives, including the right to speak and express themselves. Freedom of speech for women in this context means that women have the right to voice their opinions, experiences, and feelings.

This freedom of speech begins with simply expressing ideas in general, but over time, it develops in the context of romantic relationships. In this context, feminism not only focuses on equality of rights but also on how women express themselves in a relationship. Before the development of the feminist movement, communication in romantic relationships was often dominated by patriarchal norms that limited women's voices. However, with the emergence of the feminist movement, women began to take control of their narratives. They dared to voice their opinions, desires, and needs in relationships, including making decisions, which were previously considered taboo, as in several cases expressed in this study (Surya Saputra et al., 2022).

One of the basic principles of feminism is equality. In romantic relationships, both parties must have equal rights to speak and be heard. Relationships based on equality of communication tend to be more satisfying and last longer. Social media and technology also play an important role in changing the way women communicate in romantic relationships. Platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok have given women space to express themselves more broadly. Feminism has brought significant changes in the way women communicate in romantic relationships. From increasing confidence in expressing opinions to creating space for more balanced communication.

CONCLUSION

According to the stereotype as affected by societal culture, especially in Asia, men typically engage in more competitive communication, while women often prioritize relational dynamics, which can lead to misunderstandings in romantic contexts. This difference in communication

styles is crucial to understanding how women respond to romantic attention, particularly in terms of expressiveness and assertiveness.

Male informants in this study tend to keep their feelings to themselves, most likely caused by the cultural expectations put on them related to making decisions. In Asian cultures, they are expected to make the right decision and accommodate aspects in the family. Whilst female informants, whether keeping their feelings to themselves or giving signals to the male, both stated that they are not going to be the one who will confess their feelings, this may stem from the 'saving face' phenomenon in Asian culture as mentioned before.

Research consistently reveals that men and women employ different communication styles. Men communicate directly and assertively, often prioritizing task-oriented discussions. This observation is supported by informants who recognize the intentions behind women's actions when they do things for others. In contrast, women typically adopt a more relational and empathetic approach, focusing on building connections and maintaining harmony. This preference is reflected in informants' inclination towards a softer tone of voice preference for a soft voice.

The concept of *muted group theory*, introduced by Kramarae in 1981, posits that women's voices are often marginalized within communication frameworks dominated by male perspectives (Syawal et al., 2024). However, this theory may not fully encapsulate the behaviors of women in romantic contexts. For instance, a recent study found that women often utilize more expressive language when discussing romantic relationships, suggesting a shift from the passive roles traditionally ascribed to them. This indicates that women can assert their communication style when they feel empowered by the context of romantic attention.

Statistical data from the Hofstede Cultural Dimension reveals that in Asian countries, especially in a collectivist culture, women report feeling pressured to conform to traditional gender roles in communication. This pressure can manifest in various ways, such as hesitance to express assertive opinions or emotions openly. However, recent studies suggest that women may exhibit a more assertive communication style when they receive romantic attention, challenging the traditional notion of women as passive communicators. This shift highlights the complexity of gender dynamics in interpersonal communication, particularly in romantic situations.

Understanding gender-based interpersonal communication requires a comprehensive examination of how women navigate romantic attention. The interplay of societal expectations, psychological factors, and individual experiences shapes their communication behaviors, leading to a more assertive and expressive style than traditionally perceived. This study aims to explore these dynamics further, providing insights into the evolving landscape of gender communication in romantic contexts.

You can put your interpretation of the discussion and recommendation of the idea. The conclusion is a description of the main idea that illustrates the answer to the research question. Suggestion presents an advanced idea to be developed in subsequent research.

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