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Relationship between Gender and Self-perceived Communicator Style in the Nigerian Cultural Context: An Empirical Investigation

by Evelyn C. Onyekwere*

Abstract

This study assesses if gender has any influence on how Nigerian males and females perceive their communication styles. Using Norton's (1978) instrument of communicator style to collect the data, it attempts to answer three research questions, namely: (1) Will physical gender affect self-reported communicator style in the Nigerian environment? (2) What variable or combination of variables best predicts a good and effective Nigerian communicator? and (3) What type of inter-relationship exists between the variables of communicator style construct? It found no significant gender influence on self-reported communication style of Nigerians, unlike the findings of Montgomery and Norton (1981) among North Americans. It also found that friendly style was the best predictor of a good Nigerian communicator.

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Relation entre l'appartenance sexuelle et les styles personnels des journalistes dans le contexte culturel nigérian: une enquête empirique

Résumé

Cette étude cherche à établir si l'appartenance à un sexe a une influence quelconque sur la façon dont les hommes nigériens et leurs collègues féminines conçoivent leurs styles de communication. Faisant usage du document de Norton (1978) sur la manière de collecter des données, l'article essaie de répondre à trois questions, à savoir:

- 1) Est-ce que l'appartenance sexuelle peut affecter le style du journaliste dans l'environnement nigérian?
- 2) Quelle variable ou combinaison de variables sont-elles susceptibles de mieux contribuer à la formation d'un futur bon et compétent journaliste nigérian?
- 3) Quel genre de co-relations existent-ils entre les variables du style du journaliste?

L'article ne trouve aucune influence remarquable au niveau sexuel quant aux styles personnels de communication au sein du peuple nigérian, contrairement aux conclusions de l'enquête de Montgomery et Norton (1981) au sein de la population américaine. L'article affirme également qu'un style empreint de sympathie était le meilleur signe d'un futur bon journaliste nigérian.

Introduction

Norton (1978), identifies eleven communicator style variables in human interaction. He defines communicator style as the way individuals verbally and paraverbally interact to indicate how meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered and understood. Research (Montgomery and Norton 1981, Talley and Richmond 1980) has found more similarities than differences in male/female communicator styles using Norton's model.

In the Nigerian context, gender differences in human communication has never been empirically investigated. As a culturally determined variable, gender in the Nigerian culture may or may not influence individuals' perception of their communication styles.

This study is an attempt to assess if gender has any influence on how Nigerian male and female perceive their communication styles. It also assesses the communicator style variables that combine to predict a good communicator in the Nigerian communicative environment.

Literature Review

Gender differences in communication has been one of the major areas of investigation in North America. Researchers (Eakin and Eakin 1978, Montgomery and Norton 1981) have articulated the importance of gender differences in communicative research. Communication researches which have investigated gender differences as a communication variable have focused on non-verbal cues (Isenhardt 1980, Putman and McCallister 1980), folk linguistics (Bradley 1981), self disclosure (Greenblatt, Hasenauer and Freimuth 1980), styles of management and leadership (Baird and Bradley 1978; Bormann, Pratt and Putnam 1978) language use (Liska, Mechling and Stathas 1981), conflict resolution (Roloff and Greenberg 1979) and public speaking (Infante and Fisher 1978).

Gender has been defined as either physiological or psychological gender. It had been operationalized as physiological until Bem (1974) attempted to reconcile some of the conflicting results in gender research, and re-operationalized gender as a psychological orientation. Bem identified three types of psychological gender: (a) masculinity (primarily masculine psychological characteristics); (b) femininity (primarily feminine psychological characteristics); and (c) androgyny (both male and female psychological characteristics).

Montgomery and Burgoon (1980) studied the effect of gender on persuasion and found Bem's psychological sex role concept to be a better predictor of acceptance of a persuasive message than was physiological gender.

The relationship between gender and communication style variables has, therefore, been investigated from both self-reported measures and observers' measures. Using observers measures, Brown (1980) found that men display dominant, assertive communication behaviours while women showed submissive, warm behaviours. Wheelless and Dierks - Stewart (1981) using Bem's (1974) psychological gender scale also found that femininity was characterized by gentleness, tenderness, warmth, compassion, helpfulness and understanding, while masculinity was characterized by leadership, dominance, aggressiveness, forcefulness, assertiveness, competitiveness, independence and risk-taking.

With self-reported scale, Montgomery and Norton (1981) found that men perceived themselves as being more precise while women reported being more animated. No gender effect was found for the behaviour associated with impression-leaving, open, dramatic, dominant, contentious, relaxed, friendly, and attentive style, suggesting that there are more similarities than differences in male and female self-perceived communicator styles. Talley and Richmond (1980) also studied the relationship between gender and communicator styles, operationalizing gender as psychological as opposed to physical orientation and found more similarities than differences in male and female self-perceived communicator styles. With the exception of animated and attentive styles where women reported higher self-perception than males, no gender difference was reported for the remaining nine communicator style variables.

Communicator Style Variables

Norton's eleven communicators style variables (dominant, dramatic, animated, open, precise, contentious, relaxed, friendly, attentive, impression-leaving and communicator image) are defined below, based on the adaptation of Norton's (1978) description.

Dominant

Dominant communicators are associated with influential communicators. It can be viewed as communication behaviour which lowers the communicative control of others.

Dramatic

Dramatic and animated styles exaggerate communication content, and are both exhibited through high energy communication behaviours, (Montgomery and Norton 1981). Dramatic communicators, however, use metaphors, fantasies, exaggeration, manipulation, rhythm, and other stylistic devices to raise or lower communication content.

Animated

An animated communicator, on the other hand, purposely uses vocal emphasis, gestures, postures and body movements to colour communication content (Goffman 1961).

Open Style

An open style communicator reveals his or her true feelings, opinions and beliefs in communicative situations. Such an individual easily volunteers personal information about self during interaction. Open style communication can be exhibited through facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, posture, vocal cues and word choices. An individual whose communication style is high in open behaviour can also be described as unreserved, frank, outspoken, unsecretive, approachable, affable, expansive and gregarious. Research found that an open communicator tends to be perceived as more attractive (Kogan and Wallach 1961) and more trustworthy (Griffen 1967) than a closed style person.

Precise

A precise communicator is one whose communication behaviours focus on accuracy, documentation and proof in communicative situations.

Contentious

This relates to argumentativeness. A contentious communicator advocates positions on controversial issues during communication and finds it hard to stop the argument without the issue being resolved.

Relaxed style

Stylistically, an individual who is calm, collected and relatively free from nervousness and anxiety in communicative situation is a relaxed communicator.

Friendly

Communicator behaviours ranging from unhostile to deep intimacy can be classified as friendly style. Research suggests that women may communicate more friendliness in their style of communication than males.

Attentive

Attentive and friendly styles reflect social sensitivity in communicative situations. Attentive style can be revealed through non-verbal behaviours such as smiling, nodding, eye contact, posture, empathy or good listening.

Impression-leaving

This particular variable relates to the impression a communicator leaves with those he/she communicates with. It is dominated by inferences from non-verbal, relational and verbal message content.

Communicator image

This can be seen as an index of one's communicative style. By definition, it is the way a communicator perceives his or her communicator style. Therefore, an individuals' communicator image is the general evaluation of the effectiveness of that individual's styles of communication.

Research Questions

The three research questions to be explored in this study are as follows:

Research question 1: Will physical gender affect self-reported communicator style in the Nigerian environment?

Research question 2: What variable or combination of variables best predicts a good and effective Nigerian communicator?

Research question 3: What type of inter-relationship exists between the variables of communicator style construct?

Methodology

Fifteen per cent of adults in Anambra state were used for this study. About 50 per cent of the respondents were male, and 50 per cent female. Their ages ranged from 21-50 years. All of the respondents had some form of formal education, ranging from first school leaving certificate to doctorate degree. The subjects voluntarily participated in the study.

Norton's (1978) communicator style instrument was used as a means of collecting data. The instrument was designed to assess the eleven communicator style variables (impression-leaving, contentious, open, dramatic, dominant, precise, relaxed, friendly, attentive, animated and communicator image). Statements describing each variable were made and the respondents were instructed to assess the way they communicate based on the description, along a six point Likert type scale.

The instrument has been found to be both valid and reliable with the North American sample (Norton 1978, Talley and Richmond 1980, Montgomery and Norton 1981). However, to test its validity across the Nigerian sample, two validity tests were conducted. The first was based on the testimony of the respondents when a pretest was done with 20 randomly selected subjects. The second approach was based on the testimony of judges when a face validity was conducted using four communication experts who were asked to evaluate the instrument as a

valid test in measuring communication styles in the Nigerian cultural context. Both approaches found the instrument to be highly valid in measuring communicator style in the Nigerian environment.

Results

Research Question 1

The possible influence of gender on self-reported communicator style of the Nigerian sample were explored using univariate analysis of variance (*F*-test) statistics. The resultant *F*-test were not significant, suggesting that gender has no effect on the self-reported communication styles of the respondents.

Research Question 2

Research question 2 dealt with the best predictor(s) of a good communicator image. To explore this research question, stepwise multiple regression analysis was conducted by regressing impression-leaving, contentious, dramatic, open, relaxed, precise, attentive, friendly, animated and dominant, on communicator's image, to determine the best predictor(s) of a good communicator within the Nigerian environment. Table 1 reports the results. Friendly style alone explained 37% of the total variance, followed by attentive 13%, relaxed 9%, precise 5%, animated 2% and dominant 1%. The remaining four variables (dramatic, contentious, impression-leaving and open) did not enter the equation. Overall, the six variables that entered the regression equation accounted for 67% of the total explained variance. This means that within the Nigerian cultural context, a good communicator should exhibit friendly, attentive, relaxed, precise, animated and dominant communication behaviour. However, friendly style appears to be the single best predictor based on this analysis.

Table 1. Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Communicator Image.

Variable	R^2	t-statistics
Friendly	0.37	18.3*
Attentive	0.50	11.4*
Relaxed	0.59	8.9*
Precise	0.64	5.7*
Animated	0.66	4.2*
Dominant	0.67	3.1*

* means $P < 0.05$

Note: Contentious, impression-leaving, dramatic and open styles did not enter the regression equation. The other six variables displayed above entered the equation and accounted for 67% of the explain variance, at 0.05 significant level.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 dealt with the level of inter-relationship among the communicator style variables. The Pearson correlation coefficients showed significant relationship among the 11 variables (Table 2). The highest level of relationship was observed between relaxed style and friendly style ($r = 0.58$, $P < 0.05$). This was followed by communicator image correlations with: attentive ($r = 0.57$, $P < 0.05$) friendly ($r = 0.54$, $P < 0.05$) and relaxed styles ($r = 0.52$, $P < 0.05$), respectively. The lowest relationship was between attentive and contentious styles ($r = 0.12$, $P < 0.05$). The result also found that individuals who perceive themselves as precise communicators also perceive themselves as dominant, and relaxed communicators ($r = 0.48$ and 0.50), respectively, ($P < 0.05$). Animated communicators also perceived themselves to be friendly ($r = 0.48$, $P < 0.05$ and relaxed ($r = 0.45$, $P < 0.05$) communicators. The overall relationship ranged from relatively low to moderately high correlations.

Discussion

This study found no significant gender influence on self-reported communication style of the Nigerian sample. This is slightly inconsistent with results obtained in North America. While Montgomery and Norton (1981) found gender differences in the behaviour of precise (male more than female) and animated (female more than male), Talley and Richmond (1980) found female to be higher in the behaviour of animated and attentive styles. Interestingly and more importantly, both studies found more similarities than differences in male and female communication styles.

Various explanations can be given for the gender result obtained in this study. The inconsistency of the differences in gender communicator style provides evidence that there may be cultural differences in self-perception of communicator style. Perhaps the American sample, in contrast to the Nigerian sample, may have been responding to perceptions of appropriate sex-role behaviour. Perhaps psychological gender orientation may have been a better predictor for the Nigerian sample than physiological gender. Perhaps observers' report or interactant report measures could have yielded a different result from self-report measures.

The stepwise multiple regression analysis has friendly style as the best predictor of a good Nigerian communicator, while Norton's study found dominant style to be the best predictor for the North American sample. Again culture seems to have influence in the differences for these differential predictions. Dominant style of communication is associated with power, struggle, influence, and competition — attributes associated with North Americans in general in comparison with individuals in a traditional society like Nigerian. This study, therefore, suggests that good

Table 2. Pearson Correlation Coefficients, Means and Standard Deviations for the 11 Dependent Variables.

Variables	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8	X9	X10	X11
X ₁ Impression-leaving	—										
X ₂ Contentious	0.33*	—									
X ₃ Open	0.26**	0.22***	—								
X ₄ Dramatic	0.28*	0.17***	0.37*	—							
X ₅ Dominant	0.22***	0.14***	0.29*	0.35*	—						
X ₆ Precise	0.26**	0.06	0.32*	0.38*	0.48*	—					
X ₇ Relaxed	0.28*	0.21**	0.29*	0.33*	0.38*	0.50*	—				
X ₈ Friendly	0.27*	0.15***	0.29*	0.32*	0.34*	0.48*	0.58*	—			
X ₉ Attentive	0.26**	0.12***	0.29*	0.33*	0.30*	0.47*	0.36*	0.48*	—		
X ₁₀ Animated	0.37*	0.36*	0.24**	0.18*	0.26*	0.32*	0.45*	0.37*	0.40*	—	
X ₁₁ Communication image	0.28*	0.25**	0.23*	0.33*	0.32*	0.47*	0.52*	0.54*	0.57*	0.045*	—
Mean	3.56	2.87	3.11	3.18	2.86	3.11	2.89	3.63	3.68	3.08	3.31
(S.D.)	(2.10)	(2.47)	(2.18)	(2.23)	(2.26)	(2.16)	(2.29)	(2.14)	(2.06)	(2.30)	(2.29)

N = 150, * P<0.0001, *** P<0.005

** P<0.001, **** P 0.05

communicator image in Nigeria is associated with friendly style of communication.

The finding related to correlational study found the eleven variables to be intercorrelated, reinforcing Norton's previous study, to produce strong justification for the reliability of this instrument.

In conclusion, the findings in this study indicate that there are no differences in the way Nigerian males and females perceive their communication style, while friendly style was found to best predict a good Nigerian communicator. In comparison with the North American study, the findings in this study have important implications for the study of intercultural communication. Future research should build on this and probably investigate further gender differences in intercultural communication.

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