

South Asian Women's Communication Styles & Relationship Development: Gaps in Literature

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000172>

Received: 27 August 2025; Accepted: 01 September 2025; Published: 03 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Asian culture is diverse and varied. Hussain (2005) writes that South Asia refers to an 'imagined community' that consolidates people who trace their roots to the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka). South Asian values include a strong family orientation, collectivism, respect for the elderly, and adherence to tradition. One key feature of South Asian Culture is patriarchy, which plays a significant role in shaping the identity and roles of women in this society. South Asian women demonstrate the complex relationship between cultural assumptions, gender roles, and communication.

This review paper aims to identify gaps in the literature focusing on the role of women in South Asian society, the features of South Asian Culture, how gender roles shape women's identities, and how women navigate their identities and relationship development in a patriarchal society.

The paper helps to develop a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and discourse on gender and communication studies. This literature review will uncover unique cultural influences on the identity and communication style of South Asian Women. The review synthesises the findings from selected research studies to underline the development of identity growth and communication trends, challenges, and opportunities within different South Asian contexts. The literature review aims to identify gaps in the existing literature and provide insights into the future scope of research.

Keywords: South Asian, Women, Culture, Identity, Patriarchy, Communication

INTRODUCTION

South Asians represent many countries; they share similar worldviews (Tewari et al., 2003) that impart common values and behavioral expectations for men and women in their countries of origin. The traditional values of the South Asian subcontinent, such as the paramount importance of family, community, and religious beliefs, are instrumental in shaping the cultural identity and communication styles of women in this region. However, education, migration, and globalization have contributed to the gradual shift in gender roles.

Culture can be seen as including everything man-made (Hall, 1959). Cultural perspectives and prevailing beliefs shape role definitions, regulations, and communication objectives. Cultural values influence how people see themselves and others, influencing their communication style. Individualists prefer direct communication, while collectivists avoid conflict by talking indirectly. Cultural awareness fosters tolerance and avoids misconceptions in intercultural interactions. The norms and values of religion and culture are powerful forces in the lives of people, families, and communities worldwide. Culture primarily defines the type of behavior and responsibilities expected of males and females (Chakawa & Hogg, 2016). South Asia, a diversified region of the global South, is both socio-politically and geo-strategically significant. Dasgupta (1998) described South Asians as individuals with historical/ancestral and cultural connections to the South Asian subcontinent. The traditions, practices, languages, and lifestyles of South Asian countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are influenced by thousands of years of history, religion, migration, and globalization, forming one of the world's oldest and most complex cultures. Despite being a densely populated region, it is home to diverse cultures, faiths, languages, and ethnicities, making it an excellent area for intercultural studies (Dutta, 2017). South Asian cultures value family and community, emphasizing face-saving and collective dignity. These values influence

how individuals navigate intercultural interactions, and the notion of family is crucial to all aspects of life.

Statement of Problem

This literature review addresses a significant gap in communication studies regarding the unique communication styles of South Asian women and their role in relationship development. While gendered and intercultural communication has been widely studied, most frameworks are grounded in Western contexts and often overlook the intersection of gender, culture, religion, and migration specific to South Asian women. As these women navigate both traditional expectations and modern influences, a deeper understanding of their verbal and non-verbal communication behaviors is essential. This review lays the foundation for more inclusive, culturally grounded research in interpersonal communication and identity negotiation.

Gender Roles In a Patriarchal Society

South Asian cultures' values and practices are patriarchal. South Asian women are expected to be obedient daughters and wives among their families (Pande, 2015; Zaidi et al., 2014). Women from these regions endure the struggles of patriarchal cultural values, which reflect the burden of domestic responsibilities that are not shared or expected by their male counterparts (Inman, 2006). This means that women's subordination is not only present but encouraged in South Asian culture.

In Asian society, women's primary role is to care for their families and adhere to traditional values. Women are considered caretakers of society. They are trained to be the saviour of family values and traditions, which often leads to the subordination of their own needs and desires (Tripathi, 2013). South Asian women are expected to prioritize family honor and adhere to the restrictions surrounding dating, relationships, and sexual intimacy over their agency (Couture-Carron, 2020).

South Asian parents exercise more control over their daughters than their sons. Zaidi et al. (2014) explored how parental restrictions influence the personal choice of South Asian women to refrain from exploring intimate relationships. Daughters are encouraged more than sons to remain dependent and seek approval from their families (Varghese & Jenkins, 2009). Daughters are expected to take on domestic responsibilities from a young age. In contrast, sons are expected to focus on their educational standing to pursue careers that will provide them tremendous financial success (Zaidi et al., 2014). In many countries, girls are fed less than their brothers, forced to work harder, provided little education and denied equal access to medical care (Tripathi, 2013). Based on how men and women are assigned to positions in society, Social Role Theory, developed by Alice H. Eagly and Wendy Wood (2012), explains the differences and similarities in social behavior between the sexes. These roles are influenced by cultural, economic, technical, and ecological factors in addition to physical traits such as men's better physical strength and women's capacity for reproduction and nursing. This division of labor cultivates gender roles and stereotypes and are further strengthened by socialization, personal conformity to gender norms, and hormonal changes. Men and women consequently exhibit behaviors that are in line with their socially assigned roles, which results in discernible sex disparities. People absorb these gender norms as they grow up, which influences how they see themselves and behave. Behavioral sex inequalities are the result of socialization, which sustains gender norms throughout generations.

In South Asian cultures, gendered behavioral expectations such as demeanor, way of dressing, and interactions are important to maintaining a cultural identity (Inman, 2007; Ghosh, 2013). While it may seem that gender roles have more to do with cultural background, it is often also the result of familial values and how cultural expectations are passed down from generations (Inman et al., 2007).

Women have been pushed to lag behind men on all vital aspects of life, whether it is the choice of education, employment opportunities, health and nutrition, sexuality or even crucial decisions about their family. Many girls are raised in an environment of neglect, overwork and often abuse just because of being a female.

Marriage And South Asian Women

Male-dominated orthodox Indian society has always valued marriage. In South Asian countries, wives generally play a subordinate role toward their husbands in the form of household and maternal responsibilities (Samuel,

2010). Marriage entails the unification of two families, wherein the perspectives of all family members are considered in the union's decision-making process. Families ought to evaluate prospective marriage partners for their children upon reaching maturity to guarantee the continuation of cultural customs and communities across future generations. (Usulul et al., 2011). Many South Asians take marriage and family for granted, especially for women.

One reason South Asian women are encouraged to uphold their background and culture is to find a good husband. Virtue is expected of South Asian women until marriage. This promotes "goodness" and not having close relationships with men before marriage. This honors the family and the societal expectation that women serve their husbands. South Asian women are victims of the cultural expectation of marriage (Pande, 2015). They are married off earlier and face more significant risks of death in adolescence and early childhood because of early and too closely spaced pregnancies. Even the tragic abandonment of women's issues in all major revolutions and movements has become the bane of our civilization (Tripathi, 2013).

Expectations for South Asian women in their roles as wives include cooking, cleaning, and caretaking for both the children and their husbands. Women maintain respect through devotion and their reputation as feminine and subservient to their male counterparts (Dwyer, 2000). Gita Mehrotra (2016), by detailing typical South Asian marriage customs (such as planned or semi-arranged marriages), highlights marriage's cultural significance. In her study, many women talked about different ways that they experienced explicit pressure to get married from family and community. Marriage and marital happiness are other societal concepts related to women's well-being. Women's standing depends on their marriage. A woman's identity is connected with her husband's family name, reputation, and societal status. Thus, the responsibilities of continuing the cultural heritage, nurturing the family, and being modest and submissive to society's traditions bind women of South Asia from pursuing personal and professional development.

C. S. Biswas and I. Mukhopadhyay (2018) studied Marriage and women's empowerment in India and concluded that marriage should give women security, respect, completion, and confidence. Due to this socially built traditional paradigm, girls internalize the value of marriage from childhood. This encourages women to endure their in-laws' faults, including their husbands, to maintain their marriage. Most of these cultural expectations directly affect the identity construction of South Asian women (Samuel, 2010).

An Insight into The Women's Identity Construct

Identities are not fixed. Our definitions or representations of our identities are always specific to the time, place, and context from which we speak (Hall, 1993). Identity is influenced by context; it is formed through relationships; it is dynamic; and it involves meaning-making (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Identity is a construct of Culture. Dhaliwal and Patel (2019) explore the "politics of belonging", revealing that identity construction among South Asian women is not static but evolves through experiences of migration, race, and gender. Studies show that in South Asia, women negotiate their identities by balancing cultural traditions with the pressures of assimilation. Self-exploration is an integral part of self-identification for South Asian women. Early experiences shape these women's views and define their roles in any given society (Inman, 2006).

Women have multiple identities based on gender, looks, caste, class, ethnicity, and age. At any given time, they could be oppressed by any one or various other factors. Bhopal (2010) identifies marginalization as a critical factor, with societal stereotypes often constraining women's opportunities for self-expression and growth. It emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in understanding identity, particularly the interaction of class, religion, and gender. This identity negotiation often involves maintaining collectivist values, such as familial loyalty, while adapting to individualistic environments. Women's networks are often comprised of private spheres that include kinship, friendship, and business or professional ties and are influenced by religion, mistrust, culture, and societal expectations (Surangi et al., 2018).

Another important element of South Asian Culture is religion. It serves as a cornerstone in the lives of many South Asian women, providing a framework of values, norms, and roles that significantly influence their identities. In Hinduism, for instance, traditional scriptures often delineate specific roles for women, emphasizing virtues like modesty and devotion. However, contemporary interpretations and feminist movements within

Hindu communities are challenging these traditional roles, advocating for a more egalitarian perspective (Pechilis, 2008).

Islam, prevalent in countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, also profoundly impacts women's identities. Cultural practices such as purdah (seclusion) and specific dress codes are manifestations of religious beliefs that influence women's public presence and self-perception. While some women find empowerment within these frameworks, others experience constraints, leading to a complex interplay between religious adherence and personal autonomy (Basu, 1995).

Festivals and rituals, integral to South Asian cultures, provide a sense of belonging and continuity, reinforcing cultural identities. However, participation in these traditions can also impose expectations that may conflict with personal aspirations, leading to a complex negotiation of identity (Pande, 2015).

The identity of South Asian women is intricately woven with cultural factors such as religious beliefs, ethnicity and traditions, and language and communication styles. These elements collectively shape their self-perception, societal roles, and interactions.

Migration profoundly impacts the identity and culture of South Asian women by compelling them to navigate and negotiate multiple cultural frameworks. As these women transition from their home countries to host nations, their sense of self and cultural practices undergo significant transformation, influenced by societal norms, cultural expectations, and individual agency. Rao and Shroff (2017) highlight how identity negotiation for South Asian women often involves reconciling traditional roles, such as familial caregiving, with professional aspirations in more egalitarian host societies.

Migration also affects the cultural practices of South Asian women, who often act as cultural bearers in their families. Studies suggest that women are central in preserving cultural traditions, such as language, food, and religious practices, within the diaspora (Gupta & Sharma, 2019). South Asian women's conversation styles are heavily influenced by intercultural communication, particularly in regions with diverse cultural backgrounds. Research shows that South Asian women in intercultural contexts frequently encounter gendered and racialized expectations that can constrain their communication behaviors. For example, Patel and Bowman's (2020) study highlights how stereotypes about submissiveness or passivity often associated with South Asian women can misinterpret their communication style in workplace or academic settings.

Developing intercultural communication competence is crucial for South Asian women to assert their identities while effectively navigating diverse environments. Intercultural competence involves empathy, cultural awareness, and adaptability (Deardorff, 2006). Studies have found that South Asian women who actively engage in intercultural learning develop greater confidence and flexibility in their communication (Chacko, 2021).

Culture-Shaping Communication Style

A communication style could then be defined as a cluster of aspects of conversational language behaviors which collectively specify a cultural communication pattern (Brzozowska & Chłopicki, 2015). Hall (1959), for example, believes that 'culture is communication, and communication is culture' (p. 169). Culture equips individuals with unique communication patterns that tend to be distinct from those of people from different cultures. Ethnic identities often carry varying cultural values, creating unique communication styles that are typically different from those of other cultures. This means that the impact of culture on an individual will not be uniform (Park, 2012).

Sharma and Liu (2024) explored the complex link between culture and communication. The study investigated how communication among people and communities shapes and preserves cultural values and norms. The scholars stressed the intricacy of this link, pointing out that although sharing cultural values occurs via communication, culture also shapes communication methods and practices.

Wang and Leung (2019) studied cross-cultural variations in communication styles, focusing on directness versus indirectness and elaboration versus simplicity. They examined data from several civilizations to spot trends and

underlying causes driving these choices for communication. The study emphasizes how people express themselves by means of cultural aspects including individualism vs collectivism and high-context against low-context communication. Emphasizing the need for cultural understanding in good communication, the writers also address the consequences of these variations for intercultural contact. Their results show how values and cultural standards affect communication practices in many societies.

Communication Style Men Vs Women

According to Deborah Tannen's Genderlect Communication Theory, women and men have diverse speaking styles—akin to different ethnic dialects—which she labels "genderlects." One fundamental idea is the difference between "report talk" and "rapport talk." Rapport conversations are common among women and are used to create bonds and generate rapport through dialogue. Conversely, men usually employ report speech, emphasizing information sharing and establishing their standing (Tannen, 1990).

Gender plays a pivotal role in determining communication styles within diverse cultural contexts, contributing to the rich tapestry of cultural influences. Societal norms and expectations can influence gendered communication, and often, these norms are shaped by cultural context (Tannen, 1990). Mulac, Bradac, and Gibbons (2001) examined the "gender-as-culture" concept, which holds that male and female communication styles are cultural languages. They classified 16 gender-indicated linguistic elements into Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey's four intercultural communication dimensions. The results showed that masculine language elements were direct, concise, personal, and instrumental, while feminine features were indirect, complicated, and emotive. The study also found that male language features included directions and assertive declarations, and female features included uncertain verbs and qualifiers, representing gender communication preferences. The study showed that gender-based language preferences reflect stylistic differences across national cultures, supporting the idea that gender is a cultural variable in communication.

Franklin et al. (2019) found that women were likelier to use language that created social bonds and expressed support, corresponding to Norton's friendly and open styles. Men were likelier to engage in contentious and dominant speech, especially in competitive contexts. Feminine communication is more indirect, elaborate, and emotional, whereas masculine communication is more direct, succinct, and instrumental. The feminine linguistic style can help establish rapport and encourage the speaking partner to respond, but it can also reflect uncertainty, tentativeness, and a lack of authority (Aries, 2006; Lindsey & Zakahi, 2006).

Women might use these communication styles to establish their presence and navigate their roles effectively (Eagly & Wood, 2012). A study by Leaper and Ayres (2007) found that women tend to use more affiliative and attentive language, correlating with Norton's attentive, open, and friendly styles. Women are generally more cooperative in their communication and are more likely to use language that fosters connection and relationship-building.

Being more relaxed and open could be associated with their nurturing role in society. Traditionally, women are viewed as caregivers and are expected to create a warm, welcoming environment (Eagly & Wood, 2012). This perception could have influenced the observed relaxed communication style. Being argumentative and dramatic may also reflect their increased assertiveness and willingness to express emotions openly (Gartzia & Lopez-Zafra, 2014).

The core of South Asian identity is language. South Asian migrants negotiate identity by drawing on multilingualism, linguistic cosmopolitanism, and cultural expressions (Dutta, 2021). In traditional societies, women tend to suppress their anger, and men express it more directly (Fischer & Evers, 2011). Traditional gender roles can influence communication styles. In patriarchal South Asian cultures, women may adopt or reject specific linguistic styles to assert their identities. Men may engage in more direct, assertive, and authoritative communication, while women may adopt a more indirect, cooperative, and nurturing approach. (Azmi et al., 2023).

South Asian young adults must negotiate South Asian cultural values and beliefs, particularly related to gender and cultural adjustment, which could pose both challenges and opportunities (Mahapatra & Murugan, 2024).

Communication styles, including verbal and non-verbal cues, are also culturally embedded. South Asian cultures often value indirect communication, humility, and respect for authority, influencing how women express themselves. These communication norms can affect women's participation in public discourse and decision-making processes, impacting their sense of agency and identity.

Religious beliefs and practices are central to the identities of many South Asian women and profoundly affect their communication styles. For instance, modesty and humility are emphasized in Islamic communities, leading women to adopt reserved communication patterns (Hussain & Bagguley, 2007).

CONCLUSION

The literature examined emphasizes how culture shapes South Asian women's communication styles and identities. It emphasizes how women's roles are still shaped by conventional rules, family systems, and patriarchal ideals, producing a complex dynamic whereby modern goals must fit cultural expectations. South Asian culture is based on patriarchal values and gendered expectations, which have a significant impact on how women in this area see themselves and their lives. South Asian women are taught from a young age to put family duties first, follow cultural norms, and favor cultural values.

Patriarchy not only keeps gender differences going, but it also tells people how to act, which can hurt women's health, schooling, and job prospects. Social Role Theory explains how rigid gender roles are formed through cultural, economic, and biological factors and are passed down from generation to generation, affecting how people behave and what society expects of them.

Marriage is an essential part of South Asian society and an institution that helps women define their identities. Women's identities are often tied to their husbands' social standing, making their goals seem less important. The identities of South Asian women change over time because of how cultural, religious, and social factors interact with each other and with their unique experiences in different situations.

South Asian women constantly balance traditional values, choices, and outside factors that shape who they are. This complex identity shows their strength and flexibility as they deal with how culture, gender, and social expectations affect them. Identity is not set in stone; it changes over time as people connect, move, and deal with different cultural norms. For South Asian women, this growth means balancing collectivist values like family loyalty and preserving culture and individualistic goals common in cross-cultural settings.

Communication across cultures is an integral part of this process, and South Asian women often have to deal with stereotypes and standards that make it hard for them to say what they want to say. Women's communication is characterized by being subtle, humble, and respectful of authority. This is often because of the roles they play in patriarchal societies. Based on societal norms and expectations, gendered communication styles show how men and women talk to each other, get along, and show power in different ways. Men are known for being straight, assertive, and goal-oriented in their conversation, while women are more likely to be cooperative, relational, and nurturing. Migration, adjusting to a new culture, and exposure to different social norms all present challenges and opportunities, forcing women to find a balance between individualistic goals and community values. These situations demonstrate the importance of international competence for women, enabling them to communicate effectively in diverse settings while remaining true to themselves.

Research Gaps

Culture significantly impacts communication patterns, while an individual's gender and personal characteristics introduce further complexity. The combination of these aspects can yield different communication patterns, underlining the need for extensive research on the impact of cultural, gender, and individual factors on communication in diverse South Asian countries. A paucity of comprehensive studies investigates the impact of these components on identity and communication practices among South Asian women. Thorough research investigating particular aspects of South Asia, such as the differences between urban and rural settings or among ethnic minorities, is crucial to capture the region's extensive diversity. The influence of male relatives and broader patriarchal systems on women's communication styles is typically highlighted.

Understanding male perspectives may facilitate a comprehensive analysis of society dynamics. The changing communication strategies among generations, especially among diasporic communities, are insufficiently investigated. Comparative examinations of identity and communication among generations within South Asian diaspora communities might reveal how younger women balance cultural expectations with contemporary objectives. Research may focus on developing culturally sensitive communication frameworks that aid South Asian women in navigating traditional conventions while asserting their individuality in globalized environments.

Limitations

The literature study offers significant insights on the relationship among culture, communication, and gender, specifically emphasising the communication patterns of South Asian women. The review addresses aspects such as patriarchy and gender roles but fails to adopt a thorough intersectional perspective that examines how caste, class, religion, age, and other social categories intersect with gender to affect communication methods among South Asian women.

The literature applies theories like Tannen's Genderlect Communication Theory, which was primarily developed in Western contexts. These theories may not adequately encompass the subtleties of South Asian communication styles, and dependence on Western paradigms may result in cultural biases and misinterpretations. The discourse is limited to conventional male and female gender roles, excluding non-binary and transgender individuals. This exclusion neglects the variety of gender identities found within South Asian civilizations.

The review article depends on conventional gender binaries and stereotypes, positing that men are intrinsically more forceful, whilst women are more cooperative and nurturing (Tannen, 1990). This oversimplification disregards the diversity of gender identities and expressions, potentially failing to represent individual differences within gender categories. Recent studies may provide revised insights and reflect current changes in communication styles driven by globalization and technological progress.

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