

# Individualism in Everyday Communication among University Students: A Qualitative Study of Self-Expression and Social Interaction

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how individualism is enacted in the everyday communication of university students, examining self-expression, autonomy, and social interaction within both face-to-face and digital contexts. While prior research has predominantly treated individualism as a stable cultural or psychological trait, this study reconceptualizes it as a dynamic, interactionally accomplished, and contextually negotiated phenomenon. Employing a qualitative interpretive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focused participant observations, and digital communication artifacts from fifteen purposively sampled undergraduate students. Data were analyzed using an iterative thematic approach informed by practice-based and power-sensitive perspectives, ensuring credibility through method triangulation, member reflection, and reflexive memoing. Findings reveal that students strategically deploy autonomy, assertiveness, and self-expression, modulating their communicative behavior according to relational considerations, institutional norms, and digital affordances. Individualism is neither absolute nor unbounded; rather, it is hybrid and relationally regulated, coexisting with concern for social harmony. Digital platforms extend opportunities for self-expression, yet visibility and audience awareness impose new constraints, illustrating that individualistic communication is always situated and mediated. The study contributes theoretically by advancing a practice-centered framework of individualism that foregrounds interactional accomplishment, contextual contingency, and structural constraint. Practically, it highlights the need for higher education institutions to recognize diverse forms of student engagement, including reflective silence, selective participation, and digitally mediated expression, as legitimate modes of agency. By reframing individualism as a communicative practice, this study provides both a robust theoretical lens and actionable insights for fostering balanced and contextually aware communication in higher education settings.

## 1. Introduction

Individualism has long been theorized as a cultural orientation that foregrounds personal autonomy, independence, and self-directed action<sup>1</sup>. Within communication studies, individualism is commonly associated with assertive self-expression, the prioritization of personal opinions, and the articulation of identity through language<sup>2</sup>. These characteristics are often framed as indicators of communicative competence and personal empowerment<sup>3</sup>. However, such conceptualizations tend to treat individualism as a relatively stable cultural or psychological trait<sup>4</sup>, paying limited attention to how it is enacted, negotiated, and potentially contested in everyday communicative practices.

This limitation becomes particularly salient in higher education contexts, where communication functions not only as a means of individual expression but also as a relational and collaborative process<sup>5</sup>. University students are simultaneously expected to demonstrate autonomy, critical thinking, and personal achievement while engaging in dialogic interaction, cooperation, and shared meaning-making<sup>6</sup>. This dual expectation suggests that individualism in student communication cannot be adequately understood through static cultural models alone, but must instead be examined as a situated social practice shaped by interactional demands and institutional contexts<sup>7</sup>.

Early influential work on individualism and communication, such as Markus and Kitayama's (1991)<sup>8</sup> distinction between independent and interdependent self-construals, has provided valuable insights into how cultural orientations shape communicative behavior. Individuals with an independent self-construal tend to emphasize personal attributes, opinions, and internal states, whereas those with an interdependent self-construal prioritize relational

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<sup>1</sup> Albina Alikovna Gallyamova and Dmitry Sergeevich Grigoryev, 'Development of a Measure for Assessing Perceived Community Culture Based on Triandis's Horizontal/Vertical Individualism-Collectivism Cultural Orientation', *RUDN Journal of Psychology and Pedagogics*, 19.3 (2022) <<https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-1683-2022-19-3-429-447>>; Sukma Nurmala and Ali Mashuri, 'Peran Kepribadian Dan Orientasi Budaya (Individualis vs. Kolektif) Terhadap Perilaku Inovatif Individual Pada Pegawai', *Jurnal Psikologi Sosial*, 23.1 (2025) <<https://doi.org/10.7454/jps.2025.08>>; Sjoerd Beugelsdijk, Robbert Maseland, and André van Hoorn, 'Are Scores on Hofstede's Dimensions of National Culture Stable over Time? A Cohort Analysis', *Global Strategy Journal*, 5.3 (2015) <<https://doi.org/10.1002/gsj.1098>>.

<sup>2</sup> Su Yueh Wu and Donald L. Rubin, 'Evaluating the Impact of Collectivism and Individualism on Argumentative Writing by Chinese and North American College Students', *Research in the Teaching of English*, 2000 <<https://doi.org/10.58680/rte20001715>>.

<sup>3</sup> Claire Balleys and others, 'Searching for Oneself on YouTube: Teenage Peer Socialization and Social Recognition Processes', *Social Media and Society*, 6.2 (2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120909474>>.

<sup>4</sup> Ashley Humphrey, Ana Maria Bliuc, and Pascal Molenberghs, 'The Social Contract Revisited: A Re-Examination of the Influence Individualistic and Collectivistic Value Systems Have on the Psychological Wellbeing of Young People', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23.2 (2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2019.1590541>>.

<sup>5</sup> Ashley Humphrey and Ana-Maria Bliuc, 'Western Individualism and the Psychological Wellbeing of Young People: A Systematic Review of Their Associations', *Youth*, 2.1 (2021) <<https://doi.org/10.3390/youth2010001>>.

<sup>6</sup> Xiaodong Zhang, 'Understanding EFL Students' Academically Transitioning Experiences with Meaning-Making-Based Instruction: A Qualitative Inquiry', *Linguistics and Education*, 84 (2024) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2024.101357>>.

<sup>7</sup> Olga Gould-Yakovleva, 'Voices from University Classrooms on Effects of Multimodality on Polylingual EAL College Students' Meaning Making', *International Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 2.2 (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.33422/ijfsfle.v2i2.450>>.

<sup>8</sup> Vivian L. Vignoles and others, 'Beyond the "East-West" Dichotomy: Global Variation in Cultural Models of Selfhood', *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 145.8 (2016) <<https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000175>>.

context and social expectations<sup>9</sup>. While this framework has been widely adopted, subsequent scholarship has noted that such dichotomous models risk oversimplifying communicative realities, particularly in contemporary societies<sup>10</sup> where individuals routinely navigate multiple and sometimes competing communicative norms.

More recent studies have highlighted the role of digital media in intensifying individualistic communication practices<sup>11</sup>. Social media platforms and online messaging environments facilitate immediate, personalized, and self-oriented forms of expression<sup>12</sup>, often reducing the immediacy of social accountability present in face-to-face interaction. Research suggests that these environments encourage selective self-presentation and reinforce communication patterns centered on personal voice and visibility<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, much of this literature relies on quantitative methodologies that measure attitudes or usage patterns<sup>14</sup>, offering limited insight into how individualism is experienced and managed in everyday interaction across different communicative settings.

Within higher education research, communication studies have predominantly focused on academic participation, intercultural competence, or collaborative learning outcomes, with relatively little attention given to informal, everyday communication among students. When individualism is addressed, it is often framed normatively—either as a desirable attribute linked to independence and critical thinking or as a challenge to cooperation and social cohesion. Such framings obscure the complexity of students' communicative practices, which may simultaneously reflect autonomy, relational sensitivity, and strategic adaptation to academic and social expectations.

The dominance of Western-centric perspectives in the study of individualism further limits the explanatory power of existing research. In non-Western contexts such as Indonesia, where collectivistic values emphasizing social harmony and relational interdependence have traditionally shaped communication, contemporary university students are increasingly exposed to globalized academic norms and digital communication cultures that valorize individual voice and personal visibility. This intersection produces a communicative tension in which students must continuously negotiate self-expression and social obligation. Yet, qualitative research that examines how this tension is navigated in students' everyday communication remains scarce.

Against this backdrop, there is a clear need for qualitative, context-sensitive research that conceptualizes individualism not as a fixed orientation but as a communicative practice embedded in specific social, cultural, and institutional settings. By foregrounding students' subjective experiences and interactional choices, such an approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how individualistic values are enacted, negotiated, and sometimes constrained in daily communication.

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<sup>9</sup> Vivian L. Vignoles and others, '3 Vignoles et Al (2016). 7 Models of Selfhood', *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 145.8 (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Cecilia Gallardo Macip, 'Individualism in Contemporary Societies: A Common Diagnosis by Patrick Deneen and Axel Honneth', *Discusiones Filosóficas*, 24.42 (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.17151/DIFIL.2023.24.42.7>>.

<sup>11</sup> Hua Wang, Renwen Zhang, and Barry Wellman, 'Are Older Adults Networked Individuals? Insights from East Yorkers' Network Structure, Relational Autonomy, and Digital Media Use', *Information Communication and Society*, 21.5 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428659>>.

<sup>12</sup> Dmitry A. Davydov, 'A Narrow Dichotomy: The Future Beyond Tradition and Modernity', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 23.1 (2025) <<https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2025-23-1-51-68>>.

<sup>13</sup> Khalil Zaman and Zara Ali, 'Cyber Activism and Digital Identity: Navigating the Politics of Representation in Cyberspace', *Journal of Loomingulus Ja Innovatsioon*, 2.1 (2025).

<sup>14</sup> M M D Rubio, 'Authorial Visibility in the Introduction and Post-Methodology Sections of Research Papers from Different Disciplines', *Revista Signos*, 54.106 (2021).

Responding to these gaps, the present study investigates individualism in university students' everyday communication, with particular attention to forms of self-expression, patterns of social interaction, and the contextual factors that shape these practices. Employing a qualitative approach, this study examines how students negotiate individualism across face-to-face and digital communication contexts. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions: *How is individualism manifested in students' everyday communication practices?*

By examining individualism as a situated communicative practice rather than a stable cultural trait, this study contributes to communication scholarship by refining existing conceptualizations of individualism in higher education contexts. The findings are expected to provide theoretical insights into the dynamic relationship between self-expression and social interaction, as well as practical implications for fostering communicative environments that balance individual autonomy and social connectedness within university settings.

## 2. Research Method

### 2.1. Research design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design informed by a practice-oriented analytical framework<sup>15</sup> to examine how individualism is enacted and negotiated in university students' everyday communication. The study conceptualizes individualism not as a fixed cultural or psychological trait, but as a communicative practice that emerges through interaction, self-expression, and relational negotiation within specific social and institutional contexts<sup>16</sup>.

An interpretive qualitative approach was chosen to capture students' meaning-making processes and lived communication experiences, particularly in relation to autonomy, self-expression, and social interaction<sup>17</sup>. This design is methodologically aligned with the study's objective to explore how individualistic orientations are performed and managed in both face-to-face and digital communication settings.

### 2.2. Analytical framework

The analysis was guided by an integrated analytical framework combining cultural–conceptual perspectives on individualism with interactional approaches to communication. At the cultural–conceptual level, the study draws on the notions of individualism–collectivism and independent versus interdependent self-construals<sup>18</sup>. These perspectives functioned as sensitizing concepts that informed the interpretation of autonomy, self-expression, and relational orientation in students' communication, without being imposed as fixed analytical categories.

At the interactional level, the framework incorporates insights from interpersonal and intercultural communication studies to examine how individualistic values are enacted through communicative practices such as assertiveness, responsiveness to others' perspectives, turn-

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<sup>15</sup> Gabrielle Agin-Liebes and others, 'Participant Reports of Mindfulness, Posttraumatic Growth, and Social Connectedness in Psilocybin-Assisted Group Therapy: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis', *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 64.4 (2024) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211022949>>.

<sup>16</sup> Hanzhi Fu, 'Horizontal and Vertical Individualism and Collectivism of Chinese Migrant University Students and Their Relationships with Adjustment: A Scale Validation and Exploratory Investigation', *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 109 (2025) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2025.102302>>.

<sup>17</sup> Tanner Morrison, 'Mixed Methods Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Bridging Lived Experience and Contextual Complexity', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 24 (2025) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069251400179>>.

<sup>18</sup> Gallyamova and Grigoryev; Nurmala and Mashuri; Beugelsdijk, Maseland, and van Hoorn.

taking, and selective engagement. This dual-layered framework enabled the analysis to move beyond abstract cultural labels and attend to the ways individualism is produced, negotiated, and constrained in everyday interaction.

These conceptual lenses were operationalized through an inductive analytical process informed by the interactive data analysis model of Miles & Huberman<sup>19</sup>. Empirical patterns and themes were generated from the data and subsequently interpreted in dialogue with the analytical framework<sup>20</sup>, ensuring both analytical flexibility and theoretical coherence.

### 2.3. Participants and sampling strategy

The study was conducted within Indonesian higher education contexts, involving undergraduate students from both public and private universities located in urban and semi-urban areas. Indonesia provides a theoretically relevant context due to the coexistence of collectivistic cultural norms emphasizing social harmony and the growing prominence of individualistic self-expression shaped by digital communication and competitive academic environments.

Fifteen undergraduate students participated in the study, representing diverse academic disciplines, years of study, and gender backgrounds. This diversity was intended to capture a broad range of everyday communication experiences across academic, organizational, and informal social settings. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria directly aligned with the analytical framework and research objectives. These criteria included active engagement in academic discussions and social interactions, regular use of digital communication platforms, and the ability to reflect critically on personal communication experiences. This strategy ensured the inclusion of information-rich cases capable of illuminating how individualism is enacted in everyday communication practices.

### 2.4. Data collection

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to capture both participants' subjective interpretations and observable communicative practices.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences of self-expression, autonomy, and relational negotiation in everyday communication. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and followed a flexible interview guide informed by the analytical framework, allowing participants to elaborate on communicative dilemmas, moments of tension, and differences between online and offline interaction. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and transcribed verbatim.

Focused participant observation was carried out in selected academic and social settings, including classroom discussions and student organizational activities. Observations concentrated on interactional features relevant to the analytical framework, such as turn-taking patterns, expressions of agreement or disagreement, responsiveness to others' contributions, and instances of withdrawal or silence. Field notes were recorded systematically to document naturally occurring communication practices.

Digital communication artifacts were collected with participants' permission to capture forms of self-expression in online environments. These artifacts included selected social media posts, public comments, and excerpts from online interactions that reflected individualistic communicative practices. All digital data were anonymized to protect participants' identities.

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<sup>19</sup> Hen AjoLeda, 'Bagaimana Langkah-Langkah Analisis Kualitatif Menurut Miles Dan Huberman?', *Kompasiana*, 2024; Daniel J. Palazzolo, 'Miles & Huberman', *Experiencing Citizenship: Concepts and Models for Service-Learning in Political Science*, 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Aulia siti Shalwa, 'Model Teknik Miles Dan Huberman Dalam Penelitian Kualitatif', *Ebizmark Blog*, 2025.

## 2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative and inductive process guided by the interactive model of Miles & Huberman<sup>21</sup>. The process began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and digital artifacts. Open coding was conducted to identify communicative practices related to self-expression, autonomy, and social interaction as they emerged from the data.

Codes were then grouped into broader categories and refined into thematic constructs that reflected patterns of individualism in students' everyday communication. Throughout this process, the analytical framework functioned as an interpretive lens rather than a rigid coding scheme, enabling themes to be interpreted in relation to cultural orientations and interactional dynamics. Reflexive analytical memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions and enhance analytical transparency.

## 2.6. Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed method and source triangulation by comparing interview data, observational field notes, and digital communication artifacts. Member reflection was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with selected participants to assess resonance with their experiences. Thick description and reflexive memoing were used to enhance credibility, dependability, and transferability, in accordance with qualitative research standards.

Ethical principles of qualitative research were strictly observed. Participants provided informed consent prior to data collection and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and reports, and all digital communication data were anonymized. Participation was voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

## 3. Results

This section presents the findings of the study derived from thematic analysis of interview data, observations, and documentation. In line with the analytical framework that conceptualizes individualism as a situated communicative practice, the findings demonstrate that individualism among university students is not a fixed cultural orientation but a dynamic pattern of communication enacted, negotiated, and constrained across interactional contexts. Students' individualistic orientations emerge through autonomy in expression, selective assertiveness, digitally mediated practices, and strategic restraint shaped by relational and institutional considerations.

Individualism in students' everyday communication is manifested through how students position themselves as autonomous communicators while continuously managing social risks, power relations, and expectations of appropriateness.

University students in this study consistently articulated a strong sense of personal autonomy in communication, particularly in academic settings. Students described themselves as independent thinkers who value having and maintaining personal viewpoints. However, this autonomy was not expressed uniformly or unconditionally. Instead, it was enacted selectively depending on interactional context, perceived authority, and the social climate of the discussion.

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<sup>21</sup> Hen AjoLeda; Palazzolo.

One participant explained this conditional autonomy as follows:

*“I usually already have my own opinion, but I don’t always say it immediately. I need to see the situation first, especially if the lecturer dominates the discussion.”* (Participant 4)

This excerpt illustrates that individualism operates through contextualized autonomy, where students balance personal voice with situational awareness. Observational data further supported this pattern, showing that students often demonstrated engagement through attentive listening and note-taking even when refraining from verbal participation. In this sense, individualism was expressed not only through speaking but also through internal positioning as an autonomous subject who chooses when and how to speak.

Self-expression emerged as a central communicative practice through which individualism was enacted. Students perceived communication as a legitimate space to articulate personal values, emotions, and identities. However, such self-expression was consistently moderated by relational considerations. Rather than expressing opinions in a confrontational or absolutist manner, students employed interactional strategies to mitigate potential social tension.

As one student noted:

*“I want to be honest about what I think, but I don’t want people to feel offended or think I’m arrogant. So I choose my words carefully.”* (Participant 7)

This finding indicates that individualism in communication does not necessarily undermine social harmony. Instead, it is enacted through negotiated self-expression, where students remain attentive to the interpersonal consequences of their speech. Indirect disagreement, softened critiques, and selective disclosure were common strategies observed in both academic and informal interactions. These practices suggest that individualistic self-expression coexists with relational orientation, rather than replacing it.

Assertiveness, often associated with individualism, was found to function as a situational communicative resource rather than a stable personal characteristic. Students displayed varying degrees of assertiveness depending on familiarity with interlocutors, perceived legitimacy, and interactional risk. Assertiveness was more evident in peer interactions and informal discussions, whereas formal academic settings often elicited more restrained communication.

One participant described this contrast clearly:

*“With close friends, I’m very direct. But in class, I prefer to listen more because I don’t want to be seen as showing off or challenging others.”* (Participant 2)

This pattern demonstrates that assertiveness is strategically mobilized rather than consistently performed. Observations confirmed that the same students who were highly vocal in student organization meetings often adopted a quieter role in classroom discussions. Thus, individualism is enacted through flexible communicative positioning rather than constant self-assertion.

Digital communication platforms played a significant role in shaping how individualism was expressed. Students consistently described online spaces as affording greater freedom for self-expression due to reduced immediacy and social pressure. The asynchronous nature of digital communication enabled students to reflect, revise, and control their messages before sharing them.

As one participant explained:

*“Online, I can think first before responding. I feel more confident expressing my opinion there than face-to-face.”* (Participant 9)

Digital communication thus functioned as an expanded space for individualistic practice, allowing students to articulate views that might remain unspoken in face-to-face interactions. However, this autonomy was accompanied by heightened self-monitoring. Students consciously curated their online self-presentation to align with desired identities and anticipated audience reactions. Consequently, digital individualism was often performative and strategic rather than spontaneous.

Despite these expressions of autonomy and self-expression, the findings clearly indicate that individualism in students' communication is bounded by cultural and institutional constraints. In contexts characterized by strong hierarchical relations or rigid norms, students frequently restrained individualistic expression. Silence, withdrawal, and strategic compliance emerged as meaningful communicative practices rather than indicators of passivity.

One participant articulated this constraint as follows:

*"Sometimes it's better to stay quiet, even if you disagree, because you don't want problems later."*  
(Participant 1)

This statement highlights how silence operates as a form of communicative agency. Rather than signaling the absence of individual opinion, silence reflects a calculated response to institutional power and social risk. These findings demonstrate that individualism does not disappear in constrained contexts but is temporarily suspended or redirected through alternative communicative strategies.

#### 4. Discussion

This study challenges the prevailing conceptualization of individualism as a stable cultural trait or psychological disposition. While classical frameworks<sup>22</sup> have treated individualism as a relatively fixed attribute shaping communication across contexts, the findings reveal a far more nuanced reality: individualism among university students is interactionally accomplished, strategically managed, and institutionally constrained. Rather than preceding communication, individualism emerges through communicative choices—when to speak, how to express disagreement, and when to exercise silence—underscoring its contingent and negotiated nature.

Autonomy, commonly equated with vocal participation or assertiveness in academic literature, is revealed here as context-dependent and relationally calibrated. Students often exercised agency through selective restraint, postponement, or indirect expression in response to hierarchical structures and evaluative pressures. Silence and cautious engagement, rather than signaling passivity, functioned as deliberate strategies to navigate institutional authority and interpersonal risk<sup>23</sup>. This finding problematizes traditional assumptions in higher education research that equate engagement with visibility, emphasizing instead that autonomy encompasses both action and deliberate inaction.

The study also destabilizes the persistent binary between individualism and collectivism. Students routinely moderated self-expression to preserve relational harmony while maintaining personal integrity, illustrating that individualism does not inherently oppose relational concern. This points to a hybrid communicative orientation in which independence and social sensitivity coexist and are enacted dynamically. By revealing the coexistence of autonomy and relational

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<sup>22</sup> Gallyamova and Grigoryev; Nurmala and Mashuri; Beugelsdijk, Maseland, and van Hoorn.

<sup>23</sup> Syasya Firzana Azmi and others, 'Culture and Communication Styles: Collectivism vs Individualism Cultural Orientations from Malaysian Perspectives', *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13.16 (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarbss/v13-i16/18738>>.

awareness, the study advances theoretical models that move beyond rigid cultural binaries, offering a more practice-centered understanding of selfhood in communication.

Assertiveness, often portrayed as a stable personal attribute, emerged as a situational resource deployed according to familiarity, perceived legitimacy, and interactional risk. The same students alternated between assertive and restrained modes depending on context, demonstrating that communicative behaviors traditionally attributed to personality or cultural orientation are in fact strategically mediated practices. Digital communication further expands the arena for individualistic expression, but not without constraint. Online spaces afford reflective self-expression and reduced immediacy pressure; yet visibility, audience awareness, and performativity impose new forms of accountability. Digital individualism is thus not unbounded freedom but strategically curated expression, highlighting the structural and social conditions shaping communication.

Individualism is always embedded within institutional and relational boundaries<sup>24</sup>. Hierarchical norms, evaluative expectations, and anticipated consequences constrain how students express personal viewpoints. Strategic silence, compliance, and selective participation are not failures of autonomy but adaptive practices reflecting communicative agency under power-laden conditions. This insight advances a power-sensitive understanding of individualism, situating it within the complex interplay of personal choice, relational accountability, and structural constraint.

These findings necessitate a reframing of individualism as a dynamic communicative process<sup>25</sup> rather than a static cultural or psychological trait. Autonomy, assertiveness, and self-expression should be theorized as contextually mediated resources, always negotiated and bounded. From a practical standpoint, higher education institutions should recognize multiple forms of engagement, including reflective silence and digitally mediated participation, as legitimate expressions of individual voice. Communication training should cultivate adaptability, relational awareness, and ethical self-expression, preparing students to navigate complex interactional terrains.

While this study is contextually situated and not statistically generalizable, its implications for theory and pedagogy are significant. By demonstrating that individualism is interactionally produced and institutionally bounded, the study offers a robust practice-based framework for understanding student communication in higher education. Rather than treating individualism as a cultural endpoint, this analysis positions it as a contingent, negotiated, and continuously produced phenomenon, providing both a theoretical intervention and a practical guide for fostering balanced communication in academic contexts.

## 5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that individualism among university students is not a static cultural orientation or fixed personality trait, but a dynamic, communicatively produced, and contextually negotiated phenomenon. Autonomy, assertiveness, and self-expression function as situational resources that students strategically deploy, modulate, or suspend depending on relational, institutional, and digital conditions. Rather than opposing relational concern, individualistic practices are often calibrated to maintain social harmony, revealing hybrid

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<sup>24</sup> Haitao Feng, Jie Guo, and Li Hou, 'The Moderating Role of Individualism/Collectivism in Predicting Male Chinese University Students' Exercise Behavior Using the Theory of Planned Behavior', *Journal of Men's Health*, 19.8 (2023) <<https://doi.org/10.22514/jomh.2023.066>>.

<sup>25</sup> Nina A. Seliverstova and Elena V. Chankova, 'Socio-Cultural Reproduction of Communicative Competencies in Young People', *Research Result Sociology and Management*, 8.3 (2022) <<https://doi.org/10.18413/2408-9338-2022-8-3-0-3>>.

communicative orientations that reconcile self-expression with relational accountability. Moreover, institutional norms and digital affordances delineate the boundaries within which individualism is enacted, highlighting its contingent, power-sensitive, and practice-based nature.

These findings carry significant implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, the study advances a practice-centered framework that reconceptualizes individualism as an interactional accomplishment rather than a cultural endpoint, emphasizing the interplay of autonomy, relational regulation, and structural constraint. Practically, the results suggest that higher education institutions should recognize diverse forms of student engagement—including reflective silence, selective participation, and digitally mediated expression—as legitimate modes of exercising agency and voice. By reframing individualism in terms of communicative practice, this study provides a robust foundation for future research and pedagogical strategies that foster balanced, contextually aware, and ethically attuned communication in higher education settings.

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