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## Managing Anxiety and Uncertainty through Nonverbal Communication in Intercultural Communication

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**Abstract** Previous studies have acknowledged the role of nonverbal communication in intercultural competence and adjustment in higher education. Less is known about how international students experience nonverbal behaviors as the source of their anxiety and uncertainty. This study explored the lived experiences of international students in Gujarat, India, as they managed these sensations in their intercultural communication. A sample of (n=17) international students from (n=14) countries was recruited to collect data through in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that nonverbal behaviors—smiling, handshaking, and touching—serve not only as a means of communication but also as active sources of anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural student interactions. The findings also indicated that questioning, conducting research, and avoidance were the strategies employed by the respondents to manage their anxiety and uncertainty, thereby facilitating effective communication. The findings suggest that nonverbal behaviors are culture-specific; thus, mindfulness is essential for intercultural adjustment and effective communication.

**Keywords** Anxiety, Effective communication, Intercultural communication, Nonverbal behaviors, Uncertainty

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## 1. Introduction

Effective communication is linked to culture. Culture enables individuals to interpret and understand messages within their cultural context (Baldwin et al., 2023). In intercultural communication, researchers view culture as having a significant role in influencing the communication process (Zhang & Giles, 2018). One of the benefits of intercultural communication is that it helps individuals increase their awareness of how culture influences communication (Hall et al., 2018). In the context of higher education, it helps international students with intercultural adjustment and also fosters the building of friendships (Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013). On the other hand, challenges may also occur when international students interact with local peers. These challenges include misinterpretation, social abandonment, and emotional discomfort (Mak et al., 2014; Song & Xia, 2020).

Anxiety and uncertainty are among the challenges that may arise from interacting with people from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds. While much attention has been paid to language (foreign or second) as a source of anxiety and uncertainty for students in higher education learning contexts (Alla et al., 2020; Alsowat, 2016; Dağtaş & Şahinkarakas, 2024; Song, 2024), there is a limited number of studies on nonverbal communication as a source of anxiety and uncertainty in the context of intercultural communication. This research gap presents an exciting opportunity for further exploration and understanding.

Nonverbal communication also has a significant role in intercultural interactions. Most nonverbal behaviors are rooted in a specific culture and may convey different meanings. Unfamiliarity with these behaviors may lead to misinterpretation, conflicts, and confusion, which can be an experienced source of anxiety and uncertainty. International students in Gujarat, India, exhibit similar and different nonverbal behaviors due to their diverse backgrounds. A profound understanding of their lived experiences with anxiety and uncertainty is crucial for assisting administrators and educators at their institution in providing support that addresses the emotional and communication needs of international students. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of international students in Gujarat as they manage anxiety and uncertainty in their intercultural communication.

### 1.1 Background

Communication systems are among the most critical components of any culture. Cultural bonds are the verbal and nonverbal symbols that members of a culture employ to communicate. Most of our communication behavior is nonverbal. Eye contact, body posture, and space are all forms of nonverbal communication, regardless of whether we are using words (Neuliep, 2016). Cultural norms influence nonverbal communication and are typically observed in specific cultural contexts (Chang, 2015). Cultural norms are social rules that dictate what people should and shouldn't do. Norms are frequently perceived as having a substantial impact on behavior (Hall et al., 2018).

Nonverbal communication is employed by individuals across all cultures (Mandal, 2014). Individuals exchange messages through nonverbal behavior. Other nonverbal messages are specific to certain cultures, subcultures, or intimate groups, while others are universal or nearly universal (Gifford, 2010). Culture strongly shapes nonverbal behaviors, even though some have universal and perhaps biological foundations (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). These behaviors are particularly significant in disturbed situations and culturally diverse (Mandal, 2014). Members of every culture learn to communicate differently using verbal and nonverbal language. Thus, communicating with individuals from diverse cultures involves both verbal and nonverbal communication. Consequently, individuals may acquire a language, yet they remain culturally incompetent until they assimilate its mannerisms and nonverbal cues (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). Alongside acquiring a nonverbal repertoire, the effective application of gestures necessitates comprehension of their verbal contexts (Patterson, 2010).

Nonverbal communication in educational contexts has been the subject of numerous research studies. For instance, Podkowińska (2018) describes the significance of proxemics for both lecturers and students in higher education. Yang (2015) examines the role of intercultural nonverbal communication competence among Australian higher education workers in supporting students from culturally diverse backgrounds. In a similar vein, Anderson (2023) emphasizes the significance of nonverbal communication in ESL classes in Korea to enhance intercultural communication competence. Pang et al. (2024) take this analysis a step further by examining nonverbal cues to interpret indirect messages between British and Chinese students, illustrating cross-cultural disparities. Although these studies make significant contributions, the current study aims to advance our understanding of nonverbal communication and its role in managing anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural contexts.

## 1.2 Forms of Nonverbal Communication

This study employed two forms of nonverbal communication to explore the management of anxiety and uncertainty among international students. These two forms include kinesics and haptics. *Kinesics* is the study of body movements, including facial expressions and gestures, as a form of communication. These kinds of nonverbal cues enable us to perceive differences in others and draw conclusions about them (Hall et al., 2018). *Haptics* is the study of touch-based communication. This form of nonverbal communication provides clear guidance and instruction regarding the use of touch (Hans & Hans, 2015). It is crucial to remember that our cultural background has an impact on who touches whom, when, where, and how (Hall et al., 2018). Negative interpersonal effects might result from a lack of competence in touch-related nonverbal communication (Hans & Hans, 2015).

## 1.3 The Present Study

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of international students in Gujarat as they manage anxiety and uncertainty in their intercultural communication. The specific objectives are twofold: to understand the types of nonverbal behaviors that international students in Gujarat experience as sources of their anxiety and uncertainty and to investigate the strategies they use to manage these sensations in their intercultural communication. The following research questions guide the study:

RQ 1: What types of nonverbal behaviors do international students in Gujarat experience as the source of their anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication?

RQ 2: What strategies do international students in Gujarat use to manage anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication, and how do they describe these experiences?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

The Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) Theory underpinned this study. AUM theory holds that controlling uncertainty and anxiety is adequate for effective communication and intercultural adjustment. AUM theory posits that the ability of strangers, such as sojourners, to manage uncertainty and anxiety in the host culture leads to intercultural adjustment. Uncertain strangers will feel comfortable in the host culture if they manage their anxieties. Strangers feel anxious in addition to being uncertain while communicating with hosts (Gudykunst, 1998). Stranger is a fundamental element of AUM theory, alongside uncertainty, anxiety, effective communication, and mindfulness (Prince, 2021). In AUM, a *stranger* is someone who is both physically proximate and conceptually far at the same time (Neuliep, 2017). This relates to the concepts of nearness and remoteness, wherein nearness denotes a physical proximity, while remoteness indicates that communicators have different practices and values (Prince, 2021). Research by Huiwen et al. (2023) categorizes international students as members of the “strangers” category.

Uncertainty and anxiety are two critical elements that significantly influence the commencement of communications with strangers. *Uncertainty* is cognitive and pertains to the degree of predictability regarding knowledge about another individual. *Anxiety* is an emotional state, reflecting one’s feelings. Interactants have minimal and maximum uncertainty and anxiety thresholds. The greatest level of uncertainty or anxiety that allows people to anticipate a stranger’s attitudes, beliefs, values, and communication is the maximum threshold. An individual’s minimal threshold of uncertainty or anxiety is the lowest degree of uncertainty before the encounter becomes boring and uninteresting. *Effective communication* requires that anxiety and uncertainty be maintained within defined minimum and maximum limits (Gudykunst, 1995; Neuliep, 2017; Prince, 2021). AUM identifies superficial factors, including “self-concepts, motivation, responses to hosts, social categorization, situational processes, and relationships with hosts,” influencing anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1998).

During intercultural interactions, international students often require adjustment to facilitate effective communication. Effective communication with host countries requires international students to manage their uncertainty and anxiety (Nishida, 2015), which influences their capacity to adjust to a new culture (Gudykunst, 1995). Effective communication also requires mindfulness among international students. *Mindfulness* pertains to an individual’s deliberate focus on incoming information about others. AUM contends that for mindfulness, people must recognize that strangers convey messages via various means. Additionally, mindfulness involves the process of deriving meaning from interactions with strangers (Neuliep, 2017). The ability of international students to manage uncertainty and anxiety via mindfulness significantly influences their cultural adjustment (Gudykunst, 1998).

Previous studies on Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory have explored superficial causes (Huiwen et al., 2023), strategies (Hamenyimana et al., 2023; Prince, 2021), intercultural adjustment (Huiwen et al., 2022; Zurita et al., 2016), mindfulness and effective communication (Nadeem & Koschmann, 2023), and implications (Gul et al., 2023) among others. Research on nonverbal communication based on AUM theory has garnered little attention.

The application of AUM theory to this study pertains to exploring the lived experiences of international students in terms of how nonverbal behaviors can be a source of anxiety and uncertainty when they are unfamiliar and misinterpreted. These nonverbal behaviors can also serve as strategies to manage anxiety when international students try to socialize with locals. The theory helps explore how international students adjust their behaviors to enhance effective communication. Further, the results of this research may be used to guide the creation of training programs that improve intercultural adjustment via nonverbal forms of communication, as suggested by Gudykunst (1998). Such programs may help cultivate an environment for international students to appreciate their intercultural communication in Gujarat.

### 3. Methods

This qualitative study employed an interpretive phenomenological design to construct interpretations of the participants' lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990). In line with the study's objectives, the participants shared their personal experiences of how nonverbal communication can be a source of anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication, as well as the strategies they used to manage these sensations.

#### 3.1 The Sample

This study employed purposive sampling, indicating that the researcher deliberately picks participants for a sample that accurately reflects his objectives (Shukla, 2023). The researchers deliberately selected postgraduate international students based on their campus presence and departmental affiliation. The chosen participants were all in their first year of enrollment in master's and Ph.D. programs across three departments: education, English, and international studies. We selected these departments due to their adequate population of international students. We further based our selection on the public university category, prioritizing state institutions that boast a significant number of international students. Therefore, we chose a state university located in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India.

The overall sample included 17 participants. The sample consisted of 11 females and 6 males. The education department had 9 participants: 5 from the International Studies program and 3 from the English department. In each department, there were 6 participants from master's programs and 11 from Ph.D. programs. Eleven participants from Africa represented eight nations (Botswana, Burundi, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Tanzania, and Uganda). In contrast, six participants from Asia hailed from six countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Fiji, Indonesia, and Mauritius). The participants' ages range from 23 to 42 years old. Table 1 illustrates the detailed demographic information.

**Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants**

Gender		Home Country		Level of Study		Department		
M	F	Africa	Asia	Master	Ph.D.	Education	International Studies	English
6	11	11	6	6	11	9	5	3

#### 3.2 Research Procedures and Instruments

Using a purposive sampling technique, the first author recruited international students based on their lived experiences with intercultural communication in a university setting. The researcher contacted the participants in person for participation in a study. The researcher explained the research subject and inquired whether the participants would be willing to engage in the study. All volunteer participants received the informed consent form after obtaining approval from the heads of three designated departments. Upon completion, both parties scheduled an interview time. Participants requested different interview schedules.

### 3.2.1 Interviews

Creswell (2012) asserts that a qualitative interview occurs when researchers provide open-ended questions to one or more participants and record their answers. The first author conducted in-depth interviews using open-ended questions to collect extensive experiences from international students about nonverbal behaviors, anxiety and uncertainty, and the adjustments made in intercultural interactions. The researcher conducted all interviews in person, individually. Each interview lasted around 45 to 75 minutes. All interviews were done in English on the university campus.

The overall number of interview questions was twelve. The questions were segmented into two sections: the first included the demographic data of the participants, and the second focused on their experiences with nonverbal behaviors, as well as their experiences of anxiety and uncertainty, and the strategies they utilized to manage anxiety and uncertainty for effective communication. To respect participants' voices and experiences, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. These transcripts provided the primary material for theme analysis, thereby guaranteeing that the results are firmly grounded in personal experience. The data gathering for this tool spanned three months (August–October 2023).

### 3.3 Data Analysis

This research used thematic analysis with an inductive approach to analyze the data. The data were interpreted and analyzed by the six recommended steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The interview data was first transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' exact expressions. The following process involved reading and rereading transcripts, listening to audio recordings, and editing to become familiar with the data. The initial codes, which served as the building blocks of the analysis, were generated. These codes were then cross-checked and grouped into broader themes relating to the use of nonverbal communication, anxiety, uncertainty, and adjustment strategies for managing the two sensations. Extracts from each theme were selected to illustrate the pertinence of the analysis to the study's objectives and research questions. In the analysis, the letter 'P' in the extracted quotes denotes "participant". Upon completion of all procedures, the codes and themes were disseminated to selected participants for validation, a process that actively involved the participants and reassured the credibility of the research.

## 4. Results

The findings of this study pertain to the lived experiences of international students in Gujarat regarding how they manage anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication. Two major themes emerged from the interview data. Table 2 illustrates the themes, along with their corresponding codes and nonverbal forms of communication.

**Table 2: Emerged themes that illustrate the lived experiences of international students concerning nonverbal behaviors, anxiety, and uncertainty**

Emerged Themes	Nonverbal Forms of Communication	Codes
Nonverbal behaviors as the source of anxiety and uncertainty	1. Kinesics	
	Smiles	Nervousness during the initial interaction Unfamiliarity with hosts' facial expressions
	2. Haptics	
	(a) Unintentional touching	Unfamiliarity with cultural norms
Strategies for managing anxiety and uncertainty	(b) Handshaking	Concern about religious display rules
	Kinesics and Haptics	
	(a) Smiles	Adjusting for positive interactions
	(b) Illustrators	Seeking substitutes
	(c) Hand movements	Seeking information from others
	(d) Self-adaptors	Conducting observation Adjusting to avoid negative impressions

*RQ 1: What types of nonverbal behaviors do international students in Gujarat experience as the source of their anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication?*

The interpretation of the findings from this research question led to the development of one of the themes derived from the data: nonverbal behaviors as a source of anxiety and uncertainty. The theme explores the perception of nonverbal behaviors and the emotions they evoke during intercultural encounters.

#### **4.1 Nonverbal Behaviors as the Source of Anxiety and Uncertainty**

The interpretation of this theme presents the nonverbal behaviors that correlate with reported anxiety and uncertainty, focusing on when and how these correlations occur. The results revealed that participants encountered anxiety and uncertainty during their initial and throughout interactions. Specifically, this interpretation focuses on two forms of nonverbal communication: kinesics and haptics.

##### **4.1.1 Kinesics**

A facial expression as a nonverbal means of communication was employed by participants to express their anxiety and uncertainty. The results indicated that participants employed “smiles” to initiate interactions in their intercultural communication, to create a bond and trust, signal friendliness, and serve as a customary sign of respect toward strangers. Through this mode of communication, participants held the belief that “first impressions matter” for subsequent interactions. This finding was analyzed through the lens of the hosts’ nonverbal behaviors in response to the initiated smiles, which may contribute to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. Participants noted that they attempted to smile when encountering local or other international students despite uncertainty regarding their responses, which could have alleviated their anxieties about future interactions. A participant from Uganda remarked:

Of course, I’m very nervous! I will likely use facial expressions first; I will create a bond or trust. If I don’t get it, like a smile or any friendly gesture, then I will quit. Positive impressions, like smiles, are the only things that matters for me. (p6, Female)

Other participants also expressed uncertainty about their unfamiliarity with the cultural display rules for showing respect to strangers based on smiles. An Indonesian participant illustrated the comments below:

One thing I worried about when I came to India was that I didn’t understand the behavior of the local students, especially if they don’t know you; they are not easy to smile with you. But in Indonesia itself, people say that if people look at your eyes directly, you have the right to smile; anyhow, it doesn’t matter if they know you or if they don’t know you. You need to know how to respect people; just smile. A smile is free. (p16, Female)

Unfamiliarity with the hosts’ facial expressions during initial interactions can be a source of uncertainty and lead to feelings of anxiety in future interactions. A smile is a display rule in one culture, but in another, it may be misinterpreted. Such experiences may necessitate intercultural adjustment based on these nonverbal behaviors.

##### **4.1.2 Haptics**

Haptics is another form of nonverbal communication identified in this study. The interpretation of this communication took into account the experiences of the participants regarding cultural norms and values, specifically the two subthemes identified in the findings: touching and gender norms, as well as handshaking.

##### ***Touching and Gender Norms***

In this subtheme, participants shared their experiences with unfamiliar cultural norms concerning touching when communicating with local female students. The majority of African participants admitted to engaging in this behavior, as it is a standard practice in their countries to touch others, regardless of gender, as a sign of friendliness, a greeting, or as a reminder for various reasons. Several local students perceived this type of nonverbal behavior negatively. Gender and cultural norms may contribute to the perception of Africans as outsiders. The interpretation could cause discomfort for some African participants, and anxieties stemming from being misunderstood could affect their willingness to continue engaging in communication. One participant from Burundi spoke about how accidentally touching a local female student made him feel uncomfortable. He asserted:

..... It was like a context in which an Indian lady was trying to involve me in the activities, and there was something that she was trying to explain to me, but it was not clear. I had my points of view also, and then I tried to approach



her by trying to explain, and I touched her body like this ... (showing an action of how he touched her), and she said, No, no, no. After that, I was left worrying, "Why did I do that? I felt bad." (p4, Male)

He further explained:

She told me, No, in India, don't touch me, don't touch me. In Indian culture, you can't touch me, but that was not my intention, which was not what she thought. Even GOD knows my intention, but I don't know hers. You can imagine how I felt about that.

Touching is also culture-specific. During intercultural interactions, this kind of nonverbal behavior can also be misinterpreted based on the context as well as the relationship between the communicators. However, misinterpreting such behavior may enhance the understanding of the symbolic nature of nonverbal behaviors in intercultural contexts. This understanding may contribute to the adjustment process.

### **Handshaking**

This subtheme presents findings indicating that a handshake from a female to a male is regarded as a violation of religious norms. Certain participants suggested that this behavior induced anxieties during interactions with professors and other international students, especially those from Africa. They were worried about upsetting their recipients if they didn't shake their hands back, but they weren't sure how they would respond to such conduct either. A participant from Afghanistan stated:

We don't shake hands, okay? And this is the cultural difference that many times I faced in India. I'm having a hard time with my professor, especially in public places like conferences, if he greets me like that. If I don't do the same, I might offend him; how will he react? These are the biggest issues that are always distressing me. (p1, Female)

In summary, the findings show that the discrepancy between international students' expectations and the reactions of their hosts, as expressed through kinesics and haptics, can lead to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. The findings also indicate that different cultures interpret touching behavior in various ways, which can lead to both feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. These findings also provide an opportunity to understand how international students manage anxiety and uncertainty in their intercultural communication, as explained in the subsequent parts.

*RQ 2: What strategies do international students in Gujarat use to manage anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication, and how do they describe these experiences?*

As illustrated in Table 2, a single theme emerged in response to this research question. This theme addresses the adjustment strategies employed by participants during their intercultural communication. The theme also highlights the impacts, both positive and negative, associated with these strategies on communication.

## **4.2 Strategies for Managing Anxiety and Uncertainty**

This theme presents various strategies that participants employed to manage their anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural communication. These strategies include asking questions, conducting research, and avoidance. The following paragraph describes these strategies:

### **4.2.1 Conducting Research**

Some participants reported that they conducted observations to analyze the interactions between local students and their peers. The observation aimed to examine the interactions among male and female local students, as well as between local and international students of both genders. The participants indicated that the observations revealed no gender offenses among local students. Understanding such results could help international students become more aware of cultural norms and prepare them to adjust their nonverbal behaviors while engaging with local students. A participant from Burundi remarked:

I decided to conduct a small observation after what happened during my previous interaction; I realized that they only act strangely toward us internationals. Anyway, I now understand I won't feel bad again. I'm in their country; I have to be careful when interacting with them. I cannot avoid them because we interact with each other everywhere on campus. The only thing I have to do is to adjust myself. (p4, Male)

Conducting research means that participants sought information about Indian cultural norms during their intercultural interactions. The information gained could reduce the unfamiliarity of touching norms that often trigger

anxiety. This strategy means that it's better not to rely on assumptions but instead to seek information to navigate cultural differences and facilitate the adjustment process.

#### 4.2.2 Asking Questions

Other participants reported using this strategy to gather information about the nonverbal behaviors of the local students. They explained that getting information based on the reactions of the local students could help them understand their behaviors and confirm the specific facial expressions they frequently use. An Indonesian participant commented, "We asked our seniors some questions concerning the behaviors of the local students, especially smiling. They gave us some prior information, so at least we knew how to adjust ourselves." (p16, Female)

It is essential to ask questions about the hosts' nonverbal behaviors to foster mutual understanding and help clarify misunderstandings that may have arisen during intercultural communication. This strategy also demonstrates an openness to other people's behavior and nonverbal communication styles, which plays a vital role in managing anxiety and uncertainty.

#### 4.2.3 Avoidance

Several participants provided insights regarding this strategy for managing anxiety and uncertainty. The effects of avoidance employment were dual: both beneficial and disadvantageous. Participants reported that they needed to adjust certain nonverbal behaviors to reduce the likelihood of causing offense or embarrassment to their hosts. This approach could reduce the possibility of discomfort and misinterpretation, thereby enhancing effective communication. For example, rather than a physical handshake as a greeting, some participants suggested alternative hand movements, such as placing the arm on the chest; instead of touching, other participants employed illustrators to convey their meanings. The following excerpt illustrates their remarks:

I tried to explain that, in my country, women don't do this. They put a right hand on the chest. So, I use it as a strategy to show some sense of respect. (p1, Female)

Other participants reported that they needed to smile during their interactions with local students, regardless of their level of familiarity or the language barriers present. In this scenario, the participants reported that they adjusted positively to help reduce the local students' anxiety about their interactions. A participant from Tanzania stated, "As I have told you about this smiling, yeah, smiling all the time to show them that even though I don't understand what they say, at least I'm there for them." (p5, male)

Other participants employed self-adaptors, such as touching their hearts, as a means of reducing anxiety associated with expressing feelings of sorrow. Conversely, some participants utilized hugs to enhance the well-being of their peers; nonetheless, they emphasized that the appropriateness of hugs was contingent upon context, age, gender, and the nature of the relationships involved. The subsequent excerpts demonstrate their comments.

If my friend, either Indian or another student from other countries, is telling me that he or she is not feeling good, I can touch my heart and say, Yes, I feel your situation, so I am together with you. (p3, Female)

Also, there is another concept that is maybe a factor to consider when hugging someone. One factor to consider is sex, which can be either male or female. If you are of the same sex, I can't have any kind of worries, but it's more complicated with the opposite sex, especially in a foreign country like this. (p7, Female)

Other participants employed avoidance as a strategy to mitigate discomfort caused by the responses of local students during their initial interactions. They said that they believed this was the best way to deal with their uncertainty and anxiety. An Indonesian participant remarked, "Now I'm trying to avoid smiling; for example, if I don't know you, I will just act normally and do whatever I want." (p16, Female)

Cultural differences in intercultural communication can serve as a basis for the development of adjustment strategies. These strategies facilitate intercultural adjustment and demonstrate the increasing awareness, flexibility, and comfort necessary for effective intercultural communication. The adjustment strategies are context-dependent and may vary according to cultural factors and the nature of the relationship between communicators.



## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of international students in Gujarat as they manage anxiety and uncertainty in their intercultural communication. The two research questions focused on exploring nonverbal behaviors as the source of anxiety and uncertainty among international students and the strategies employed for managing these sensations. The following paragraphs illustrate the discussion of each research question.

The findings of nonverbal behaviors revealed that smiling, touching, and handshaking were associated with uncertainty and anxiety, as some were used subconsciously, and others were misinterpreted. Uncertain cultural norms influenced others.

The findings suggest that smiling at a stranger may serve as a strategy for initiation; however, it can also lead to uncertainty. The results also indicated that the nonverbal behavior of international students during their first encounters showed maximum thresholds, which could lead to a decrease in the intimacy of the communication content (Neuliep, 2017). The findings suggest that the interpretation of smiles differs across cultures, and a signal of trust and openness to interaction may be misinterpreted in various countries due to specific cultural norms (Niedenthal et al., 2019). To facilitate effective communication in intercultural communication, there is a need to balance the thresholds, as indicated by AUM assertions. It is also important to recognize and understand cultural differences. This cognitive ability can help international students adjust their behaviors and recognize other forms of nonverbal communication and interaction.

The findings also provided a detailed explanation of the behavior associated with touching. The results indicate that touch is culturally endorsed and varies in directionality (Dibiase & Gunnoe, 2004). It may be regarded as a cultural norm that functions as a symbol and is utilized by individuals to regulate others and inform decision-making based on the level of intimacy with their interactants (Chang, 2015; LaFrance & Mayo, 1978). Within the context of this study, being mindful is crucial for understanding how to adapt to these norms in intercultural communication, particularly in relation to gender. McDaniel and Andersen (1998) emphasize that comprehending the role of touch in interactions among individuals from diverse nationalities is essential for effective communication. Hall et al. (2018) also argue that understanding cultural disparities will not erase discomfort, but it may help in avoiding forming aggressive assumptions about people based on discomfort.

The results also indicated various strategies employed by the respondents to manage uncertainty and anxiety in their intercultural interactions. The respondents employed these strategies in response to the intercultural interactions they encountered.

This section combines three strategies—questioning, research, and the positive effects of avoidance—to explain how international students perceive the nonverbal behaviors of local students. The results are consistent with the theory's assertion that fostering mindfulness among strangers is crucial for effective communication. The information obtained through research and inquiries could have helped them gain knowledge about communicative behaviors and cultural norms from different perspectives, which, in turn, could assist them in adjusting and communicating effectively. The results align with other research (Nadeem & Koschmann, 2023; Nurindra et al., 2021; Prince, 2021), which similarly emphasizes how the concept of mindfulness helps participants engage in positive behaviors. According to the current study's results, international students should be open-minded and acquire new information about nonverbal behaviors without depending on their prior knowledge. The knowledge gained can also contribute to enhancing cultural awareness and facilitating the adjustment process (Nurindra et al., 2021).

Additionally, a positive nonverbal reaction shown in the results suggests that locals socially categorize international students. The results support AUM theory, showing that strangers who expect positive behavior from locals and can ignore negative thoughts will feel less anxious and more confident in their predictions (Nishida, 2015). The results also indicate that the positive use of nonverbal behaviors can diminish cultural differences, alleviate anxiety and uncertainty, and enhance interaction and communication. Concerning negative avoidance, we might view those participants as individuals who possess diminished positive expectations and heightened negative expectations (Neuliep, 2017; Nishida, 2015), which can lead to ineffective communication.

### 5.1 Implications

This study's findings underscore the practical implications for the administrators and educators at the university in question in Gujarat. The university needs to foster intercultural communication, education, and competence. These goals may be achieved by conducting orientation training programs on intercultural adjustment on how to manage

anxiety and uncertainty through nonverbal communication. While implementing all seven sessions suggested by Gudykunst (1998) may be challenging, we recommend incorporating a few into the training: (1) Emphasize the significance of mindfulness in intercultural communication. This training may help students open their minds to understanding nonverbal cultural differences and similarities and provide opportunities for adjustment. (2) Provide training concerning the basic nonverbal behaviors and the corresponding cultural norms essential for intercultural communication. The knowledge gained through this training can also aid students in developing cultural awareness and adjustment. (3) Organize practical activities, such as a role-play, that focus on themes illustrating how nonverbal behaviors can be the source of anxiety and uncertainty while also demonstrating the practical benefits of being mindful of these behaviors as a strategy to manage anxiety and uncertainty and enhance effective communication. By focusing on these insights, the institution can foster better intercultural communication, which may enhance intercultural education and help international students develop the skills necessary to adjust their nonverbal communication, manage anxiety and uncertainty, and communicate effectively.

## 5.2 Limitations and Future Directions

This study addresses specific limitations. Initially, it relates to the theoretical framework and research methodology. The interpretation did not utilize the AUM general cultural categories, such as high vs. low culture or individualist vs. collectivist; instead, this research focused solely on qualitative interview data derived from personal experiences. It could be challenging to interpret nonverbal behaviors across cultures. The sample size is also limited to seventeen participants. This small sample size means that the results can't be applied to a broader range of international students in Gujarat. A second limitation relates to the educational context. The study restricted its scope to a single public institution in Gujarat, thereby limiting the results' global applicability. Consequently, in light of these limitations, the study recommends that future research examine a larger sample, including additional public universities, as well as central and other private institutions within Gujarat. Future quantitative research is recommended to enhance objectivity, replicability, and comparability across cultural groups.

## 6. Conclusion

This study employs AUM theory to explore the three nonverbal behaviors—smiling, handshaking, and touching—as the source of anxiety and uncertainty experienced by international students during intercultural communication in Gujarat. This study shows that these nonverbal behaviors serve not only as means of communication but also as active sources of anxiety and uncertainty in intercultural student interactions. The findings suggest that these behaviors may also contribute to communication gaps. The study also utilizes the concept of mindfulness to investigate the strategies participants employed, including questioning, research, and avoidance, to manage the two sensations for enhanced communication effectiveness. The research highlights the importance of intercultural training in facilitating the adjustment of nonverbal behaviors, thereby helping to manage anxiety and uncertainty. Due to the increasing global prevalence of intercultural communication, international students must master the nonverbal communication of their host cultures, just as they apply themselves to learning the host language. Mastery skills can reduce communication gaps and foster effective communication.

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