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# Working in Multicultural Dubai: Everyday Intercultural Communication and Identity Awareness in the Hospitality Workplace

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**Abstract:** In many global cities, interaction among people from different cultural backgrounds has become a routine part of everyday life. Dubai represents a particularly striking example of this phenomenon. Due to extensive international migration, workplaces in the city are highly diverse, and employees regularly interact with colleagues from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. While previous research has examined intercultural competence mainly in educational contexts such as study abroad programs, less attention has been given to how intercultural awareness develops through everyday workplace experience. This study examines how employees working in Dubai's hospitality industry describe their experiences of communication in multicultural workplaces. Drawing on qualitative data collected through an anonymous survey, the study explores how participants perceive intercultural interaction, how they adjust their communication practices when working with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds, and how these experiences influence their awareness of cultural differences. The findings suggest that intercultural awareness often develops gradually through routine workplace interaction rather than through formal training. Participants described becoming increasingly attentive to differences in communication styles and expectations as part of their daily work. The study highlights the role of multicultural workplaces as environments in which intercultural understanding can emerge through everyday professional interaction.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication; multicultural workplace; Dubai; intercultural awareness; hospitality industry

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, globalization has significantly increased opportunities for contact among people from different cultural backgrounds. In many global cities, interaction across languages, cultures, and nationalities has become part of everyday social life rather than an exceptional experience. Workplaces, in particular, have emerged as important sites where individuals encounter cultural diversity in their daily professional activities. Employees working in such environments must navigate differences in communication styles, expectations, and social norms while carrying out routine tasks.

Dubai provides a particularly interesting context for examining these dynamics. As one of the most internationally diverse cities in the world, the majority of its residents are foreign nationals working in a wide range of industries. The hospitality sector relies heavily on a multinational workforce composed of employees from Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. In such workplaces, communication across cultural boundaries is not occasional but an integral part of everyday work. It is estimated that approximately 85–90% of Dubai's



population consists of foreign nationals, making it one of the most internationally diverse urban environments in the world. In everyday workplace settings, it is common for employees from South Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Middle East to work together within the same shift, often under time constraints at front desks and during check-in procedures where interaction with international guests is continuous. English is typically used as a shared working language; however, differences in fluency, pronunciation, and communication style mean that interaction often involves repetition, clarification, and reliance on non-verbal cues such as gestures or tone. These features suggest that communication is not always smooth or standardized but is shaped by ongoing adjustment in context-specific situations.

Research on intercultural communication has long emphasized the role of cultural context in shaping communication practices. Hall's (1976) distinction between high-context and low-context communication highlighted how cultural backgrounds influence the ways in which meaning is conveyed and interpreted. Gudykunst (2005) further examined how uncertainty and anxiety influence intercultural interaction, suggesting that individuals continuously interpret unfamiliar cues and adjust their communication behavior accordingly. These perspectives have provided important foundations for understanding intercultural communication processes.

Another important area of research concerns the development of intercultural competence. Deardorff (2006) proposed a process model in which intercultural competence develops through the interaction of attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Much of the empirical research in this area has focused on educational contexts, particularly study abroad programs and international education initiatives. Such studies have shown that exposure to cultural diversity can encourage individuals to reflect on their assumptions and develop greater awareness of cultural differences.

However, intercultural learning does not occur only in formal educational settings. In highly internationalized cities, everyday workplaces may also function as environments in which individuals encounter cultural diversity and develop new perspectives through routine interaction. Despite the growing importance of multicultural workplaces in the global economy, relatively little research has examined how employees themselves interpret their everyday experiences of intercultural communication in such settings.

In addition, informal observations conducted by the author during a recent stay in Dubai suggest that such interactions frequently occur under time constraints, particularly at front desks and during check-in situations where staff must coordinate tasks while responding to international guests waiting in queues. These observations are used only to contextualize the setting and are not part of the primary dataset. In these situations, communication is not always smooth or explicit; rather, it often involves hesitation, repetition, and ongoing adjustment. While previous studies have provided valuable insights into intercultural competence and multicultural workplaces, many have focused on formal training programs or educational contexts. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how employees themselves interpret their everyday experiences of intercultural communication in highly internationalized urban workplaces. Vande Berg et al. (2012) point out that much of the existing research on intercultural learning has focused on structured educational interventions rather than naturally occurring interaction in everyday contexts. The present study explores how workers in Dubai's hospitality industry describe their experiences of communication in multicultural workplaces. Rather than focusing on formal training programs or structured intercultural education, the study considers how intercultural awareness may emerge through everyday professional interaction. By examining how employees reflect on their communication practices and workplace relationships, the study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of how intercultural awareness develops in routine professional environments.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1. Intercultural Communication and Cultural Context*

Research on intercultural communication has consistently emphasized the role of cultural context in shaping communication practices. Hall (1976) distinguished between high-context and low-context communication, arguing that cultures differ in the degree to which meaning is conveyed explicitly through language or implicitly through contextual cues such as shared knowledge, relationships, and social norms. In high-context cultures, communication often relies on implicit understanding and nonverbal signals, whereas low-context cultures tend to emphasize explicit verbal expression.

Gudykunst (2005) further developed this line of research through Anxiety/Uncertainty Management theory, which focuses on how individuals manage uncertainty and anxiety when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. According to this perspective, successful intercultural communication involves interpreting unfamiliar cues and adjusting communication behavior in response to cultural differences.

In contemporary globalized societies, such interactions increasingly occur in everyday environments. In international workplaces, employees regularly interact with colleagues and clients from different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communication therefore becomes embedded in routine professional practice rather than occurring only in clearly defined intercultural encounters.

## *2.2. Intercultural Competence and Awareness*

Another important area of research concerns the development of intercultural competence. Intercultural competence generally refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations. Deardorff (2006) proposed a widely cited process model in which intercultural competence develops through the interaction of attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Openness, curiosity, and respect toward cultural differences are considered essential foundations for intercultural learning.

Empirical studies of intercultural competence have frequently focused on educational settings such as study abroad programs and international exchange initiatives (Jackson, 2015; Vande Berg et al., 2012). These studies suggest that exposure to cultural diversity can encourage individuals to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and develop greater sensitivity to cultural differences. At the same time, scholars have pointed out that intercultural competence may also develop through everyday experience. In environments characterized by sustained intercultural contact, individuals may gradually adjust their communication practices and develop new perspectives through routine interaction.

## *2.3. Multicultural Workplaces as Sites of Intercultural Interaction*

As international labor mobility has increased, workplaces have become increasingly multicultural. In many global cities, organizations employ workers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who must collaborate in order to carry out daily tasks. Research on multicultural teams suggests that cultural diversity can create both opportunities and challenges in workplace communication (Stahl et al., 2010). Diverse teams may benefit from a wider range of perspectives and problem-solving approaches, but differences in communication styles and expectations may also lead to misunderstandings. Within the hospitality industry, intercultural interaction is particularly frequent. Hotels and tourism-related businesses often employ workers from many different countries who interact not only with colleagues but also with international guests. As a result, hospitality workplaces provide rich contexts in which intercultural communication takes place as part of everyday service work.

## *2.4. Research Gap*

While previous studies have provided valuable insights into intercultural competence and multicultural workplaces, many have focused on formal training programs or educational contexts. Comparatively less attention has been paid to how employees themselves interpret their everyday experiences of intercultural communication in highly internationalized urban workplaces. In cities such as Dubai, where multicultural interaction is embedded in daily life, workplaces may function as informal environments of intercultural learning. Employees encounter cultural diversity not as a temporary experience but as a routine aspect of their professional lives. Understanding how workers perceive and respond to these interactions may therefore deepen our understanding of how intercultural awareness develops through everyday practice.

## **3. Research Questions**

In highly internationalized cities, workplaces often bring together employees from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. In such environments, communication across cultural boundaries becomes part of everyday professional life. Rather than being experienced as unusual encounters, intercultural interactions frequently occur as routine aspects of daily work. While previous research has examined intercultural competence mainly in educational contexts or in structured training programs, fewer studies have focused on how individuals interpret intercultural interaction within the context of their everyday professional activities. Exploring how workers themselves describe these experiences may provide insight into how intercultural awareness develops through practice.

Based on this perspective, the present study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do employees in multicultural workplaces describe their everyday experiences of intercultural communication?

RQ2: In what ways do workers adjust their communication practices when interacting with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds?

RQ3: How do these experiences influence employees' awareness of cultural differences and their perceptions of their own cultural identity?

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory approach to examine how employees interpret their experiences of communication in multicultural workplaces. Rather than seeking to produce statistically generalizable results, the study focuses on identifying patterns in how participants describe and reflect on their everyday workplace interactions. Because the aim of the research is to explore participants' perceptions and experiences, qualitative data were collected through an anonymous survey consisting primarily of open-ended questions. This format allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words while maintaining confidentiality.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. No personally identifiable information was collected, and responses were used solely for academic research purposes.

### 4.2. Participants

The participants were eight individuals currently employed in Dubai's hospitality sector. The hospitality industry in Dubai employs workers from a wide range of national backgrounds, making it an appropriate setting in which to explore everyday intercultural interaction in the workplace. Participants reported different lengths of work experience in Dubai, ranging from less than one year to more than five years. Their roles included positions in hotels and related service industries where interaction with culturally diverse colleagues and customers forms part of routine professional practice.

### 4.3. Data Collection

Data were collected through an online anonymous questionnaire. The survey included questions about participants' experiences working in multicultural teams, their perceptions of communication with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds, and any changes they perceived in their own perspectives because of these experiences.

Participants were also invited to describe specific situations in which cultural differences influenced workplace communication. The open-ended format enabled respondents to provide detailed accounts of their experiences.

### 4.4. Data Analysis

Responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The data were first read repeatedly to identify recurring patterns in participants' descriptions. Similar responses were then grouped into broader thematic categories related to communication practices, cultural awareness, and workplace interaction.

The analysis focuses on how participants interpret their experiences rather than attempting to measure intercultural competence quantitatively. This approach allows for an exploration of how intercultural awareness may gradually emerge through everyday workplace interaction.

## 5. Results

The analysis revealed several recurring themes in how participants described their experiences working in multicultural environments.

All participant quotations presented in the following sections have been translated into English where necessary.

### 5.1. Multicultural Workplace as Everyday Reality

All participants described their workplaces as highly multicultural environments in which employees from many national backgrounds work together. For most respondents, cultural diversity was not perceived as unusual but rather as a normal aspect of everyday work. Participants emphasized that communication with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds occurs constantly throughout the workday. Intercultural interaction was therefore described less as a special event and more as an ordinary component of workplace life. One participant noted:

*“At the front desk, you hear different languages all the time during a single shift. At first, I was not sure how to respond in some situations, especially when guests were waiting in line, but now it just feels like part of daily work.”* (Participant No. 2)

### 5.2. Communication Adjustment

Many respondents reported adjusting their communication styles depending on the cultural background of their colleagues. These adjustments included changes in tone, language use, and the degree of directness in communication.

Participants also noted that they became increasingly attentive to contextual cues such as body language, tone of voice, and situational context. Such adjustments were often described as gradual adaptations that developed over time rather than as strategies learned through formal training. Another participant explained:

*“When I was working with an American colleague during a busy shift, I sometimes didn’t get a clear response. After that, I started to ask more directly... Sometimes I still hesitate, especially during peak hours, but I try to be clearer than before.”* (Participant No. 5)

### 5.3. Identity Awareness

Several participants indicated that working in multicultural teams prompted them to reflect more consciously on their own cultural background. Through daily interaction with colleagues from different countries, respondents reported becoming more aware of differences in communication styles, social expectations, and workplace norms.

These experiences occasionally encouraged participants to reconsider assumptions about their own cultural perspectives and communication habits.

### 5.4. Career Perspective Changes

Some respondents also described shifts in how they viewed their future careers. Exposure to culturally diverse work environments appeared to broaden participants’ perspectives on international collaboration and professional mobility.

For some participants, working in such environments strengthened their interest in continuing to work in international settings.

## 6. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that multicultural workplaces can function as important environments for everyday intercultural learning. Rather than occurring primarily through formal training programs, intercultural awareness may develop gradually through routine interaction with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds.

Participants frequently described adjusting their communication practices in response to cultural differences. These adjustments resemble processes described in previous research on intercultural competence, in which attitudes, knowledge, and communication skills evolve through experience and reflection (Deardorff, 2006).

At the same time, communication was not always smooth; participants described hesitation, delay, and occasional misunderstanding, indicating that intercultural interaction involves ongoing negotiation rather than simple adaptation. This finding aligns with Gudykunst’s (2005) argument that intercultural communication involves managing uncertainty and ambiguity.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the significance of informal learning processes. In the workplaces described by participants, intercultural communication was not framed as a structured educational activity. Instead, employees encountered cultural diversity through daily professional interaction. These findings suggest that such workplaces function as informal learning environments in which intercultural competence develops through repeated exposure and practical engagement. This perspective contributes to a growing body of research that emphasizes the role of everyday workplace interaction in the development of intercultural awareness.

## 7. Conclusions

This study examined how employees working in Dubai’s hospitality industry describe their experiences of communication in multicultural workplaces. By focusing on participants’ reflections on everyday workplace interaction, the research explored how intercultural awareness may develop through routine professional practice.

The findings indicate that multicultural workplaces require employees to adapt their communication practices in response to cultural diversity. Participants described becoming more attentive to differences in communication styles and cultural expectations through their daily interactions with colleagues.

These results suggest that workplaces in global cities may serve as important environments for informal intercultural learning. Rather than being limited to educational settings, intercultural awareness may emerge through everyday professional interaction in multicultural environments.

## 8. Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the number of participants was relatively small, and the findings should therefore be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative. Second, the study focuses on employees working within a particular sector of Dubai's hospitality industry. Communication experiences may differ in other professional contexts.

Future research may therefore benefit from examining a broader range of industries and including larger participant samples in order to further explore how intercultural awareness develops in multicultural workplaces.

## Funding

This research received no external funding.

## Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were not obtained for this study. The study was based on an anonymous voluntary survey of adult participants. No names, contact information, or other personally identifiable information were collected. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were protected throughout the research process.

## Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

## Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality considerations.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to assist with language editing and proofreading. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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