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The Mediating Role of Nonverbal Communication in Managing Anxiety and Uncertainty During Intercultural Exchange

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ABSTRACT

Background: Effective intercultural communication is often hampered by the anxiety and uncertainty individuals experience when interacting with those from different cultural backgrounds. While Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory provides a robust framework for understanding this challenge, the specific role of nonverbal communication as a proactive management strategy remains underexplored. **Objective:** This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of individuals in intercultural settings, focusing on how they utilize nonverbal communication behaviors—such as kinesics, proxemics, and haptics—to manage feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. **Methods:** A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 22 international university students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes in participants' experiences and strategies. **Results:** Four primary themes emerged: (1) the simultaneous experience of cognitive uncertainty and affective anxiety in initial encounters; (2) the deliberate use of kinesics (e.g., gestures, smiling) to create clarity and signal goodwill; (3) the careful and conscious navigation of proxemics (space) and haptics (touch) to avoid causing offense; and (4) the perception that successful nonverbal adjustments significantly reduced anxiety and enhanced communication effectiveness. A fifth theme revealed a divergence in strategies between participants from high-context and low-context cultural backgrounds. **Conclusion:** The findings indicate that nonverbal communication serves as a critical, mediating tool for managing the core challenges outlined in AUM theory. Individuals do not just passively experience anxiety and uncertainty; they actively employ nonverbal strategies to reduce them, and these strategies are moderated by their cultural communication style. These insights hold significant practical implications for intercultural training and support programs.

KEYWORDS: Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM), Nonverbal Communication, Intercultural Communication, Kinesics, Proxemics, Haptics, Communication Competence.

INTRODUCTION

Background

In an era defined by unprecedented global mobility and digital connectivity, intercultural communication has transitioned from a specialized academic field to an essential life skill. The fabric of modern society, from multinational corporations and international university classrooms to diverse local communities, is woven with threads of cross-cultural interaction [4], [26]. While this interconnectedness offers immense opportunities for growth, innovation, and mutual understanding, it also presents significant challenges. Navigating interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds is a complex process, often fraught with misunderstandings that can impede the development of meaningful personal and professional relationships [14]. At the heart of these challenges lie the fundamental psychological experiences of anxiety and uncertainty, which arise when individuals are removed from their familiar cultural scripts and must operate within a new, often ambiguous, social reality [8], [15].

The process of adapting to a new cultural environment, whether for study, work, or migration, requires individuals to decipher a host of unfamiliar verbal and nonverbal codes. The potential for misinterpretation is high, leading to feelings of apprehension and a lack of confidence in one's ability to communicate effectively. This is particularly salient in initial encounters, where first impressions are formed and

the foundation for future interactions is laid. Effective communication in these contexts is not merely about linguistic proficiency; it is about the capacity to manage the psychological stress that accompanies intercultural exchange and to build rapport despite cultural differences [17], [21]. Understanding the mechanisms that individuals use to mitigate these feelings is therefore crucial for fostering more successful intercultural outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the psychological dynamics at play, this study is grounded in William B. Gudykunst's Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory [11], [12]. AUM theory posits that managing anxiety and uncertainty is the central process influencing the effectiveness of intercultural communication. Gudykunst defines **uncertainty** as a cognitive phenomenon—the inability to predict or explain the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors of others. When interacting with someone from a different culture, the norms and scripts that guide behavior in one's own culture may not apply, leading to a high degree of cognitive uncertainty [27]. Individuals may be unsure of how to behave, what to say, or how to interpret the actions of the other person.

Complementing this cognitive challenge is **anxiety**, an affective or emotional response characterized by feelings of uneasiness, tension, and apprehension about the interaction [29]. This anxiety stems from the potential for negative consequences, such as being misunderstood, appearing incompetent, or being negatively evaluated by the cultural stranger. Gudykunst argues that both uncertainty and anxiety exist on a continuum. While a complete lack of these feelings might lead to overconfidence and a failure to be mindful, excessive levels are debilitating and create significant barriers to effective communication. The core proposition of AUM theory is that for communication to be effective, individuals must manage their anxiety and uncertainty, keeping them between a minimum and maximum threshold [11]. The theory has been widely applied and tested in various contexts, from international student adjustment [15], [18], [30], [41] to organizational and healthcare settings [34], demonstrating its robustness as an explanatory framework.

Problem Statement and Literature Gap

AUM theory provides a comprehensive list of "superficial causes"—factors related to self-concept, motivation, and reactions to strangers—that influence levels of anxiety and uncertainty [19]. However, while the theory excels at identifying these antecedents and their impact on communication effectiveness [13], [25], the literature has paid less attention to the specific, actionable *strategies* that individuals consciously employ in real-time to manage these feelings during an interaction. The focus has often been on the internal psychological state rather than the external communicative behaviors used to regulate that state.

More specifically, the role of **nonverbal communication** as a primary tool for managing anxiety and uncertainty represents a significant gap in the AUM literature. Nonverbal cues—including gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, use of space, and touch—are fundamental to communication, often conveying more meaning than words themselves, especially in emotionally charged or ambiguous situations [10], [22], [32]. In an intercultural context, where language barriers may exist, nonverbal channels become even more critical [3]. While nonverbal differences are often cited as a source of cultural misunderstanding and thus a cause of uncertainty [6], [20], [23], their potential as a solution—a deliberate strategy for reducing ambiguity and building rapport—is underexplored. This study, therefore, addresses a critical question: How do individuals actively use the nonverbal channel not just to convey information, but to manage their own and their partner's feelings of anxiety and uncertainty in the service of more effective intercultural communication?

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and describe how individuals utilize nonverbal communication to manage anxiety and uncertainty during intercultural interactions. By focusing on the lived experiences of international students, this research seeks to illuminate the proactive, strategic deployment of nonverbal behaviors as a core component of intercultural communicative competence, while also exploring how these strategies may vary across cultural dimensions. To achieve this objective, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do individuals describe their experiences of anxiety and uncertainty during initial intercultural encounters?
- **RQ2:** What specific nonverbal communication behaviors (e.g., kinesics, proxemics, haptics) do individuals employ to manage these feelings?
- **RQ3:** How do individuals perceive the effectiveness of these nonverbal strategies in reducing anxiety and uncertainty and fostering effective communication?

METHODS

Research Design

To address the research questions, this study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding and describing the essence of a lived experience from the perspective of the individuals

who have experienced it [38]. This approach was deemed most appropriate because the central concepts of anxiety, uncertainty, and the strategic use of communication are deeply subjective. A phenomenological design allows for a rich, in-depth exploration of participants' feelings, interpretations, and conscious choices within the context of their intercultural encounters, providing insights that quantitative methods might overlook [7]. The goal was not to test a hypothesis in a statistical sense, but to build a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of managing intercultural stress through nonverbal communication.

Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could provide rich and relevant data. The target population was international students enrolled at a large, multicultural university in an English-speaking country. The inclusion criteria were: (1) currently enrolled as a full-time student; (2) identified as an international student (i.e., not a citizen of the host country); (3) had resided in the host country for a period of between six and twelve months; and (4) self-identified English as a second language. The 6-12 month timeframe was chosen to ensure participants had sufficient experience with intercultural interactions to reflect upon, while still being close enough to the initial adjustment period where feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are most potent [17].

Recruitment was conducted via email invitations distributed by the university's international student services office and through snowball sampling. A total of 22 students participated in the study. The sample was diverse, comprising 13 female and 9 male participants, with ages ranging from 19 to 28. Participants represented 15 different countries of origin across Asia, South America, the Middle East, and Europe, ensuring a broad range of cultural perspectives, including those from both high-context and low-context communication orientations.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This format provided a flexible framework to guide the conversation around the research questions while allowing the freedom to probe interesting or unexpected responses and for participants to elaborate on their unique experiences [35]. Each interview was conducted by the principal researcher, lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, was audio-recorded with the participant's consent, and was conducted in a private room on campus to ensure confidentiality.

The interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed narratives. It began with broad, open-ended questions about the participant's overall experience of moving to the host country and their initial interactions with local students. Subsequent questions became more focused, asking participants to recall specific encounters that they found challenging or uncomfortable. Probes were used to encourage reflection on their feelings at the time (anxiety), their thoughts and uncertainties (e.g., "What were you unsure about in that moment?"), and the specific actions they took, both verbal and nonverbal (e.g., "What did you do with your hands?" "How close did you stand?"). The final set of questions asked participants to evaluate the success of their strategies and reflect on how their communication style has changed over time.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the six-phase thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke [5]. This systematic approach allows for the identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within the data.

1. **Familiarization with the data:** All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The researcher read and re-read the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings to gain a deep and holistic understanding of the dataset.
2. **Generating initial codes:** The researcher meticulously worked through each transcript, identifying segments of text relevant to the research questions and assigning a descriptive code to each. This process was iterative and focused on capturing the semantic content of the participants' narratives.
3. **Searching for themes:** The coded data segments were collated, and the researcher began to identify broader patterns of meaning. Codes were grouped into potential themes based on their similarities and relationships, creating a preliminary thematic map.
4. **Reviewing themes:** The potential themes were reviewed and refined. This involved checking the themes against both the collated coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure they accurately represented the data. Some themes were merged, others were split, and some were discarded.
5. **Defining and naming themes:** Once a satisfactory thematic map was developed, each theme was clearly defined and given a concise, descriptive name. This phase involved writing a detailed analysis for each theme, explaining its essence and how it related to the overall story of the data.
6. **Producing the report:** The final phase involved weaving the thematic analysis into a coherent and persuasive narrative, as presented in the Results section of this paper. The analysis is supported by vivid, illustrative quotes from the participants to provide evidence for the themes.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the university's Institutional Review Board. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as participants. They were assured that their participation was voluntary, that their identities would be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. The audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected server, accessible only to the research team.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed five major themes that capture the essence of participants' experiences in using nonverbal communication to manage anxiety and uncertainty. These themes illuminate a process that begins with an acute awareness of psychological stress and progresses toward the strategic use of nonverbal behaviors to mitigate this stress and build communicative bridges. The themes are: (1) The Dual Onset of Cognitive and Affective Stress; (2) The Proactive Use of Kinesics for Clarity and Connection; (3) Navigating Proxemics and Haptics as a High-Stakes Balancing Act; (4) Perceived Effectiveness and a Shift in Confidence; and (5) Divergent Nonverbal Strategies Between High-Context and Low-Context Cultural Backgrounds.

Theme 1: The Dual Onset of Cognitive and Affective Stress

Nearly all participants described their initial intercultural encounters as being defined by an overwhelming combination of cognitive confusion (uncertainty) and emotional distress (anxiety). This finding directly supports the foundational concepts of AUM theory [11], [12]. The participants did not experience these as separate issues but as a deeply intertwined state of being that made communication feel difficult and high-risk.

Cognitive Uncertainty

The cognitive dimension manifested as a constant and exhausting process of "overthinking." Participants were uncertain about the fundamental rules of social engagement. They worried about conversational topics, the appropriate level of formality, and how to interpret subtle social cues. Mei, a 21-year-old student from China, explained this cognitive load:

"In the first weeks, my brain was so tired after talking to people. Not from the English, but from the... the thinking. What do they mean by that? Is it okay to ask this question? In China, we know the rules. Here, I felt like I was playing a game without knowing the rules. I was always guessing, always trying to predict what they expected from me."

This quote illustrates the core of uncertainty: the inability to predict and explain the behavior of others [27]. Participants frequently used metaphors of being "lost" or "in the dark," highlighting their lack of a reliable cultural script to guide their actions.

Affective Anxiety

This cognitive uncertainty directly fueled affective anxiety. The fear of making a mistake, violating an unknown norm, and being negatively judged was a powerful emotional barrier. This was not a vague nervousness but a specific fear of social sanction or rejection. Javier, a 23-year-old from Colombia, described the physical manifestation of this anxiety:

"My heart would beat so fast before I had to speak in a group. I was sweating. It feels silly now, but I was so scared of saying the wrong thing and having everyone think I was stupid or weird. I felt like I was a representative for my whole country, and if I made a mistake, it would be a bad reflection on all of us."

Javier's experience captures the essence of intercultural anxiety: a heightened sense of self-consciousness and a fear of negative evaluation [2], [37]. The feeling of being an "outsider" was palpable, and this anxiety often led to communication avoidance, with several participants admitting they initially limited their interactions with host nationals to minimize this stress.

Theme 2: The Proactive Use of Kinesics for Clarity and Connection

Faced with this dual stress, participants did not remain passive. The data revealed that they actively and consciously employed kinesics—the use of body motion, including facial expressions and gestures—as their primary tool for managing ambiguity and signaling positive intent.

Gestures as a Bridge

When linguistic proficiency was a barrier, hand gestures became an essential communicative bridge. Participants described using gestures to illustrate concepts, add emphasis, and ensure their verbal message was understood. This was not an unconscious behavior but a deliberate

strategy to reduce the cognitive uncertainty of their communication partner. Fatima, a 20-year-old from Saudi Arabia, explained:

"Sometimes I cannot find the exact word in English. So I use my hands... I 'draw' the shape of it or I act it out. It helps the other person understand, and when they nod, I feel a relief. It's like, okay, we are connected, we are on the same page. It's not just about the word; it's about making sure there is no confusion."

This highlights how gestures serve to manage uncertainty by providing a redundant, visual channel for information, confirming understanding and thereby reducing the anxiety associated with being misunderstood [16].

The Power of a Smile

Universally, the most frequently mentioned and highly valued kinesic behavior was smiling. Participants viewed smiling as a low-risk, high-reward strategy. It was described as a "universal language" that could cut through cultural and linguistic barriers. A smile was used to signal friendliness, project warmth, and de-escalate potential tension. Kenji, a 22-year-old from Japan, who described his own culture as more emotionally reserved, spoke about learning to use smiling proactively:

"In Japan, we do not smile at strangers so much. But here, I saw everyone does. At first, it felt strange, but I learned it is a tool. When I feel nervous approaching someone, I make sure to smile first. It's like sending a signal that says, 'I am friendly, I am not a threat.' Almost always, they smile back, and the tension in my shoulders just goes away. It opens the door for conversation."

This conscious use of a facial expression to manage one's own anxiety and influence the perception of the other person demonstrates a sophisticated level of nonverbal competence [22], [39]. It served to create a positive emotional climate before a single word was even spoken.

Theme 3: Navigating Proxemics and Haptics as a High-Stakes Balancing Act

While kinesics were seen as a versatile tool, participants expressed significant uncertainty and anxiety around proxemics (the use of personal space) and haptics (the use of touch). These nonverbal channels were perceived as "high-stakes" because the cultural rules governing them are often unspoken and violations can be interpreted as either aggressive or overly intimate [9].

The "Safe Distance"

Participants were highly conscious of managing their physical distance from others. The fear of invading someone's personal space was a common source of uncertainty. Most participants adopted a strategy of "observe and wait," consciously maintaining a greater physical distance than they might in their home culture until they could ascertain the local norm. Lena, a 25-year-old from Russia, recounted her experience:

"I am a very expressive person, and at home, we stand closer when we talk, especially friends. But I noticed here people have a bigger... bubble. I was so worried about making someone uncomfortable. So I would stand back, maybe a little too far, and let them set the distance. I would wait for them to step closer to me. It was safer that way. I didn't want them to think I was pushy."

This strategy of defaulting to a more conservative distance is a clear uncertainty-reduction behavior. It minimizes the risk of a social transgression while allowing for observational learning [24].

Touch as a Taboo

Haptics were even more fraught with anxiety. With very few exceptions, participants described a near-total avoidance of initiating touch, especially with members of the opposite gender. Cultural norms around touch are highly variable [9], [24], and participants perceived the potential for misunderstanding to be extremely high. The handshake was seen as a safe, ritualized form of touch, but anything beyond that was uncharted territory. David, a 26-year-old from Nigeria, where casual touch among friends is common, explained his adjustment:

"At home, you might clap a friend on the back or touch their arm when you are talking. Here, you just don't do that. I learned that very quickly. People would kind of flinch or move away. So I learned to keep my hands to myself. It feels a bit cold, but it's better than making someone feel awkward. You just don't know how it will be received, so it is better not to try."

This avoidance strategy, while effective at preventing negative outcomes, also highlights how anxiety and uncertainty can lead to a more reserved and distant communication style, potentially inhibiting the development of closer relationships.

Theme 4: Perceived Effectiveness and a Shift in Confidence

The final theme captures the outcome of these strategic efforts. Participants consistently reported that when their

nonverbal strategies were successful—when a smile was returned, a gesture was understood, or a comfortable physical distance was established—it created a positive feedback loop. This success directly led to a noticeable reduction in both anxiety and uncertainty, which in turn increased their confidence and willingness to communicate in future encounters.

Priya, a 24-year-old from India, articulated this transformative process:

"Every time you have a small success, it builds you up. You smile, they smile back. You use a gesture, they understand. You make a joke, and they laugh. Each one is like a little piece of evidence that you can do this. The uncertainty gets smaller because you are learning the rules, and the anxiety gets smaller because you see that people are not so scary. You start to trust yourself more. After a few months, I stopped overthinking everything and could just… have a conversation."

This quote powerfully illustrates the central mechanism of AUM. By actively using nonverbal communication to manage interactions, participants gathered information that reduced their uncertainty and had positive experiences that lowered their anxiety. This moved them from a state of high stress to one of "mindful competence," where they could engage more spontaneously and effectively. The perceived effectiveness of their nonverbal strategies was therefore central to their overall intercultural adjustment and communication success [17].

Theme 5: Divergent Nonverbal Strategies Between High-Context and Low-Context Cultural Backgrounds

Beyond the universal experiences of anxiety and the common use of certain nonverbal tools, a deeper analysis of the data revealed a significant pattern of divergence in *how* and *why* nonverbal strategies were employed. This divergence correlated strongly with participants' cultural backgrounds, specifically aligning with the communication styles described as high-context (HC) and low-context (LC) [4], [14]. Participants from HC cultures (including those from East Asia, the Middle East, and South America), where communication relies heavily on shared context, nonverbal cues, and the maintenance of social harmony, described a fundamentally different approach to nonverbal management than participants from LC cultures (such as Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia, represented by a smaller subset of the sample), where communication prioritizes direct, explicit verbal messages [26].

The High-Context Approach: Nonverbal Cues as the Primary Text for Relational Harmony

For participants from HC backgrounds, nonverbal communication was not merely a supplement to verbal language; it was often the primary channel for navigating the most critical aspect of the interaction: the relationship itself. Their management strategies were less about clarifying factual information and more about continuously monitoring and maintaining relational harmony and "face."

A central sub-theme was the intense focus on **observational vigilance**. Before acting, these participants engaged in a meticulous process of observing the nonverbal cues of their hosts to decode the relational atmosphere. This went beyond simply learning norms; it was a real-time risk assessment. Kenji (Japan) articulated this process vividly:

"Before I speak in a group, I watch. I watch the way they look at each other. Who is the leader? Who is quiet? How do they sit? Are their arms crossed? This is all information. In Japan, you must understand the air… the atmosphere… before you speak. Here it is the same for me. My biggest fear is to say something that disrupts the harmony of the group. So, I use my eyes to find the safe path."

This quote illustrates that for HC communicators, uncertainty is not just about not knowing the rules, but about the potential to cause interpersonal discord. The anxiety is relational. Consequently, their nonverbal strategies were often subtle and indirect. They reported using **accommodating posture** (leaning in, mirroring body language) and consistent **nodding** not just to signal understanding, but to actively convey agreeableness and support to the speaker, thereby reducing potential tension.

Furthermore, they described using nonverbal cues to manage moments of disagreement or confusion without resorting to direct verbal confrontation. Mei (China) explained how she would signal a problem nonverbally to avoid causing the other person to lose face:

"If a professor says something in class and I do not understand, I would never say, 'I don't understand.' It might make them feel they are a bad teacher. Instead, I will look down, I will furrow my brow a little, I will look confused. I am sending a signal that I am struggling. Often, another student or the teacher will see this and they will explain it again in a different way. It is a much softer way. You are communicating the problem without creating a problem."

This use of kinesics as an indirect request for clarification is a sophisticated strategy aimed at managing uncertainty while prioritizing relational harmony, a hallmark of HC communication [18], [19].

The Low-Context Approach: Nonverbal Cues as an Instrument for Verbal Clarity

In stark contrast, participants from LC backgrounds approached nonverbal communication in a much more instrumental way. For them, the primary function of nonverbal cues was to support, clarify, and add precision to their verbal messages. Their anxiety stemmed less from a fear of disrupting group harmony and more from a fear of being misunderstood or being factually inaccurate.

Their strategies were characterized by **directness and purposefulness**. They used gestures to provide concrete illustrations for their words. Lars, a 28-year-old engineering student from Germany, described this functional approach:

"When I am explaining a technical concept, I use my hands to show the process. This part moves here, this one connects here. It is for clarity. The words are the most important thing, but the gestures make the words clearer. It is about efficiency. I want to make sure the information is transmitted with no errors."

Unlike Kenji's use of observation to gauge the emotional "air," Lars's nonverbal behavior is a tool for enhancing the precision of the verbal message. The uncertainty to be managed is cognitive and informational, not relational.

This group of participants also expressed frustration and uncertainty when confronted with the indirect nonverbal signals common in HC cultures. They often interpreted the lack of direct eye contact or the subtle facial expressions of their HC peers as a lack of interest, confidence, or even honesty, which in turn created anxiety for them. Anke, a 23-year-old from the Netherlands, shared her confusion:

"I was working on a project with a classmate from Korea, and when I would ask her a direct question, she would often not look at me and would be very quiet before answering. It made me very nervous. I thought she didn't like my ideas, or maybe she didn't know the answer. I felt uncertain about where I stood with her. I later learned she was just taking time to think and show respect, but my first instinct was to think there was a problem with our communication."

For Anke, the HC nonverbal cues did not reduce uncertainty; they created it. Her strategy, in turn, was to become even more verbally explicit, asking direct follow-up questions like, "So, to be clear, do you agree with this plan?" This LC response to ambiguity highlights a preference for resolving uncertainty through words rather than through the interpretation of subtle, nonverbal cues. Nonverbal signals were, for this group, a means to an end—that end being unambiguous verbal communication.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer a nuanced and grounded perspective on the role of nonverbal communication in managing the psychological challenges of intercultural interactions. By exploring the lived experiences of international students, this research moves beyond viewing nonverbal cues as mere sources of cultural misunderstanding and reframes them as essential tools for proactive self-regulation and relationship building. The discussion will now interpret these findings in relation to Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) theory, consider the theoretical and practical implications, and acknowledge the study's limitations before suggesting directions for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

The results of this study both corroborate and extend Gudykunst's AUM theory [11], [12]. The first theme, "The Dual Onset of Cognitive and Affective Stress," provides strong qualitative support for the theory's central constructs. Participants' rich descriptions of "overthinking" and feeling "lost" map directly onto the concept of cognitive uncertainty, while their accounts of heart-pounding fear and social apprehension align perfectly with the definition of affective anxiety [27], [29]. This confirms that these two elements are indeed the primary psychological hurdles that individuals face when communicating across cultures [8], [15], [30].

However, the subsequent themes significantly extend the AUM framework by illuminating the *how* of management. AUM theory identifies numerous "superficial causes" that predict who is likely to manage anxiety and uncertainty well (e.g., those with a strong self-concept, high motivation, etc.), but it is less explicit about the specific communicative behaviors used in the moment. This study's findings suggest that **nonverbal communication is a primary behavioral mechanism for this management**.

When participants consciously used a smile to create warmth (kinesics), they were actively working to lower their own and their partner's anxiety. When they used gestures to clarify a verbal message, they were directly reducing cognitive uncertainty [16], [22]. Conversely, when they carefully managed their distance (proxemics) or refrained from touch (haptics), they were employing a risk-averse strategy to prevent an increase in uncertainty or anxiety [9], [24]. This demonstrates that individuals are not passive victims of their psychological states; they are active agents who use their nonverbal repertoire to regulate the interactional environment [10], [32]. The final theme, which described a positive feedback loop of increased confidence, shows that successful nonverbal management is a key driver of intercultural adaptation, moving individuals along the continuum from ineffective to effective communication as proposed by AUM theory. The process they described mirrors the journey toward developing intercultural competence, where mindful practice leads to greater effectiveness and less apprehension [39].

Cultural Context as a Moderator of Nonverbal Management

A deeper interpretation of the findings, particularly the divergence articulated in Theme 5, suggests that an individual's cultural background—specifically their orientation toward high-context or low-context communication—acts as a powerful **moderator** in the AUM process. It influences not only the *types* of nonverbal strategies chosen but also the very *nature* of the anxiety and uncertainty being managed. This finding adds a crucial layer of specificity to AUM theory, suggesting that "anxiety" and "uncertainty" are not monolithic constructs; rather, they are experienced and addressed differently depending on one's cultural programming.

For participants from **high-context backgrounds**, the primary source of uncertainty was often relational and social. Their cognitive efforts were directed at questions like, "What is my relationship to this person?" "How do I maintain harmony?" and "What is the appropriate behavior for someone of my status in this situation?" [18]. Consequently, their anxiety was rooted in the fear of social sanction, causing a loss of face for themselves or others, or damaging the interpersonal relationship [36]. Their nonverbal management strategies were therefore profoundly relational. The intense observational vigilance described by Kenji is a classic uncertainty-reduction strategy aimed at decoding the complex web of social obligations before acting. The use of accommodative posture, nodding, and indirect facial expressions, as described by Mei, are anxiety-reducing behaviors designed to create a buffer of goodwill and preserve social harmony [23], [31]. In this context, nonverbal communication is not just about the message; it is a form of social risk management.

In stark contrast, participants from **low-context backgrounds** primarily experienced uncertainty on an informational and logistical level. Their cognitive questions were more instrumental: "Does this person understand the facts I am presenting?" "Are we in agreement on the plan?" and "Is this communication efficient?" [26]. The anxiety they felt was linked to the potential for cognitive misunderstanding, inaccuracy, or inefficiency. As such, their nonverbal strategies were geared toward enhancing verbal clarity. The purposeful, illustrative gestures described by Lars, for example, are a direct attempt to reduce cognitive uncertainty by adding a visual layer to the verbal data. Their tendency to seek direct eye contact is a strategy to gauge comprehension and attentiveness, ensuring the informational channel is open and effective [39].

This "clash of contexts" itself can become a secondary source of anxiety and uncertainty, creating a difficult feedback loop. As Anke's experience demonstrated, the very nonverbal cues an HC individual uses to signal respect and thoughtfulness (averting eyes, pausing) can be interpreted by an LC individual as disinterest or deception, thereby *increasing* the LC individual's uncertainty and anxiety. The LC individual's response—becoming more verbally direct—may, in turn, be perceived by the HC individual as aggressive or impatient, increasing *their* anxiety and causing them to become even more nonverbally reserved. This interactional dynamic, where the management strategies of one group create stress for the other, is a powerful real-world manifestation of the AUM process and highlights that effective intercultural communication requires not just managing one's own internal state, but also understanding the different logics that guide others' communicative behaviors [4]. This finding strongly suggests that intercultural competence programs should focus on teaching individuals to recognize these differing contextual orientations as a foundational step toward more effective communication.

Theoretical Implications

The primary theoretical implication of this study is the proposal of a "Nonverbal Management" component as a valuable extension to the AUM model. The original theory focuses heavily on the cognitive antecedents of effective communication. Our findings suggest a mediational model where these antecedents (e.g., motivation to interact) lead to the deployment of specific nonverbal management strategies (e.g., proactive smiling, gesture use, careful proxemics), and it is the perceived success of these strategies that directly reduces anxiety and uncertainty, leading to effective communication outcomes.

This proposed component positions nonverbal behavior not simply as an outcome or a cultural variable, but as a central, strategic element of the management process itself. It recognizes that communication is an embodied practice [33] and that managing psychological states is intrinsically linked to managing one's physical expression. Future theoretical development of AUM could benefit from explicitly incorporating this behavioral-strategic layer, creating a more comprehensive model that bridges the gap between internal cognitive/affective states and external communicative performance. This could also help integrate AUM with other theories like Communication Accommodation Theory [40], where individuals adjust their behaviors (including nonverbal ones) to increase communication efficiency and gain social approval.

Practical Implications

The findings hold significant practical implications for anyone involved in fostering positive intercultural relations.

1. **Intercultural Training Programs:** Training for students studying abroad, expatriate employees, or healthcare professionals in diverse communities should

move beyond simply listing cultural "dos and don'ts." Instead, training should focus on developing practical, observational, and adaptive nonverbal skills. This could include scenario-based training where individuals practice reading subtle cues and consciously using nonverbal signals like smiling and open gestures to manage interactional tension [3], [39]. Crucially, this training must incorporate the concepts of high- and low-context communication styles, helping trainees understand the different *logics* behind nonverbal behaviors.

2. **Support for International Students:** University international student services can use these findings to develop more effective orientation programs. Workshops could be designed to explicitly discuss the anxiety and uncertainty of initial interactions and frame nonverbal communication as a powerful, learnable tool for building connections. Normalizing these feelings and providing concrete strategies can empower students to engage more confidently [36].
3. **Enhancing Communication in Diverse Workplaces:** Managers in multicultural organizations can foster more inclusive environments by promoting awareness of nonverbal dynamics. This involves encouraging staff to be mindful of their own nonverbal signals and to be more charitable in their interpretations of others' behaviors, recognizing that a reserved demeanor might stem from managing uncertainty rather than a lack of friendliness.

Limitations and Future Research

This study, like all research, has limitations. First, its qualitative and phenomenological nature means the findings are based on a small, specific sample and are not statistically generalizable. The goal was depth, not breadth, but the experiences of these participants may not reflect those of all international students. Second, the data are based on self-report, which relies on participants' memories and interpretations of past events and may be subject to recall bias. Third, the study was conducted in a single host country context, and the specific nonverbal norms of this context undoubtedly shaped participants' experiences.

These limitations point toward several promising avenues for future research:

- **Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Studies:** Future research could use experimental or survey designs to quantify the relationship between specific nonverbal behaviors and perceived levels of anxiety, uncertainty, and communication effectiveness. For example, an experimental study could manipulate nonverbal cues in a video vignette and measure participants' responses.
- **Cross-Cultural Comparative Research:** It would be highly valuable to replicate this study in different host countries to compare and contrast nonverbal management strategies. A comparative study between a high-context culture and a low-context culture could provide deeper insight into how the cultural environment shapes the use and interpretation of nonverbal cues [18], [19], [31].
- **Longitudinal Studies:** A longitudinal study that follows a cohort of international students from their arrival over a period of several years could track the evolution of their nonverbal strategies and map their development of intercultural communication competence over time.
- **The Role of Technology:** As much intercultural communication now occurs via technology, future research should explore how nonverbal management strategies are adapted to mediated environments like video conferencing, where cues are limited or altered [1].

In conclusion, this study contributes to our understanding of intercultural communication by highlighting the crucial and strategic role of nonverbal behavior in managing anxiety and uncertainty. It shows that in the ambiguous space between cultures, the human body becomes a primary tool for creating clarity, signaling intent, and forging connection, turning moments of potential stress into opportunities for genuine human exchange.

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