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Negotiating Inclusive Communication: Gender Sensitivity and Political Correctness Practices in a Philippine State University

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ABSTRACT

Communication is a powerful mechanism for constructing social realities and contesting power dynamics, particularly within academic environments striving for greater inclusivity. This study examines the awareness, application, and challenges of practicing gender-sensitive and politically correct communication among students, faculty, and administrative staff at a Philippine state university. Utilizing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the research integrates quantitative survey data (n = 300) and qualitative interviews (n = 15) to provide a comprehensive analysis. Results reveal high levels of conceptual awareness across participant groups but highlight a persistent gap between knowledge and consistent application. The findings contribute to broader discussions on decolonizing communication practices, emphasizing the need for context-specific strategies that align with Philippine cultural values. Recommendations include formal policy development, mandatory inclusivity training, and curriculum integration to foster sustainable, culturally resonant models of inclusive communication within higher education institutions.

Keywords: Gender Sensitivity, Political Correctness, Inclusive Communication, Higher Education in the Philippines

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication serves as a conduit for information and a systemic framework through which social identities, norms, and power dynamics are articulated and

contested. This theoretical perspective is well-established within communication studies, particularly in discussions surrounding ethical and inclusive discourse (Watson, 2015). Recent scholarship highlights

the multifaceted role of communication as a mechanism for constructing social realities, emphasizing the significance of gender sensitivity and political correctness in fostering inclusivity and equity in diverse environments, including academia and professional settings (Watson, 2015; Pasquali, 2019).

Ethical communication practices underscore the need to recognize marginalized identities and promote language fostering respect and dignity across various social strata (Pasquali, 2019). The development of gender-sensitive and politically correct communication is intertwined with broader socio-political movements advocating for equality and social justice, rooted in feminist linguistics and critical discourse analysis (Akobo, 2017; Liebenberg *et al.*, 2015). Feminist linguistics, in particular, has illuminated how language shapes gendered understandings and catalyzed advocacy for communication practices that affirm diverse gender identities (Okolo, 2022).

In higher education, universities are increasingly called upon to embody these ethical communication standards by cultivating inclusive environments that acknowledge and celebrate diversity (Oh *et al.*, 2020). Research substantiates that inclusive language practices correlate positively with student engagement and work satisfaction, suggesting a transformative potential for marginalized communities (Basile & Ribeiro, 2022; Green *et al.*, 2023). However, despite advancements, a significant gap persists in exploring the localization and adaptation of ethical communication practices within non-Western contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia.

The Philippines offers a pertinent case study due to its complex intersection of traditional cultural values, colonial legacies, and globalization, all of which influence the negotiation of inclusive communication

practices (Bachmann *et al.*, 2022). While legislative frameworks such as the Magna Carta of Women (Republic Act 9710) and the Safe Spaces Act (Republic Act 11313) exemplify progressive reforms, a notable dissonance remains between legal mandates and daily communication practices in academic institutions (Lee, 2024; Auge *et al.*, 2024; Kumar *et al.*, 2020). This underscores the reality that legislative efforts alone are insufficient for enacting transformative communication shifts (Auge *et al.*, 2024).

Within academia, state universities in the Philippines emerge as critical arenas where communication practices are manifested and contested. These institutions, characterized by diverse student demographics and faculty from varied generational backgrounds, highlight the complexities surrounding negotiating gender sensitivity and political correctness (Barrientos *et al.*, 2015; Zeddies & Millei, 2015). Unlike private universities that may exhibit more organizational flexibility, public universities often confront systemic inertia, slowing the institutionalization of inclusive communication practices (Jayawardene, 2022).

Moreover, academic discourse in the Philippines has traditionally focused on media representation and political rhetoric, with limited empirical research on the day-to-day communication practices within academic contexts (Boonjubun, 2019; MNISI, 2023; Torvikey, 2021). Given this backdrop, there is an urgent need to investigate how ethical communication principles are understood, applied, and challenged in Philippine state universities.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

This study addresses these gaps by investigating the awareness, application, and barriers to gender-sensitive

and politically correct communication within a Philippine state university. It centers on the lived experiences of students, faculty, and administrative staff as they navigate ethical communication practices amid cultural influences and generational differences (Seo *et al.*, 2024; Collins, 2022). The research contributes to the broader discourse on decolonizing communication studies, aligning with calls to prioritize insights from Global South communities (Barbi, 2021; Ogedengbe *et al.*, 2023).

1.2. Research Questions

The following research inquiries guide the study:

1. What is the level of awareness of gender sensitivity and political correctness among university students, faculty, and administrative staff?
2. How are gender-sensitive and politically correct communication practices applied within academic and administrative settings?
3. What barriers hinder the consistent application of inclusive communication practices in the university?
4. What strategies can be proposed to enhance gender-sensitive and politically correct communication within state university environments?

Understanding these dynamics is vital for developing practical strategies that foster inclusive communication environments in state universities (Fayemi & Chimakonam, 2022; Dighe, 2023). Research insights can inform policies aimed at enriching institutional climates that respect diversity and inclusion (Wang & Liao, 2024; Dagys *et al.*, 2015).

1.3. Significance of the Study

The outcomes of this research have significant implications for policy development and practical implementation within academic institutions. By anchoring the study within discourses surrounding communication ethics, gender equity, and cultural negotiation, the findings can facilitate nuanced understandings of the complexities faced by institutions attempting to model inclusive communication practices (Jung, 2022; Balz *et al.*, 2024).

Moreover, capturing participants' lived experiences within Philippine state universities advances conversations on the localization and adaptation of disciplinary norms derived from Western contexts to diverse cultural settings (Gray & Gills, 2016; Mare, 2019). This contextualized understanding is essential for fostering ethical communication frameworks that resonate with realities in the Global South (Hennings, 2018; Akpa, 2024).

This research underscores the necessity for a nuanced exploration of gender-sensitive and politically correct communication in the Philippine higher education landscape. Bridging theoretical discussions with practical realities, the study aspires to catalyze meaningful shifts toward inclusive communication practices that uphold the dignity and diversity of all individuals (Hennings, 2018; Akpa, 2024).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, enabling the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), mixed-methods research allows researchers to better understand a phenomenon by integrating numerical trends with rich narrative data.

This approach analyzed quantitative and qualitative data separately and later merged them for interpretation. This design was chosen to triangulate the findings on gender sensitivity and political correctness, capturing the general patterns of awareness and application and the nuanced, lived experiences within the university setting.

2.2. Research Setting

The research was conducted in a public higher education institution in the Philippines. The university caters to a diverse student body, offering undergraduate and graduate programs across fields such as Arts and Sciences, Business Administration, Engineering, Information Technology, and Education. Its socio-cultural diversity and its role as a government-funded institution provided a compelling context for investigating the negotiation of inclusive communication norms in a developing country.

2.3. Participants and Sampling

The study involved a total of 300 participants drawn from three university sectors: students ($n = 200$), faculty members ($n = 50$), and administrative staff ($n = 50$). Purposive sampling was employed to ensure participants engaged sufficiently with institutional communication processes. As Palinkas *et al.* (2015) defined, purposive sampling is appropriate when selecting information-rich cases related to the central phenomenon of interest. Participants were eligible if they had completed at least one academic year at the university and regularly interacted within its communication systems.

For the qualitative phase, 15 participants (five from each group) were purposively selected to ensure diversity in gender identity, college affiliation, and

length of service or study. These participants were invited for in-depth interviews to provide detailed narratives on their understanding, experiences, and challenges related to gender-sensitive and politically correct communication.

2.4. Research Instruments

The survey questionnaire was developed based on previously validated instruments measuring gender sensitivity and political correctness in academic contexts. It consisted of four main sections: demographic profile, awareness scale (5-point Likert format), application checklist, and perceived barriers inventory. A pilot test was conducted with 30 participants from a similar university setting, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, indicating high internal reliability following Nunnally's (1978) acceptable threshold of 0.70.

The qualitative component utilized a guide. The guide comprised open-ended questions and a semi-structured interview format that explored participants' conceptualizations of inclusive communication, their experiences of practicing or witnessing gender-sensitive language, the institutional mechanisms in place (or lacking), and their recommendations for improvement. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility in probing emerging themes while maintaining focus on the research questions (Adams, 2015).

2.5. Data Collection Procedures

Surveys were distributed electronically through Google Forms, a method chosen to ensure broad participation while maintaining health protocols.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Zoom, depending on participant preference and

availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accurate transcription and analysis. Participants were briefed about the study's objectives, assured of confidentiality, and informed that their participation was voluntary and withdrawal could occur at any point without repercussions.

2.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to summarize awareness, application, and perceived barriers. To examine differences between groups (students, faculty, staff), a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. Where significant differences were found, Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) post-hoc tests were employed to identify pairwise group differences (Field, 2018).

Qualitative data from interview transcripts were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, search for themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and report production. Manual coding was preferred to ensure close engagement with the data. Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, where participants were asked to verify the accuracy of summaries drawn from their interviews, and peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and anonymized in reporting. Audio recordings and digital data were stored in encrypted files accessible only to the primary researcher. The research adhered to ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979), particularly regarding respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1. Quantitative Findings

3.1.1. Awareness of Gender Sensitivity and Political Correctness

Analysis of the survey data revealed a high level of awareness among participants concerning the principles of gender sensitivity and political correctness in communication. Across all groups, the overall mean awareness score was 4.18 (SD = 0.61) on a 5-point Likert scale, suggesting that most respondents possessed a strong conceptual understanding of inclusive communication.

Faculty members reported the highest mean score (M = 4.32, SD = 0.53), followed by students (M = 4.14, SD = 0.62), and administrative staff (M = 4.08, SD = 0.68). Although there were observable differences between the groups, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that the differences were not statistically significant ($F(2, 297) = 2.46, p = .088, \eta^2 = .016$). The small effect size ($\eta^2 < .06$) suggests minimal practical differences among the groups.

Further analysis showed that 21% of participants scored below 4.00 despite the relatively high awareness levels, indicating room for further improvement, particularly in operationalizing abstract understanding into communicative practice.

3.1.2. Application of Inclusive Communication Practices

Participants' self-reported frequency of using gender-sensitive and politically correct language in formal academic and administrative communication settings varied.

Overall, 59% of respondents indicated they “always” or “often” practiced inclusive communication, while 41% acknowledged only “sometimes,” “rarely,” or “never” applying these principles.

Faculty members demonstrated the highest rates of consistent practice (67% reporting “always” or “often”), which aligns with their higher awareness scores. Administrative staff and students showed comparable results, with 58% and 56% frequently practicing inclusive communication.

A chi-square test of independence indicated no statistically significant association between participant group and reported frequency of inclusive language use, $\chi^2 (6, N = 300) = 8.17, p = .227$. This suggests that group membership (student, faculty, staff) did not strongly predict application behavior.

However, subgroup analysis showed that among faculty members aged 45 and above, rates of “always” using inclusive communication were substantially lower (only 25%) compared to younger faculty (54% in the 30–44

Table 1. Mean Awareness Scores by Participant Group

Group	n	M	SD	95% CI for M
Students	200	4.14	0.62	[4.06, 4.22]
Faculty Members	50	4.32	0.53	[4.17, 4.47]
Administrative Staff	50	4.08	0.68	[3.91, 4.25]
Total	300	4.18	0.61	[4.11, 4.25]

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; CI = Confidence Interval.

Table 2. Frequency of Inclusive Communication Practice by Participant Group

Group	Always (%)	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely/Never (%)
Students	34	22	30	14
Faculty Members	40	27	25	8
Administrative Staff	36	22	28	14

Table 3. Top Perceived Barriers to Inclusive Communication Practice

Barrier	Percentage of Respondents Reporting (%)
Lack of institutional policies	72
Cultural conservatism	65
Fear of mistakes	58
Lack of training/exposure	49

age group), suggesting a generational factor influencing application rates.

3.1.3. Perceived Barriers to Inclusive Communication Practice

When participants were asked about barriers to the consistent practice of gender-sensitive communication, several key themes emerged quantitatively:

These findings suggest that although individual awareness is relatively high, systemic and cultural contexts substantially limit the full operationalization of inclusive communication practices within the university.

3.2. Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview data provided richer insights into the contextual nuances surrounding the quantitative findings. Three major themes were identified, supported by multiple participant narratives.

3.2.1. Theme 1: Cultural Conservatism and Traditional Norms as Obstacles

Participants consistently cited deep-rooted cultural expectations regarding gender and hierarchy as obstacles to fully adopting inclusive language practices. Faculty members and administrative staff with longer institutional tenure reflected greater resistance to change.

"Our culture has always emphasized binary gender roles. While I understand the need for inclusivity, many colleagues view it as 'un-Filipino' to use gender-neutral pronouns," (Faculty Member, Interview 3).

Students similarly shared that their communication outside the university, particularly with family and local communities, still adhered mainly to traditional gender

stereotypes, complicating their ability to use inclusive language consistently.

3.2.2. Theme 2: Institutional Ambiguity and Lack of Formalization

The absence of formal university-wide policies or guidelines emerged as a significant concern among participants across all groups. While informal norms encouraged respectfulness, participants noted a lack of codified standards or training.

"There's no official guidance. We depend on personal discretion, and that varies widely. Without formal policies, inclusivity remains optional rather than mandatory" (Administrative Staff, Interview 7).

Some faculty members noted that while isolated workshops on diversity were occasionally offered, they were not mandatory and rarely emphasized language use specifically.

3.2.3. Theme 3: Generational Shifts and Hope for Organic Change

A hopeful theme emerging from the interviews was the role of younger generations in normalizing inclusive communication. Compared to their older counterparts, students expressed more comfort and fluency in adopting gender-neutral and politically correct language.

"In my classes and social media groups, it's normal to ask and respect preferred pronouns. It's no longer about being politically correct just for compliance — it's about showing basic respect," (Student, Interview 12).

Administrative staff below 30 years old also shared that inclusive communication was being normalized within younger office teams, indicating that generational

change could eventually shift institutional culture more broadly.

4. DISCUSSION

In exploring the awareness, application, and challenges of gender sensitivity and political correctness in communication among stakeholders at a Philippine state university, this study reveals significant insights that both align with and extend the existing literature. Utilizing a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach—integrating quantitative survey results with qualitative interview insights—allowed for a nuanced understanding of the academic dynamics at play.

4.1. Interpretation of Key Findings

4.1.1. Awareness Levels

The findings indicate high levels of awareness regarding gender sensitivity and political correctness among students, faculty, and administrative staff. This trend mirrors global patterns in gender studies (Loots & Walker, 2015). However, the absence of statistically significant differences across participant groups suggests that this awareness often remains declarative rather than consistently translated into practice (Bond *et al.*, 2010). Cameron (2012) similarly observed that awareness-raising efforts, while ideologically beneficial, often fail to transform behavior without sustained institutional frameworks to support change (Teelken & Deem, 2013).

Supporting this view, Bond *et al.* (2010) emphasized that mere awareness of gender-related issues cannot affect organizational behavioral change. Thus, actionable strategies embedded in institutional policies are critical to fostering the internalization of gender-sensitive practices (Myers & Griffin, 2018).

4.1.2. Application of Inclusive Communication Practices

Despite high awareness, only 59% of participants regularly employed inclusive language. This gap between knowledge and behavior reflects Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory, highlighting that awareness does not automatically lead to adoption (Akala, 2018). Faculty members engaged more with inclusive language practices, underscoring their dual role in modeling ethical communication and academic instruction (Alam *et al.*, 2023).

Generational factors also surfaced, with younger faculty and students demonstrating a greater propensity toward inclusive practices, suggesting that gradual cultural transformation may occur over time, though institutional initiatives are necessary to accelerate change (Lobo, 2024). Barriers to consistent application included a lack of formal institutional policies, cultural conservatism, fear of making language mistakes, and limited training opportunities (Vanderlinden & Putte, 2016). These align with Lim *et al.*'s (2021) findings regarding the inertia created by cultural norms and the need for clear institutional guidance. Participants' struggles between traditional Filipino values such as *pakikipagkapwa* (harmonious relations) and the adoption of contemporary inclusive language practices echo Fairclough's (2015) view of communication as a site of struggle (Salvador, 2022).

4.1.3. Comparison with Related Studies

Unlike in many Western contexts where gender-inclusive policies are formalized and legally mandated, the adaptation of such norms in the Philippines has been slower (Wroblewski, 2021; Cuenca-Soto *et al.*, 2023). However, the Philippine cultural emphasis on respectful interpersonal relations offers a unique

pathway to frame inclusive communication initiatives in a locally resonant way (Kurzman *et al.*, 2019).

Where Dutta (2011) noted outright resistance to Western political correctness in some Global South contexts, participants in this study expressed more confusion and a desire for more precise guidance (Vélez *et al.*, 2022). These findings suggest that localization, rather than direct transplantation of Western models, is key to successful integration (Condrón *et al.*, 2023; Capek, 2023; Duran & Mariñas, 2024).

4.1.4. Theoretical Implications

This study affirms social constructionist theories of communication (Craig, 1999), highlighting that communication norms are actively negotiated, not passively absorbed (Rudakov *et al.*, 2022). Language inclusivity is thus a cultural evolution requiring mediation across generations and institutional frameworks (Ruggi & Duvvury, 2022; Löther, 2019). Furthermore, the findings support Dutta's (2011) advocacy for decolonizing communication theories to reflect localized, evolving realities (Tarrayo & Potestades, 2023).

4.1.5. Practical Implications

The Philippine academic community is at a critical juncture. Robust, formal communication policies explicitly endorsing gender sensitivity and political correctness are necessary (Maurel *et al.*, 2017). Mandatory, context-specific training programs addressing generational differences and emphasizing inclusive communication should be implemented (Llantos, 2021).

Embedding discussions of gender sensitivity into the curriculum—not relegating them to optional

workshops—will help normalize these practices institutionally (Crimmins & Barnard, 2022). Using culturally resonant rhetoric centered on respect and community could facilitate greater acceptance (Li & Yang, 2022). Without such systemic interventions, the reliance on gradual generational change risks reinforcing existing divisions (Lobo, 2023).

4.1.6. Limitations of the Study

This study focused on a single Philippine state university, limiting the generalizability of findings (Saguin *et al.*, 2021). Reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, though triangulated with qualitative interviews (Hinton-Smith *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, the cross-sectional nature captures only a snapshot in time; thus, longitudinal approaches are necessary to observe evolving attitudes and behaviors (Wheeler & Wiese, 2024).

4.1.7. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should adopt multi-site comparative designs across both public and private universities to capture regional nuances (Wang, 2022). Longitudinal or experimental studies assessing the impact of specific interventions, such as gender-inclusive policy implementation, would yield valuable insights (Källén & Almqvist, 2024). Moreover, exploring intersections with ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status could enrich understanding of inclusive communication in diverse Philippine contexts (Aldabahi, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the awareness, application, and challenges surrounding gender sensitivity and political correctness in communication practices within a Philippine state university context. Anchored on a

convergent parallel mixed-methods design, the research revealed high levels of conceptual awareness across students, faculty, and administrative staff. However, a noticeable gap emerged between awareness and consistent application, highlighting the complexity of translating progressive communication ideals into everyday practice.

The findings demonstrate that while inclusive communication is generally recognized as valuable, its practical adoption is hindered by systemic factors such as the absence of formalized institutional policies, the persistence of cultural conservatism, generational divides, and the fear of making errors in politically sensitive language use. These results echo global patterns identified in previous research but also emphasize the need for context-specific interventions sensitive to the Philippine sociocultural landscape.

Theoretically, the study reinforces the notion that communication practices are sites of social negotiation, requiring intentional individual, institutional, and societal efforts. Practically, it underscores the urgency for universities to move beyond awareness campaigns and toward institutionalizing inclusive communication through structured training, policy formulation, and integrating gender sensitivity into the broader academic ethos.

While the research focused on one university and is context-bound, it provides a valuable template for similar studies across the archipelago. Future research should further interrogate the intersections between language, gender, culture, and identity, employing longitudinal and intervention-based designs to capture dynamic shifts over time.

Advancing gender-sensitive and politically correct communication within academic institutions is not

merely an aspirational ideal; it is an ethical imperative for cultivating environments of respect, inclusion, and dignity for all academic community members. With its rich traditions of relational ethics and community solidarity, the Philippines is poised to develop culturally resonant models of inclusive communication that can contribute meaningfully to global discourses on language, power, and equity..

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7. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have declared that there is no conflict of interest.

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