

LANGUAGES AND CULTURE

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PERSONAL NAME AVOIDANCE
IN VIETNAMESE AND ENGLISH-SPEAKING CULTURES****NGUYEN VIET KHOA***

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the practice of personal name avoidance, comparing Vietnamese and Anglophone cultures. In Viet Nam, avoiding elders' names is a cultural norm rooted in Confucian values, where kinship terms are used to express respect (Le Trung Hoa, 2005). Anglophone cultures, while more flexible with name use, employ formal titles to indicate hierarchy and professionalism (Adler, 1978). The study highlights how both cultures use linguistic tools to convey respect and manage power dynamics. By comparing these customs, the research provides insight into how different cultures handle status and hierarchy through language, offering valuable perspectives on cross-cultural communication.

KEY WORDS: personal name; name avoidance; kinship; address term; Vietnamese; English.

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1. Introduction

Avoidance of personal names is a linguistic practice where individuals refrain from using personal names in certain social or cultural contexts. This phenomenon, also loosely known as name taboo, often reflects deep cultural norms, such as respect for authority, hierarchical relationships, or superstition. Rather than using direct names, people may use titles, kinship terms, or circumlocutions to navigate interpersonal interactions. The avoidance of names is particularly significant in cultures that emphasize hierarchy, as it helps to maintain social distance and shows deference to elders or authority figures. In other contexts, it may also be tied to religious beliefs or taboos, where certain names are considered too sacred or dangerous to be spoken.

This paper aims to compare the practice of personal name avoidance in Vietnamese and Anglophone cultures (i.e., English-speaking societies in which the English language and cultural values predominate). In Viet Nam, the avoidance of parents' or elders' names is a deeply ingrained tradition, often replaced by kinship terms as a mark of respect (Le Trung Hoa, 2005; Nguyen Viet Khoa, 2010). In contrast, while English-speaking cultures do not generally exhibit widespread avoidance of names, titles or formal address may serve similar functions in professional or hierarchical relationships (Adler, 1978). This comparison will explore how cultural values, power dynamics, and respect are encoded in language in these two contexts.

This study is relevant for understanding cross-cultural communication, as naming conventions are a critical part of polite interaction. By comparing name avoidance in Vietnamese and English-speaking societies, the paper will contribute to sociolinguistic research on how different cultures handle issues of respect, status, and hierarchy through language. It will also offer insights into how these linguistic practices influence communication across cultural boundaries.

2. Literature review**2.1. Review of previous studies on naming avoidance**

Naming avoidance is a cultural taboo against naming, writing or even speaking the given names of exalted people. Alder (1978, 56-7) contends that taboos (word and name) exist in all societies, from "surviving aboriginals" in all parts of the world to those with the "highest possible level of civilization". One may then ask why the name tabooing practice is universal. Many linguists and cultural anthropologists have long been looking for an answer. According to Radcliffe-Brown (2015), name avoidance customs provide one means of preventing overt conflicts in relationships where

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conflicts are predictable and structural. Lévi-Strauss (1969) suggests that avoidance customs function primarily to prevent incestuous contact between kinsmen. Alford (1988, pp.111-121) states that avoidance customs, and name taboos as one class of such customs, “function primarily to maintain distance in a relationship”, and that this distance serves to keep the relationship fixed, conventional, and customary (Ndlovu, 2023).

Eid and Ebrary (2002, p.121) hold that as a strategy in the identification of people, name avoidance “can justifiably be construed as a meaningful act symbolic of the relationship between identifier (speaker or writer) and identified, and reflective of the identifier’s attitudes toward the identified”. According to Alford (1988), name taboos can be split into three groups: taboos on the use of one’s name, taboos on the use of the names of specific kin, and taboos on the use of the names of the dead. This classification of name taboos is appropriate not only in the case of Vietnamese naming but in many other non-Western cultures.

In Viet Nam, child-naming taboos are a regular occurrence inside the family unit. Pham Tat Thang (1996) and Phan Hong Lien (2002) discussed name avoidance for pre-school boys by calling them *Cu* or *Cò* (dick or penis). Vietnamese people are also always consistent in avoiding the names of their previous generation, ancestors, deities and saints (Le Trung Hoa, 2005; Nguyen Viet Khoa, 2010).

In brief, previous studies on naming avoidance reveal significant differences between Vietnamese and English-speaking contexts, particularly in how names reflect cultural norms of respect and hierarchy. Studies highlight that Vietnamese people often avoid using the names of parents or older relatives, opting instead for kinship. This practice reflects a deep-rooted respect for hierarchy and social harmony. Conversely, studies on English-speaking cultures show a relatively lower emphasis on naming avoidance, although titles may be used in formal or professional contexts to signal respect.

2.2. Cultural taboos and respect in addressing family members

In both cultures, naming practices are deeply tied to notions of respect, particularly when addressing family members or elders. In Viet Nam, using the names of parents, grandparents, or older relatives is considered disrespectful and can even carry cultural taboos, as Luong Van Huy (1990) and Nguyen Thai Hoa (1999) assert. Instead, kinship terms are used to reinforce social roles and respect for elders. This avoidance of personal names also extends to religious and ancestral contexts, where naming practices are governed by strict rules (Cao Xuan Hao, 2000). In English-speaking contexts, there are fewer rigid taboos surrounding name use within families, but respect is still conveyed through the use of titles and polite address forms, particularly in formal settings (Ross & Blackenbury, 1969).

2.3. Key sociolinguistic theories

Sociolinguistic theories on kinship terms, politeness, and power dynamics provide a framework for understanding these practices. Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory suggests that the use of indirect language and address terms helps to mitigate face-threatening acts, particularly in hierarchical relationships. In Vietnamese culture, kinship terms serve as a politeness strategy to avoid threatening the face of elders (Cao Xuan Hao, 2000; Le Trung Hoa, 2005). Meanwhile, theories of power dynamics in language highlight how address terms reflect the negotiation of social status and authority (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In English-speaking contexts, the use of titles serves a similar function in formal or hierarchical relationships, though it is less pervasive in everyday interactions (Alder, 1978).

3. Avoidance of personal names in Vietnamese culture

3.1. Cultural and social background

Vietnamese society is deeply influenced by Confucianism, which has shaped many of its cultural norms, particularly regarding hierarchy, respect, and social order. At the core of this philosophy is a strong emphasis on maintaining social harmony, respecting authority, and adhering to clearly defined roles within families and society (Vu Khieu, 1990).

Confucian thought stresses the importance of hierarchical relationships, which manifest in the five basic relationships: ruler-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend. Each relationship is governed by clearly defined roles, with one party (often the elder or superior) deserving more respect, while the other party (often the younger or subordinate) is expected to demonstrate obedience and deference. This hierarchy is considered essential to maintaining social order and harmony (Tran Ngoc Them, 2021; Vu Khieu, 1990).

According to the researchers, this hierarchical framework is most apparent within family relationships. The concept of “gia đình” (family) is central to Vietnamese life, and traditional Vietnamese values dictate strict norms of behavior towards parents, grandparents, and older relatives. Younger family members are expected to respect and care for their elders, with respect often expressed linguistically through the use of kinship terms rather than personal names. Addressing someone older or in a position of authority by their first name would be considered disrespectful and disruptive to social order.

The Vietnamese custom of avoiding personal names when addressing parents or elders stems directly from these Confucian values. Using kinship terms like *Bố* (dad, father), *Mẹ* (mom, mother), or *Ông* (grandpa, grandfather) reinforces the social roles and conveys respect. Also, traditionally the way of referring to or even addressing an adult or senior person (in the family) is by an expression meaning “mother/father of ABC”. Also, the names of dead seniors in the family are under no circumstances to be given to children in the family and are hardly ever used by other family members. Other acquaintances and friends always try to avoid using the names of the dead. For instance, when a man dies of old age, others start referring to him as “husband of Mrs. A”, “father of B”, or “grandfather of C”. Coates (2006) uses the term *tekonym* to describe such expressions when he observes the similar aspect of name avoidance in Korean and English. Coates (2006, p.315) reveals “similar though less systematic phenomena can be found in English too, for example in *pro-names* (such as *Mum* and *Dad*)”.

This is not merely a linguistic preference but a reflection of cultural expectations surrounding deference. By avoiding personal names, younger individuals acknowledge the superior position of their elders, preserving the hierarchical relationship.

In professional and societal settings, these values also permeate interactions. Deference to authority figures is a fundamental aspect of Vietnamese culture, where titles and honorifics are essential in communication. For example, addressing a teacher as *Thầy* (male teacher) or *Cô* (female teacher) instead of by name emphasizes the teacher’s higher status and acknowledges their position in the social hierarchy.

Name avoidance in the family is one way that this respect is linguistically codified. By using kinship terms, individuals show deference and acknowledge their indebtedness to their parents and ancestors. This value extends beyond immediate family relationships, influencing social interactions with elders in general. Elders are accorded high respect in Vietnamese society, and interactions with them often involve language that reflects their seniority and the speaker’s lower social rank (Le Trung Hoa, 2005; Nguyen Viet Khoa, 2010).

By adhering to prescribed linguistic practices and demonstrating respect for social hierarchies, individuals help ensure smooth and respectful interactions. Avoiding personal names minimizes the potential for conflict or misunderstanding and strengthens the bonds of respect within both family and society.

Also in Viet Nam, child-naming taboos are a regular occurrence inside the family unit. The Vietnamese carefully choose lexical words that they subjectively contend to be nice, elegant, meaningful and suitable as the main names for their children. However, a child’s main/official name is hardly ever used in the family before school age. The so-called nickname, pet name or temporary name is used instead. Compared to main names, these temporary names are usually “ugly”, meaningless or even vulgar. Even today, for example, many pre-school boys are called *cu* or *cu* +

name. The reason for the temporary name is usually based on superstitious concepts relating to children's health. This name is gradually forgotten about, and fades into disuse when parents assure that their children are old and healthy enough to confront the challenges of life (see Pham Tat Thang, 1996; Phan Hong Lien, 2002).

Vietnamese people are also always consistent in avoiding the names of their previous generation, ancestors, deities and saints. It is something contradictory truth that in many European countries, naming children after grandfather/mother is a proper way to show respect to the previous generation whereas in Viet Nam, for the same degree of respect, names of children must not be the same or even similar to those of their previous generations (Le Trung Hoa, 2005).

In sum, Vietnamese cultural norms of name avoidance are deeply rooted in the principles of respect, hierarchy, and social harmony. These values manifest in the way individuals navigate relationships with the elderly and authority figures, using language as a tool to uphold social order and demonstrate proper conduct.

3.2. *The role of address terms*

Like other peoples, the Vietnamese often pay great attention to how to address a person. This is not easy, and in fact seems to be very complicated because the ways of addressing, as Luong Van Huy (1990) and Nguyen Thai Hoa (1999) assert, depend on a wide range of sociolinguistic factors, such as the age, sex, social status, relationship status (blood, intimate, or distant), attitudes towards (respectful or arrogant), and feelings between the speaker and addressee, as well as things like the formality of the communication context between communicators.

Vietnamese terms of reference can reveal the social relationship between the speaker and the person being referred to, differences in age, and even the attitude of the speaker toward that person. Thus, a speaker must carefully assess these factors when deciding on the appropriate term. This may well explain why it is not unusual for strangers to ask each other about age when they first meet. In Western eyes, asking strangers about their age is considered rude, but in Vietnamese culture it is considered polite because people do so in order to establish the proper terms of address to use.

Addressing in Vietnamese is an art that Vietnamese speakers have to learn for their whole life. Addressing properly is difficult, even for many Vietnamese native speakers. Some people claim that it should be made less complicated as in English or French (Ross & Brackenbury, 1969). In fact, it is more appropriate to delineate addressing in Vietnamese as subtle complexity. It is rich, clear, hierarchical and civilizing, and requires people to be subtler in selecting the right terms to address one another. In this case the complexity is the external display of the subtlety (see also Cao Xuân Hạo 2000).

The Vietnamese are addressed by their given name in both formal and informal situations, although an honorific equivalent to *Mr*, *Mrs*, etc., will be added where necessary. Today, addressing someone by his or her family name alone is very rare. Only a few extremely well-known people are sometimes referred to by their family names. In general, Vietnamese people rarely call others using only their names. They will generally add an addressing title (usually kinship terms or personal pronouns) before main names. For example, a middle-age woman whose name is *Huong* will be called *chị Huong* (sister) by the person who is younger by several years, *cô Huong* (Ms, Mrs) by the younger person whose parents are older than the addressee, *bác Huong* (Mrs, aunt) by the younger person whose parents are younger, and *bà Huong* (Mrs, grandma) by the younger person who thinks the addressee is as old as the addresser's grandparents or by all people in formal contexts.

In Vietnamese, kinship terms are the most popular ways to refer to oneself and others. According to Cooke (1968, p.125), these are nouns, most of which have a primary meaning "denoting blood kin." Edmondson (2009, p.435) maintains that kinship names (terms) "also have features of anaphoric nouns [because] they contain additional information about gender and degree of familiarity, and they function differently in tracking participants in discourse". Anyone can be referred to using kinship terms, not just people who are related. For example, lovers calling each other as *Anh* (elder brother) and *Em* (younger

female sibling) sounds incestuous in Western languages but is perfectly normal (and expected) in Vietnamese. The Vietnamese kinship terms are quite complicated. While there is some flexibility as to which kinship terms should be used for people not related to the speaker, there is often only one term to use for people related to blood or marriage, for up to three generations, as shown in the table below.

(Adapted from Cooke 1968: 135)

Term	Literal meaning	Usages		
		In both 1 st & 2 nd persons	In 1 st person	In 2 nd person
<i>Cụ</i>	Great grandparent	Very elderly person to or by much younger person		To a very elderly person
<i>Ông</i>	Grandfather (great uncle)	Male about grandparent's age to or by young person	Male (arrogant)	Among male equals
<i>Bà</i>	Grandmother (great aunt)	Female about grandparent's age to or by young person	Female (arrogant)	Among female equals
<i>Bố, cha</i>	Father	Father to or by offspring		Young man (humorous, ironical)
<i>Mẹ</i>	Mother	Mother to or by offspring		Young woman (humorous, ironical)
<i>Bác</i>	Parent's elder sibling, or cousin	Person parent's age or above to or by young person		Person speaker's age or above
<i>Cô</i>	Father's younger sister/female cousin	Woman parent's age or under to or by child		Woman younger than speaker
<i>Chú</i>	Father's younger brother/male cousin	Man parent's age or under to or by child		Man younger than speaker
<i>Cậu</i>	Mother's younger brother/male cousin	Man parent's age or under to or by child		Intimate friends - Man younger than speaker
<i>Anh</i>	Elder brother or male cousin	Husband to or by wife Older male to or by younger person		Male equals (general)
<i>Chị</i>	Elder sister or female cousin	Older female to or by younger person		Female equals (general)
<i>Em</i>	Younger sibling or cousin	Wife to or by husband Younger female by or to older person	Younger to older	Man and woman younger than speaker (intimate)
<i>Con</i>	Offspring, children	To or by person about same age as offspring		
<i>Cháu</i>	Grandchild, nephew, niece	To or by person much younger than speaker		

Some common Vietnamese kinship terms - meanings and usage

One of the most remarkable characteristics in addressing is that the Vietnamese always seem to feel more comfortable in addressing other people, even strangers, in the way that they do in their own family. In other words, addressing using kinship terms is widely used in ordinary social contacts. Luong Van Huy (1990) and Ho Dac Tuc (2016) observe that Vietnamese kinship terms are used not only for third-party reference, but also, pervasively, for use of address and self-reference among related people, as well as non-relatives, to express various degrees of meaning that range from high disrespect to great respect, and from a high level of intimacy to extreme distance. Vietnamese has equivalents of most of the kinship terms that are available in English. It also has many terms for which English does not have equivalents, such as those which translate as “younger uncle”, “older aunt”, “maternal sister”, “paternal brother”, and “male cousin”, to name just a few (Ngô Thanh, 2006; Truong Khanh My, 2018).

Apart from personal pronouns and kinship terms, Vietnamese people also use status terms (occupational titles), e.g., *Đồng chí* (comrade), *Thầy/Cô* (teacher, master/Ms), *Giáo sư* (professor), or *Bác sĩ* (doctor), etc. All such terms of address followed by personal/given name form modes of address and reference.

In summary, to address each other, the Vietnamese often use three kinds of address terms: kinship, personal pronoun and status. Among these, kinship terms followed by personal/given names are most widely used across social contexts.

4. Avoidance of personal names in English-speaking cultures

4.1. Cultural and social context

In English-speaking cultures, there is an absence of a widespread norm for avoiding personal names in everyday social interactions. Unlike in Vietnamese or other hierarchical cultures, where name avoidance reflects deep-rooted respect for elders or authority figures, English-speaking societies tend to prioritize individualism, egalitarianism, and directness, which shape how personal names are used (Adler, 1978; Hofstede, 2001).

According to Hofstede (2001), English-speaking cultures, particularly in Western contexts, place a high value on individualism, which fosters a sense of personal identity and autonomy. As a result,

addressing someone by their personal name is often seen as a way to acknowledge their individuality and establish a personal connection. This practice is widespread in both informal and formal settings, especially in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, where people are more likely to use first names even in professional interactions (Adler, 1978; Alford, 1988).

Individualism leads to the widespread belief that each person is unique, and using someone's name reinforces this sense of personal distinctiveness. Addressing someone by their first name can signal friendliness, familiarity, and equality, reflecting the cultural norm that people should be treated as individuals rather than as members of rigid social hierarchies.

Egalitarianism, a core principle in many English-speaking cultures, further influences the use of personal names (Bourdieu, 1990; Rawls, 1971). Egalitarian societies emphasize equality between individuals, regardless of their social status, age, or position. In these contexts, the avoidance of names could be seen as creating unnecessary distance or hierarchy, which runs counter to the values of fairness and mutual respect. For example, it is common in the workplace for employees to address their supervisors by their first names, which contrasts with hierarchical societies where titles or respectful terms are preferred.

The use of personal names in English-speaking societies also reflects the belief that everyone, regardless of their status, deserves the same level of respect. While formal titles like *Mr.* or *Dr.* are still used in certain professional or formal settings, they are typically reserved for specific contexts (e.g., during introductions, or in professional correspondence). Outside of these situations, individuals often prefer first names, even in hierarchical settings, as a reflection of more horizontal social relations.

Directness is another cultural value that shapes name usage in English-speaking societies. People tend to prefer straightforward, unambiguous communication, which includes addressing others by name. Using someone's name directly is often seen as a clear and open way to engage in conversation, establishing immediate rapport and signaling a willingness to communicate on equal terms (Bourdieu, 1990; Rawls, 1971).

In sum, the absence of widespread name avoidance in English-speaking cultures can be understood through the lens of individualism, egalitarianism, and directness. These cultural values prioritize personal identity, social equality, and open communication, making the use of personal names a central feature of social interaction.

4.2. The role of address terms

In English-speaking cultures, titles like *Mr.*, *Ms.*, *Dr.*, and *Professor* are used to show respect in formal or professional settings. These titles acknowledge status, profession, or age, helping to maintain social distance and professionalism. For instance, in business, addressing superiors or clients with *Mr.* or *Ms.* signals formality, while titles like *Dr.* or *Prof.* / *Professor* emphasize expertise and authority in academic or medical contexts. However, English speakers often shift to first names in informal settings, contrasting with cultures like Vietnamese, where titles and kinship terms are more consistently used regardless of familiarity.

Within English-speaking families, kinship terms like *Mom*, *Dad*, *Grandma* and *Aunt*, etc., are used to express affection and reinforce family bonds, often replacing personal names (Coates, 2006). These terms reflect family roles and convey respect, but using personal names alongside kinship terms is not uncommon. For instance, some English speakers address parents or grandparents by their first names in casual or playful contexts, without it being seen as disrespectful - unlike in Vietnamese culture, where avoiding personal names is more important for showing respect.

Overall, while address terms in English-speaking cultures serve to express respect and affection, they lack the cultural significance of name avoidance seen in Vietnamese society. The flexibility in switching between names and titles reflects broader values of egalitarianism and individualism, where respect is conveyed more through tone and context rather than strict avoidance of names.

4.3. Address terms in professional and social settings

In English-speaking families, kinship terms are commonly used to address family members, reinforcing affection and family roles. These terms often replace personal names, especially in close relationships, to highlight the individual's familial position. However, unlike in Vietnamese culture, English speakers do not avoid personal names as strictly. First names are sometimes used interchangeably with kinship terms, depending on the situation and relationship. For instance, siblings may call each other by name, and in informal contexts, even parents might be addressed by their first names. This practice does not carry the same cultural weight as in Vietnamese culture, where avoiding names reflects respect and calling each other by name is seen as rudeness. English-speaking families instead balance individual identity with family roles, offering flexibility in name usage.

5. Cross-cultural comparison

5.1. Respect and hierarchy

In both Vietnamese and English-speaking cultures, respect and hierarchy play important roles, but they are expressed differently due to distinct cultural values. In Vietnamese culture, influenced by Confucianism, respect for authority and seniority is deeply ingrained, and strict hierarchies govern social interactions. Personal name avoidance, especially when addressing elders or superiors, reflects these hierarchical values. Kinship terms or honorifics are used to show difference and reinforce social structures, emphasizing the importance of age, seniority, and familial roles. For example, younger people rarely address older relatives or authority figures by their personal names, as it would be considered disrespectful.

In contrast, English-speaking cultures, particularly in the West, prioritize individualism and egalitarianism. While respect for authority is present, it is balanced by a belief in equality, where hierarchical differences are less emphasized. Personal names are commonly used across age groups and social statuses, even in professional settings, without necessarily implying a lack of respect. Titles and formal address terms are used situationally, but the avoidance of names is not a widespread practice. This reflects broader cultural values where directness and equality in communication are prioritized over hierarchical deference.

Overall, name avoidance in Vietnamese culture highlights the weight of authority and seniority, while in English-speaking cultures, respect is shown through other forms, with less focus on name avoidance.

5.2. Kinship terms and social relations

Kinship terms play a significant role in both Vietnamese and English-speaking cultures, but they are employed differently to navigate social relationships. In Vietnamese culture, kinship terms are crucial for expressing respect, especially toward elders. Terms like *Anh* (older brother) or *Chị* (older sister) are used to address not only family members but also non-relatives in social interactions. These terms replace personal names almost entirely in familial and respectful contexts, reflecting hierarchical relationships and reinforcing social cohesion through clear acknowledgment of status and age differences.

In contrast, English-speaking cultures, which prioritize individualism and egalitarianism, use kinship terms primarily within family settings. While terms like *Mom*, *Dad*, or *Grandma* are common, personal names are often used alongside kinship terms, even within families. Outside the family, kinship terms are rarely used to address non-relatives, with personal names being the default in most social interactions. The use of kinship terms in English-speaking societies is more flexible and informal, playing a lesser role in maintaining social hierarchy but still contributing to expressions of affection and family bonds.

In both cultures, kinship terms serve to maintain social cohesion and respect, but their role in replacing personal names is far more pronounced in Vietnamese culture than in English-speaking societies.

5.3. *Linguistic and cultural differences*

In both Vietnamese and English-speaking cultures, various linguistic strategies are used to navigate politeness and avoid personal names, though these strategies differ significantly due to cultural norms.

In Vietnamese culture, circumlocution, kinship terms, and titles are common strategies to avoid personal names, particularly in familial and social hierarchies. Kinship terms replace personal names when addressing family members, superiors, or elders, reflecting traditional values of hierarchy and respect. Pronouns in Vietnamese also carry specific social meanings related to the age, gender, and status of the interlocutor. This strict avoidance of personal names is a pragmatic way to show deference and maintain social harmony, especially in hierarchical relationships.

In contrast, English-speaking cultures do not emphasize name avoidance as much. Pronouns like *he* or *she* are used, but these are typically neutral and do not carry the same hierarchical significance. Titles such as *Mr.*, *Mrs.*, and *Dr.* are often used in formal or professional settings to show respect, but they are more flexible. As relationships become more informal, first names are commonly used, reflecting the individualistic and egalitarian values of these cultures.

Pragmatically, Vietnamese culture emphasizes indirectness and deference in communication, using naming conventions to negotiate power and respect. In English-speaking cultures, directness and equality are prioritized, and names are used as a tool for open, personal connection rather than as a means to navigate power dynamics. This results in fundamentally different approaches to politeness and social interaction in each culture.

It is recommended to dwell more in the insight of naming avoidance. For Vietnamese personal name avoidance, this practice is believed to have originated from China and influenced neighboring nations in the ancient Chinese cultural sphere, including Viet Nam (see Le Trung Hoa 2002, Pham Tat Thang 1996). In Britain, the notion of a naming taboo does exist, but there is no name avoidance similar to that in Viet Nam or other eastern cultures. In general, personal naming is completely liberal; people are free to choose any names they like without any cultural confines and restrictions, as long as such names are not deemed offensive (e.g. registrars may refuse to register a name like Binladen these days). In Viet Nam, although things are more tolerant nowadays, people still practice taboo in naming when they come to naming their children (Le Trung Hoa, 2005; Nguyen Viet Khoa, 2010). This is another major difference between Vietnamese and English personal/given names, and to some extent, it reflects the cultural diversity of the two nations. In Viet Nam, as a common custom, a child's name must be different from the name of superiors such as the saints, deities, the senior family members, the older generations, etc. Even referring to the dead or the elderly by their given names is considered an offence because of superstitious beliefs, and also because of the fact that junior members of the family are prohibited from mentioning the personal name of their elder relatives.

In the past, this taboo in naming in Viet Nam was first and foremost applied to avoid the name of the king or other members of the royal family (Le Trung Hoa, 2005). People were not allowed to name their children after the reigning king by law. And if a new king was crowned, all people with the same name as the new king had to change their name. This then was a taboo so strict that breaking it was actually breaking the law, and this could result in severe punishments, even a death penalty.

With the end of French colonization and the collapse of the Nguyen Dynasty in 1945, this naming taboo has been effectively abolished, although there is no official lawful document stating this. However, the consequences of this taboo still remain as most people still obey conventional naming practices, for example, children's name must not be the same as their parents'. It is revealing that not a single child has been named after the late president Ho Chi Minh, founder of the new Viet Nam. On the contrary, English people have a great number of given names that derive from names of the saints, as well as legendary and mythological figures. They also feel proud of the fact that members of the younger generation are named after their elders. Grandchildren are commonly named after their grandparents, and the names of kings or queens are always among the favored names for newborn children.

The rise in popularity of names like *Victoria*, *George* or *Elizabeth* owes a lot to the name of the contemporary queen or king. In Britain, passing names on is a way to show respect to the older generations, and by inheriting names, the family members inherit the fame and reputation of their predecessors. For example, looking back at British history since 1702, it can be seen that the name *George* has been shared by six monarchs from George I to George VI.

So, what is behind a naming practice that is viewed as taboo in Viet Nam but as an honor in English-speaking societies? The differences in the structure of society and culture in the two countries may play a vital role in this case. Jin's viewpoint is interesting when she discusses the "taboo-or-honor" phenomenon in Chinese and Western naming system. According to Jin (2006), it is power distance in eastern and western societies that produces this difference in naming.

Similarly, according to Hofstede, cultures with a high-power distance accept inequality as the cultural norm, while cultures with a low power distance tend to favor equality between members of society. Hofstede (2001, p.79-91) introduced a Power Distance Index under which Viet Nam scores 70 and Britain scores 35 on the cultural scale of analysis. The score 70 indicates that in Viet Nam people have to obey strict hierarchy rules and are treated quite differently based on their status in society. This can explain why those considered inferior do not dare to share names with their superiors (i.e., elders), and why those considered superior are reluctant to share their name with their inferiors.

As for British society, a low power distance index score of 35 implies out that respect for individuals is encouraged and all members of society, in principle, expect to be treated equally. Living in a less hierarchical culture, English people do not mind being named after their elders, and their elders in turn do not object to it, as no one is considered hierarchically superior in the relationship. On the contrary, they consider it a pride or honor rather than an offence.

Another difference in naming avoidance in Vietnamese and English cultures is the use of hypocoristic names or pet names. If the Vietnamese use hypocoristic names as a way to avoid using official names for customary reasons, English people use pet names as a way to show their intimacy. As a custom, Vietnamese parents are quite reluctant to refer to their son or daughter by his or her official main name before school age (Le Trung Hoa, 2005). They instead use pet names (or better-known hypocoristic forms of names) for their children.

Vietnamese hypocoristic names are often phonologically different from official names, while in English such names usually take the official name as the base on which they develop. In other words, Vietnamese hypocoristics are closer to nicknames while English ones are diminutives or shortened forms of official names. For example, the official given name of a certain Vietnamese boy is *Mạnh Hùng* and his pet name is *Cò* while an English boy named *Benjamin* can be called *Ben* by his family and friends. In the Vietnamese case, the semantic relationship, if any, is that *Mạnh Hùng* is a male name and *Cò* is a common name of either the male sexual organ or a kind of bird (stork), thus the pet name *Cò* implies that the child is a boy. In the English example, it is obvious that the relationship between the base name and the pet name is merely phonological and morphological, since truncation can be a reasonably systematic process. For example, the full official name of the former US president *Bill Clinton* is *William Jefferson Clinton*. In this case, *William* shortened to *Will* and then through rhyming that turned into *Bill*.

In most cases, people with a working knowledge of English language and culture can use the hypocoristic form of an English name without difficulty. A traditional English name may have more than one pet form, but overall, the number of pet forms of names is limited and can be guessed by native speakers. For example, *Pat* from *Patrick*, *Sam* from *Samuel* or *Samantha*, *Joe* from *Joseph*, *Liz* from *Elizabeth*, etc. By contrast, there is no means in Vietnamese to "guess" a boy's or girl's pet name until one is told. In Viet Nam, pet names are used to replace official names for the first few years of life. As soon as a child goes to school (at six years of age), he or she will be known only by their official name at school, and the use of the pet name at home will gradually disappear. In English however, it seems that when one is happy with his or her pet name, that name can accompany him or her for the

whole life. At a certain level, this also indicates the reason why many pet names are now used as official names in parallel with their root such as *Tony/Anthony*, *Kate/Katherine*, *Nick/Nicholas*, etc., (see also the aforementioned case of *Bill Clinton*).

6. Discussion

The findings from this study highlight important implications for cross-cultural communication. In Vietnamese culture, the avoidance of personal names is deeply rooted in respect, hierarchy, and Confucian values. On the other hand, English-speaking cultures, with their emphasis on individualism and egalitarianism, allow for more frequent use of personal names, even in formal settings. These differences can lead to misunderstandings in cross-cultural interactions if not recognized. For instance, an English speaker may perceive the use of personal names as friendly and informal, while a Vietnamese person might interpret the same behavior as disrespectful, especially in hierarchical relationships. Similarly, English speakers might find the avoidance of names in Vietnamese culture overly formal or distant, not understanding its significance as a marker of respect.

Understanding naming avoidance practices is essential for bridging cultural gaps in both formal and informal communication. Being aware of these differences allows individuals to adapt their communication style to show respect in culturally appropriate ways. For example, a foreigner working in Viet Nam might choose to address elders or superiors using kinship terms instead of personal names, while a Vietnamese person in an English-speaking context might become more comfortable with using first names in the workplace. The researcher has witnessed some speakers of English balance the formality by addressing each other using *kinship term* + *given name*. For example, “I share the viewpoint of *anh Thanh* on this issue” instead of “... *Mr. Thanh*...”.

Modern globalization, however, is gradually influencing traditional name avoidance practices in both cultures. With increased cross-cultural exposure, younger generations in Vietnam are gradually adopting more casual name usage, particularly in international business and social media, where English-speaking norms prevail. Traditionally, Vietnamese culture emphasizes formality and respect through titles or kinship terms instead of personal names, especially when addressing elders or superiors. However, in globalized settings, such as business meetings or online platforms, using first names has become more common. For example, in international business, Vietnamese professionals may adopt the Western practice of addressing colleagues by their first names to align with global norms. In a meeting with American counterparts, a Vietnamese employee might address the CEO as *Marc* rather than using a formal title like *Mr. Knapper*. This shift helps create a sense of equality and approachability, fitting the more egalitarian communication style of the English-speaking world. Despite these changes, traditional Vietnamese norms remain significant in personal and family contexts, demonstrating a hybrid approach to name usage that reflects both cultural heritage and global influence.

Conversely in English-speaking countries, the growing awareness of diverse cultural norms has led to more conscious efforts to adjust communication styles, particularly in multicultural or international settings. While direct use of personal names is generally the norm in English, individuals are increasingly aware that this practice may not be appropriate in all cultural contexts. For instance, in business or diplomatic interactions with Vietnamese individuals, English speakers may adopt more formal address patterns to show respect. They might use titles and honorifics, such as *Mr. Tuan* or *Professor Lan*, following the protocol common in Vietnamese culture (although this practice is not as so in their culture - i.e., titles do not precede given names).

Another example is within diverse communities in the Anglosphere, where individuals may adjust their speech when interacting with people from Vietnamese culture. Addressing elders or senior colleagues with titles like *Sir*, *Anh* (elder brother) or *Chị* (elder sister) rather than using first names only reflects an understanding of the importance of status, respect and hierarchy in Viet Nam.

These adaptations illustrate how cross-cultural awareness fosters more considerate communication. By avoiding personal names in situations where it could be seen as overly familiar or disrespectful,

English speakers demonstrate cultural sensitivity, recognizing that respect and deference can be conveyed through language choices.

Globalization fosters more fluid and adaptable communication practices, but the traditional values underlying these naming conventions continue to play a significant role in maintaining cultural identity of Vietnamese and English-speaking cultures.

7. Conclusion

To sum up, this research has highlighted the contrasting practices of personal name avoidance in Vietnamese and English-speaking cultures. In Vietnamese society, influenced by deep-rooted Confucian values, the avoidance of personal names, particularly when addressing elders or parents, serves as a marker of respect and social hierarchy. Kinship terms and titles are widely used in place of names, reflecting the cultural emphasis on seniority, difference, and familial duty. In contrast, English-speaking societies, shaped by values of individualism, egalitarianism, and directness, exhibit less prominent and more context-specific name avoidance. While titles and kinship terms are used in formal or family contexts, personal names are more freely employed across social hierarchies, signaling equality and personal identity.

It is recommended that future research explore how globalization and generational shifts are influencing these naming practices. In both cultures, younger generations, shaped by increasing intercultural communication, may be adapting or reshaping traditional naming customs. Investigating how these changes impact social interactions, identity, and respect in both Vietnamese and English-speaking contexts could provide deeper insights into the evolution of name usage and its cultural significance in a rapidly globalizing world.

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Nghiên cứu so sánh vấn đề né tránh sử dụng tên cá nhân trong văn hoá Việt Nam và văn hoá các nước nói tiếng Anh

Tóm tắt: Bài viết tìm hiểu về tập quán tránh sử dụng tên cá nhân trong văn hoá Việt Nam và văn hoá các quốc gia nói tiếng Anh như ngôn ngữ thứ nhất. Ở Việt Nam, việc tránh trực tiếp gọi tên của người lớn tuổi là một chuẩn mực văn hóa bắt nguồn từ các giá trị Nho giáo. Thay vào đó, các từ ngữ chỉ quan hệ họ hàng được sử dụng thay thế để thể hiện sự kính trọng với người trên (Lê Trung Hoa, 2005). Trong các nền văn hóa nói tiếng Anh, mặc dù việc sử dụng tên gọi linh hoạt hơn, để thể hiện cấp bậc và chuyên môn, người ta sử dụng các danh xưng chức tước (Adler, 1978). Nghiên cứu này làm rõ cách cả hai nền văn hóa sử dụng công cụ ngôn ngữ để thể hiện sự tôn trọng và quản lý động lực quyền lực. Bằng cách so sánh các tập quán này, nghiên cứu mang lại cái nhìn chuyên sâu về cách các nền văn hoá khác nhau xử lý vấn đề địa vị và cấp bậc thông qua phương tiện ngôn ngữ, qua đó góp phần mang đến những góc nhìn có giá trị về giao tiếp xuyên văn hóa.

Từ khóa: tên cá nhân; né tránh tên cá nhân; quan hệ họ hàng; từ xưng hô; tiếng Việt; tiếng Anh.