

Social-emotional communication among employees of selected agencies in Sulu

Grace A. Akalal, DPA

Mindanao State University-Sulu

Jolo, Sulu, Philippines

Email: grace.akalal@msusulu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

This study explored the extent of social-emotional communication among employees of selected line agencies in Sulu, focusing on horizontal (peer-to-peer) and vertical (supervisor-subordinate) communication. Guided by the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) theory, the research aimed to determine whether employees' perceptions of social-emotional communication varied according to demographic characteristics such as gender, age, length of service, status of appointment, and educational attainment. Using a descriptive-correlational design, data were gathered from 200 purposively selected employees across ten government agencies in the province. A structured and validated questionnaire adapted from Wang (2011) served as the primary instrument. Findings revealed a high tendency for horizontal social-emotional communication, indicating strong peer-level interactions characterized by positivity and cooperation. However, vertical communication showed only a moderate tendency, suggesting hesitation or uncertainty in emotionally expressive interactions with superiors. Statistical analyses confirmed no significant differences in communication patterns across most demographic variables, except educational attainment, which showed a significant difference in perceptions of horizontal communication. These results reflect the influence of cultural values like pakikisama and hiya in shaping communication dynamics in hierarchical organizations. The study underscores the importance of fostering emotionally intelligent communication across all levels of public sector organizations. Recommendations include integrating SEL-informed training programs, enhancing leadership communication practices, and promoting inclusive, feedback-rich environments to improve both vertical and horizontal communication flows.

Keywords: social-emotional communication, horizontal and vertical communication, public sector employees, demographic variables in communication

Date Submitted: June 15, 2025

Date Accepted: July 2, 2025

Date Published: July 19, 2025

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social-emotional communication has emerged as a foundational pillar in effective organizational communication, especially within public sector environments such as government line agencies. The complex interplay of emotional intelligence, empathy, and communication style significantly influences organizational productivity, employee well-being, and workplace cohesion (Muring, 2022). In the Philippines, where collectivist values and hierarchical structures dominate many institutional frameworks, understanding the nature and degree of social-emotional interactions is especially vital.

The Province of Sulu, located in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), represents a unique context where cultural nuances, local governance challenges, and historical marginalization intersect. Government line agencies operating in such areas perform critical roles in service delivery, peacebuilding, and community development. Hence, it is essential to understand how interpersonal communication—especially horizontal (peer-to-peer) and vertical (supervisor-subordinate)—supports or hinders administrative effectiveness in these sensitive environments.

In particular, social-emotional communication enables employees to build trust, show empathy, express concerns constructively, and foster a psychologically safe environment (Datu & Restubog, 2020). Studies have shown that employees with higher emotional competence are more likely to collaborate, manage conflict, and adapt to organizational changes (Agoylo et al., 2024). However, there is a scarcity of empirical research addressing how these dynamics function within public agencies in rural, conflict-prone areas like Sulu. Ultimately, this study will contribute to the growing literature on workplace communication in culturally and politically distinct areas. It will also serve as a policy guide for local governance and human resource strategies in line agencies throughout BARMM and similar regions.

This research is rooted in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Theory, which postulates that individuals develop five interrelated competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). These competencies significantly shape workplace interactions, especially communication patterns across hierarchical levels.

Filipino workplace culture is influenced by “pakikisama” (smooth interpersonal relationships), “utang naloob” (debt of gratitude), and “hiya” (sense of shame/modesty), all of which underscore the affective dimension of workplace exchanges (Geraga, 2024). These sociocultural values impact both horizontal (colleague-to-colleague) and vertical (superior-subordinate) communication. For instance, an employee might refrain from expressing dissent openly to a superior, potentially hindering constructive feedback and innovation.

Moreover, the post-pandemic workplace environment has increased stress levels among public servants and highlighted the need for emotional resilience and communication adaptability (Ching & Malabanan, 2025). These issues are particularly critical in Sulu, where public servants face additional stressors due to logistical constraints, insurgency threats, and limited resources.

Understanding the demographic profile of employees—such as gender, age, length of service, appointment status, and educational attainment—is crucial to contextualizing variations in communication behaviors. Prior studies indicate that younger employees tend to exhibit more openness in horizontal communication, whereas those with permanent status often exhibit more assertiveness in vertical interactions (Caparoso, 2024).

Statement of the problem

This study aims to answer the following critical questions:

1. What is the demographic profile of employees of line agencies in Sulu in terms of gender, age, length of service, status of appointment, and educational attainment?
2. What is the extent of social-emotional communication of these employees in the context of horizontal communication type and vertical communication type?

3. Is there a significant difference in the extent of social-emotional communication when data are categorized according to demographic variables?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design to investigate the extent of social-emotional communication among employees of selected line agencies in Sulu. The descriptive aspect focused on profiling the demographic characteristics of the participants and assessing the degree of social-emotional communication within two specific contexts: horizontal communication among peers and vertical communication between supervisors and subordinates. Meanwhile, the correlational component examined whether significant differences or relationships existed in communication patterns when categorized according to demographic variables. This design was deemed suitable for capturing both the occurrence and comparative patterns of variables without altering the natural work environment. Anchored in Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Theory, the approach facilitated an exploration of interpersonal dynamics essential to effective organizational communication, particularly within the culturally diverse and hierarchical setting characteristic of Sulu.

The research was conducted across ten government line agencies situated in the province of Sulu, part of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). These agencies included a mix of national, regional, and local offices, offering a broad perspective on employee communication across various administrative levels. The study's participants were 200 employees drawn from these agencies, each contributing 20 respondents who were actively employed during Fiscal Year 2022, regardless of their rank or civil status. To select the participants, purposive sampling was utilized, prioritizing those available and relevant to the study while ensuring an appropriate representation of demographic variables such as gender, age, length of service, appointment status, and educational attainment. This sampling approach was essential in addressing the study's comparative research questions effectively.

Data collection followed strict procedural protocols. Prior to the distribution of the questionnaires, permission was obtained from the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies and the heads of the participating agencies, ensuring ethical compliance and organizational support. The researcher personally administered and retrieved the questionnaires, which contributed to accurate dissemination and high response rates. The instrument used for data gathering was a structured questionnaire adapted from Wang's (2011) study on social-emotional and organizational communication within workplace settings. Modifications were made to reflect the specific cultural and contextual realities of Sulu while focusing exclusively on the constructs pertinent to this research, namely social-emotional communication and demographic variation.

Although Wang's (2011) original instrument had established international reliability and validity, the adapted questionnaire underwent a validation process by two faculty members from the School of Graduate Studies at Sulu State College. Their expert feedback ensured that cultural and linguistic nuances unique to the study locale were appropriately addressed, thus enhancing the instrument's validity and reliability in the local context.

For data analysis, various statistical techniques were employed corresponding to each research question. Frequencies and percentages were used to describe the demographic profile of respondents. To measure the extent of social-emotional communication within horizontal and vertical contexts, weighted means and standard deviations were calculated. To examine significant differences in communication patterns by gender, independent samples t-tests were

applied, while one-way ANOVA was used to assess differences based on age, length of service, appointment status, and educational attainment. This comprehensive analytical strategy enabled the study to rigorously address both descriptive and inferential aspects of the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic profile of the respondents

The first research question sought to identify the demographic profile of employees of line agencies in Sulu in terms of gender, age, length of service, status of appointment, and educational attainment. In terms of gender, among the 200 respondents, 115 (57.5%) were female while 85 (42.5%) were male, indicating that female employees slightly outnumber their male counterparts in the line agencies of Sulu. Regarding age, the distribution showed that 68 respondents (34.0%) were 30 years old or younger, 56 (28.0%) were between 31 and 40 years old, 48 (24.0%) were between 41 and 50 years old, and 28 (14.0%) were 51 years old or above. This suggests that more than one-third of the workforce belongs to the youngest age bracket. Concerning length of service, half of the respondents (100 or 50.0%) reported having five years or less of experience, 43 (21.5%) had six to ten years, 19 (9.5%) had eleven to fifteen years, and 38 (19.0%) had sixteen years or more. Thus, the majority are relatively recent entrants to their positions. With respect to status of appointment, the data showed that 107 employees (53.5%) were permanent, 65 (32.5%) were contractual, and 28 (14.0%) were temporary, indicating that permanent and contractual employees comprise the bulk of the workforce. Lastly, regarding educational attainment, a large majority of 139 respondents (69.5%) held a bachelor's degree, 24 (12.0%) had bachelor's degrees with master's units, 25 (12.5%) had master's degrees, while smaller proportions held master's degrees with doctoral units (6 respondents, 3.0%) or doctorate degrees (6 respondents, 3.0%). This reveals that most employees possess at least the basic academic qualification required for their roles.

Extent of social-emotional communication of these employees in the context of horizontal communication type and vertical communication type

The second research question examined the extent of social-emotional communication among employees in the contexts of horizontal and vertical communication types. For horizontal communication, which refers to interactions among employees at the same organizational level, the total weighted mean was 3.5475 with a standard deviation of 0.79429, corresponding to a rating of "Agree" and interpreted as a "High Tendency." This indicates that respondents generally perceived frequent and positive social-emotional exchanges with coworkers at the same level, such as talking positively about non-work-related topics and using communication to solve problems or coordinate tasks across departments. However, they were undecided about the frequency of discussing non-work-related topics with coworkers within or outside their immediate department. In contrast, for vertical communication, involving communication between employees and their supervisors or upper management, the weighted mean was lower at 3.1888 with a standard deviation of 0.88592, rated as "Undecided" and interpreted as a "Moderate Tendency." This suggests that respondents were uncertain about the efficiency or frequency of social-emotional communication flowing downward through the organizational

hierarchy. They were unsure if such communication is commonly used for directives, instructions, or feedback. Respondents also expressed ambivalence about the frequency and quality of non-work-related conversations with supervisors, though they agreed that when such conversations occur, they tend to be positive and free of complaints.

Difference in the extent of social-emotional communication when data are categorized according to demographic variables

The third research question explored whether significant differences exist in the extent of social-emotional communication based on demographic variables, specifically gender, age, length of service, status of appointment, and educational attainment. When categorized by gender, the data revealed no significant differences in perceptions of social-emotional communication in either horizontal or vertical contexts. This suggests that male and female employees share similar views about the extent of communication, implying that gender does not influence employees' perceptions. Similarly, age did not significantly affect how employees perceived social-emotional communication. Employees across different age groups—whether 30 years old and below or 51 years and above—displayed comparable perceptions regarding the adequacy of both horizontal and vertical communication flows. This indicates age is not a determining factor in employees' views on social-emotional communication. Regarding length of service, no significant differences were found either. Employees with varying years of experience, from those with five years or less to those with over sixteen years, reported similar perceptions of communication extent, suggesting that tenure does not influence these perceptions. Analysis by status of appointment also yielded no significant differences. Whether employees were permanent, temporary, or contractual, their views on the sufficiency and nature of social-emotional communication did not differ, implying appointment status does not impact perceptions in this area.

Educational attainment was the only demographic variable that showed a significant difference, but solely within the horizontal communication type. The analysis found that perceptions of social-emotional communication among employees with different educational qualifications varied significantly in horizontal communication, suggesting that employees with higher education levels may perceive peer-level communication differently. However, in the vertical communication context, no significant differences were observed across educational levels. Employees, regardless of whether they held bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degrees, shared similar perceptions about social-emotional exchanges between employees and leaders. This finding implies that educational attainment influences horizontal but not vertical social-emotional communication perceptions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding the social-emotional communication and demographic characteristics of employees in line agencies in Sulu. The workforce is predominantly female and relatively young, with most employees aged 30 years or below. Additionally, the majority have less than five years of service, hold permanent appointments, and possess at least a bachelor's degree. This profile reflects a demographic composition that is moderately educated, newly tenured, and characterized by a youthful presence within the agencies. Regarding social-emotional communication, employees

demonstrated a high tendency toward horizontal communication, indicating strong, positive, and cooperative interactions among peers. Conversely, there was a moderate tendency in vertical communication, suggesting a degree of hesitation or uncertainty when engaging in emotionally expressive conversations with superiors. This may be influenced by cultural norms emphasizing hierarchy and deference, which shape communication dynamics in the workplace.

Furthermore, perceptions of social-emotional communication were largely consistent across demographic variables such as gender, age, length of service, status of appointment, and educational attainment. The sole exception was in the context of horizontal communication, where educational attainment showed a significant effect on perceptions. This consistency suggests that, generally, employee views on social-emotional communication transcend these demographic distinctions. The findings also align well with the theoretical framework of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Theory, which highlights the importance of relationship skills, social awareness, and communication styles in shaping interpersonal workplace interactions. The prominence of effective horizontal communication reflects Filipino cultural values such as *pakikisama* (smooth interpersonal relationships) and *hiya* (social restraint), which encourage peer harmony while tempering more direct emotional expression in hierarchical exchanges.

In light of these conclusions, several recommendations are proposed to enhance social-emotional communication within line agencies in Sulu. Institutional leadership, particularly agency heads and human resource officers, should prioritize strengthening vertical communication channels where uncertainty currently exists. This could be accomplished through regular leadership development programs that cultivate emotional intelligence, effective communication skills, and sensitivity in interactions with subordinates. Creating environments that encourage open feedback—such as open-door policies, mentorship initiatives, and inclusive staff discussions—can help lower barriers between supervisors and employees. Employee training programs should also be responsive to the educational diversity within the workforce. Since educational attainment influenced perceptions of horizontal communication, differentiated workshops and seminars focusing on interpersonal communication and emotional resilience would be beneficial. Encouraging peer mentoring and cross-departmental collaboration can further foster integration and reinforce positive horizontal relationships.

At the policy level, regional governance structures like those in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) should consider embedding SEL principles into human resource and civil service training frameworks. Institutionalizing these practices will empower employees with essential relational skills and promote a workplace culture that values empathy, respect, and shared accountability—critical factors in contexts with unique cultural and geopolitical challenges such as Sulu. Future research could expand the scope of inquiry by employing qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to capture deeper insights into the emotional and communicative experiences of employees. Exploring additional organizational behavior constructs, including emotional labor, leadership styles, and psychological safety, may further enrich understanding. Comparative studies involving different provinces or organizational settings would also help assess the broader applicability of these findings.

Finally, organizational efforts should build on existing strengths as well as address areas needing improvement. Given the relatively strong horizontal communication observed, management should sustain and enhance this through team-building activities, collaborative learning environments, and employee wellness programs designed to strengthen camaraderie and

reinforce positive interpersonal behaviors. Recognition campaigns that highlight not only technical accomplishments but also emotional and relational contributions could normalize and reward healthy social-emotional engagement across all levels. By thoughtfully implementing these recommendations, government agencies in Sulu and similar settings can cultivate more inclusive, emotionally intelligent, and communicatively effective public service environments.

REFERENCES

- Agoylo, J. C., Oclarit, F. P., & Alfaro, C. G. M. (2024). Enhanced social-emotional learning (ESEL): An intervention to mitigate work-related stress among teachers. *Wisdom Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*.
- Caparoso, J. (2024). Building a constructivist classroom: How social-emotional competence and school climate influence teachers' pedagogical competence. *ResearchGate*.
- Ching, G. S., & Malabanan, J. C. (2025). Adapting to online education: Social and emotional learning and teaching efficacy among Filipino teachers post-pandemic. *ResearchGate*.
- Datu, J. A. D., & Restubog, S. L. D. (2020). The emotional pay-off of staying gritty: Linking grit with social-emotional learning and emotional well-being. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 48(3), 351–365. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2019.1632419>
- Geraga, G. S. (2024). How social-emotional competence and school climate influence teacher performance. *ResearchGate*.
- Justice, J. B. (2008). Purpose and significance of research design. In M. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman, & T. Futing Liao (Eds.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of social science research methods*. Sage Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589>
- Mingoa, T., Hernandez, K., Paguio, D., Rice, A., & Tapales, M. R. (2024). Filipino teachers' understanding and promotion of social-emotional skills and resilience. *Child Research Net*.
- Muring, K. (2022). Social competence and emotional intelligence in relation to work commitment among school administrators. *ResearchGate*.
- Palero, J. B. (2025). Social emotional learning programs in promoting positive classroom climate: A phenomenological analysis in Lambayong III. *ICCEPH*.
- Wang, Y. (2011). The role of communication in enhancing employees' organizational commitment: Exploring the relationship between social-emotional-oriented communication, work-oriented communication and organizational commitment in China (Master's thesis, University of Jyväskylä). <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/37081>