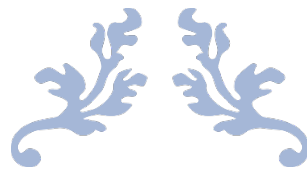




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REPORT

International Business Communications (LCBB6001)



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1. Introduction

In the modern day of globalisation, good cross-cultural communication has become critical for multinational firms entering new markets. Unilever PLC, a leading UK-based multinational consumer goods corporation, has formed a strategic relationship with Shiseido, a well-known Japanese personal care firm, to develop and market new products in Asia. This partnership necessitates the incorporation of varied cultural and communication styles from the United Kingdom and Japan, both of which have distinctive communication standards influenced by their respective cultures. As the Country Director for this project, my duty is to ensure clear and effective communication among team members from both areas in order to avoid misunderstandings and encourage successful project implementation.

This report compares the communication styles of UK and Japanese teams, using cultural theories such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the high-context versus low-context communication model. By investigating these cultural frameworks, this paper hopes to provide insights into how cultural values influence communication, decision-making, and professional relationships in both locations. It also suggests ways for bridging communication barriers and improving team cohesion, which will help to ensure a successful cross-cultural relationship.

2. Cultural context of Unilever and Shiseido

Unilever PLC, a British multinational, offers a diverse range of personal care, home care, and food products. Known for its commitment to sustainable living, Unilever emphasizes open communication, innovation, and diversity within its corporate culture. Operating in over 190 countries, Unilever promotes transparency and direct communication, which aligns with the UK's low-context, individualistic cultural norms (*Unilever, 2023*).

Shiseido, established in Japan in 1872, is a leading beauty and personal care company with a strong focus in Asia. Rooted in Japanese traditions, Shiseido's culture emphasizes harmony, respect for hierarchy, and an indirect communication style. Japan's high-context culture values subtlety and nonverbal cues, with decision-making often achieved through consultation and consensus (*Shiseido, 2023*).

The contrasting communication styles of Unilever and Shiseido reflect their respective cultures. Effective collaboration requires understanding these

differences, balancing the UK's direct communication with Japan's indirect approach. Together, Unilever and Shiseido aim to develop innovative beauty products tailored to Asian markets, blending sustainability with cultural sensitivity.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Hofstede's cultural dimension

Power Distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation, and Indulgence vs. Restraint are the six variables identified by Hofstede's model as explaining cultural differences among nations (*Hofstede, 1980*).

Power distance:

According to *Hofstede, 1980* Japan's Power Distance index is comparatively high. This suggests a more hierarchical culture in which an uneven allocation of power is typically tolerated. This can result in top-down decision-making in organisations, where lower-level staff members are less inclined to challenge authority or have candid conversations with superiors.

In contrast, the UK has a moderately low Power Distance score. Employees may feel better at ease voicing their ideas to superiors in flatter organisational structures, which are typically supported by UK culture. In general, equality is expected, and authority is respected but challenged when needed.

Japanese personnel may find the UK's emphasis on egalitarianism difficult to adjust to, whereas UK staff may find Japanese hierarchical systems stifling in joint ventures or collaborations. It can be necessary to negotiate these hierarchical expectations in order to collaborate effectively.

Individualism vs Collectivism:

The United Kingdom is exceedingly individualistic. People place a high importance on personal freedom, self-reliance, and achievement. In the business world, this frequently results in an emphasis on personal goals and rewards, with performance strongly related to individual accomplishments.

Japan is significantly more collectivistic. Moreover, *Hofstede 1980* states that there is a great emphasis on teamwork, commitment, and consensus. Group accomplishments frequently take precedence over individual accolades, and personnel work with the goal of promoting the company's long-term prosperity rather than personal benefit.

Japanese teams collaborating with UK counterparts may initially struggle with the emphasis on individual successes, whilst UK teams may need to acclimatise to the Japanese model, in which choices and responsibilities are frequently shared among groups.

Masculinity vs Femininity

As of *Hofstede 1980* Japan rates high on the Masculinity scale, reflecting a competitive, goal-oriented society that values success, assertiveness, and productivity. In business, this can result in a demanding work environment in which employees are expected to demonstrate dedication and sacrifice for the company's success. The United Kingdom likewise has a reasonably high Masculinity score, although it is lower than Japan's, showing a society that prizes performance while maintaining a more balanced attitude to work-life issues. British employees frequently seek a balance between work and recreation, yet there is still a desire for achievement.

Both countries may share a desire for success, yet the UK's emphasis on work-life balance may differ from Japan's more rigorous work culture.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Japan has a high Uncertainty Avoidance score, indicating a strong propensity to avoid ambiguity. Japanese organisations frequently rely on meticulous planning, protocols, and risk-averse methods, while personnel prefer precise instructions and established systems where on the other hand the United Kingdom has a lower Uncertainty Avoidance score, indicating that it is more comfortable with uncertainty and willing to adjust to change. British enterprises may be more willing to experiment, change strategy, and take measured risks. (*Hofstede, 1980*).

In cross-cultural projects, UK organisations may need to spend more time offering clear frameworks and timetables to their Japanese partners, whilst Japanese teams may need to adjust to the UK's more flexible approach.

Long- term vs Short – term orientation

Japan ranks high in Long-Term Orientation, which reflects their cultural emphasis on endurance, sustainability, and commitment to future outcomes. Japanese businesses frequently prioritise long-term connections and consistent growth over rapid profits where in contrast, UK has a shorter-term perspective, with a preference for fast results and ROI in business. While long-term planning is encouraged, there is a significant emphasis on meeting short-term goals and achieving financial success. (*Hofstede, 1980*)

The UK's drive for fast outcomes may appear to conflict with Japan's long-term perspective. In joint ventures, Japanese partners may argue for strategic patience and endurance, whereas UK partners may prefer rapid profits.

Indulgence vs Restraint

According to *Hofstede, 1980* Japan leans towards restraint, indicating a more conservative society that values self-control, hard effort, and humility. Japanese culture traditionally prioritises the ability to control one's appetites and impulses, with a focus on adhering to social conventions. On the other hand, UK ranks higher on the Indulgence scale, reflecting a society that values leisure, personal enjoyment, and individual gratification. There is more freedom to express emotions and enjoy life, as well as greater flexibility in following personal interests while working.

UK employees may find Japanese restraint constraining in social situations, whilst Japanese employees may see UK indulgence as unfocused. Mutual understanding of these characteristics can lead to a polite cultural exchange.

3.2. High – context and Low – context theory

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall's (1976) theory of high-context and low-context communication sheds light on how people communicate across cultures, particularly in high-context countries like Japan and low-context societies like the United Kingdom. In a high-context culture, much communication is implicit, relying primarily on context, nonverbal clues, and shared understanding. Low-context societies, on the other hand, rely heavily on explicit, direct communication, with words conveying the majority of meaning.

High – context communication in Japan

Japan is frequently described as a high-context culture. Japanese communication focusses on subtle indicators such as tone, body language, and shared cultural knowledge, therefore messages are frequently transmitted indirectly. Understanding the context is critical in Japan, as people presume a shared cultural background and avoid open confrontation or outright disagreement (*Hall, 1976; Nishimura, Nevgi, & Tella, 2008*). To maintain harmony and minimise discomfort, Japanese people frequently use indirect language rather than stating "no" outright (*Nakane, 1970*). Silence can also be important since it conveys agreement, respect, or the need for additional thought (*Matsumoto, 1988*). This approach is based on the values of group harmony and societal hierarchy, which emphasise collective understanding and implicit respect in communication.

Low – context communication in the UK

In contrast, the United Kingdom is considered a low-context culture. British communication is typically straightforward, with messages given immediately and exactly, leaving little room for interpretation based solely on context (*Hall, 1976*). In the United Kingdom, language is the primary means of communicating information, with less emphasis on nonverbal clues or shared cultural knowledge. The British emphasise clarity and directness, especially in professional contexts where precise instructions and feedback are required (*Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988*). This low-context communication approach may appear unduly straight or brutal to high-context communicators, yet it is designed to avoid ambiguity and misconceptions (*Lewis, 2006*).

Implications for cross – cultural communication between UK and Japan

Differences in communication style between British and Japanese individuals might cause misunderstandings if both parties are ignorant of these opposing methods. For example, a British person may regard a Japanese colleague's indirect feedback as ambiguous or evasive, whereas the Japanese colleague may perceive the British person's directness as thoughtless or excessively brutal. As a result, in business environments, both parties gain from understanding each other's communication preferences. British communicators may need to read between the lines and pay attention to nonverbal clues, whereas Japanese communicators may want to use a more clear communication style when dealing with British colleagues (*Beamer & Varner, 2001*).

4. Evaluation of communication styles

4.1. Direct and indirect communication

In the United Kingdom, communication is typically direct, clear, and goal-oriented, reflecting a cultural preference for transparency and efficiency (*Hall, 1976*). The British value honesty and clarity, often expressing ideas openly, making straightforward requests, and offering criticism without excessive reliance on nonverbal cues (*Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988*). This approach minimizes misunderstandings and fosters effective information exchange, especially valued in professional contexts where clear feedback and precise instructions support productivity and effective management (*Lewis, 2006*). Although politeness remains integral, British people are often comfortable addressing issues head-on, particularly when offering constructive criticism (*Maude, 2011*).

In contrast, Japanese communication tends to be more indirect, emphasizing subtlety, nonverbal signals, and implicit understanding. Japanese culture prioritizes social harmony, often avoiding direct confrontation or refusal to

preserve positive relations (*Nakane, 1970*). Expressions like "it's difficult" or "we will consider it" are used instead of an outright "no" (*Nishimura, Nevgi, & Tella, 2008*), reflecting respect for others' feelings and the importance of societal harmony (*Matsumoto, 1988*).

4.2. Formality and Respect in communication

In Japan, communication is deeply influenced by social hierarchy and keigo, or respectful language. The Japanese language includes formal and honorific terms that reflect the other person's social position, age, or relationship to the speaker (*Ide, 1989*). It is essential to use the appropriate level of formality, as neglecting this can seem disrespectful. Japanese culture values hierarchy, humility, and courtesy, especially in professional environments (*Nakane, 1970*). Junior employees, for example, show respect by using honorific language and observing respectful gestures like bowing. They may also address others by titles rather than first names to maintain formality (*Nishimura, Nevgi, & Tella, 2008*). Additionally, the concept of enryo, or restraint, encourages indirect disagreement to avoid confrontation (*Matsumoto, 1988*). In contrast, British communication emphasizes respect and politeness with subtlety, often balancing formality with warmth (*Fox, 2004*). British politeness also includes maintaining personal space and privacy as forms of civility (*Brown and Levinson, 1987*).

4.3. Decision making and Hierarchy

Japanese businesses tend to have hierarchical decision-making procedures, with a significant emphasis on consensus building. Decisions are thoroughly addressed to promote group unity and obtaining a resolution may take longer than in the United Kingdom, where decision-making is frequently faster and based on individual responsibility. This distinction may frustrate UK team members, who anticipate faster resolutions, whilst Japanese members may perceive the UK approach as rushed. UK teams may need to respect Japanese hierarchical conventions, but Japanese teams could benefit from knowing the UK's egalitarian approach.

4.4. Non – verbal communication

Nonverbal communication differs substantially between Japan and the United Kingdom, reflecting each culture's ideals. Nonverbal cues in Japan are delicate and context dependant, with an emphasis on harmony and respect. Bowing is essential, with the depth showing the degree of respect or apologies; motions are

limited to prevent looking disrespectful or too expressive (*Matsumoto, 1988; Nakane, 1970*). Eye contact is utilised sparingly; avoiding lengthy eye contact with superiors demonstrates humility and respect (*Gudykunst and Nishida, 1986*). quiet is strategic, signalling reflection or agreement, as opposed to Western conventions where quiet may indicate discomfort (*Nishimura, Nevgi, & Tella, 2008*). Personal space is highly valued, and minimising interaction in crowded areas is seen as a form of civility (*Davies & Ikeno, 2002*).

In the United Kingdom, nonverbal communication is more expressive, with firm handshakes and modest gestures indicating courteous greetings and sentiments (*Fox, 2004*). Eye contact demonstrates attentiveness and confidence, yet excessive eye contact may be perceived as hostile (*Lewis, 2006*). Personal space is likewise valued, but with more flexibility in congested environments (*Brown & Levinson, 1987*).

5. Strategies for bridging communication gaps

Cultural Awareness and Training

Intercultural training helps bridge communication gaps between the United Kingdom and Japan. Training emphasises cultural differences, such as Japan's high-context, harmony-centered communication vs the UK's straightforward style (*Hall, 1976; Lewis, 2006*). Understanding these styles allows participants to anticipate misconceptions and adjust their approach for more effective interactions (*Beamer & Varner, 2001*).

Adapting Communication Style

In cross-cultural settings, both cultures can accommodate each other's preferences. British professionals may employ softer language with Japanese colleagues when dealing with delicate matters (*Gudykunst & Nishida, 1986*), whereas Japanese professionals may use a little more direct manner to ensure clarity (*Nishimura, Nevgi, & Tella, 2008*).

Clear and Structured Communication

Using organised agendas and summaries reduces ambiguity for both sides and provides a solid foundation for mutual understanding (*Maude, 2011*).

Nonverbal Cues

Preventing misinterpretations requires awareness of nonverbal signs such as **eye contact and quiet** (*Nakane, 1970; Matsumoto, 1988*).

Relationship-Building

Building trust gradually through social encounters promotes rapport, which is highly valued in Japanese culture (Davies & Ikeno, 2002).

Encourage feedback.

Encouraging candid feedback promotes understanding and helps to avoid misinterpretation across cultures (Lewis, 2006).

6. Conclusion

Effective cross-cultural communication is critical to the success of Unilever and Shiseido's collaboration in producing new products for the Asian market. Communication style differences established by cultural conventions in the United Kingdom and Japan present possible issues. Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions and Hall's high-context versus low-context communication theory, this paper assessed the key distinctions in communication styles, such as directness, formality, and decision-making procedures. Cultural sensitivity training, hybrid communication styles, active listening, and digital tools can all help to bridge communication barriers. This strategy will increase understanding, collaboration, and contribute to the success of this cross-cultural alliance.

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