

Cross-cultural business-to-business communication – the experiences of Polish companies with the Chinese and Americans

Cross-cultural
B2B
communication

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Abstract

Purpose – The main purpose of the study is to identify the differences and similarities in the communication between B2B participants in cross-cultural environments.

Design/methodology/approach – The research methods used in the study are two-fold: the literature analysis is complemented by primary qualitative research conducted in small- and medium-sized enterprises operating in Poland and doing business internationally. The research was focused on two culturally different markets: China and the United States. In the empirical research, the authors used one of the qualitative methods – Individual Depth Interview (IDI).

Findings – General findings showed that the strongest influence of culture was identified among older (+50 years old) business partners. The younger ones are eager to adapt and try to understand others' viewpoints. The research results may be used in creating business communication models in the countries researched for companies that plan to enter both American and Chinese markets.

Practical implications – The results of the study may have useful applied managerial value and be used in cooperation between SMEs' B2B business partners, not only from Poland but also from the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe and the United States and China.

Social implications – The findings may help to understand and communicate with culturally different social groups such as co-workers, students, teachers, etc.

Originality/value – The research presented in the paper covers the gap in the literature because it relates to some new factors (like cultural heritage, age and type of industry) which determine the effectiveness of personal business communication between partners in the international marketplace.

Keywords China, Poland, B2B, The United States, Cross-cultural communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The notion of national culture includes many diversified factors that shape people's behaviour, lifestyle and attitudes. One of the key cultural elements in the way that both individuals and companies operate is communication. People communicate in varied ways

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using different languages and carrying different values and norms. Hall (1976, p. 63) claims that “language is not (...) a system transferring thoughts and meanings from one brain to another but a system organizing information and influencing other organisms to release thoughts and reactions; this feature makes personal communication possible, both communication and whole culture depends on it”. The differences between these “systems” cause many misunderstandings in communication and cooperation among people from diverse countries and cultures (e.g. Dheera-aumpon and Changwatchai, 2020).

Different forms of communication can be distinguished in the literature depending on the components involved in the communicative process (e.g. McLuhan, 1964; Dunne, 2017). On the one hand, personal communication refers to people (individual units), on the other hand, marketing communication is a process between companies and individual customers (Zimand Sheiner and Lahav, 2020). Business-to-customer (B2C) communication is related to a process where there is a company in the sender’s location and a potential customer in the receiver’s location (Zhang and Du, 2020). But, who takes part in the process of communication in the business-to-business (B2B) market? The answer to this is people who create a company and/or those who work for/at/within it. Koponen and Julkunen (2022) underline that long-term B2B customer relationships are usually built and they evolve at the interpersonal level. The background of B2B communication lies in the theory of individual communication (Jandt, 2001; Zhang and Du, 2020) because there are individuals in both spaces – senders and receivers (Dunne, 2017; Zhang and Du, 2020). Szkudlarek *et al.* (2020, 1) state that according to global communication technologies’ development the research mainly focuses on language and knowledge transfer and “only limited attention has been given to the importance of interpersonal communication, which is at the core of any business activity”.

This paper contributes to the scientific literature in numerous ways: (1) by studying the role of cultural background in interpersonal communication in B2B relations, (2) by indicating the determinants impacting the efficiency of this communication, (3) by formulating both theoretical and practical implications for diverse stakeholders. Although there are quite a several papers and research outputs presenting cultural background and its importance in international cooperation and communication between different cultures (e.g. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988; Puffer and McCarthy, 1995; Kim *et al.*, 1998; Lewis, 1999; Kapoor *et al.*, 2003; Gudykunst, 2003; Tsui *et al.*, 2007; Wang *et al.*, 2021) most of them focus on the problem of cross-cultural communication without indicating what type of market is involved. There are still few studies and surveys focusing on the study of cultural barriers for those working in the B2B market (e.g. Jukka *et al.*, 2017; Zhang and Du, 2020; Koponen and Julkunen, 2022). Many studies present also the significance of digital tools (e.g. social media, Internet of Things) in both communication B2C and B2B (e.g. Kumar and Sharma, 2022) and their implementation during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Hu and Olivieri, 2022). The coronavirus pandemic forced companies to look for new possibilities to communicate with business partners in the situation of lockdown or health risks. Nowadays companies move to the adoption and implementation of new technologies both in the communication with the market and business partners (Corsaro and D’Amico, 2022).

The majority of the papers usually present a comparison of two culturally diverse geographical areas (e.g. Yan and Gray, 1996; Nowak and Dong, 1997; Li and Karakowsky, 2002; Hung, 2004; Buckley *et al.*, 2006; Tsai and Men, 2012; Abugre, 2018; Yousaf *et al.*, 2022). There are not many studies where researchers present features of cultures representing more regions and continents. In one of them, for example, Vollero *et al.* (2022) compared corporate social responsibility (CSR) institutional messages used by companies in three macro-regions (Asia, America and Europe). The findings show that there are not many differences in the way they highlight sustainability orientation.

This paper tries to fill the existing gap and tries to build a “worldwide cultural bridge” which will have implications for the practice of the cooperation of companies coming from cultures situated on three continents. The research includes the American, Polish and Chinese

markets that indicate three different cultures, but the common ground is linked with the communication of people belonging to the B2B market. In such circumstances there are concepts and theories of individual cross-communication implemented.

The main purpose of the paper is to identify the differences and similarities in communication among B2B participants in cross-cultural environments. The research methods consist of an initial literature analysis, which is subsequently complemented by primary qualitative research conducted in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in Poland (Polish origin, but doing business internationally). In the post-transformation period, Poland has become one of the most significant regional (Central and Eastern Europe) players and tends to be viewed as a leader there where the SME sector “(micro, small and medium companies) comprises the vast majority of companies in Poland, namely 99.8%” (Nowakowska-Grunt *et al.*, 2018, p. 234). The research was focused on two culturally different markets where Polish companies conduct business: China and the United States. In the empirical study, qualitative in-depth interviews (IDI) were used. This method was used due to the research problem discussed, which is difficult to quantify. In addition, it would be difficult to identify the communication features and issues using quantitative methods. That is why the decision was made to exploit a qualitative research method (Craig and Douglas, 2009). The great significance of the research presented in the paper is because, firstly, there are relatively few studies capturing more than two cultures from different continents, secondly, communication in the B2B market is considered (most studies do not indicate this type of market), and thirdly, factors that can affect the effectiveness of communication and thus achieving success in foreign markets are identified.

The theoretical background of the paper is associated with cultural differences as well as Hall's (1976) and Gesteland's (2003) communication theory (e.g. high- and low-context theory, deal- and relationship-focused concepts, and time perception, etc.). These theories are recognized in the literature, but the novelty and main contribution of this paper are the specifics of the communication between B2B companies which is related to interpersonal communication and relationships between managers working in the companies. New factors such as cultural heritage (e.g. American businessperson whose cultural heritage is Mexican) and age of interlocutors and type of industry were identified as determinants influencing interpersonal communication in the international marketplace. Such circumstances are rarely subjects of scientific studies. Besides, the countries which are taken into account in the research belong to three different cultural dimensions (Gesteland, 2003). The research goal has been translated into three research questions, which are as follows:

- RQ1. Do any differences or similarities in B2B communication across cultures exist?
- RQ2. Which cultural elements are barriers to B2B communication?
- RQ3. Is it possible to indicate any framework of B2B communication that can be applied in particular cultures?

The answer to the first research question is not as obvious as one would think. Many sources indicate that as a result of globalization, business people are “above” cultural differences that exist among regular members of given cultures (Steers *et al.*, 2018).

Emphasizing the novelty of the paper it should be stated that it is three-fold, first, it presents the problems in communication between three culturally diverse countries constituting a cultural and economic bridge (North America-Europe-Asia). The topic's novelty also follows from the fact that the researched countries are in different stages of economic development – the United States belongs to the highly developed countries, Poland is the post-transition economy and China is in the group of emerging markets. Second, the topic of the paper deals with the B2B market but focuses on interpersonal communication and relationships, which is not often analysed in the literature, and third, it focuses on the elements that affect the way of communication such as the cultural heritage of the person and his/her age.

Theoretical background and literature review

Communication theory

One of the first definitions of communication was introduced by Cooley (1909), who underlined that communication is a way to sustain and develop human relations (Fornes *et al.*, 2022). Shannon and Weaver's (1949) classical model of effective communication postulates that the message sent by the sender will be more effective when it meets the needs and preferences of the receiver. While Shannon and Weaver's (1949) effective communication model focuses on the message, McLuhan (1964) emphasizes the importance of the media used in communication. According to him, "the medium is the message", indicating the need to use the media preferred by the receiver (Internet, telephone, TV, etc.).

In this paper, communication is understood as a process of information exchange between persons (Gudykunst *et al.*, 1988; Martin and Nakayama, 2007; Davies *et al.*, 2016). Because of B2B market specifics (information is exchanged and relationships are built among individual people employed in the companies), the communication process involves individuals (representatives of companies) (Dunne, 2017; Fornes *et al.*, 2022) and as such, the paper focuses on interpersonal communication. In other words, the specifics of the B2B market involve companies that are represented by individual managers in communication.

Cultural concepts in communication theories

National culture is a diverse environment of elements that influence people's lives, their behaviour, values, attitudes, etc. (Benedict, 2006). The dimension of cultural traits is associated with a group and national membership (Benedict, 2006; Yaprak, 2008). Cultural factors determine how people talk, build relationships and trust – these elements are the most important issues in the effective communication business process (Thanetsunthorn and Wuthisatian, 2019).

While researching cultural roots it can be accurately predicted how members of a particular society may react to different situations, especially those which are important when establishing cooperation or solving conflicts, etc. Previous studies conducted internationally have distinguished certain cultural dimensions which are particular characteristics of nations. Among the most widespread studies which are applicable in communication and business are Hall's (1976) and Gesteland's (2003).

In communication between individuals coming from different cultures, other than the language, the context should also be a focus. It can be a significant obstacle because it consists of using signs and metaphors which have a certain meaning for a particular culture. Hall (1976) classified cultures in terms of context used in communication into low-context cultures communicating on a low level of context (e.g. Scandinavian countries, Germany, Switzerland) and high-context cultures which communicate on a high level of context (e.g. Japan, China, Arabian and Latin American countries) (Hall and Hall, 2000; Chen *et al.*, 2019).

High-context cultures are characterized by "coding" their messages by using many metaphors or sayings which are very often misinterpreted by the low-context cultures. Their communication is indirect, ambiguous and reserved (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988). Representatives of high-context cultures more often use different kinds of gestures which are sometimes misunderstood by others (Chen *et al.*, 2019). They value trust and relationships among people (including in business). Furthermore, they are more likely to use the concept of "face" which is called in China *mianzi* and means adapting to the rules established by the group, building a reputation in the society and hospitality (Wang *et al.*, 2015; Dobrucali, 2019). "Losing face" by the individual is equal to the embarrassment of the whole group (Hwang, 1987; Wang *et al.*, 2007) and it means losing one's reputation in society.

On contrary, low-context societies apply direct communication, without using a wide array of symbols or sayings which may be understood differently by people representing

different cultures. Context is not necessary for understanding the message, which should consist of a lot of information, arguments and data. When something is unclear they expect direct explanations. According to Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988), low-context communication is precise, direct, open and based on real intentions. From the practical point of view, for low-context cultures “yes” means “yes”, “no” means “no”, etc.

Successful communication usually depends on the purpose of the participants, e.g. to build long cooperation or to conduct only one, short transaction. One of the significant factors which are fundamental to that process is the relationship (Anning-Dorson, 2019; Fornes *et al.*, 2022). From the micro-level perspective, this can be interpreted as interpersonal interactions used for trust-building and good, long cooperation (Williams, 2012; Shaladi, 2012; Thanetsunthorn and Wuthisatian, 2019). The significance of business relationships is culturally ingrained and diversified by the values and norms of people. Despite many theoretical concepts of cultural differences presented in the literature (e.g. Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997), Gesteland’s (2003) framework focuses to the greatest extent on the significance of relationships in business and communication. Because of that he divided cultures into relationship and deal-focused.

Business people from relationship-focused cultures need to build relationships to achieve effective communication (e.g. Asia). They highly value building relationships and trust from the beginning of any cooperation (Anning-Dorson, 2019). For them, the partner is more important than a quick and impersonal business. They do not usually trust new and unknown persons (Thanetsunthorn and Wuthisatian, 2019). That is why there is also a need for a longer time before starting a business, negotiations and getting to know a business partner (Gesteland, 2003).

Deal-focused cultures also value relationships but it is not so important during starting cooperation. The character of the relationships they build is professional rather than personal. They are characterized by task orientation and quick, economically efficient transactions (Anning-Dorson, 2019). There is also a positive attitude to cooperation with unknown companies observed (Gesteland, 2003). They are structured, well organized and attach high importance to time and schedules (e.g. Nordic and German Europe, North America).

Poland, China and the US in the cultural concepts of communication

The cultural theoretical concepts and the examples of particular countries illustrate the world’s differentiation because of ways of communication, directness, values, attitudes, etc. The cultures researched in the paper belong to diverse cultural groups concerning Hall and Gesteland’s frameworks. In other words, cultural distance, which is the degree to which the cultural values are different among countries (Carlos *et al.*, 2008; Wang *et al.*, 2021), is significant in the case of the United States, Poland and China.

According to Hall (1976) the United States belongs to a low-context culture where people say what they think directly. In other words, they communicate in a predominantly explicit way (Martin and Nakayama, 2007). On the opposite side, China is classified as a culture where very little is in the coded and explicit part of the message. Communication consists of other important elements such as non-verbal messages and moments of silence during which individuals show respect for their counterparts (Martin and Nakayama, 2007).

Developing the level of focus on partners and transactions in the United States and China, it should be pointed out that Americans pay attention to time and represent a high level of pro-transaction behaviour. They are concentrated on business, and relationship building probably takes place during the cooperation (Gesteland, 2003; Anning-Dorson, 2019). By contrast, the Chinese tend to be more partnership-focused. This orientation of the Chinese is associated with *guanxi*, which is at the centre of relationship-building in China (Hackley and

Dong, 2001; Niedermeier *et al.*, 2016; Tian, 2016; Jukka *et al.*, 2017; Dobrucali, 2019). *Guanxi* is explained as a “complex cultural construct deeply rooted in China that revolves around the exchange of favours to build trust and deep connections” (Niedermeier *et al.*, 2016, p. 36). The *guanxi* concept regards the relationships between individuals (family members, friends, business partners, etc.), but also between companies (suppliers, deliverers, governments institutions, etc.) which are presented as connections, exchanging information and support among parties who belong to *guanxi* (Chen *et al.*, 2004; Chang *et al.*, 2017; Jukka *et al.*, 2017). The connections achieved by building *guanxi* create significant and strategic advantages for business persons (Hackley and Dong, 2001; Tian, 2016; Dobrucali, 2019).

Poland belongs, in both cultural clusters, to the moderate group. It has to be pointed out that the number of studies describing Polish business culture is limited (Nasierowski and Mikula, 1998). The place of Poland on the cultural map of the world is connected with the historical and political environment and is still present in different generations (X, Y and Z) today. The older generation (X) remembers the times when the communist system existed in Poland and normal people could not directly say what they thought. They masked their true thoughts using synonymous, symbols and different signs which were difficult to understand the communist politicians. The average member of society was relationship-focused toward other persons (neighbours, family, business partners, etc.). They were against the political system and this opposition tied people together. That is why members of the older Polish generations have features of high-context and relationship significance. On the other hand, the younger generations (Y and Z) grew up in a democratic Poland where there was no censorship, they have high access to information and new technologies, learn a lot about the world and other cultures, work in foreign companies and have friends across the world, etc. That means that younger Poles have learned behaviours, values and attitudes from other countries. Those features differ from Polish older generations and are in the direction of low context and deal-focused behaviour. This can be an explanation for placing Poland in the middle of the continuum of the presented dimensions.

Methodological approach

The research methods used in the paper are two-fold: an initial literature analysis is complemented by qualitative primary research conducted in SMEs operating in and doing business internationally. The empirical study focused on one of the qualitative methods available (Bryman, 2012) – IDI. That qualitative approach was used to obtain a detailed description and understanding of the communication process between managers representing different cultures (Craig and Douglas, 2009; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Rashid *et al.*, 2016). To achieve the main aim of the study and to answer the research questions the IDIs were used and took the form of a conversation between the respondent and the researcher, during which questions were asked about how to communicate with a foreign partner from a different culture. The authors actively listened to the responses in which the respondents presented their experiences. In addition, the authors of the study asked additional questions (depending on the respondent, his or her experience and situation) to deepen the knowledge. Such in-depth information is possible to collect mainly through qualitative methods, hence this choice of the study authors.

The study consisted of 18 semi-structured IDIs with managers of ten Polish SMEs from the metallurgical industry before the coronavirus pandemic started (before Spring 2020). Results don't include the possible changes in communication after Covid-19. The authors of this paper were the persons who conducted these interviews within a major project supported by National Science Centre, Poland (grant no. 2015/17/B/HS4/00309). The first research items – 4 Polish companies – were identified while conducting the other primary research within the project mentioned above. During that project's realization, the authors found out that there is a research

problem connected with cross-cultural communication that should be explored and developed. Then the authors prepared a research project with the theoretical background and primary research. It has occurred that there is a research gap in that area that could be covered. The authors contacted the first four companies that took part in the previous research to conduct individual depth interviews. During the first interviews, the Polish managers – representatives of Polish companies informed authors which other companies meet the requirements and may take part in the measurement. The main requirements concerned: (1) SME operating in Poland (Polish origin, but doing business internationally) from the metallurgical industry, (2) cooperating with American or Chinese market/companies. Taking into account the criteria presented above and the companies' recommendations authors applied a snowball sampling (not random). This sampling method is usually used when the population is difficult to identify (Naderifar *et al.*, 2017). In this case, the difficulty was recognizing whether the company was doing business with companies from the United States and China. Finally, the authors conducted 18 semi-structured depth interviews within ten companies. Because of non-random sampling, the results of the whole study cannot be generalized.

The Polish managers, who took part in the IDIs, were those who cooperate with partners from American or Chinese companies; they communicate with Americans or Chinese daily, occasionally meet them in person, and negotiate in English. They usually were working in the Export/Import departments. They belonged to the age range between 32 and 63 years old. The number of managers who took part in the interviews in a particular company depended on its size. In micro-companies (1–9 employees) only one interview was conducted (with the owner), but in small (10–49) and medium (50–249) companies two interviews were conducted. In the SMEs the interviewed persons were owners or managers (while the results are presented the authors use the term “manager” for all) who usually take part in business negotiations with the Chinese or Americans (Table 1). The number of Chinese and American companies the Polish respondents cooperate with is about 5, both from USA and China.

The type of industry was chosen as one of the representatives of the B2B sector, which is highly developed in Poland (Metallurgical Sector in Poland, 2011). Many Polish companies cooperate with foreign representatives concerning selling and buying semi-finished products (Gajdzik, 2013). Polish companies which took part in the study are located in two provinces of Poland: Silesia (6 companies) and Great Poland (GP) (4 companies). Those provinces are areas

No. of company	Province/size (amount of employees)	Country/culture – partner in the cooperation and communication of the study	Company position concerning the foreign partner in the study	The number of IDIs conducted in the company
1	Silesia/10–49	China	Owner and Buyer/importers	Two IDIs
2	Silesia/10–49	China	Owner and Buyer/importer	Two IDIs
3	Silesia/10–49	China	Owner and Buyer/importers	Two IDIs
4	Silesia/10–49	the US	Owner and Seller/exporters	Two IDIs
5	Silesia/50–249	the US	Two Sellers/exporters	Two IDIs
6	Silesia/50–249	the US	Two Sellers/exporters	Two IDIs
7	GP/50–249	the US	Two Sellers/exporters	Two IDIs
8	GP/10–49	China	Owner and Buyer/importer	Two IDIs
9	GP/1–9	China	Owner	One IDI
10	GP/1–9	China	Owner	One IDI

Source(s): Own study

Table 1.
Respondents' profile

where the majority of metallurgical Polish companies are located ([Metallurgical Sector in Poland, 2011](#)). The sample of the research – Polish companies that participated in the study belong to the SME sector ([Table 1](#)) and cooperate as exporters or importers with American and Chinese companies. They were chosen by the criteria of cooperation intensity with those markets. The companies were numbered from 1 to 10 because they did not agree to use their real names, which had to be hidden.

The Chinese companies which cooperate with the Polish ones come from Guangdong and Zhejiang provinces and the American company operates in Tennessee.

Because of the qualitative dimension of the research, it was decided not to form the research hypotheses but rather formulate research questions ([Craig and Douglas, 2009](#)). Based on the literature study and the theoretical concepts used in the project three researches were questions formulated (presented in the Introduction section of the paper). The IDI method allows the use of unstructured, semi-structured or structured (standardized) interviews with open or closed questions during the interview ([Schmidt and Hollensen, 2006](#)). The type of interview conducted in this study was semi-structured with both open and semi-open questions. Semi-open questions were related to the features of companies like size, industry, etc. and open questions were related to the characteristics of communication and other additional aspects appeared during the interviews. The interview questions were derived from the existing literature on communication ([Gudykunst et al., 1988](#)) and cultural differences ([Gesteland, 2012; Hall and Hall, 2000](#)). They were divided into three groups:

- (1) Types of communication (direct: face to face; through different media and devices: e-mails, telephone, skype, instant messengers such as WeChat, WhatsApp, Messenger, etc.);
- (2) Communication context (level of understanding, style of communication, usage of verbal/non-verbal communication, etc.);
- (3) Understanding and communicating through the building of a relationship and trust (what elements are used in communication, e.g. recommendations, the significance of business protocol elements such as business cards, gifts, etc.).

All interviews were conducted by the authors and were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The interviews were held in the offices of the companies and lasted from 50 to 120 min. The data were analysed thematically and presented in thematic groups ([Bryman, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2013](#)).

Results

The findings are presented in the descriptive form with the usage of qualitative data analysis elements, because the results of qualitative research are usually presented in the form of thick description, narration and text, usually citing empirical data abundantly (e.g. fragments of interviews), etc. To confirm the described results, quotes from respondents' statements were used.

The first step of the qualitative analysis was to make a transcript, i.e. writing down the recorded interviews, and transforming the audio materials into text (e.g. who and what was said, in what context, etc.). Transcription also includes an element of analysis, and notation is inevitably selective ([Rapley, 2018](#)). In the next stage, the authors attempted to code, i.e. assign labels/themes to certain fragments of data, then search for common elements and group these topics into descriptive categories, and then – “combine” descriptive categories into higher-order – analytical categories, and then in schemes or typologies (when it is possible to indicate relations). The results are grouped, by culture, and, secondly by three key themes: types of communication, the significance of context in communication and understanding, and communication through the building of relationships and trust.

Communication with the American business partner

The results of the interviews indicate that there are not many communication problems and cultural barriers in between Poles and Americans (the American participants were Americans with English as a first language.) All Polish companies were sellers/exporters in that cooperation. That said, some of the Polish managers underlined that Americans are very direct: “They usually say what they think and sometimes it is rude for me. Sometimes I suppose that they didn’t think what they said [. . .]. In Poland, we tend to try not to criticize a business partner during the first meeting; even if we think so, we don’t say anything. I don’t know, maybe it’s unique to that branch. They are usually men, who work in the metallurgical companies, maybe it influences [. . .]” (Company 4).

All Polish respondents emphasized that it is easy to communicate with Americans using different devices and that there was no need to meet face-to-face and discuss important issues. Some of them indicated that “telephone, e-mail and skype” are the most useful tools (Company 4, 5 and 6). Others also pointed out the significance of Internet communication in cooperation with Americans. In their opinion:

[. . .] Americans are willing to use the newest solutions in business communication. It’s normal for them to write a message on Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp. They don’t have to meet and talk to arrange many things and solve some easy problems. I think maybe it is because of time differences and our good relations. Maybe [. . .] sometimes I have received a message from my American business partner when I’m at home and it’s after work. He knows about it and the fastest way to get a response is Messenger, not e-mail. Generally, they (Americans) don’t have a problem with using such devices [. . .] (Company 7).

However, some of the Polish respondents indicated that there are differences between Americans because of their cultural background, for example, Latin American or Asian.

[. . .] I have some American business partners whose families come from Mexico or Guatemala. They were born in the US, and work in the American system, but they have many features of Latin American, e.g. they are more time flexible, like to talk a lot, and are not only focused on business during our conversations (usually via Skype) [. . .]. Americans are rather concentrated on business, when they call you about business, they talk about business, not families and their private lives. [. . .] (Company 4).

The majority of Polish respondents also pointed to the fact that it is easy to communicate in English with Americans because of their understanding. “They are really happy that I speak English, even if I make some grammar mistakes or forget some words [. . .]. It is really nice from their side [. . .].” (Company 5). Some of the managers pointed out that it is easier to communicate in English with Americans of Latin or Asian origin, because “they also speak English with their native accent [. . .], and it is easier for me to understand them well. [. . .] Sometimes they also speak a little bit slower than others” (Company 4).

Concerning communication style, all the Polish representatives agreed that the American style is similar to the Polish. They underlined that Americans use “direct words” (Company 4) and a moderate tone of voice. They try not to show emotion because “[. . .] probably it is not professional in their opinion [. . .]” (Company 6). Poles indicated that American business partners do not use many gestures. “[. . .] Body language? No, I’d say no . . . I haven’t noticed such behaviour in many situations. It was normal, so probably similar to my behaviour, that’s why I didn’t concentrate on it [. . .]” (Company 5).

But, some differences in non-verbal language were noticed, and which were connected again with the cultural origin of the American partners.

[. . .] When it comes to body language I can say that there are differences [. . .], but they are associated with the cultural heritage of people. Latinos/as are more talkative (during face-to-face meetings as well as telephone calls). They ask you about all members of your family first and then about the issue

they call [. . .]. But it is nice, I personally like such behaviour. [. . .] I don't mind if they gesticulate more or just clap my shoulders. It is a gesture of friendship for me, isn't it? [. . .] I have already gotten used to such gestures; at the beginning, I had some strange feelings, but now it's ok [. . .]. Asians are shyer and more focused on the problem. Personally, I prefer to look into the eyes of my partner in communication. [. . .] What about native Americans? [. . .] Well, I didn't notice, so probably they are similar to Polish culture [. . .] (Company 4).

More than half of the Polish managers cooperating with Americans (three) underlined the significance of relationships during business communication with Americans. But firstly, they were asked what a relationship in business is and their answers focused on different aspects: “[. . .] a relationship is the situation in which I can rely on my business partner and believe that if he/she says yes, it will be yes [. . .]. It means that I can trust them [. . .]” (Company 4). The manager from Company 7 indicated that for him “a relationship is just doing business and cooperation”. The salesperson from Company 5 also pointed out that “Americans are usually eager to communicate with new and unknown companies [. . .]. They don't have problems with that when I write an initial e-mail and introduce myself that way. This is the first stage of building a relationship [. . .]”.

Trust and relationships were underlined as important factors by all Polish managers communicating with Americans, but a majority of them also indicated that it is not important at the initial stages of business. One of them said:

[. . .] Trust? Trust is important everywhere, but with a different level of significance [. . .]. From my experience with Americans, when I start business dealings, they always insure all transactions. This insurance is treated as a trust for them when they don't know their partner. I have had such situations; the first, second and third transactions were insured. [. . .] Now, not every transaction is insured . . . We know each other personally and trust each other (Company 5).

One of the small Polish companies also underlined that they used to use recommendations when starting a business in the United States. However, the rest of the companies explained that the best way to begin business relationships is participation in international fairs, where managers can meet and talk for a while (Company 5). One indicated:

[. . .] The best option for finding a potential business partner is to spend money on participating in some international metallurgic trade fairs [. . .]. When you meet, talk and then contact a particular person you are not an unknown person when you telephone or write [. . .]. There are many such events in Germany (Cologne, Düsseldorf, Hannover), where my company meets new partners [. . .] (Company 6).

All companies were asked about the elements of the business protocol in their cooperation with American business partners. All of them indicated that Americans are informal and do not use business etiquette so much. A manager from Company 7 indicated that:

[. . .] Americans are professionals, but they are not very structured. [. . .] Sometimes they leave things to solve themselves. And, what is interesting [. . .] it works. They don't usually pay attention to clothes, gifts or other such things.

During the summarizing and identification of the factors which influence the behaviour, values and attitudes of an American business partner, three Polish companies underlined culture in addition to age and the type of industry:

[. . .] The way they do business is certainly influenced by cultural factors, as I mentioned before. Doing business with a Mexican native and an American native requires different behaviours [. . .]” (Company 7). “Their (Americans) attitude to new companies is also related to the age of people, young Americans are quite open and don't have a problem doing business with small companies from Central Europe [. . .]” (Company 4). “[. . .] The way we communicate with Americans is mainly associated with the type of industry [. . .]. There are many men in that branch, so we are sometimes very direct and informal [. . .]” (Company 5).

Communication with Chinese business partner

Six out of ten Polish companies participating in the study imported products from China (all of them were buyers/importers in cooperation with the Chinese). All of them underlined the significance of cultural differences in communication with Chinese business partners. They especially indicated the way of communication which was described as: “masked” (Company 1), “with many understatements” (Company 2), “indirect” (Company 3), “gentle” (Company 8), “very specific” (Company 9) and “[. . .] with hidden thoughts” (Company 10). One of the Polish managers explained that indirect communication and the way of showing emotions is probably associated with the concept of the face which is called *mianzi* in China:

[. . .] Chinese are very gentle and kind businessmen, they don't show their negative emotions in public, which is for me, personally, an indication of professionalism. [. . .] One can notice such behaviour, especially in communication with older people (above 50 years old). [. . .] Younger Chinese businessmen don't have a problem with being direct and just focusing on business. Older ones focus more on the person and trust [. . .] (Company 3).

All the Polish representatives indicated that the best way to start cooperation with the Chinese is to meet first and talk exchange, and gather information about the company, its workers, products and market position (the metallurgic industry is quite small, so it is easy to identify a particular company). Some of the Polish companies (Company 9 and 10) underlined that the best way to start a business (for a small company, as they are) with a Chinese company is, firstly, to participate in international fairs (e.g. as a visitor, not necessarily as an exhibitor), and secondly, to participate in business missions organized by governmental or private institutions. “[. . .] During our visit to Guangdong province we visited lots of companies we were interested in [. . .]. Now, we buy metal bars from some of them, which are transported in containers by ships or by train (more expensive but quicker than the ship) [. . .]” (Company 9).

Business negotiations among Chinese and Polish representatives are usually conducted in English, because of the great differences between Polish and Chinese. “When you speak Chinese or you have somebody in your company who speaks that language, take him/her to be one of the members of the negotiation group [. . .]. The Chinese really appreciate it [. . .] they treat it as showing respect to them. It is important. It is also a kind of relationship and trust-building. Besides, it may be associated with the fact that the Chinese are very proud of their language and culture” (Company 3).

The necessity of face-to-face communication and meeting with the Chinese was underlined by all Polish companies. However, five of them additionally indicated the use of Internet tools. Some managers highlighted the significance of writing e-mails and short messages via the Internet.

[. . .] The young generation of Chinese businessmen is fascinated by the use of instant messengers. #Facebook Messenger, which I usually use, is limited in China. That's I have installed WeChat, a very useful tool that I use for contact with my Chinese partners. [. . .] Of course, not all Chinese are eager to communicate with foreigners that way, but young people are [. . .]. The older generation prefers to talk face-to-face or write e-mails (Company 8).

Polish managers indicated the fact that it is easier to negotiate with the Chinese (and achieve a goal) in a group (not alone). They underlined that a group of negotiators have a higher regard for Chinese business than individuals. One manager added “[. . .] when I was first in China I didn't realize that functioning in groups can be so useful and successful. I was alone and they felt that my position, as a business partner, was worse. I have never gone to China alone again [. . .]” (Company 2).

Personal communication is also related to non-verbal language usage. “Be careful with body language in China [. . .]. Less is better” – the manager from Company 8 highlighted this

during the interview. “Generally the Chinese have many gestures which we don’t know and when we use them we could offend somebody [...]” (Company 2). “It is strange but they usually don’t look you in the eye. In Poland, this is not ok. Sometimes you have to look into your partner’s eyes. In my opinion, when people lie they don’t look into the eyes of their partner in communication. [...] But I know, I know that we are different cultures and I respect it [...]” (Company 9).

The respondents were also asked about business protocol issues. They underlined that elements such as business gifts, business cards, titles and others are important, but:

[...] they were even more important about 5 years ago. [...] Now, maybe because of the generational change, the situation is a little bit different. They don’t put so much emphasis on the ritual of exchanging or using their surnames. Chinese business partners often adapt (change) their first names into Anglicized ones to be better identified and remembered [...]. Of course, it is done only for the period of staying abroad (e.g. when they come to Poland or during international fairs). It is really very useful for me to recognize and talk to my Chinese partner. Their names are so difficult for me [...]. (Company 2).

Three of the companies participating in the research said that they always buy gifts for their Chinese business partners. One of them indicated that he usually prepares something typical for Poland (Company 8), whilst the manager from Company 10 said that he always looks for something special, because the Chinese appreciate gifts which are specially prepared for them. One of the managers also pointed out that:

[...] You should be careful when preparing gifts for the Chinese. It is a very sensitive and symbolic culture. It is very easy to offend somebody. And you will probably never find out that you offended somebody, but your relationships will be “colder” [...]. Once I was trying to give a gift at the end of my visit and I was surprised because my partner didn’t want to accept [...]. I didn’t know what to do but I, fortunately, asked again [...]. He accepted [...]. Finally, turned out that this is normal Chinese behaviour. They refuse verbally, but inside they would like to have it. You should even ask three times [...]. (Company 1).

The Polish managers who indicated the usage of business protocol underlined that such behaviour strengthens relationships and leads to better results in the future. The necessity of building relationships in China was not indicated by all the research participants, but some of them stated that China is a culture where a person’s value is considered important. The managers who highlighted such values have cooperated with the Chinese for more than 8 years.

[...] In China, everybody has her or his *guanxi*, which can be interpreted by people from western countries as a network of business partners, but in practice, it is a network of informal relations I have with my partner. [...] In the beginning, it was difficult for me to understand that “system” but now I’m convinced of its importance [...]. (Company 2).

In the opinion of another respondent:

[...] *guanxi* is a way of building social interactions with partners, companies with their suppliers, deliverers and other institutions. [...] I have since found out that *guanxi* is rooted in Confucian thought [...]. (Company 3).

There are also some other aspects described by individual managers, which in their opinion were worthy of mention: “don’t criticize in public [...]”. It will bring bad luck and loss of *mianzi*” (Company 1); “don’t ostentatiously introduce your lawyer – if you bring them with you for negotiations with Chinese. [...] they can interpret such behaviour as a lack of trust” (Company 10), “[...] you have to be patient and culturally sensitive when you want to do business with Chinese [...]” (Company 9).

Discussion

The theoretical concept of cross-cultural communication shows the differences which exist among cultures (Gudykunst *et al.*, 1988; Hall and Hall, 2000; Gesteland, 2012). The results of the primary study helped answer all the research questions. They identified both similarities and differences between cultures concerning the cross-cultural communication theories of Hall (1976) and Gesteland (2012).

The IDI conducted with Polish B2B managers cooperating with American and Chinese partners showed many differences in the communication forms and values among those cultures. The identified differences indicate a considerable overlap with existing theories, but also show new aspects which are associated with the personalities, age and even cultural heritage of business people. The results indicate the changes in many areas (e.g. different attitudes because of age and the influence of digital media in communication) which could shape cross-cultural communication in the future. These results are in line with the achievements of Abugre (2018) who underlined that there is a need for appreciation of the cross-cultural differences in context-related modes of communication between managers belonging to different cultures.

The strongest differences identified in the primary research refer to the communication style and method of contacting a business partner (RQ1) (Tables 2 and 3). For example, American companies are focused on business, whereas Chinese companies place a high value on relationships and mutual trust. They have to trust a business partner before finalizing transactions. The results of Fomes *et al.* (2022) also proved that informal relationships are significant in the development of companies in the international marketplace (evidence from China and Brazil). In turn, Americans say that trust is important, but they can take out insurance in case something goes wrong. Those results support Hall's context communication theory, according to which the Chinese belong to a high-context and Americans to a low-context culture (Hall, 1976). Nevertheless, some participants indicated that the behaviour depends on age and cultural roots. Younger managers are more eager to adapt to other cultures and assimilate with them (especially when it comes to the younger generations of Chinese). They adapt to be more easily understood by western countries. Concerning the differences and similarities in communication between countries, its types and tools should be mentioned. According to both cultural groups, the tools of new media such as instant messengers (e.g. Facebook Messenger, WeChat) are used to share information quickly. These results are in line with the achievements of Kumar and Sharma (2022). Nevertheless, the Polish managers underlined that F2F communication is the best tool to build relationships and trust.

Despite the examples of adaptations, of which many have already been diagnosed and described in the literature (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2019; Dheera-aumpon and Changwatchai, 2020), the traditional behaviours of both Americans and Chinese recognized which occurred strong difficulties in communication (RQ2). The Polish managers who were interviewed underlined that indirect communication (e.g. the Chinese do not often state negative opinions in public, and do not use the word "no"), limited facial expressions and indirect eye contact were difficulties in communication with the Chinese. This corresponds to results achieved and described by other authors as the *mianzi* concept (e.g. Hwang, 1987; Hwang and Hu, 2004; Wang *et al.*, 2007). The results of the study conducted by Szkudlarek *et al.* (2020) also indicated that the face concept, indirect communication and non-verbal expressions may cause many difficulties and misunderstandings in communications with Asians. By contrast, Americans were direct, more critical and business-focused, the features both identified by Hall and Gesteland. Such results were also achieved by Zhu and Bresnahan (2022) while studying the behaviour and reactions of Chinese and American students for criticism and group cooperation.

Some differences were also identified in the area of a relationship's significance. Generally, the results confirm the theoretical cultural models of Hall (1976), Gesteland (2003) and other authors (e.g. Hackley and Dong, 2001; Niedermeier *et al.*, 2016; Anning-Dorson, 2019; Fornes

Table 2.
Communication with
Americans – research
sum up

The elements of communication		Ease of using the tools for remote communication		Emphasizing the importance of the cultural background of American partners		Significance of communication in English		Significance of relationships during business communication		Small use of business protocol		The influence of age and type of industry on communication	
No. of company	The direct style of communication, deal-focused	Ease of using the tools for remote communication		Emphasizing the importance of the cultural background of American partners		Significance of communication in English		Significance of relationships during business communication		Small use of business protocol		The influence of age and type of industry on communication	
4	X	X		X		X		X		X		X	
5	X	X				X		X		X		X	
6	X	X		X						X		X	
7	X	X		X				X		X		X	

Note(s): X – the feature mentioned by the representatives of the company
Source(s): Own study

The elements of communication									
No. of company	The indirect style of communication, partnership-focused	The importance of F2F at the beginning of cooperation	Internet tools in communication but Chinese are preferred	English in communication but Chinese is welcome	Significance of relationships during business communication	High use of business protocol	Importance of non-verbal language	The influence of age and type of industry on communication	
1	X	X		X	X	X	X		
2	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
3	X	X	X	X	X		X		
8	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
9	X	X			X		X		
10	X	X			X	X	X	X	

Note(s): X – the feature mentioned by the representatives of the company
Source(s): Own study

Table 3.
Communication with
Chinese – research
sum up

et al., 2022). Nevertheless, some derogations were indicated. They are strongly connected with the age, type of business and cultural heritage (e.g. Latin or Asian in American society). Younger Asians do not place so much attention on building relationships at first and then start talking about business. Everywhere, the prevailing understanding of a successful business result is a contract and profit.

Using the results from the primary research, a conceptual framework (RQ3) for effective communication with the Chinese and Americans is offered (Figures 1 and 2), to help guide future research and applications.

Polish managers indicated many behaviours and values of both Chinese and American business partners which were already illustrated in the literature and research of other authors (e.g. *Szkudlarek et al., 2020; Fornes et al., 2022; Zhu and Bresnahan, 2022*). Despite the similarities, some new issues should be highlighted. The Polish managers underlined the behaviours of business partners based on age. Such an opinion appeared especially concerning Chinese managers. Older Chinese partners follow traditional and conservative values and ways of communication to a greater extent, whereas the younger generations are more influenced by “international” patterns.

The second new issue that appeared in the primary research is connected with the type of industry. Some of the managers underlined that many behaviours can be impacted by the type of business. They pointed out that the uniqueness of the metallurgical industry (e.g. mostly individual communication, male-dominated workforce) could influence particular behaviours. The third new issue indicated in the research was the cultural heritage of American businesspeople. Polish managers highlighted a strong differentiation among Americans because of this and the influences of Latin culture in the behaviour of Americans of Mexican origin were noticed. It should point out that those elements are not widely recognized both in the literature and research.

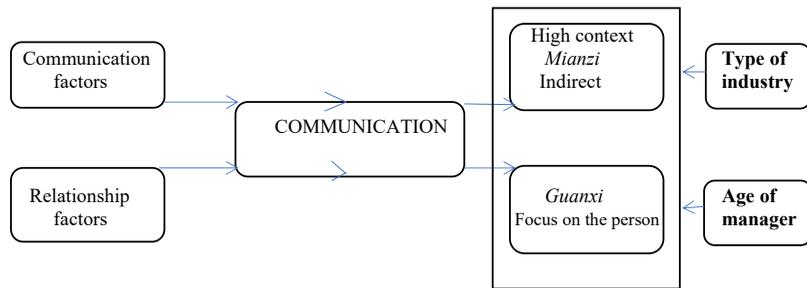


Figure 1.
Cultural factors of effective communication in China

Source(s): Own study

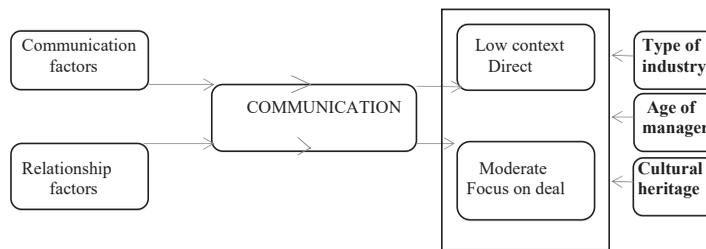


Figure 2.
Cultural factors of effective communication in the United States

Source(s): Own study

Conclusions

Communication across cultures plays a significant role to achieve success in the international marketplace. The paper presents the existence of cultural traits which are recognized both in the theories (Hall and Hall, 2000; Hofstede, 1991; Gesteland, 2003; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997) and practice (e.g. Chen *et al.*, 2019; Zhang and Du, 2020; Szkudlarek *et al.*, 2020). The results of primary research show both similarities and differences in the communication of Poles managers from the B2B industry with Americans and Chinese. Some elements help to achieve effective communication identified. Moreover, the accomplishments of the empirical study also indicate some new theoretical contributions that can be used to establish a conceptual framework that may be used in further research in the future. Taking into account all the above one may state that the main aim formulated in the paper was achieved.

Theoretical implications

The main theoretical contribution of the study is the fact that not only cultural traits are the elements impacting success in cross-cultural communication but also there are other factors impacting this process. It is especially important in globalization times where cultural differences overlap, and people are migrating more and more, whether for economic (e.g. seeking better jobs abroad and higher wages), political, educational or religious purposes. This situation means that even in hitherto culturally homogeneous countries, representatives of different cultures are increasingly coming together. The results of the study provide knowledge that the importance of cultural factors (in terms of a person's belonging to a particular culture/country) is also determined by age and cultural heritage of a person (e.g. person born in United States, but her/his family originates from China). These variables may be used to expand the measurement and use them, firstly, to formulate the research hypotheses, and secondly, to verify them using other research methods. The results of the study pointed out that the type of communication is also conditioned by the industry's specifics. The companies from metallurgical industry may have specific traits and jargon both in organizational structure, communication and relationship building. Concluding, the type of business, age, and cultural origin of managers can be the variables that influence the type and features of communication and the conducting of business.

The next theoretical contribution is a trial of developing a communication framework influenced by cultural factors. There were two frameworks presented with small adaptations to American and Chinese culture (based on the empirical findings). These findings related to the conceptual frameworks can be the beginning of further research where quantitative methods could be used for correlating communicative aspects with these new variables in the form of age, cultural heritage and type of industry. In other words, the formulated frameworks can be a launchpad for quantitative and representative measurements.

Managerial implications

The results of the study may have useful managerial application value and be used in cooperation between SMEs' B2B business partners not only from Poland but also from the whole region of Central and Eastern Europe and the United States and China. The findings provide an understanding of the different behaviours and modes of communication not only between different cultures but also within the same culture, such as due to the different ethnic backgrounds of business partners in the United States. In addition, the non-schematic behaviour and reactions of people in some of the countries studied are in fact due to factors such as age. For example, young Chinese people have many similar reactions and behaviours to partners from Western countries. The results of the study will also help improve communication, as they indicate certain behaviours that are specific to the indicated culture,

such as mianzi and guanxi in China. These are aspects whose understanding is the basis for effective communication and business success. But also, the findings may help business managers to understand the behaviour of their subordinates who come from other cultures.

In other words, the results of the research can contribute to improving intercultural competence among managers, which can translate into better results of cooperation with a foreign partner resulting from good communication. A low level of cultural competence leads to problems in individual communication and the functioning of multicultural teams. Indeed, among the factors that most often hinder communication in multicultural relations are different communication styles.

Social implications

With regard to social implications, it should be noted that the results of the presented study help to understand the behaviour of other nations, the ways they communicate, their values, etc. This is important in the context of the development of globalization and internationalization, the mobility of the population (as mentioned above), as well as the development of cooperation in the international arena. Many people change their place of residence, e.g. for education or income purposes, hence we increasingly have to deal with working in cross-cultural teams, groups of students, etc. where respect and understanding of cultural differences is extremely important and are the key to success.

Limitations and future research

The main limitations of the study are connected with the possibility of the generalization of the results. The results show the experiences of Polish managers in communicating with Chinese and American business partners. So, the results present the Polish managers' perceptions of the cultural influences on communication. The additional research could be conducted in other countries that are culturally diverse in order to show the similarities of the differences both in relation to the theories used in presented study and the results achieved.

The next limitation may regard the type of method and the analysis applied. The results of qualitative research are usually not quantified, i.e. the analysis does not consist in calculating correlations, making statistics or presenting in the form of diagrams (Pickard, 2007). In line with this goes another limitation related to the number of Polish companies involved in the primary study (only 10 companies and 18 interviews). That is why future research should be concentrated on quantitative data to check if the identified variables are statistically significant and correlate to the types of communication with culturally differentiated managers.

The final limitation is associated with the type of industry, which is specific both in the character of the product and the method of negotiating. The research participants also pointed out that these companies were male-dominated. Together, these factors can have a significant impact on the approach and type of communication. This notwithstanding, research limitations are very often a stimulus to either continue the study or expand it.

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