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A Cross Cultural Study of Communication Strategies for Building Business Relationships

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ABSTRACT This study aims to explore communication strategies for relationship building across cultures from a linguistic as well as a culture-specific perspective. Specifically, it sees business relationships as part of social capital and compares communication strategies used to build relationships in sales firms. The research method is based on a discourse analysis of interviews with business managers, which also incorporates their success stories. In the analysis, relationship building is divided into two stages: the initiating stage and the maintaining stage. It has been found that more interpersonal strategies have been employed by Chinese and Indian business managers when initiating a business relationship. In contrast, the New Zealand and South African managers tend to use more impersonal communication strategies to promote public relations. Similar interpersonal communication strategies are employed in all the target cultures for maintaining relationships. However, a stronger orientation for long-term relationships in the Chinese and Indian cultures has been identified. Furthermore, the communication strategies are dynamic in all the countries investigated since they are becoming more and more multicultural and increasingly globalized in international business and management.

KEY WORDS • communication strategies • cultural dynamics • impersonal • interpersonal • social capital • success stories
Extensive research has been done in business relationship building, in particular in the area of marketing relationship (e.g. Arias, 1998; Dwyer et al., 1987). The marketing relationship is often used as a universal concept in the study of business relationship-building, such as with guanxi (connections) (Arias, 1998). In today’s world of globalization and internationalization of businesses, the marketing relationship is becoming increasingly important as a means to meet the marketing needs of sales firms. However, when it comes to establishing specific business relationships in a particular culture, business people can resort to their own cultural values and communication strategies, which may go beyond the area of marketing to include broader social dimensions. Social capital theory (e.g. Lin, 2001) can be of relevance for exploring these social dimensions and relevant communication strategies. Existing literature, however, has given little attention to exploring specific communication strategies for establishing business relationships, and even less has been done from a culture-specific perspective. Intercultural dimensions such as proposed by Hofstede (1991) and Hall (1976) may shed light on the understanding of different communication strategies used to establish business relationships. For example, Grosse (2002) made an attempt to explore relationship building in relation to communication strategies. She mainly used intercultural dimensions to compare American and Latin American cultures, but these cultural dimensions tend to have the presumption that all cultures can be categorized by these kinds of polarized differences, thus ignoring the specific communication strategies each culture employs.

This study attempts to go beyond these limits and employ both intercultural dimensions and culture-specific perspectives to compare communication strategies for building business relationships across New Zealand, Chinese, Indian and South African cultures. These four cultures are chosen for analysis for the following reasons. First, New Zealand is located in the Asian Pacific region, along with China and India, and is also developing close international trade ties with countries in this region and this kind of frequent contact requires further understanding of each other’s culture. Second, New Zealand has a significant proportion of immigrants from China, India and South Africa, and comparing and understanding these cultures will shed light on a better understanding between these cultures. Third, South African culture is included here since it may share some similarities with the New Zealand culture as a multicultural society and it would be insightful to explore the dynamics and implications for relationship building in a rapidly changing world. Last but not least, there is a personal reason to compare these cultures: each of the authors comes from one of these cultures and all have lived in New Zealand for at least five years.

Specifically these research questions are proposed:

- What does ‘business relationship’ mean across cultures?
- What specific communication strategies does each of the target cultures employ to initiate business relationships?
- What specific communication strategies does each of the target cultures employ to further develop and maintain business relationships?

In order to answer these questions, the article first provides some background information about each of the target cultures. Second, it develops a conceptual framework based on social capital and intercultural communication. A particular culture-specific dimension of exploring the semantics of relationship building is recommended to complement these dimensions. The research method is based on both interviews with business managers and genre analysis of their success stories. The research method section details the data of success stories collected from busi-
ness executives. The fourth section discusses findings on how these managers, who are also the main characters of the success stories, have specifically applied the communication strategies to initiate and maintain relationships. The article concludes with findings on the differences between New Zealand and China, and the implications for understanding the dynamics of relationship building.

**Conceptual Framework**

This section develops a conceptual framework for studying communication strategies of business-relationship building. The discussion also incorporates a culture-specific dimension. According to Bond et al. (2001), it is imperative to have a dual perspective for comparing cultures.

**Relationship Marketing**

Relationship marketing (Buchanan and Gilles, 1990; Gordon, 1999; Levitt, 1983) is a form of marketing with a strong emphasis on building business relationships with customers, and it is also a further development of marketing, which mainly concentrated on individual transactions previously. It also sees marketing as a pervasive approach for doing business and has the potential to form a synthesis between quality management, customer service management and marketing. Business relationships are often interpreted as a business construct in the light of marketing relationships (e.g. Arias, 1998; Li and Wright, 2000; Yau et al., 2000), which may well reflect the importance of business orientation in the global economy. Other researchers also have made attempts to apply relationship marketing as a universal approach for studying guanxi – a controversial issue we will come back to later. In spite of its popularity and its broader focus than traditional marketing, relationship marketing still functions in the marketing domain and has marketing as its core orientation. This limitation indicates that relationship marketing may not be an appropriate approach for studying customer or business relationships that go beyond the domain of marketing. Thus it is essential to examine business relationship from an even broader perspective, hence the introduction of the concept of social capital.

**Social Capital: Relationship Building as a Social Construct**

According to Lin (2001: 19), social capital is ‘investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace’. Social capital is interpreted here as a social asset by virtue of people’s connections in the group of which they are a member.

Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) define social capital as the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit. Putnam (1995: 67) states that social capital represents a social organization’s ‘networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1986) points out that social capital is composed of social obligations and connections and is linked to possession of a durable network of institutionalized relationships. All these definitions incorporate the concept of ‘network’. A network can be understood as firms involved in a long-term relationship, and network relations are also closer and longer term than market relations (Thorelli, 1986: 37), and are likely to facilitate greater information density and a more reliable information exchange than markets do (Easton, 1992).

Another relevant concept to network relations is relational capital (Bontis, 1998, 1999; Bontis and Choo, 2002; Ordóñez de Pablos, 2002, 2005), which is also a subset of social capital. Relational capital extends the definition of relationship marketing or customer capital by including both sides of the value chain (Ordóñez de Pablos, 2005).
Relational capital is thus a broader term that encompasses these two types of values: the value of customer relationships and the value of relationships with shareholders, governments, and partners of strategic alliances. In this way, human capital provides a matrix of relationship-building networks. This can be another valid reason to show why the marketing relationship alone cannot explain all the business network relationships.

In light of the social capital theory, business relationships should be seen as a social construct since they contribute to the formation of networks or group of memberships. In addition, social capital also offers a potential link to communication strategies in the area regarding the way business network relationships are specifically established and maintained in each culture, hence the need to introduce communication strategies and intercultural dimensions.

**Communication Strategies and Culture**

This section reviews literature in the area of interpersonal communication strategies since networks and business relationships are built through appropriate use of these strategies (Adler et al., 2005; Bolton, 1986; Car Hijio et al., 2005). According to Adler et al. (2005), interpersonal communication is characterized by a high level of personal commitment, while impersonal communication represents a clear detachment from personal feelings and involvement. The important dimensions to differentiate interpersonal from impersonal communication include uniqueness, replaceability, interdependence, self-disclosure and intrinsic rewards. In interpersonal communication, one tends to use strategies that are unique and irreplaceable to the interactant. A high level of self-disclosure, such as personal feelings, is also frequently involved in interpersonal communication. An additional feature of interpersonal communication is that it tends to target intrinsic rewards and long-term relationships. The opposite is true of impersonal communication in all the dimensions just mentioned.

These communication strategies can also be seen as related to the intercultural dimensions, and people in different cultures resort to different types of communication strategies for building business relationships and developing social and relational capital. Specifically these intercultural taxonomies are seen as relevant: Hofstede’s (1991) power distance and individualism/collectivism, and Hall’s (1976) high context and low context. These dimensions are chosen because they can reflect the networking patterns as shown in their definitions. According to Hofstede, power distance (1991) reflects a culture’s attitude towards human inequality. Cultures differ in the extent to which they view social status inequality and prefer particular value orientations regarding the importance of status difference and social hierarchies. Hofstede also divides cultures into a continuum of individualism and collectivism, and this dimension reflects the extent to which a culture relies on and has allegiance to the self or the group. Typical examples of individualistic cultures are the USA, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Scandinavia, Britain and Germany. Typical examples of collectivistic cultures are China, India, Japan, Korea, Brazil and Egypt (Gudykunst, 1994; Singer, 1998).

Hall’s (1976) low- and high-context cultures are a very important dimension for studying communication strategies. Low-context cultures tend to communicate in a direct fashion, whereas high-context cultures tend to function in an indirect fashion (Gudykunst and Kim, 1997; Samovar and Porter, 1991). In addition, Hall also points to the polychronic nature of high-context communication, which is easily interrupted, whereas low-context communication is characterized by monochronic styles.

It can be inferred that there is a close link between the use of communication strategies and intercultural dimensions. For example,
in more power-oriented cultures such as India and China, people need to apply unique and irreplaceable communication strategies to deal with specific relationships relating to power influence when building business relationships. Cultures that exhibit less power distance and strong egalitarianism, such as New Zealand and South Africa, tend to apply more egalitarian and replaceable communication strategies since they tend to treat everyone as of equal status.

Furthermore, similar inference extends to other cultural dimensions. In collectivist cultures people tend to exhibit more self-disclosure and use interdependent communication strategies, since group members tend to share their feelings and thoughts with each other. People from individualistic cultures tend to have a lower level of self-disclosure and to view themselves as an independent entity for promoting business relationships, such as those shown in marketing relationships. Accordingly, these two types of culture also tend to stress different goals in their communication behaviours. Collectivist cultures may target both tangible and intrinsic goals for business-relationship building. In contrast, individualistic cultures target mainly tangible goals such as business transactions and product promotion in relationship marketing. This tendency is also in congruence with Hall’s (1983) concepts of monochronic and polychronic dimensions. If cultures tend to achieve intrinsic goals in addition to business transactions in the process of building business relationships, they are likely to be polychronic, which means they focus on achieving multiple goals and performing more than one task at a time. This discussion is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 represents a comparison across the four target cultures of possible ways of developing business networks and relationships. However, it is only a static representation of the interrelatedness of communication strategies and culture and at least two dimensions are missing: culture-specific semantics and the dynamics of relationship development. Only relational and social capital theory can help develop these two dimensions.

On the one hand, it is essential to explore the meanings of relationship building shared among the members of the professional culture – the business managers as in this study.
In fact, the culture-specific ‘semantics’ refers to the particular definitions each culture tends to offer. Take *guanxi* as an example. *Guanxi* can be interpreted in more depth in the light of Fei’s (1985) work on the Chinese networking system as part of social capital. According to Fei, Chinese culture is composed of a series of concentric circles with ‘I’ and ‘family’ placed at the centre. Subsequent circles that surround this core circle are composed of siblings, classmates and friends. Therefore group membership is the key to relationship building and in order to achieve this, one has to locate oneself somewhere inside the circles.

On the other hand, social capital theory also stresses the long-term investment in relational networking as a kind of resource for members to have access to. An investigation into communication patterns in each of the development stages will help in understanding the dynamics of networking patterns. Communication strategies should not be seen as something static, even within a particular culture. Instead they should be seen as context-related and stage-based in the interpersonal communication processes.

The ‘dynamics of relationships’ therefore specifically alludes to the stages of a particular business relationship, including the initiating stage and the maintaining stage. According to social capital theory, social networks can be maintained for long-term purposes. Therefore, it is essential to examine the use of communication strategies for each stage across cultures. In light of social capital theory, this article proposes the following dimensions to complement the study of communication strategies:

- Defining business-relationship building from a culture-specific perspective
- Exploring the communication strategies in two stages: the initiating stage and the maintaining stage.

**Methodology**

The data are drawn and updated from open-ended interviews with business executives of all the target cultures. Fifteen business managers from each culture were interviewed, making a total of 60 across the four cultures. For each country, the interviews were conducted in between two and three major cities. Only European New Zealanders and European South African cultures were included in the discussion. However, we were very much aware of the changing face of the countries, which probably deserves another topic of discussion. The interview results and the managers’ success stories were transcribed. The interview questions were composed of three sections in light of the dimensions proposed in the conceptual framework. The managers were first asked to define relationship building in their own language, and then their views on the communication strategies in each of the relationship-building processes were solicited. As a third task, the managers were invited to provide a success story about how they initiated and maintained a successful business relationship. Altogether 15 success stories were collected from each culture, which again makes the total of 60.

Both interview results and success stories are analysed using the proposed conceptual framework. The units for analysing the stories were based on social interactions embedded in the story and the genre approach is used to identify the interactions. According to Orlikowski and Yates (1994), genre is characterized by its purpose, form and content, which are often used as criteria for identifying organizational genres such as stories and business documents (Louhiala-Salminen, 1997; Zhu, 2005). Both purpose and content are seen as the major areas for understanding the success stories. Content can be analysed in the idea unit of moves. A move is a communicative event which also refers to the strategies used in a text, and
form refers to the linguistic features of realizing the moves and purposes (Zhu, 2005). Specifically, the following purposes and moves are seen as essential for analysis:

- **Purposes**: Promoting business initiatives vs. establishing other types of relationships such as friendship.
- **Initiating moves**: Communication strategies for initiating relationships.
- **Maintaining moves**: Communication strategies to further develop and maintain relationships.
- **End-result moves**: Long-term vs. short-term relationships.

In this way, the focus of analysis is placed on the purposes and content. This focus is also congruent with the proposed aim of identifying communication strategies as shown earlier in this article.

**Introducing Target Cultures**

This section introduces the target cultures in comparison. One cannot really compare them without an adequate understanding of the target countries, hence a brief introduction to the socioeconomic contexts of New Zealand, China, India and South Africa follows. The focus here is on the mainstream business national culture within each country. However, we are also aware of the multicultural contexts in New Zealand and South Africa and the paradoxical western and eastern business influences in China and India. Furthermore, other levels of contexts such as professional and interpersonal cultural contexts may also play an important role. Detailed attention is given to the different levels of culture where relevant.

**The European New Zealand Culture**

New Zealand has witnessed a remarkable transformation in the last 20 years, both economically and socially. Muldoon’s National government until 1984 involved itself heavily in the economy through big spending and interventionism (King, 2003). After the 1984 elections, the Labour government and its finance minister Roger Douglas, initiated major economic reforms that brought in deregulation and free competition in many sectors. The business culture was mainly one of managing and control over monopolies and an antagonistic attitude towards the workers. With deregulation and a more open economy, managers have evolved towards an upgrading of competitive advantage for NZ businesses (Enderwick and Akoorie, 1996). On the other hand, New Zealand is a small country and people tend to form friendship circles based on cronyism and the ‘old boys’ network’ in business dealings.

It needs to be noted that New Zealand is also known as a bicultural country, where the European New Zealand culture coexists with the traditional Maori culture. More recently immigrants from various countries, in particular from China, are adding richness to the existing bicultural context. The multicultural context may indicate the potential for the dynamics of relationship building in New Zealand.

**The Chinese Culture**

China is an emerging key player in the international market. Since it started its open-door policy in 1978, it has witnessed tremendous changes in terms of economic growth and international business development. Western influence, in particular that of the market economy, has become a driving force for business undertakings. China has also gone through a series of reforms in organizational structure. As a result, various types of business are in practice, including foreign-owned, government-owned, joint ventures and private companies.

In other words, China is caught between its age-old cultural tradition and the western influence, and the market economy and traditional family values compromise each other and exist alongside each other. On the
one hand, marketing practices and business values have been well accepted and have become a major trend in Chinese society. On the other hand, Confucian heritage and family values are also maintained and reflected in business practices, although there is noticeable conflict between these two sets of values. Confucian capitalism may help describe the context. The idea of ‘Confucian capitalism’ (such as in Yao, 2003) became well accepted in the past two decades as a concept to explain the capitalist development in East Asia. This term may not fully capture the nature of business practice in China, but it more or less reflects the business-relationship building under both western influence and Confucian principles. Both are also crucial for interpreting and understanding the Chinese guanxi.

The Indian Culture

Historically after independence in 1947, India had a command economy with socialistic principles. This led to the license raj period in which a few politically connected businesses dominated the economy and were virtual monopolies in their sectors. The Indian economy was closed and even the government played a major role in the economy via its public sector undertakings (PSUs), which were controlled by politicians and bureaucrats. In this era, considerable time was spent by senior management on cultivating ‘contacts’ within the bureaucracy and political circles.

However in 1991, there was a change in direction with the first tentative steps to economic liberalization (Ghoshal et al., 2000). In the last decade, new competitive and technologically advanced forces have evolved, forcing senior managers to restructure and face the onslaught of foreign competition. According to Ghoshal et al. (2000), many Indian managers aspire to internationalize their companies. Pearson and Chaterjee (2001) write that this new competitive environment has inevitably reshaped managers’ expectations and priorities, and in particular the societal value orientations held by them.

The European South African Culture

South Africa is currently a complex amalgam of several cultures and sub-cultures, but the dominant management practices are, for historical reasons, currently still mainly Eurocentric (Booysen, 2000; Jackson, 1999; Manning, 1997; Nel et al., 2004; Prime, 1999). However, after full South African democracy was established in 1994 and Nelson Mandela became President, moves toward Afrocentric management gained momentum. The cultural constellation of the Afrocentric South African management is different from that of Eurocentric management in that it reflects high levels of collectivism and humane orientation, concern for people as well as working for the common good and respect (Booysen, 2001).

Khoza (2002: 22) proposes the redirection of business culture in order for the community concept of business to be pursued. Booysen (2000: 1) states that the face of South African management is becoming more diverse and inclusive of all race groups, which poses a challenge to the dominant Eurocentric approach. This view also echoes other researchers’ findings (e.g. Booysen, 2000; Khoza, 2002). For example, in summarizing the current business management culture in South Africa, Dadoo et al. (2001: 130) state: ‘Up to now, business has been done according to Western styles of management. Presently, even Africans in senior management positions tend to adopt them. But in future, South Africa could develop its own style of business due to the meaningful interaction occurring among different people.’

Defining Business Relationship Building

This section provides a culture-specific perspective, and relationship building is defined
by managers in the respective languages of the target cultures.

To New Zealand business managers, relationship building was a critical exercise in order to achieve business goals. The terms that emerged in the interviews for relationship building were ‘competition’, ‘marketing relationships’, and ‘business mates’. There is a clear focus on the business orientation. However, the small size of the economy and population may account for the tradition of conducting business via referrals or ‘mates’, even though New Zealand is predominantly an individualistic society of Anglo-Saxon heritage (Enderwick and Akoorie, 1996). This seemingly contradictory approach could be due to the history of earlier pioneering farming settlers who helped and were dependent on each other; it is, thereby, a clear focus on community.

The community focus could also be related to the influence from the bicultural and multicultural environment in New Zealand. The managers were aware of the influence from the Maori culture, as Maoris were known to be the earliest settlers in New Zealand. For example, whanau or family is a relevant term defining relationships in the Maori language. In the Maori culture, relationships, which also include business relationships, are built around the concept of whanau with an emphasis on community support for individuals. In the past 20 years, immigrants from all parts of the world, in particular from China and India, also began to settle in New Zealand, which may also contribute to an increasing emphasis on community-based networks.

In mainland China, guanxi is the Chinese word for relationship. Literally it means a personal bond or connection. According to the Chinese business managers, it had a much broader social and cultural construct than the utilitarian concept. Specifically, they emphasized these terms for relationship building: jiao pengyou (making friends), jianli ganqing (developing connection of feeling between people), and yanxuxing touzi xingwei (continual investment behaviour). They also indicated that the action word for developing guanxi should be ‘jianli’ (establish) guanxi, and should not be ‘la’ (forcing or using dishonest means) whanau as sometimes people misinterpret it. The former is to develop relationships based on reciprocal respect, friendship, effort and continued contribution. The latter is often to do with bribery, doing favours or using power to influence in dishonest ways. However, the Chinese managers also stressed the importance of achieving business objectives in the process of developing guanxi, and they believed that guanxi can help realize these objectives if it is developed and maintained healthily.

Their views validate the business values, Confucian relationship principles and Fei’s (1985) interpretation of guanxi discussed earlier. The business managers’ comments, however, seemed to go beyond Fei’s theory to include more dimensions. A clear emphasis was placed on friendship, trust, honesty, reciprocity and care, without which guanxi could not be achieved successfully.

In addition, Chinese managers’ definition of guanxi seems to have a broader perspective than some of the existing research findings, which tend to focus on a pejorative and utilitarian connotation to mean using someone’s influence and authority to obtain favours and political and economic benefits (e.g. Hwang, 1987; Luo, 1997; Yang, 1994).

Indian interviewees used two key words, jain pehchan and sambandh, to define the concept of business-relationship building in Northern India. The Hindi term jain pehchan essentially means ‘who you know’ and reinforces the criticality of ‘familiarity’ and ‘right connections’ as a means of furthering one’s business interests. Sambandh means a firm bond developed from the right connections and also has the emotional connotation of a long-term tie, which indicates a similarity with the Chinese guanxi. This kind of interpersonal bond was particularly true in
the old closed economy. On the other hand, the interviewees also stressed the interrelatedness of *jan pehchan* and ‘professionalism’, which is indicative of the current open competitive business environment sweeping India.

The South African interviewees indicated that relationship building in South Africa was attained by mutual understanding of what was important to a business and to the benefit of all stakeholders. One interviewee expressed it as ‘a concerted effort by different parties to establish a foundation whereupon they can all co-exist in peace and harmony’. As noted earlier, alongside the dominant Eurocentric business orientation, coexists the Afrocentric South African culture. The word that can be used to summarize building relationships for the latter is *ubuntu*, meaning ‘a person is a person through other human beings’, according to Khoza (2002: 22). With this concept, it is suggested that the community concept of management culture should be enhanced by the concept of *ubuntu*. According to Mbigi (1997), *ubuntu* also means that there should be supportiveness, cooperation and solidarity; that is, communalism. The interviewees were also quite aware of the influence of this concept when emphasizing the importance of business orientations.

These business managers’ definitions may well underpin their strategies for building relationships and are used as an underlying guideline for analysing and understanding business relationships.

**Communication Strategies for Relationship Building**

This section discusses findings from the interviews with the business managers in light of the conceptual framework. Specifically, relationship building is discussed in both the initiating stage and the development stage. Relevant intercultural dimensions are alluded to in these stages as well.

**Communication Strategies:**

**European New Zealand Culture**  
The New Zealand managers to a large extent indicated that the marketing relationship captured the nature of business relationships throughout the relationship-building processes.

**Stage 1: Initiating business relationships**  
New Zealand is one of the individualistic cultures, and many of the features described in Table 1, such as a tendency to use impersonal strategies for initiating relationships, apply here. The business managers interviewed noted that they frequently used seminars and public meetings to solicit initial interest in their business proposals. They further noted that these seminars were no-obligation meetings that focused on the market needs. As one manager commented, ‘It is a matter of finding the potential partner who may share common interest with us.’ It can be seen from this that independence is emphasized in the communication processes of initiating relationships.

New Zealand is also characterized by the egalitarian approach and a low power distance is paramount (Enderwick and Akoorie, 1996). This view is further illustrated by the ‘tall poppy syndrome’, which discourages individuals from standing out as achievers. Accordingly most of the managers interviewed talked about using an informal ‘mates’ approach to communicating with all levels of the social hierarchy. To them, what was more important was an understanding that the potential business partner would be reliable and trustworthy – a social approach to apply to all they interact with.

**Stage 2: Maintaining business relationships**  
Once the potential customer was identified, they would follow up and maintain it on a one-to-one ‘mate’ basis and achieve their business objectives. Note that their communication strategies shifted from
impersonal to a more interpersonal style once their relationships became more specific. The managers’ orientation towards business meetings and time usage was monochronic as would be expected from Hall’s (1976) definition of low-context cultures. The relationships, according to the interviewees, could be either long term or short term, depending on how the objectives were achieved. For example, the interviewees indicated that they could keep in contact with clients over the long term because most people knew each other in the same industry. However, if an opportunistic situation offered itself, they could also develop a short-term relationship. Their attitudes towards relationship development with clients seem to be quite flexible and they are ready to accept and adapt to the relationship pattern.

The interviewees, in general, pointed out that they preferred direct and clear communication in order to reach a ‘win–win’ business proposition. However, one interviewee mentioned that communication could also be indirect and subtle if the relationship was likely to evolve and be advantageous in the long term. This manager’s comment indicates that their communication strategies change when the business relationship becomes more interpersonal.

**Communication Strategies: The Chinese Culture**

As discussed earlier, China is one of the collectivistic societies (Hofstede, 1991) and the managers’ views tend to substantiate this tendency. Communication strategies were also used to achieve social capital of a collective nature. The managers’ views regarding this are summarized below.

**Stage 1: Initiating business relationships**

The Chinese managers indicated that it was their own understanding of *guanxi* as shown in their definition earlier that underlined their strategies for initiating a business relationship. As one manager commented, *guanxi* is about connections and ‘The more you help others, the more you’ll get connected with people.’ This view further reflects Fei Xiaotong’s (1985) view about China being a *guanxi*-oriented society based on its own peculiar social structure, and it also points to a unique way of establishing *guanxi* in China, which involves connection of feelings and reciprocal care, and also contributes to the development of relationship and social capital.

Specific strategies for establishing *guanxi* at the initiating stage tend to be indirect and often through a third person’s introduction. For example, one manager indicated that if he wanted to initiate a relationship with a potential client or business partner, he would like to be introduced to that party through a friend who had existing *guanxi* to both parties. He admitted, however, direct communication to approach the potential client could also be a possibility if he did not have any existing *guanxi*. The relationship was built on a one-to-one basis and was special and also interdependent as it was regarded as part of the *guanxi* network.

**Stage 2: Maintaining business relationships**

With regard to how to maintain relationships, the Chinese managers admitted that they would use different styles based on how the relationship had developed. For example, they tended to be more direct with long-established *guanxi* relationships. Their comments can be interpreted in relation to social proximity again. When *guanxi* was turned into friendship, the social distance actually would decrease accordingly and they would use more direct styles. In other words, their communication style is underpinned by specific *guanxi* with the people with whom they interact, which fits in well with Confucian theory and philosophy about relationship building (Fei, 1985).

In addition, the Chinese business managers preferred a polychronic communication style, which confirmed Hall’s (1983)
claim. The reason for their preference could be that they tend to develop a one-to-one *guanxi*, and building *guanxi* with more than one person sometimes happens simultaneously.

Chinese business managers agreed that power relations play an important role for initiating *guanxi* in the Chinese context. In the meantime, they also believed that it was important to understand these power relations in order to use communication strategies appropriately. For example, one business executive pointed out that ‘showing an adequate level of respect to senior people’ was an important strategy.

In addition, they also mentioned that it was important to reduce the power distance and reach a certain level of proximity as the business relationship developed, which is the second stage in relationship building. So informal communication styles were seen to be useful for developing friendships. One manager, based on her experience of developing *guanxi*, even developed a model of turning ‘power or social distance to friendship’ as a fundamental principle.

So far the Chinese managers’ views were found not to be very supportive of Hall’s claims since most of the managers agreed that their communication styles were direct and they often spoke to the point, and this preference was particularly true with the type of *guanxi* closely intertwined with friendship in the second stage.

Communication Strategies: The Indian Culture

Stage 1: Initiating relationships The Indian business executives preferred high-context communication styles that required a subtle or indirect approach to develop *jan pecham* or knowing the right people for doing business. One way of initiating business relationship was through the ‘old boys’ network’, which relates to well-known colleges and universities. Another facilitator towards relationship building was managers or businesses coming from common linguistic or regional backgrounds. One manager commented that if one belonged to a certain caste that too gave them access to a network system with substantial resources. However, getting connected to and accepted by the target caste can be very time consuming and also involve respect for hierarchy and seniority, which leads to the next cultural dimension of power distance (Hofstede, 1991).

During the interview, the Indian managers mentioned that the various levels of hierarchy had to be respected and were an important consideration in relationship building. The managers usually formed connections horizontally to appropriately match the level of hierarchy. For example, a managing director ‘connected’ with another CEO or president, depending on the title used.

More derivative types of goals were achieved by the Indian managers, who say they can continue with their existing business partners even after a certain interval of time, and that the ties they had established before could be easily renewed and continued with a similar level of trust and intensity.

Stage 2: Maintaining business relationships Communication strategies became more direct as the relationship developed. The key issue that emerged as underpinning relationship building in the Indian business environment was trust in light of *sambandh* or the firm bond. Accordingly long-term relationships were seen as an essential part of social obligations, which could be extended to the families of the business contacts. Note the difference from the individualistic cultures such as European New Zealanders who are flexible with either short- or long-term goals. For example, a few interviewees said that attending weddings or other such personal functions was expected of them.

Because of the various obligations involved in developing relationships, Indian business executives usually exhibit a polychronic orientation (Hall, 1983), with many distrac-
tions and interruptions during meetings, and this is especially true of the large family-run traditional businesses. However, senior executives working for multinational firms expressed a more professional attitude, similar to the low-context communication style of being direct and forthright, which is another instance to indicate the dynamics of relationship building in a multicultural or international context.

**Communication Strategies: The European South African Culture**

**Stage 1: Initiating business relationships**

The South African managers pointed out that the major motivation to establish business relationships is the need to fulfil a particular business requirement. This response also lends support to the individualism dimension. The South African managers vouched for long-term relationships. This is in line with the research of Booysen (2000) who states that future orientation, such as in the areas of goal setting, planning and allocation of resources, are important for South African managers. However, the communication strategies of using direct and clear styles were seen as part of their long-term relationships. Note that their long-term strategies are different from those preferred by the Chinese or Indian business executives. The South African interviewees placed great emphasis on the importance of building trust to achieve organizational objectives. They also mentioned that if quick payoffs and a one-off situation arose, the relationship would be short term only. In-depth relationships were, however, less common in building business relations. As one interviewee mentioned: ‘The main goal is to achieve the business’ set objectives.’ This comment is once again characteristic of the Eurocentric management style.

**Stage 2: Maintaining business relationships**

Generally speaking, the South African business managers preferred direct and low-context communication, which indicates a similarity to the New Zealand European culture. However, when a relationship was developed that was envisaged to be longer-term, the communication was subtler and less direct. Note the difference from the Chinese close proximity for maintaining long-term relationships. In the context of E.T. Hall’s style of communication, Prime (1999: 6) states that the Eurocentric top management uses an explicit style of communication with little reference to the contextual aspects of communication. Written commitments are the only indicators of trust and there is a tendency to depersonalize relationships and focus on the tasks to be done.

Interviewees also claimed that the approach to establish a relationship could vary, mainly according to the business need. Power distance is therefore a less important variable in application, which shows a certain level of discrepancy with Hofstede’s power index. This is an indication that the traditional dimension of power distance being high in business relationships is starting to shift in top management in South Africa. Managers are becoming less focused on maintaining quality and status stratifications, as had previously been the case (Booysen, 2000; Prime, 1999). It may be deduced that more participative communication is starting to evolve when business contexts are established, such as those involving multicultural interaction.

As shown in the interview results, significant differences across the cultures exist in both stages of relationship building, with more interpersonal strategies being preferred by the Chinese and Indian cultures, and the opposite is true with the New Zealand and South African cultures. Differences are also apparent between the two pairs, which can only be interpreted in more depth from the culture-specific dimension. In addition, the interview results can only be explained further in light of the semantics of relationship building provided by each of the target cultures, since the cultural dimensions can-
not explain fully the dynamics of business-relationship building, nor can they offer the insider’s perspective about cultures.

Analysing Success Stories as a Genre

This section analyses the success stories collected from the business executives using the proposed conceptual framework, and both stages of relationships building are examined here. First, a breakdown of general findings from the data is summed up in Table 2.

The Purposes

In general, both tangible and intrinsic purposes are identified in the success stories collected. As shown in Table 2, marketing relationships with clients are the most important purpose for the New Zealand and South African cultures, while both interpersonal goals and business objectives are found in the Chinese and Indian cultures. This finding is congruent with Hofstede’s collective and individual cultural dimension, and more collective goals are in existence in the collective cultures of China and India.

However, the strategies of achieving similar goals may vary as shown in the discussion of the next section on strategic moves employed by each culture.

The Initiating Moves

The strategic moves (see Table 2) concur with those preferred strategies discussed in the earlier sections of this article: the New Zealanders and South Africans resorted to public-relation strategies, while the Chinese...
and Indian managers mainly approached individuals with irreplaceable interpersonal relationships. These strategic moves are also a further substantiation of the interview results with the business executives.

As shown in Table 2, the Chinese managers sometimes also approached the potential customer or partner directly at this stage. This direct communication strategy can be related to the cultural dynamics discussed earlier. Under the western influence of marketing relationships, the Chinese and Indian managers can also resort to a more direct and open communication style. However, they still prefer a one-to-one interpersonal relationship.

The Maintaining Moves
Maintaining moves are used to further develop and maintain the relationship. At this stage (see Table 2), interpersonal communication using self-disclosure is quite common in all the stories collected across the four cultures. The New Zealand and South African managers also switched to interpersonal communication strategies at this stage. For example, all four cultures tend to have individual meetings and working lunches to follow up their business goals. However, the Indian and Chinese managers were found to use even more interpersonal strategies to further develop their ties with the clients or partners. This kind of relationship also includes further connections within the group or cluster they belonged to. Both cultures tended to be polychronic in communication styles. At this point only the culture-specific perspective can offer a more detailed interpretation. The Chinese managers interact within the guanxi networks, taking care of their partners, their family members and the other members connected with the network system, which reflects the continuum of guanxi. The Indian managers functioned also beyond the business goals and interacted with the partners’ family members within their network system.

End-result Moves
As a consequence of the different communication strategies employed, the end results also indicated significant differences across all four cultures (see Table 2). Most of the stories collected from the New Zealand and South African managers tended to focus on one major goal of promoting businesses. More derivative types of relationship such as friendship were achieved by the Chinese and Indian managers.

However, similarities also exist and each culture may develop both long- and short-term business relationships. What is more interesting is that each culture may have its own preference about this. Business managers in Chinese and Indian cultures appeared to prefer a long-term goal, while this was not as strong in the New Zealand and South African cultures. In addition, the communication styles in both Chinese and Indian culture in fact became more polychronic at this stage as the relationship spread to the related networks that go beyond the business relationship between the manager and the partner or customer.

Examples of Success Stories
Among the 15 success stories collected from each of the four cultures, one from each culture (see Appendix) is discussed in detail in this section, with reference being made to the corpus where relevant. The following four stories were randomly chosen for illustration purposes.

New Zealand Story
As noted earlier, organizing public relations is an important way of communicating business relationships for the initiating stage in New Zealand. As shown in Mr Frazier’s case, sound relationships have developed from these activities, including attending public seminars and approaching potential clients directly, which is also true of the initi-
ating move in other success stories collected from the interviews. This scenario has confirmed some of the findings discussed earlier. As already mentioned, the New Zealand interviewees defined relationship building as building trust and dependability with another business ‘contact’.

The maintaining move can be analysed in light of the New Zealand manager’s definition relating to ‘business mates’ and keeping ‘faith’ and the continuity of the relationship. Accordingly, Mr Frazier involves his client in social activities such as golf tournaments. However, a surprising theme to emerge was that relationship building was looked at as a long-term exercise (see the end-result move) and not a short-term one as would be expected in an individualistic society. This could be related to the community focus in a small country characterized by both biculturalism and multiculturalism.

**The Chinese Story**

This story can be interpreted in light of the collectivistic dimension, power distance, and the culture-specific ways of building trust. As part of the background of the story, Mr Chang, the CEO of the telecommunications sales company, first identifies a need for building a relationship with a brand name corporation in the electronics industry. As shown in the initiating move, his way of initiating a possible relationship was via a third person who is directly connected to the target corporation. In the maintaining moves, their interpersonal relations are also further developed, involving both partnership and friendship. However, each party involved also tried to make sure that they had their own integrity and all the criteria for the collaboration were appropriately met, which led to an ideal win–win outcome, as shown in the end-result move. This story demonstrates that successful relationship building is a process intertwining friendship, integrity, trust and long-term relationships.

**The Indian Success Story**

The Indian success story can be viewed in light of India being a collectivist society, where the caste-related type of relationship is important in creating trust and loyalty. According to Mun, the senior manager, the concept of the *jan pehchan* (who you know) aspect of ‘connections’ was critical for both initiating and maintaining relationships with distributors and clients. Mun implies that he initiated relationships through his old school mates, a practice quite similar to *guanxi*. However, different from *guanxi*, it stresses the interaction at the same social status, as shown in this story. The maintaining stage shows even more intensive effort in dealing with his clients since Mun often emphasizes the importance of investing in ‘relationship for success’ – a communication strategy that effectively encapsulates the concept of social capital. The extensive maintaining efforts have naturally led to growing trust and loyalty from his clients. This scenario is further substantiation of our findings regarding the nature of the Indian economy and business practices. For example, the interviewees defined it as being an exercise to build the ‘right connections’ for business development, and this focus was also prevalent in other success stories collected from the Indian business executives.

**The South African Story**

This story is strikingly similar to the Chinese story in terms of finding an appropriate business partner in the telecommunications industry. However, the success of an application is gained through very different communication strategies. In the initiating move, Mr Olivia started with clear communication and directly approached the marketing managers of Nokia and Motorola without any referral from a third person as used in the Chinese case. Mr Olivia switched to interpersonal communication strategies to maintain these relationships. As shown in the maintaining
move, frequent meetings and social activities took place for both parties to communicate in business and also to develop interpersonal ties. A great level of harmony and mutual understanding is stressed throughout their relationship-building process, which can be explained in the South African managers’ definition of relationship building focusing on both business goals and the *ubuntu* context as well. As a result they both benefited from their interactions, as shown in the end-result move. This is also a significant example to show how different strategies are used to build a long-term business relationship between the Chinese and South African cultures.

These four stories offer further substantiation of the interview findings. There is an overarching theme across all the target cultures: all business managers regarded relationship building as a process of building trust and reciprocal behaviour. This finding further supports our claim that relationship building is a social construct rather than simply part of business or marketing capital. The major difference lies in the initiating stage. As shown in the New Zealand and South African stories, both cultures employed similar strategies relating to public relations to promote business opportunities. In contrast, the Chinese and Indian cultures vouched for the interpersonal relationships to develop business relationships.

Significant cultural dynamics can also be identified throughout the stories. For example, the New Zealander manager takes an active part in the ‘old-mate’ networking system to develop his client base. The Chinese manager identifies the need for building *guanxi* first in order to achieve business goals. The South African story, using a similar approach of public relations as in the New Zealand story, offers a glimpse into direct and clear communication styles, but at the same time with the intention of achieving a long-term business outcome.

**Conclusion**

This article developed a feasible conceptual framework for comparing communication strategies of building business relationships across cultures from both linguistic and intercultural perspectives. Compared to marketing relationships, social capital theory offers a broader perspective to view business relationships as a social construct intertwined with social networking activities. Specific definitions were used to complement the study of communication strategies, and offered further explanation about why certain communication strategies were employed to build relationships. As shown in the managers’ own definitions, relationship building was defined in close relation with the sociocultural and economic contexts of each culture. Each of the four target cultures also clearly showed cultural dynamics in a changing business and multicultural context, which indicates the need to study this topic in a broader social dimension.

It has been found that different cultures tended to emphasize different values – such as marketing relationships and ‘old mates’ for the New Zealand culture, *guanxi* or friendship for the Chinese, *jan pehchan* or right connections for the Indians, and a mixture of business relationships and *ubuntu* for South Africans. This further indicates that even if business managers share similar goals, as shown in the business managers’ views, they still resort to different communication strategies for building and maintaining business relationships.

For example, different communication strategies were employed for initiating business relationships: both Chinese and Indian managers resorted to interpersonal communication strategies such as one-to-one meetings, while impersonal strategies such as seminars and public meetings were found to be more frequently used by the New Zealand and South African managers. More similarities in communication strategies were identi-
ified across the target cultures in the stage of maintaining relationships, and all tended to use more interpersonal communication strategies that involved specific communication strategies tailored for the continuation of the existing relationship. However, significant differences were also identified in terms of goal orientations, and more intrinsic goals were found in the Chinese and Indian cultures, which can be seen as the continuation of the long-term tendency already in existence in the initiating stage.

Further differences were also in existence between the Chinese and Indian cultures, which can only be explained from the culture-specific perspective. Guanxi and caste are both collectivistic-based networking systems but they differ in the way people are connected. In addition, there is no lack of differences in the individualistic cultures. New Zealand managers stressed ‘mates’ as part of the egalitarian approach, while South African managers placed much more emphasis on harmony and collaboration. These nuances of differences are crucial for understanding what communication strategies may be appropriate for each stage of the relationship development.

All these findings have been further supported by the success stories incorporated in the analysis, which offered an insider’s perspective into what the business executives actually did to develop business relationships. In addition, the dynamics of communication strategies for relationship building in the global and multicultural contexts have also been identified, as summarized in the section on success stories. Cultures are dynamic and developing and, in particular, individualistic cultures including New Zealand and South Africa have also applied interpersonal communication strategies in order to maintain longer-term relationships. In India and China, the dynamics also exist. Changes are also beginning to take place in China, and both traditional and modern marketing relationships already exist in India. These dynamics will continue as the world becomes more and more globalized. However, the traditional guanxi or jan pechlan won’t go away overnight since they were deeply rooted in the respective cultures long before the concept of business was ever in practice. They are essential for initiating business relationships for these cultures. It will be interesting to see how the dynamics develop and what new forms of relationship building take place under the influence of both traditional and modern marketing relationships.

The research findings have implications for conducting international business and doing business across cultures, and also for developing social networking relations in general. In particular, an understanding of the differences in the preference of interpersonal and impersonal communication strategies at the initiating stage can help prevent potential intercultural barriers. According to Zhu and Sun (2004), intercultural business collaborations tend to collapse at the initiating stage. The nuances of differences between Chinese and Indian cultures and those between New Zealand and South African cultures also have implications for maintaining business relationships. Further research, however, needs to be conducted to see if similar types of preferences also exist in other cultures, more importantly to identify whether the cultural dynamics explored in this article also apply to other cultures.

References


Appendix

New Zealand Success Story

Mr Frazier is senior manager for one of the largest law firms in Auckland, which has practising partners in all the fields of law such as commercial, family, property, and immigration. He felt that there had been a change in business practice from a stage where clients just walked in to the firm to a stage where they are actively marketing the firm. One of the key strategies he used was building the client base through marketing relationships, and here is his story.

Initiating

I regularly organize seminars for our clients to update them on the latest law changes, and mail out newsletters with the goal of keeping the clients informed and the firm’s name at the ‘top of the mind’ for brand recall. In addition, I pay attention to the client base and organize business and social activities that will enhance business relationships, such as golf tournaments and barbecue evenings. At one such barbecue evening I developed a relationship with a large firm providing family services in Auckland including counselling, property settlements, and arbitration. I made it a point to lunch with them regularly and even became ‘mates’ with some of the managers and attended their family functions.

End-result

This in turn generated a lot of business referrals to my law firm, which I feel was a win–win situation for all concerned.
The Chinese Story

Mr Chang Mingde is CEO of a Chinese telecommunications firm selling mobile phones and other telecommunications products. His firm has recently experienced a downturn in sales. The major problem, he believes, is that they do not sell brand-name products. As China is going through westernization, customers would like to buy products of known brands. In addition, the markets are full of products manufactured by small family businesses. He decided to develop a business relationship with a brand company, as shown in his story below.

Initiating  I approached some of my senior management members to find out who knew anyone from a company that produces brand-name products. One of the managers, Li Lan, responded that his friend Ms Wang is a senior manager for the Five Star Telecommunications Corporation, which is well known in China for its quality telecommunications products. With the introduction of Li Lan, I got to know Ms Wang.

Maintaining Subsequent informal meetings with Ms Wang took place to explore the possibility of having our company as a wholesaler. I also offered help to her and her family whenever needed. Ms Wang recommended us as a wholesale company. After appropriate procedures of assessment on our company site, Five Star Telecommunications

End-result Corporation agreed we had met all the criteria. Finally Yada has succeeded in becoming a wholesaler for the brand company and our relationship continues up to today.

The Indian Story

This success story is provided by Mun Bhatia, a senior manager of FMCG firms, which sell a range of products including tea and other grocery items, a line of liquor products and durables such as white goods.

Initiating  I always view maintaining relationships with distributors as a critical strategy to achieve business goals. Some of my customers are large firms that in turn are managed by graduates from the same elite institution that I graduated from, which allows for strong networking opportunities. After a connection – *jan pehchan* – is made, it is important to invest in the relationship for success. I always encourage my subordinates in this regard. For example, one of them is particularly good at maintaining his relationship with major clients. He managed our client relationship very well, even going unannounced to the airport or railway station to meet them, sometimes at 5 am! This effort pleases the clients since it shows his sincerity to them and the extent to which he is willing to go in order to maintain the relationship.

End-result This sort of personalized service adds to our commitment to nurturing a long-term relationship.

The South African Story

This story is narrated by Alex Olivia, who is a senior manager at Vodacom South Africa, a telecommunications corporation in South Africa. Vodacom South Africa as a market leader in handsets has over the past years established relationships with various manufacturers. This led to the seeking of opportunities to build relationships in order to market products and to improve business. Alex’s story unfolds part of the process of establishing a relationship with manufacturers.

Initiating  I did quite a bit of research on telecommunications manufacturers and decided that Nokia and Motorola should be my target since they produce high quality products. I invited their marketing managers to attend some of our seminars, which they did. We explored our overlapping interest in the market after the seminar. Our relationship was established by means of various intensive negotiations between senior managers of these two organizations to establish mutually beneficial advantages in the communications market. Currently Vodacom South Africa provides a market for these
Maintaining manufacturers to distribute their products. As part of the agreement reached between the parties, Vodacom undertook to supply these particular products at the lowest possible price in exchange for a constant supply of products and parts, as well as an excellent service from the manufacturers which is going to benefit both parties over the long run.

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Résumé

Une étude interculturelle des stratégies de communication dans l'établissement des relations professionnelles (Yunxia Zhu, Pieter Nel et Ravi Bhat)

Cette étude tente d'explorer les stratégies de communication visant à établir des relations entre cultures d'un point de vue à la fois linguistique et culturellement spécifique. Notamment, elle perçoit les relations professionnelles comme partie intégrante du capital social et compare entre elles les stratégies de communication employées pour construire les relations au sein des entreprises de vente. Cette méthode de recherche s'appuie sur une analyse du discours issu d'entretiens avec des cadres dirigeants, en intégrant également à cette analyse leur réussite personnelle. Cette analyse distingue deux stades dans l'établissement des relations: un stade d'amorce et un stade d'entretien. D'après les résultats, les cadres dirigeants chinois et indiens ont eu davantage recours aux stratégies interpersonnelles pour amorcer une relation professionnelle. À l'opposé, les cadres dirigeants néo-zélandais et sud-africains ont tendance à recourir davantage aux stratégies impersonnelles de communication dans la promotion des relations publiques. Des stratégies interpersonnelles de communication semblables sont employées pour entretenir les relations. Néanmoins, on a pu noter une orientation plus forte en faveur de relations à long terme dans les cultures chinoise et indienne. En outre, les stratégies de communication sont dynamiques dans tous les pays de l'étude, car ces pays sont en train de devenir de plus en plus multiculturels et de plus en plus mondialisés en matière d'affaires internationales et de management.
摘要

关于建立商业联系沟通战略的跨文化研究

Yunxia Zhu, Pieter Nel and Ravi Bhat

本研究旨在从语言及特定文化的观点探究跨文化人际创建的沟通战略。具体而言，本研究把商业联系视为社会资本的一部分，并比较用来建立销售公司人际关系的沟通战略。研究方法建立在经理访谈的基础上，并将他们的成功经历整合在分析里。人际关系的建立在此分析中分为两步：启动阶段和维护阶段。研究发现中国和印度的经理们更多的运用人际关系来启动关系的建立。相反，新西兰和南非的经理更倾向于用非个人沟通战略来增强公共关系。为了维持关系，所有文化几乎都使用类似的人际沟通战略。然而我们发现中国和印度更倾向于建立长期关系。而且所有被调查国家的沟通战略都是的，因为这些沟通战略不是变得越来越趋向于多文化就是在国际商务和管理中变得更加国际化。