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Informed Communication in High Context and Low Context Cultures

Peter Broeder¹

ABSTRACT

In a variety of cross-cultural studies, comparisons are attached to Hall's (1976) notion of contexting. A commonly accepted distinction is made between high-context and low-context cultures. The purpose of this study was to determine whether this characterisation affects some facets of culture-specific communication styles, that is, preferences in the use of context and information for constructing meaning in communication. Specifically, data were collected from 774 subjects so that a comparison could be made. Representing three ethnically identified cultural groups—Dutch, Greek, and Japanese—the subjects completed an online survey where they reflected on the way in which they think they communicate. The results reveal some clear differences between the cultural groups in their reported communication style. The Dutch used relatively more non-verbal communication; the Greeks used more hand gestures, and the Japanese were more indirect in their communication. A cultural divergence emerged, in that, the Greeks living in the Netherlands reported higher levels of non-verbal communication, were more indirect, and used more metaphors than did the Greeks living in Greece.

Keywords: Communication style, Cross-cultural, Hall, Low context, High context.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The fast-growing globalization implies more intercultural contacts. This makes awareness of cultural differences more important for successful communication. It is a reasonable conjecture that the new reality of globalization has affected culture-specific communication styles. In cross-cultural studies, Hall's (1976) contexting theory is quite influential, and quite often more or less successfully applied (McSweeney, 2015). The idea is that the use of context to infuse information and meaning into communication varies across cultures. Therefore, cultures can be characterised as primarily low- or high-context cultures. The basic research aim of this study is to find out whether and to what extent Hall's context model distinguishes the communication styles of ethnically defined cultural groups. More specifically, do members of low-/high-context cultures differ in the way they use context in conveying information through communication. The paper is structured as follows. First, the important points of Hall's (1976) context theory are clarified and some limitations are pointed out. Then a detailed account is given of the method of an empirical investigation into cross-cultural communication styles. To this end, the findings are given of an online survey with participants representing a high-context culture (Japan), a medium-context culture (Greece) or a low-context culture (the Netherlands). The paper ends by offering some suggestions for further research.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In Hall's (1976) cross-cultural contexting theory, the message in the communication environment of a high context culture is "one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1976, p. 91). Asian cultures usually prefer high context messages. Establishing the message's meaning is the minor (needed) activation of the context that consists of pre-programmed, culture-specific cues. The members of these cultural groups are used to implicit and indirect messages with visual associations. In contrast, in the communication environment of a low context culture, "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976, p. 91). The members of these cultural groups are used to direct and explicit messages (visually and verbally). Western cultures usually prefer low context messages, and information is expressed largely through words. Hall's conceptualising of contexting was instanced by a limited list of countries, composing a continuum from primarily high-context cultures towards primarily low-context cultures. The country classification most commonly used is given in Figure 1.

High-Context Cultures

Japan
China
Arabic Countries
Greece
Spain
Italy
England
France
North America
Scandinavian Countries
German-speaking Countries

Low-Context Cultures

**Figure 1: Country Classification based on Corresponding High-/Low-Context Cultures
(Initial source: Hall, 1976, Hall & Hall, 1990, updated by several follow-up studies)**

The high-/low-context distinction theory of Hall (1976) has been utilized extensively and more or less successfully applied in a wide variety of cross-cultural investigations. For all that, several reviews and systematic meta-analyses (Hermeking, 2006; Würtz, 2006; Cardon, 2008; Warner-Søderholm, 2013; Usunier and Roulin, 2010; Kittler, Rygl, and Mackinnon, 2011; Alexander, 2019; Heimgärtner, 2019; Yama and Zakaria, 2019) noted several limitations. Some of them are as follows:

- Hall (1976) and follow-up provided only anecdotal evidence for the context model and the ranking of countries, with no explanation of the qualitative method used.
- Empirical cross-cultural (quantitative) examinations of contexting information were very scarce.
- Very few studies attempted to construct valid scales for measuring differences in contexting information use across cultures.
- The high-/low-context characterization of cultures results in a classification of countries (as in Figure 1) and (static) national cultures.
- Blended and often diverging findings illustrate the arbitrariness of the commonly used country classification.

The aim of the present study is to address some of these limitations. It is a quantitative empirical investigation of Hall's (1976) theory focussing on communication styles across cultures. The central research question for this study is whether and to what extent Hall's contexting theory and the cultural country classification attached to it can be supported empirically. In addition, instead of a selection of cultural groups based on country or national culture, cultural groups are distinguished through ethnic self-identification. Derived from Hall's country classification, given in Figure 1, a comparison is made of at the one end, the Japanese group as the most typically high context culture and, at the other end, the Dutch group (more comparable with German-speaking Countries) as the

most typically low-context culture. In addition, the Greek group is included in the comparison as a middle-context culture.

Hall's cultural paradigm is related to Hofstede's (2001) model of national culture (among others, replicated by Minkow & Kaasa, 2020). Specifically, the cultural dimension individualism–collectivism coincides with the low-/high-context distinction. In collectivistic (high-context) cultures, information is exchanged more implicitly, more visual, and with much non-verbal coding between groups, with less need for explicit communication than in individualistic (low-context) cultures. According to Hofstede (2020), the Netherlands has a highly individualistic culture (score 80 on a 0-100 scale). Japan has a moderately collectivistic culture (score 46). Greece has a highly collectivistic culture (scores 35). On the basis of combining the theories of Hall and Hofstede, the following hypothesis is formulated:

Hypothesis 1: Communication style is influenced by the use of context of a message, differentiated by culturally specific individualism/collectivism.

3 METHOD

3.1 Sample

Data were collected through an online survey with convenient sampling. The questionnaire was in English. In total, the sample consisted of 774 participants, 425 participants were from the Netherlands, 203 participants from Japan, and 146 participants from Greece. Table 1 shows the country-of-birth and the country-of-living of the sample. Their cultural background was checked with the following self-identification question: “To what ethnic group do you belong?”.

Table 1: Country of Birth and Living per Ethnic Group

Ethnic group	Dutch		Japanese		Greek	
	(N = 425)		(N = 203)		(N = 146)	
	Netherlands	Other	Japan	Other	Greece	Other
Country-of-birth	425 (100%)	-	197 (97%)	6 (3%)	137 (94%)	9 (6%)
Country-of-living	425 (100%)	-	157 (77%)	46 (23%)	84 (58%)	62 (42%)

The sample consisted of 264 men and 510 women. The mean age was 27.80 years (Age range: 18-59 years). The education level was mostly middle/higher education or higher. More specific demographic information of the sample is given in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Information per Ethnic Group

Ethnic group	Dutch		Japanese		Greek	
	(N = 425)		(N = 203)		(N = 146)	
Gender						
Male	102 (24%)		101 (50%)		61 (42%)	
Female	323 (76%)		102 (50%)		85 (58%)	
Age						
18–29	333 (78%)		154 (76%)		69 (47%)	
30–39	10 (3%)		30 (15%)		51 (35%)	
40–60	82 (19%)		19 (9%)		26 (18%)	
Education						
High school	56 (13%)		29 (14%)		17 (12%)	
Middle/Higher education	181 (43%)		15 (7%)		15 (10%)	
University	188 (44%)		159 (78%)		114 (78%)	

3.2 Questionnaire

The respondents participated in the study through an online questionnaire link provided. First, they gave their informed consent and some demographic information. Then they were asked to reflect on their communication style and information preferences through the following five statements (Answers were given on a 5-point scale, “Completely (dis)agree”):

- Non-verbal communication: “I generally use a lot of non-verbal communication when I communicate”.
- Hand gestures: “I generally use a lot of hand gestures when I talk to someone”.
- Indirect communication: “I generally try to convey information as directly as possible”.
- Metaphors: “I generally use many metaphors when I talk to someone”.
- Visual preference: “In general, I prefer visual information instead of textual information”.

A statistical reliability analysis showed that the five items could not be integrated into a whole scale for measuring communication style. The internal consistency was poor with Cronbach’s $\alpha = .414$. Removing separate items did not imply an improvement. Therefore, these faces of communication style were analysed separately.

4 RESULTS

A one-way between-groups MANOVA was performed to investigate differences in communication style. The dependent variables were: non-verbal communication, use of hand gestures, indirect communication, use of metaphors, and visual preference. The independent variable was the cultural group. Age was entered as a co-variate. There was a statistically significant difference between the three groups on the combined dependent variables, $F(10, 1534) = 12.971, p < .001$; Pillai’s Trace = .156, partial eta squared = .08. However, separate univariate tests on the outcome variables, using a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .017, revealed non-significant culture effects on the preference for visual information (instead of textual information), $F(2, 773) = 0.455, p < .635$. These differences were unravelled further through an inspection of the mean scores. The results of these analyses are now discussed for each facet of cultural contexting separately. The error bars in Figures 2–6 display 95% confidence intervals. The degree to which the end-to-end of the error-bars touch or moderately overlap shows the significant differences between the groups (cf. Cumming & Finch, 2005).

First, the means for the use of a lot of non-verbal communication per ethnic group are plotted in Figure 2. The Dutch group reported significantly higher levels of non-verbal communication ($M_{Dut} = 3.81, SD_{Dut} = 0.83$) than the Greek group ($M_{Gre} = 3.45, SD_{Gre} = 0.92$) and the Japanese group ($M_{Jap} = 3.44, SD_{Jap} = 0.98$), $F(2, 770) = 15.30, p < .001$. The latter two groups did not differ significantly in this respect.

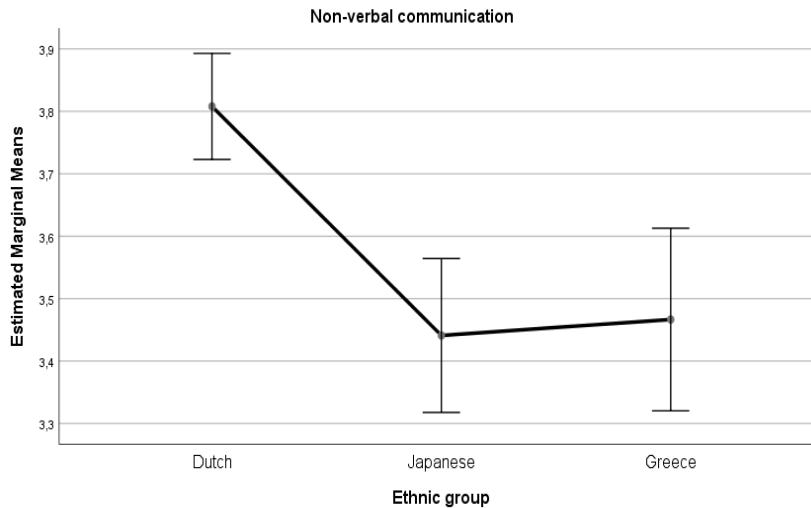


Figure 2: Non-Verbal Communication per Ethnic Group (Means on a 5-point-scale, Min. = 1 and Max. = 5, Error Bars: 95% CI)

In Figure 3, the use of hand gestures when talking to someone is summarized per ethnic group. For the Greek group a higher level of using gestures emerged ($M_{Gre} = 3.87$, $SD_{Gre} = 0.97$) compared to the Dutch group ($M_{Dut} = 3.53$, $SD_{Dut} = 0.97$) and the Japanese group ($M_{Jap} = 3.41$, $SD_{Jap} = 0.10$), $F(2, 770) = 10.97$, $p < .001$. The communication style of the latter two groups did not differ significantly in this respect.

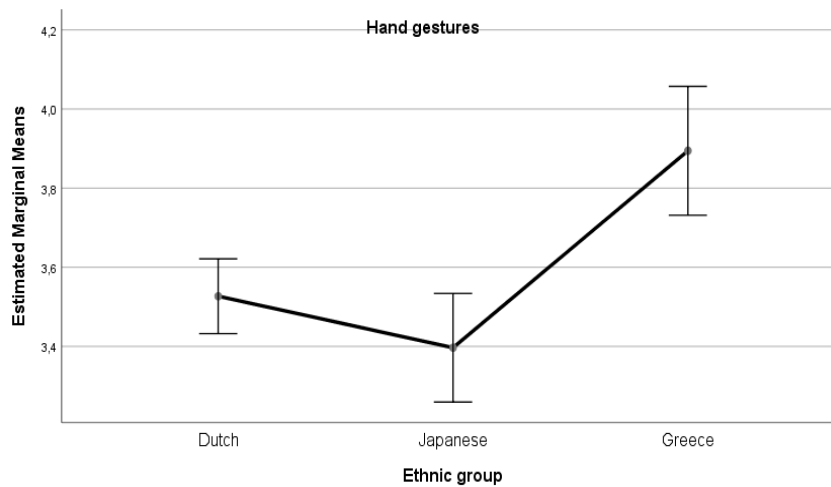


Figure 3: Use of hand gestures per ethnic group (Means on a 5-point-scale, Min. = 1 and Max. = 5, Error bars: 95% CI)

The groups also differed in the attempt to convey information as directly as possible. Figure 4 shows the degree of indirect communication. The Japanese group reported the highest level of trying to convey information not directly ($M_{Jap} = 2.55$, $SD_{Jap} = 0.88$) in comparison with the two other groups. $F(2, 770) = 20.46$, $p < .001$. The communication style of the Dutch group ($M_{Dut} = 2.16$, $SD_{Dut} = 0.75$) and the Greek group ($M_{Gre} = 2.09$, $SD_{Gre} = 0.74$) did not differ significantly in this respect.

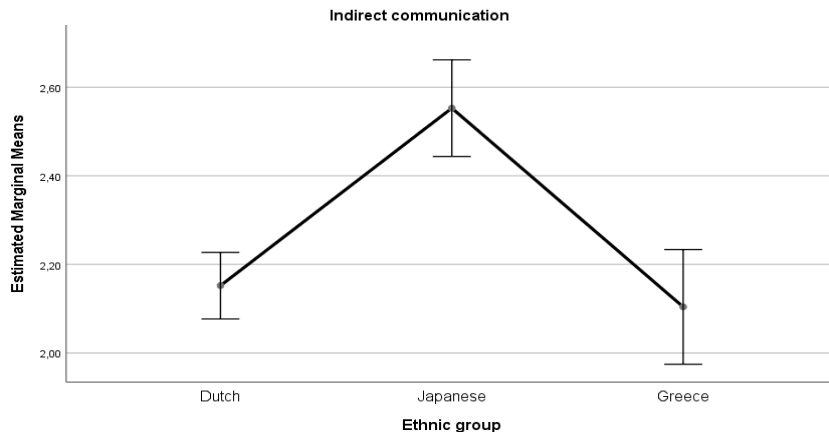


Figure 4: Indirect Communication per Ethnic Group (Means on a 5-point-scale, Min. = 1 and Max. = 5, Error Bars: 95% CI)

Figure 5 shows the degree to which the groups reported using metaphors when talking to someone. There was no statistically significant difference between the Japanese group ($M_{Jap} = 3.36$, $SD_{Jap} = 0.98$) and the Greek group ($M_{Gre} = 3.24$, $SD_{Gre} = 1.02$). Additionally, both groups had higher levels of using metaphors in comparison with the Dutch group. ($M_{Dut} = 3.08$, $SD_{Dut} = 1.01$), $F(2, 770) = 5.87$, $p = .003$.

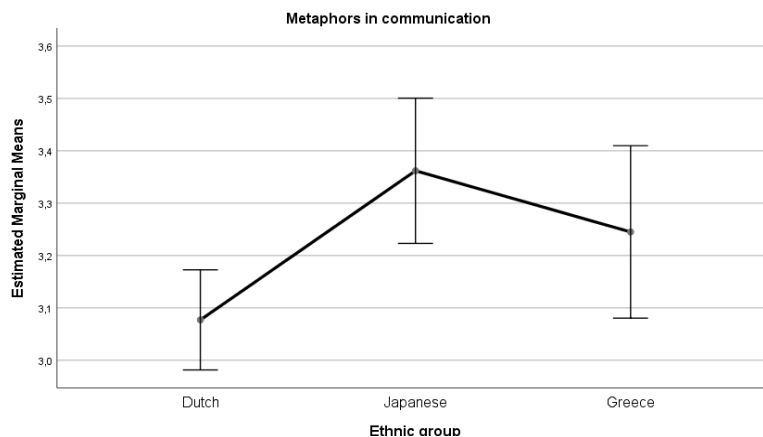


Figure 5: Use of Metaphors per Ethnic Group (Means on a 5-point-scale, Min. = 1 and Max. = 5, Error Bars: 95% CI).

The mean preferences for visual information instead of textual information per ethnic group are plotted in Figure 6. No statistically significant differences between the Dutch group ($M_{Dut} = 3.69$, $SD_{Dut} = 0.86$), the Japanese group ($M_{Jap} = 3.63$, $SD_{Jap} = 0.96$) and the Greek group ($M_{Gre} = 3.71$, $SD_{Gre} = 0.96$) emerged, $F(2, 770) = 0.455$, $p = .635$.

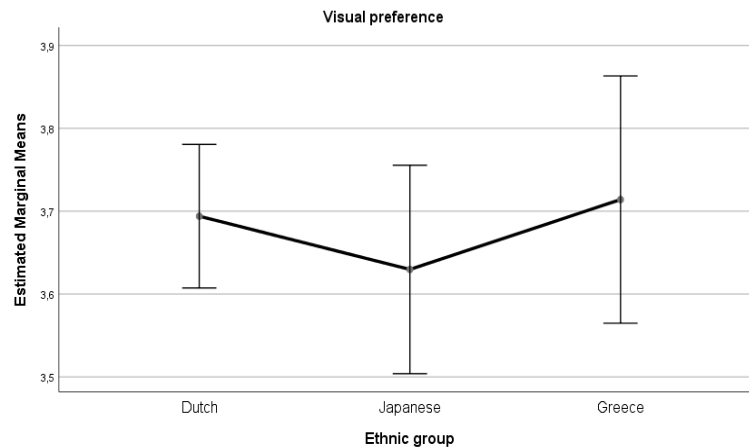


Figure 6: Preference of Visual Information per Ethnic Group (Means on a 5-point-scale, Min. = 1 and Max. = 5, Error Bars: 95% CI)

As was shown in Table 1, the Dutch participants were all living in the Netherlands. Those Japanese participants not living in Japan, were based in a variety of other countries. In contrast, for the Greek participants an interesting comparison could be made. The Greek group consisted of two clearly distinguishable subgroups: those living in Greece ($N = 49$) and those living in the Netherlands ($N = 84$). On average, the Greeks living in the Netherlands reported to use more non-verbal information, ($M_{GreeDut} = 3.65$, $SD_{GreeDut} = 0.90$) than those in living in Greece ($M_{GreeGre} = 3.25$, $SD_{GreeGre} = 0.87$), $t(131) = 2.53$, $p = .013$. This difference represented an effect size of Cohen's $d = 0.51$. In addition, the analyses showed that the Greeks in the Netherlands tried to convey information more indirectly ($M_{GreeDut} = 2.27$, $SD_{GreeDut} = 0.67$) than those living in Greece ($M_{GreeGre} = 2.01$, $SD_{GreeGre} = 0.72$), $t(131) = 2.01$, $p = .047$ with an effect size of $d = .54$. Finally, the Greeks in the Netherlands also used more metaphors when talking to someone ($M_{GreeDut} = 3.47$, $SD_{GreeDut} = 0.77$) than the Greeks in Greece ($M_{GreeGre} = 3.06$, $SD_{GreeGre} = 1.09$), $t(126.374) = 2.54$, $p = .012$ with an effect size of $d = .46$. There were no statistically significant differences in the use of hand-gestures and visual preference between the two Greece subgroups

5 CONCLUSION

This study investigated contexting in communication styles across cultures. Hall's contexting theory, and the cultural (country) classification attached to it, was partly supported empirically for Greece, Japan, and the Netherlands. As assumed, communication style was influenced by the cultural specific use of context of a message. The results revealed some remarkable convergence between cultural groups with respect to their reported communication style. The Dutch group reported using relatively more non-verbal communication; the Greek group reported using more hand gestures, and the Japanese group reported relatively more indirectness. Among the three cultural groups, no significant differences were found in the degree to which metaphors were used when someone was talking to another person, and according to the preference of visual information

above textual information. Additionally, a cultural divergence emerged, in that, the Greeks living in the Netherlands reported higher levels of non-verbal communication, were more indirect, and used more metaphors than did the Greeks living in Greece. For the Dutch and Japanese subgroups, there were not enough data to investigate this living-abroad effect on contexting in communication styles.

6 DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study is the first of its kind because of the comparison of ethnically self-identified cultural groups. In almost all prior cross-cultural studies, cultural identification of groups is based on the country of residence or that of birth. In this study, the Dutch, Greeks, and Japanese groups were distinguished by the cultural profiles based on country-of-birth, country-of-living, and self-identification criteria. This multiple identification has proven to be a highly valid one for defining cultural groups in Asia (Broeder & Stokmans, 2013), Europe (Broeder & Yagmur, 2012), and South-Africa (Plüddemann et al., 2004). Ethnic identification through self-categorisation, touches the heart of the cultural matter (Broeder & Extra, 1999).

This study has limitations that provide scope for further research. First, the questionnaire was drafted in English, which is not the native language of the Dutch, the Greek, or the Japanese participants. Future studies might provide a precise, reliable translation in the native language to ensure the most accurate responses from them. This is an important point of attention in cross-cultural investigations (discussed by Harzing, 2005). Second, the empirical observations in this study are self-reports. It concerns individual self-reflection by representatives of the Dutch, Greek, and Japanese groups of their own communication style. So, they did not reflect on the communication style of their own cultural group. This relates to the third limitation, which is the operationalisation of the core-construct contexting in communication that is non-verbal, consisting of hand gestures, directness, metaphoric language use, and of visual information preference. Suggested here is to consider facets of communicative competences developed in the functional-linguistic approach to learning and education. The basic idea is that language always has a function according to the social context in which it is used. Specifically, Broeder & Van Wijk (2020) specified five communicative competences and “school language” skills associated with them, that is, linguistic (with lexical and formulating skills), textual (with reading and writing skills), interactional (with receptive and productive skills), rhetorical (with content and presentation skills), and informational (with organization and search skills).

Finally, enhanced ecological validations (within and between cultures) might provide a more concrete insight in what is actually done in culture-specific communication styles. Suggested here is the synergy of quantitative and qualitative (anecdotal) empirical observations. Although Hall’s (1976) context theory is acknowledged and widely used in cross-cultural studies, its distinctions have been criticised as being bipolar, leading to overgeneralisation, or lacking solid empirical evidence (McSweeney, 2015). And indeed, the high/low context distinction might be very protean in its ability to explain patterns in the dynamic reality of cultural localisation and globalisation.

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