Abstract: This paper focuses on analysing communication skills within socio-cultural values developed by Hofstede (1980) and measuring their effects on intellectual capital. The emerging global business environment including different employees from different cultural backgrounds, provides a rich opportunity for further research in the role of culture on communication skills and intellectual capital. This study explores a positive relationship between culture, effective communication skills and strong intellectual capital for sustainability within an organisation. We theorise that the educational environment for all students would be highly improved by developing their communication skills and intensifying their intellectual capital when the cultural values focus on enhanced collectivism, reduced uncertainty avoidance, and reduced power distance. In turn, the educational environment for all students would be less effective when the cultural values have tendency towards more individualism, lesser uncertainty avoidance, and bigger power distance.

Keywords: academic environment; communication skills; culture; intellectual capital; theoretical framework.
Culture, communication skills and intellectual capital


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1 Introduction

Business students are expected to gain the highest level of knowledge of their relevant disciplines (e.g. accounting, management, finance, marketing, human resources) through having or gaining strong communication skills (CSs) in colleges and universities. In fact, the students cannot appropriately succeed academically without having these solid skills (Sowell, 2009). Ruppert and Green (2012, p.30) state that “…communication is both a key professional competence and a disciplinary pursuit in teaching and research”.

As the environment of higher education is changing due to technological advancements, globalisation, knowledge and information explosion, and global labour recruitment (Knight, 2004), the students’ abilities to adapt with the current situation require our students to have much stronger CSs. On the other hand, electronic communication devices have provided easy methodologies for academics to connect with other educational institutions at the national and international levels. However, understanding of barriers to gaining global CSs requires an investigation into the students’ cultural backgrounds. That is why this paper attempts to inspire a debate on how the CSs of students are affected by their cultural values by using Hofstede’s (1980) model and it also aspires to identify the relationship between the cultural values, CSs, and intellectual capital.

The rest of the paper is organised around the explanation of the importance of CSs for higher education, then segues to the role of the relationship of culture in general and Hofstede model in particular with CSs followed by blending these two topic to develop a theory for higher education. Finally, we discuss how culture, CSs can affect on the intellectual capital of our students.
2 Communications skills

CSs constitute a very essential part of students’ success in their academic programs. Therefore, developing those skills should be gradually expanded through their academic journey and erudite educational programs. In fact, lack of those CSs can cause many problems before the students’ graduation, including increased academic failure and impaired development of future career as being less efficient at the workplaces after graduation.

Robles (2012) found that CSs are one of the top ten skills perceived by business executives to be the most important for career success. CSs give business students the power of effectively and efficiently developing professional skills deemed necessary to connect with other people. The importance of CSs is tied with the value of socialisation, presentations, meetings and negotiations. Such activities should encourage students to prepare themselves for their prospective professional careers (Ibid, 2012). Professional skills can take various forms, including teamwork, conflict resolution, awareness of social justice, sustainability and ethics (Missingham, 2006). By considering the importance of these professional skills, the concern for developing strong CSs for business students cannot be ignored.

In every language, CSs generally are represented either in the form of oral or written skills (Ciortescu, 2012). In other words, CSs are mainly concerned with sending messages or transferring information clearly and receiving them correctly. However, there are many different aspects of every language that can make proper communication difficult between the sender(s) and the receiver(s). These parts include slang words, acronyms, idioms, weak listening skills, poor comprehension ability, complexity of sentences, and variation in semantics. Thus, CSs in workplaces and professional environment are the most important feature affected by language skills.

In addition, insufficient CSs cause many problems in workplaces and lead the employees to be less confident, less efficient and eventually facing career complications (Hara and Schwen, 2006). A major benefit of improving these skills, in contrast, is to maintain the employees’ confidence and then further enhance it to reach the true level of professionalism. Professional CSs assist in building a high level of ethical relationship that the employees should have with their employers (Riley, 1993; Kienzler and David, 2003). Weak CSs give way to different types of abuses that get engendered by inadvertent manipulation of facts and figures from both the employees and the managers at different levels in the organisational environment. Babcock and Du-Babcock (2001) considered how the clarity of transmitted messages as well as a leadership style promotes trust within organisation. This speaks for the importance of CSs for employees at the time when HR managers want to enhance employee commitment to the organisation. However, they found these CSs as the most lacking in most of the organisations at the time of their study.

Furthermore, CSs in this paper refer to four transmitting forms: speaking, listening, writing, and reading proficiency in English language. As English is the most common medium of interaction in the global business environment, the ability to use English language is an essential requirement for business people. Speaking and writing skills are associated with sending information, and listening and reading skills are associated with receiving information (Thomas, 2001). Any weakness in those skills will trigger an interruption in exchanging messages between senders and receivers, which in turn can cause inefficiencies and unsuccessful international business operations.
With regards to the emerging global business workforce, the importance of meaningful and productive interaction within the culturally diverse groups of people is an important skill for both employers and employees (Babcock and Du-Babcock, 2001). Many companies offer new training to their employees to get knowledge and understanding of communicating across different people with different cultural backgrounds such as language, religion, social groups etc. For managers who are working with different employees from different cultural backgrounds, the challenge lies in creating conducive work environments for effective and efficient business performance.

Learning and acquiring the ability to use English language skills are sometimes related to the concerned individual’s perception of English culture in terms of its acceptance. In other words, if a person from different cultural background resists accepting the cultural values of the one he is communicating with, he will progress more slowly in gaining sufficient CSs. In other word, one reason to learn foreign language for most of the people is deepen their understanding of the culture, nation and the people of that language; in fact, cultural alignment expedites the process of learning or increasing CSs. Therefore, the importance of the culture and cultural values in intensifying CSs for students in particular can be gauged by understanding whether or not the students like the cultural values (Valerie, 1999). The impact of culture on CSs requires deep investigation on a different level of contemporary research.

3 Cultural values – Hofstede theory

Culture is a set of homogeneous elements that gives specific identity to its members who vary from society to society. Cultural values are at the core of cultural identities which are affected by elements such as language, law, race, custom, and ritual. Different cultural values construct cultural forms inside of every society. In almost all cultural settings, an appropriate cultural relationship must exist among different parties with different cultural backgrounds before starting to have any relationships such as business. One of the most remarkable researchers in contemporary cultural studies is Hofstede. His cross-cultural research – an IBM multinational company-wide study – was an analytical framework of differences between countries in terms of cultural values among the employees (Migliore, 2011). It has to be noted that Hofstede’s study has enjoyed considerable attention by different fields of study. Despite some current criticism, his study has been cited in nearly 600 studies only from 1981–1992 (Sudarwan and Fogarty, 1996). He defined culture as: “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (1997, p.5).

Some studies (for example, see Alkailani et al., 2012; Karen and Barbuto, 2005; Yoo, 2014) measured how Hofstede cultural values can persuade students’ knowledge at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

He had defined cultural differences at four different levels – symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. There, he argued that values are the most difficult part to explain, “Values are broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others” [Hofstede, (1997), p.8]. Values are perceived to be at the core of cultural differences within different societies, and they evoke different feelings and perceptions. “Feelings that are often unconscious and rarely discussable cannot be observed” [Pratt and Beaulieu, (1992), p.668]. Thus, values are specific modes of conduct that are preferred by the individuals and also the society, of which they are members. Thus, different values, or shared values within
national boundaries, have the potential to promote and sustain significant differences in social behaviour and social interaction such as business practices. Different cultural values create cultural divergence which is the main subject of most of the studies on culture. Cultural diversity is very popular in many societies and is a central concern for having efficacious cross-cultural communications through moderating its complexity (Valerie, 1999).

Hofstede (1980) had identified a set of distinct contrasting (opposite) dimensions of cultural patterns. This study focuses only on individualism versus collectivism, strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance, large versus small power distance, and masculinity versus femininity. Karen and Barbuto (2005) investigated Hofstede’s study in the form of an original exercise developed to apply his cultural dimensions to create simulated subcultures within a multinational organisation. According to Migliore (2011, p.39): “Most significant about Hofstede’s research is its foundational framework of … the cultural dimensions for analyzing a culture and correlations between the …[model] which has renewed interest among psychologists in the relationship between personality and culture”.

Hofstede’s work could potentially be used as a sound theory for measuring cultural values in many social studies. That is why it has become the foundation for dominant cultural paradigm since 1980, remaining a significant research work to the present, including our study. The next sections will explain his theory in details.

3.1 Individualist versus collectivist cultures

According to Hofstede (1980), individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive groups, which throughout their lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (p.51). From this view, human relationships should be different in term of social benefits in collectivist and individualist societies. By extending cultural values to the current global business or globalisation, these values certainly affect business environment by affecting business performances. Morris et al. (1994) stated that their findings for three countries indicated that this individualism-collectivism is a vital aspect in understanding entrepreneurial performance of the firms.

3.2 Power distance

Power distance (PD) can be defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that the power is distributed unequally. ‘Institutions’ are the basic elements of society like family, school, and community; ‘organisations’ are the places where people work. Small PD societies ascribe with the large middle class; members of society have equal rights; there is a small income differential in society through the tax system; use of power is legitimised on the criteria of good and bad; a pluralist government is formed based on outcomes of majority votes; furthermore, the prevailing religions and philosophical systems stress on equality. The comparative study between prosperous business performances in the Western culture and countries with their own PD scales under the Hofstede study and those of the developing and emerging economies is a point of investigation.
3.3 Uncertainty avoidance

Hofstede (1997) defined uncertainty avoidance (UA) with its polarisation – weak and strong by observing, “UA can, therefore, be defined as the extent to which the member of a culture feels threatened by uncertain or unknown situations” (p.113). This feeling is, among other things, expressed through nervous stress and a need for predictability: a need for written and unwritten rules. A weak-type UA society is described as the one in which uncertainty is a normal feature of life, and each day is accepted as it comes; aggression and emotions should not be shown; people are comfortable in ambiguous situations and with unfamiliar risks; citizen’s protest is acceptable, and as for human rights, nobody is persecuted for his beliefs; furthermore, there is a low level of stress and a heightened sense of well-being among people. Venaik and Brewer (2010) compared the UA dimension of national culture of Hofstede to resolve the contradictions between and within different countries to help cross-cultural researchers develop more robust theories and more practical recommendations in international business management.

Venaik and Brewer (2010) suggested that those researchers who use the Hofstede UA index to represent the ‘stress’ dimension of UA, should consider two scores to characterise Global UA practices: rule orientation practices and aspirations of societies. Also, researchers should “…refrain from ascribing meaning and significance to the UA construct beyond the scope of its measurement in respective culture models” (p.1315).

3.4 Masculinity versus femininity – gender preference

Hofstede (1997) defined masculinity as related to societies in which gender roles are clearly distinctive. That is, men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. Femininity pertains to societies in which social gender roles overlap (i.e., both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life) (pp.82–83).

4 Culture and CSs

The influence of culture on CSs is confounded due to many integrated issues however causes and effects of culture and CSs on each other are closely connected (Gadacz, 2003). Cultures are shaped through different communication constituents (Knotts and Thibodeaux, 1992). In other words, communication is created as well as shared with cultural characteristics such as customs, values, belief, rules, rituals, and even laws (Best and Lynch, 2006). If individuals and organisations share same cultural values, they try to establish the relationships with other groups, organisations, and other parts of society through communicating to achieve their goals and needs. Accordingly, cultures are produced by the social interaction of communication mechanisms.

Cultural and social values are affected by communication of human interactions through enhancing knowledge and collecting notions during different stages or work experiences, developing eagerness to care for complicated problems, and expanding analytical and technical skills. The importance of culture on CSs to apply and transfer human knowledge and experience in our workplaces, customs, ceremonies, and social events should not be underestimated. If this transfer is successful, then this acts as an
important factor in increasing the prosperity of the enterprises by having positive effects on a society’s economy. This requires a thorough investigation of the characteristics of cultures and languages so that academic students should be equipped with enhanced CSs even if English language is not their mother language.

Knotts and Thibodeaux (1992) discussed the effects of culture on CSs from the global perspective. They assumed that majority of present workplaces may be considered culturally underprivileged due to lack of enough experience and training rooted in the diverse cultural backgrounds of workers. An international workforce may not be able to apply proper English grammar, English language structure, and even language reasoning.

There is a shift in workplace from cross-cultural communication competence to universal communication (Valerie, 2007). It has been argued that despite having cultural differences, there is a strong element of certain fundamental skills that govern all the communication patterns irrespective of cultural diversities, and these skills include interpersonal ability, eloquence, self-assuredness, and the art of swaying an audience, to name a few (Bambacas and Patrickson, 2008). Educational institutions need to ensure that instruction includes more focus on these common areas of ability for effective business communication in the current global business environment.

Figure 1 shows the interactions between cultural elements and CSs elements and conceptualises the idea of relationship between four-dimensions of cultural values and CSs:

Figure 1 A conceptual framework of the relationship between cultural values and CSs (see online version for colours)

According to the figure and the previous discussion, the theory that different cultural backgrounds pose new communication challenges for the workplace is obvious. For instance, two employees in different locations or two different office environments with
the same language but different accents will have some cultural differences requiring enhanced communication between them. Therefore, an effective communication tactic carries the intelligence that arms both the sender and the receiver of the message, coming from different cultures and backgrounds, to connect with each other. Consequently, there will be a specific amount of uncertainty, which will make communication complex and difficult in the process. The complex relationship between communication and culture exists due to close interactive relations between these two, and also due to human behaviours.

5 Higher-education cultural theory

This section articulates Hofstede’s cultural values with the principles of higher education in the academic environments, including colleges and universities for different levels of academic degrees.

5.1 Individualist or collectivist educational environment

The first question concerns the effects of individualist or collectivist type of values and how such educational environments differ from each other according to this perspective. We define collective versus individualistic educational environment by measuring the relationship between main activities of educational institutions with the students’ work, either for individual or group benefits. That is, if group students’ performances are more important than individual ones, then we can call this attitude a characteristic of a collectivist educational environment. This educational value is a typical norm as in many educational theories, the students’ performance in group study is compared with their individual work. The following sub-values of a collectivist educational environment are developed as follows:

1. Aggregated students’ success in every academic semester and for the whole period of studying is more important than just an individual student’s success.
2. Being accepted by the members of a study group is much more important for each student than by studying independently. Group studying is more efficient than single studying, and it is also very progressive for the students’ success.
3. All the students should be pursued for top performance in every course and stage of their studies by the instructors and the academic institution.
4. Student activities should bond with group studying than individual studying as the synergy creates a way to help all students in getting high performance in every course.
5. All educational facilities should be available for all the students and not just for a specific group of students. That is, equal access to all-types of educational facilities is an essential part of the overall success of the whole student body.

The extent to which the CSs of academic student would be strong or weak in an individualistic or collectivist educational environment requires further investigation. However the possible consequences of group of individualist studying depend on the student performances in groups or as individuals.
5.2 PD in educational environment

CSs in the educational environment of societies with a weak or strong PD varies substantially for students in terms of how the educational institutions involve students with the critical decision-making issues of those institutions. Yoo (2014) tested PD for teaching in EFL classrooms in Korea found that “Coming from a relatively small power distance society and working with students from a large power distance society, it was especially important for the author to be culturally sensitive and flexible in her teaching approach to the classes” (p.177).

It can be argued that, if only the instructors and the institutional managers have the main authority and power to make critical decisions about students’ success in learning, then we define this educational-institution’s environment as of large PD. That is, giving higher concern to students’ views about the educational and training methods would create lower PD and higher educational quality. The sub-values of a large PD are as follows:

1. only instructors should make the most important educational decisions for the educational institution without consulting with students
2. it is constantly necessary for a teacher to use authority and power when dealing with students’ issues
3. teachers should seldom ask for the opinions of students about their learning progress
4. students should not disagree with teachers’ decisions in every aspect of their academic life
5. teachers should be the subjects of educational research for further improvements in educational advancements or findings.

CSs of students are assumed to be less developed and more restricted in a large PD educational environment if the students’ involvement in the educational decision-making is ignored. One reason of the limitation is that the students in high PD educational environment will never gain any experience in solving diverse educational interactions. Therefore the students will have very limited understanding of solving similar CS problems while becoming involved in such a process in future if they choose to take teaching positions.

5.3 UA in educational environment

Measuring UA in any educational environment depends on how the students’ anxieties are minimised to enhance their academic performances. That is, if the environment supports the students by guiding them in all details of the course program, regulations, clear expectations of students’ performance, then the environment creates a weak UA value. Weak UA should improve the students’ performance by creating healthier educational qualities. In fact, weak UA will minimise students’ risk of academic failure by giving them more confidence to perform those activities, thereby rendering their academic goals more attainable.

For measuring UA, the following criteria are developed (e.g. also see Karen and Barbuto, 2005):
1. it is important to have a detailed course syllabus so that students know what they are expected to do during the academic period

2. teachers have provided the students details of the course instructions and procedures to be followed during the academic period

3. academic rules and regulations are provided to the students to inform them of the intrinsic educational opportunities during the academic period

4. students have access to the details of the rules and regulations through the educational institution’s website and portal

5. all those details, rules, and regulations give more confidence to the students for performing their academic duties

The CSs of the students will act as an effective intermediary tool to help them minimise their anxiety. The hypotheses of strong CSs as creating more confidence for the students to understand all those rules and regulations to be followed during their academic life and eventually to gain them with the great academic success and achievements should be predictable. In other words, weak CSs create higher UA which, in turn, creates lower academic quality and performance for the students.

5.4 Masculine or feminist in educational environment

To measure the cultural values in educational institutions, it is necessary to investigate the effects of gender in relation to the effectiveness and efficiency in building students’ academic performances. Which gender can encourage more academic efficiency by persuading students to have greater academic achievements, and whether or not students prefer specific genders to instruct them in their academic learning process? Do male or female students prefer to be taught by the opposite gender? The following points are considered for measuring this cultural attitude in an educational environment where no gender preferences are supposed to have priority in any educational institutions:

1. classes are usually run effectively and efficiently by any instructor regardless of gender type

2. teaching career suits any gender.

3. all teachers, regardless of gender, usually have the skill to solve the educational problems.

4. all teachers, regardless of gender, usually have the ability to direct and manage educational institutions.

5. students are neutral in their preference for any gender teaching them any course(s).

The cultural issue of masculinity and femininity in education can be viewed from gender distinctions for both the learners and the teachers by justifying the CSs. A question related to the interaction or effects of different genders on student performance in the educational environment would be discussed for the effectiveness of CSs. Does gender difference cause better empowerment of the students to gain stronger CSs? Issues such as male students preferring to be taught by female and vice-versa or making a study group of the same or different genders need to be ascertained within different cultural values. In
some Middle Eastern and North African Muslim majority societies, some academic institutions create segregated academic environment for the male and the female students in order to keep them separate from each other based on the religious values. To theorise the effect of cultural values on CS by justifying the gender factor, it is quite obvious that cultural values of every society view gender preference differently in improving the CSs. In other words, we could see this issue in an opposing way by saying that the students’ cultural values have different gender preference as their instructor may experience or gain different level of CSs.

6 Intellectual capital, culture and CSs

A theoretical view is important to see how cultural values affect intellectual capital through strong CSs, for the arguments illuminate the close link among these three issues as the source for the knowledge-based organisations under the sustainable competitive stage. Intellectual capital (IC) are resources and values that are beyond physical and net assets of an institution, and they mainly depend on the development of the knowledge among the human resources of organisations. Suciu et al. (2012, p.444) said: “when using the term ‘intellectual capital’, its three main components (human, relational and organisational capital) are traditionally considered”. They also added: “Intellectual Capital implies human, system and market elements. Human capital refers to what people can do individually and collectively. The system component represents the knowledge in the firm which is independent of people and includes patents, contracts, databases, and information and production technology” (Ibid).

One aspect of every successful organisation is related to having strong IC in the different levels of employee teams. However, despite having very skilful employees, if the employees’ CSs and communication networking are not strong enough, the organisation will encounter many difficulties in achieving strategic goals and eventually their best performance. Therefore, establishing and spreading strong CSs within staff cause strong enough ICs to guarantee high achievements for almost every type of organisation.

The Hofstede cultural values contribute to cultivating or diminishing knowledge as well as enhancing or weakening intellectual capitals through the effects of those cultural values on CSs. In turn, members of society with high IC intensify cultural values. CSs make channels through different language components to create a connection between CSs and intellectual capital constituents. Differences in professional practices are manifestations of nationally different social systems. By virtue thereof, culture and different professional practices are inextricably linked. This is the foundation upon which most of the discussion of how different professional practices function in different cultures is based.

According to Goby (1999), dealing with a multicultural population of students is a concern for teachers. The most common teaching strategies revolve around the theory of standardising all the characteristics of communication patterns in a uniform way, in contrast to the reality that the whole student body exhibits different cultural influences which should be considered to be composed of individuals and not one uniform group of learners. It will be a misconception to expect each of them to represent almost the same traits as those individuals who have a wider global experience should have stronger CSs and IC. The alternative approach to teaching communication competence as opposed to
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Culture specific approach is the one that suggests analysing multiple factors such as the situation, context, and objectives which influence communication patterns. The issue with the cross-cultural approach is that it is prescriptive and does not cater to the situational and contextual needs (Ibid, 1999).

Figure 2 is a representation of the hypotheses about how highly positive are the effects of combination of the cultural values and the CSs for different genders of students. We consider a combination of collectivism, small PD, small uncertainty avoidance, and instructor-gender indifference to be a highly positive influence on CSs and ICs.

Figure 2  A conceptual framework of culture, CSs, and intellectual capitals

As the figure shows, an educational environment would have strong CSs and intensified IC when the cultural values are in favour of collectivism, lower UA, and stronger PD. Conversely, an educational environment would have weak CSs and ineffective IC in the form of human capital when the cultural values are in favour of individualism, high uncertainty avoidance and weak power distance. In a common sense, strong CSs by increasing the abilities and capacities, allow human capital to be more efficient to interact with other organisational sectors to bring greater results in form of excellent achievements. The view of cultural values into the effect of ICs on CSs would be another point of investigation.

7  Conclusions

The influence of culture and cultural values on CSs in academic environment should be investigated in terms of their effect on expanding IC of business students. Different cultural values might have notable impact on the CSs, which in turn will affect IC of students. Emerging global business environments have created working environments
involving different employees from different cultural backgrounds as well as different levels of CSs. This paper illustrates how CSs can be interpreted within socio-cultural values developed by Hofstede (1980) and their effects on intellectual capital. The emerging global business environment, which in essence, is a multicultural work environment, consists of different employees from different cultural background. This environment is the basic justification for any type of research methodology in knowing the role of culture on CSs and intellectual capital.

We hypothesised the theories based on students’ gender. We theorised that strong CSs and intensified intellectual capital would be as a result of that educational environment that their cultural values are based on collectivism, less uncertainty avoidance, small power distance, and indifference in employing educators regardless of their genders. While the previous studies support our study either in results or theory, but our study is unique in logically developing the hypothetical framework of how cultural values could be viewed in an educational environment to influence CSs and intensifying IC effectiveness. Further studies are required to test empirically our study to highlight those cultural values.

References


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