

The rehabilitation of the “nation variable”

Links between corporate communications and the cultural context in five countries

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite an impressive body of international research, there is a lack of empirical evidence describing the ways in which organisational environments influence the practices of corporate communications (CC). A cross-cultural survey in five countries contributes to closing this research gap. The paper aims to discuss this issue.

Design/methodology/approach – What makes the research design innovative is that the questionnaire incorporates both practitioners’ perceptions of the cultural context and the relevance of CC practices. The sample comprises 418 practitioners from the most senior positions in CC in the biggest companies in Australia, Austria, Germany, Indonesia, and Switzerland. By choosing a systematic access to the field the authors circumvent shortcomings of “snowball” sampling techniques.

Findings – While cultural perceptions and CC priorities vary to a certain degree, there are hardly any significant correlations between the two. Meanwhile, the “nation variable”, and the institutional settings associated with it, are more instructive when explaining differences in CC.

Research limitations/implications – A large cross-cultural survey needs to take a “birds eye view” and, as such, is able to identify only general tendencies when describing relations between perceptions of culture and CC practices. Future case studies and qualitative research could explore more subtle ways in which CC is influenced not only by the cultural context, but also – and probably even more – by institutional environments.

Originality/value – This is the first cross-cultural survey to systematically describe on the level of primary data, the links between CC practices and perceptions of the organisational environment. Since the results indicate only a limited impact of culture, the authors would recommend the rehabilitation of the “nation variable”. Provided it is understood and differentiated as a representation of specific institutional contexts, the nation variable is likely to prove highly instructive when accounting for the diversity of CC observed around the world.

Keywords Culture, Comparative research, Corporate communications

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

What are the commonalities and the differences between corporate communication (CC) practices across the globe, and how can these be explained? Is there a global process of cultural convergence and standardisation of practices? Is the “nation variable” still relevant or can we disregard it based on the existing diversity of cultural orientations within societies?

These questions are anything but new, and have in the past caused a great deal of (sometimes heated) debate, with academics providing a wide range of impressive insights based on quantitative research on the one hand, and on qualitative research on the other. However, every approach has its limitations and this paper tackles some of the main empirical challenges. Country-based case studies provide a large volume of culturally sensitive, in-depth knowledge, but lack a comparative perspective. Larger cross-cultural research designs, meanwhile, provide instructive insights about global similarities and differences in CC practices. However, surveys in some instances lack a systematic sampling method. Furthermore, when interpreting primary data on communication practices research often refers to cultural and institutional context variables from secondary sources. This results in an “objectification” of the corporate environment. Research needs to establish how communication practitioners themselves perceive their cultural environment. After all, it is their own personal context perceptions that guide the way in which they conduct CC.

This paper tackles these challenges on the basis of a comparative research design. Surveys with practitioners in Australia, Indonesia, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland collected primary data both on respondents’ perception of the cultural environment and CC practices. We operationalise variables on three dimensions: practitioners’ perceptions of cultural environments; relevance of CC practices; the country in which the workplace is located (“nation variable”). Our five research questions (*RQs*) focus on links between these three dimensions:

- RQ1.* How do CC practitioners perceive their cultural environment?
- RQ2.* How does the country in which the workplace is located affect the perception of the cultural environment?
- RQ3.* Which CC practices (areas and stakeholders) do practitioners prioritise?
- RQ4.* How does the country in which the workplace is located affect the prioritisation of CC practices?
- RQ5.* How do practitioners’ perceptions of the cultural environment correlate with their prioritisation of CC practices?

Literature review

When accounting for the state of research in the field of international CC we must first touch on the fairly wide chasm between critical scholarship on the one hand, and what is often labelled “American Functionalism” on the other. The most important trigger behind the international research agenda of functionalism was the “PR excellence” project (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). Their proponents believe in generic principles of “excellence” for public relations while at the same time acknowledging cultural diversity and the need to adapt to the local context. Authors discussing CC in an Asian context in particular have drawn attention to unique cultural dimensions which are considered relevant for the practice of CC outside the Western hemisphere. The so-called “personal influence” model

describes a culture in which informal personal relations are crucial both in everyday life and in professional life (Sriramesh, 1996; Huang, 2000). “Saving Face” is another cultural dimension that describes the high valuation of respectful behaviour aimed at avoiding conflicts and securing harmony within a collectivist society (Sriramesh and Takasaki, 1999). Sriramesh and Verčič (2009a) additionally pointed out that, along with culture, the institutional context, such as the political, economic, and media system, needs to be examined in order to understand the variances observed between public relations in different societies.

This variance has been analysed in a small number of international comparative surveys (e.g. Zerfass *et al.*, 2014), but the bulk of research consists of country-by-country studies, where the degree of professionalism serves as a (normative) reference (e.g. Cooper-Chen and Tanaka, 2008; Doan and Bilowol, 2014; Gupta, 2007; Kim and Hon, 1998; Kirat, 2006; Lim *et al.*, 2005; Mellado and Barria, 2012; Niemann-Struweg and Meintjes, 2008; Sriramesh and Verčič, 2009b; Wu and Taylor, 2003; Zulhamri and Threadgold, 2008). Well-educated practitioners committed to ethical principles and holding a strong position within the organisation are typically benchmarks for professionalism. Authors outline dynamic developments around the world, though the majority conclude what Wylie (1994) stated more than 20 years ago: “Public relations is not yet a profession”. One proposed solution to this issue is an improved international PR education, which promotes PR excellence criteria.

Critical scholars in the field of international public relations research have attempted to deconstruct the international research tradition of “American functionalism” as an expression of cultural ethnocentrism (Bardhan and Weaver, 2011; Gregory and Half, 2013; Holtzhausen, 2000; Pal and Dutta, 2008). They ask, for example, whether the idea of symmetric communication that is assumed to contribute to the “effectiveness” of organisations is indeed a generic principle of professional CC or rather an expression of Western rationality (Holtzhausen *et al.*, 2003). The axiom of CC as multi-stakeholder management has also been called into question. In some countries, the government might be the only important public (Taylor and Kent, 1999). Overall, critical scholars in the field of international CC research take a relativist approach, arguing that cultures exist in their own right. Societies can undergo various developments that cannot be measured against universal benchmarks of traditional modernisation theories. Accordingly, “excellent” PR might be an excellent adaptation to the US context, but nothing more. In consequence, measuring the degree of professionalism of PR practices in different cultures on one-dimensional linear scales would prove problematic. Instead, different ways of tackling CC reflect unique cultural and institutional contexts, which are neither better nor worse than those employed elsewhere in the world.

The salience of the “ideological dispute” in international CC research has distracted somewhat from the empirical problems of research designs. Questions we would like to highlight in this context are: where do data on cultural contexts come from and how are these data related to CC practices? At most, cross-cultural research collects data on CC practices as the dependent variable, whereas data on the meso and macro level of culture are found somewhere “outside” the research designs. It is a “nation-by-nation reporting, leaving the making of comparisons to the reader” (Tsetsura and Klyueva, 2012, p. 277). The “informed linkages between environmental variables and the profession” provide only “anecdotal evidence” (Sriramesh and Verčič, 2009a, p. 3). This can easily result in a travel-guide style of writing about cultural contexts that are outdated (e.g. referring to old scores from Hofstede), aggregated (one number representing the cultural feature of a whole country), and adorned with personal impressions of the authors living in these

societies. These country profiles cannot be traced back to the non-aggregated level of primary research. Linking aggregated data from external sources with primary data from surveys leads to speculative conclusions and fuels the idea of culture as an objectified reality cut off from individual's perceptions. In a nutshell: if practitioners are asked how they practice CC, they must also be asked how they perceive the cultural context of their work.

This raises the question of how the "nation variable" fits into an approach that emphasises the importance of individual perceptions. Country-by-country case studies a priori assume the nation to be a crucial common reference for practitioners. Instead, our comparative approach is "not to presume the nation's importance but rather to test it" (Livingstone, 2012, p. 423). On the one hand, it is often argued that in the age of globalisation and multicultural diversity within societies, the affiliation to a country loses relevance as an independent variable (Pal and Dutta, 2008; Wakefield, 2010). However, empirical cross-cultural research suggests that differences between nations remain salient (Schwartz, 2004), concluding that "the nation remains a key unit of shared experience" (Inglehart and Baker, 2000, p. 37). Thus, instead of a priori assuming or rejecting the importance of the "nation variable", we must investigate its explanatory power in the context of CC practices. A research design adding the "nation variable" to an analysis of the relations between cultural perceptions and communication practices helps to shed light on "further dimensions of difference in CC operating environments" as analysed recently by Domm (2014), who is a proponent of paying more attention to neglected institutional nation-related factors that extend "beyond culture".

Research design, data collection, and data analysis

A research design that links primary data on the same level of analysis is capable of progressing from anecdotal to empirical evidence. Thus, we operationalised both cultural perceptions and CC practices for the same units of analysis. As part of a larger international research project, we distributed an online survey in five countries which, according to the GLOBE study (House *et al.*, 2004), can be assigned to three cultural clusters: Australia, representing an "Anglo" cluster; Indonesia, representing a "Southern Asian" cluster; and Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, representing a "Germanic Europe" cluster. The respondents were practitioners responsible for CC in the biggest companies operating in these countries. We asked questions both about their perception of the cultural context (see the Appendix) and about the relevance of different CC areas and stakeholders to their work. This allowed us to empirically identify relationships on the same cognitive level of comparative analysis (McLeod and Lee, 2012).

Another challenge inherent to cross-cultural survey research is accessing the field in a way that facilitates meaningful comparisons. There are no professional associations in which the majority of communication professionals are organised; the popular "snowball technique" (e.g. De Bussy and Wolf, 2009) does not offer systematic and controlled access, either. Consequently, we decided to access the field via organisations. We assume that the bigger an organisation is in terms of turnover, the higher the probability that somebody within the organisation is in charge of its communication. Therefore, we defined our sample as the practitioners who occupy the most senior position in CC in the companies with the highest turnover in the five selected countries. We decided to use the "Orbis" database, which is the most comprehensive global database and contains a list of the companies with the highest turnover in predetermined countries.

The next challenge was to ensure an acceptable response rate. There is a global cross-disciplinary trend of decreasing response rates – a worrying trend that public relations has also suffered (e.g. Huang, 2012). With this in mind, we decided to invest

project resources primarily into efforts to contact practitioners in a way that ensured that they were most likely to respond. Each potential respondent was sent an invitation by e-mail or fax. However, to ensure success, the project team went further, by directly calling as many as 800 companies in each country and attempting to build ties with the relevant head of CC in each case in order to extend a personal invitation. While this contact strategy was time-consuming, it proved extremely successful. The online survey was conducted in the respective national languages from February to September 2013. Our adjusted sample comprised 2,530 companies, and the overall response rate was 16.5 per cent. This rate was lowest in Austria at 12.4 per cent and highest in Switzerland at 25.4 per cent. The analysed sample comprised 418 questionnaires.

The “nation variable” is the country in which the respondent’s workplace is located. The relevance of CC practices was operationalised with two item sets. The respondents dragged and dropped 14 areas of CC and 18 stakeholders into three fields, according to their relevance: most important, of average importance, and least important (see the lists in Tables IV and V).

The operationalisation of cultural perceptions was a more complex undertaking. We used item sets from the well-established GLOBE study (House *et al.*, 2004), which are refinements of Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions. The nine dimensions are: uncertainty avoidance, power distance, institutional collectivism, in-group collectivism, gender egalitarianism, assertiveness, future orientation, performance orientation, and humane orientation. We used two items for each dimension and measured the perception of their relevance on a seven-point scale (Northouse, 2012). The items for gender egalitarianism proved unreliable, and were therefore excluded. We added two additional dimensions, as outlined above: “Personal Influence” and “Saving Face”. Lastly, we used the mean of the item pair in each case as values for each cultural dimension (see the Appendix). Cross-cultural research in the tradition of Hofstede has garnered criticism for positioning aggregated country scores as objective “traits” of national cultures (Courtright *et al.*, 2011). This kind of approach is said to overlook both the dynamics of culture over time and the complex multiplicity of cultures within a country, which is another reason why our analysis avoids referring to external “nation culture” scores when interpreting differences between communication practices. Instead, we collect data on cultural contexts directly from the people whose perceptions are relevant to our research: the CC practitioners.

Before comparing means and measuring correlations, we distilled the huge number of original items into just a few underlying types. We applied a factor analysis both to the cultural dimensions and to the CC practices. Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation was selected in order to improve the discriminatory power of each factor. The KMO values both for the culture set and for the CC practice set were above 0.6 and, therefore, considered acceptable. We also checked the MSA values for each single item with the help of the anti-image test. The only item we had to omit was internal communication as a CC area. This does not mean that internal communication is not important – the majority of respondents across all societies rate it highly. Consequently, the variable itself was not capable of contributing to a cross-cultural differentiation of CC practices. We determined the number of extracted factors according to the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalue min. 1), corrected by the scree plot results if necessary. Thus, we should emphasise that we did not determine a priori the number of factors to be extracted. Accordingly, the factor analysis has been used as a multivariate statistical tool that supports inductive research designs which are not hypothesis driven. The extracted factors representing the underlying structure both of cultural perceptions and CC practices demand a meaningful “qualitative” interpretation by the researchers.

In addition to the extraction and interpretation of factors (*RQ1* and *RQ3*), the factor values were calculated for each respondent. The factor value is a variable representing the relevance of an identified factor for each unit of analysis in relation to all other units of analysis. It may range from -1 to $+1$. We compared the means of the factor values for each country. This allowed us to identify the influence of the “nation variable” both on cultural perceptions (*RQ2*) and on the relevance of CC practices (*RQ4*). Finally, we correlated the values of the cultural factors and the values of the CC factors themselves. This allowed us to identify potential direct empirical links between perceptions of culture and the relevance of CC practices (*RQ5*).

Empirical analysis

RQ1 and RQ2: the perception of the cultural context in the five countries

In spite of discussions about the globalisation of culture, significant differences between the respondents’ perceptions in the five countries persist (see Table I). The European respondents score comparably high on uncertainty avoidance, whereas assertiveness seems to be an important feature of the Australian culture. High scores for Indonesia on power distance, institutional collectivism, personal network, and saving face are typical and very much in line with existing research concerning Asian cultures.

The factor analysis (see Table II) extracted three cultural pillars, which require further interpretation:

- (1) The first scores high (> 0.5) on assertiveness, future orientation, and performance orientation. We call it “Purposefulness”.
- (2) The second scores high on institutional collectivism, humane orientation, and face protection. We call it “Thoughtfulness”.
- (3) The third scores high on power distance and personal influence and low on humane orientation. We call it “Coterie”.

The calculation of factor values for each respondent (see Table III) shows that Australian practitioners score comparably high on “Purposefulness” and low on “Thoughtfulness”, whereas “Thoughtfulness” and “Coterie” appear to be typical features of the Indonesian culture. The European countries are more in the middle ground.

“Purposefulness” can be interpreted as the underlying rationale of the Anglo pluralistic democracy, where the idea of man is the goal-oriented individual. Since “Thoughtfulness” and “Coterie” are salient in the perceptions of Indonesian

Table I.
Perceived cultural
context (mean)

	Australia	Indonesia	Germany	Austria	Switzerland	Sig. (ANOVA)
Uncertainty avoidance	3.8	4.2	5.2	4.9	4.9	0.000
Power distance	3.9	4.7	4.2	4.3	3.6	0.000
Institutional collectivism	3.3	4.4	3.5	3.7	3.5	0.000
In-group collectivism	5.2	5.5	5.0	5.1	4.9	0.020
Assertiveness	5.1	4.2	4.2	3.7	3.9	0.000
Future orientation	4.1	3.7	4.4	3.7	4.2	0.004
Performance orientation	5.3	5.2	4.8	4.4	5.1	0.000
Humane orientation	4.3	4.7	4.2	3.9	4.3	0.004
Personal influence	3.8	5.1	3.7	4.4	3.9	0.000
Saving face	3.3	5.5	3.5	4.2	4.3	0.000

Notes: $n = 317-328$. The respondents rated their perception of the cultural context on a seven-point scale

	“Purposefulness”	Component “Thoughtfulness”	“Coterie”
Uncertainty avoidance	0.102	0.281	0.406
Power distance	-0.194	-0.111	0.718
Institutional collectivism	0.136	0.716	-0.071
In-group collectivism	0.436	0.442	0.324
Assertiveness	0.770	-0.212	-0.036
Future orientation	0.671	0.109	-0.314
Performance orientation	0.734	0.245	-0.041
Humane orientation	0.225	0.565	-0.528
Personal influence	-0.081	0.120	0.717
Saving face	-0.205	0.751	0.296
Explained variance (%)	24.4	19.0	11.9
Eigenvalue	2.4	1.9	1.2

Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalisation, KMO = 0.676

Table II.
Cultural factors:
rotated component
matrix

	“Purposefulness”	“Thoughtfulness”	“Coterie”
Australia	0.58	-0.67	-0.23
Indonesia	-0.18	0.82	0.50
Germany	0.08	-0.28	0.03
Austria	-0.44	0.02	0.26
Switzerland	-0.10	0.15	-0.16

Notes: $n = 283$. Sig. (ANOVA) = 0.000

Table III.
Means of cultural
factor values for
each country

respondents, we conclude that they indicate a normative ambivalence towards the same cultural context. “Thoughtfulness”, as the positive frame, indicates mutual respect in a collectivist society in which people take care of one another. Conversely, “Coterie”, as the negative frame, perceives a low humane orientation in a critical light by highlighting a high power distance and personal networks that hold society together (see Figure 1).

As a theoretical implication, we conclude that Indonesian practitioners do not perceive different cultural “realities” to any great extent when they tend either towards “thoughtfulness” or “coterie”. Instead, they interpret the same observations by highlighting either positive or critical aspects. The application of “reversed signs” to the same context creates different cultural frames. Thus, future research could transfer additive lists of cultural dimensions into more complex framing models, to account for the judgmental dialectics of cultural perceptions.

RQ3 and RQ4: relevance of CC practices in the five countries

Overall, media relations is the most important area of CC in all countries (see Table IV). Internal communication also rates highly with scores between 67.9 per cent in Indonesia and 87.8 per cent in Germany. With a few exceptions, the European countries set similar priorities. Stakeholder management and issues management are less important than in Australia and Indonesia. This could be related to language, as these

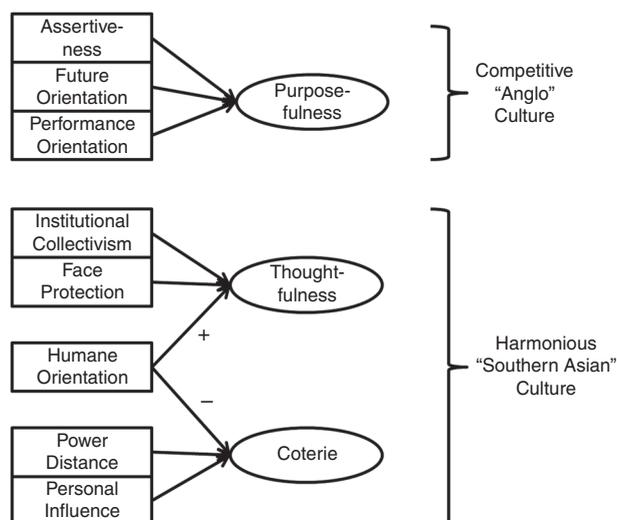


Figure 1.
Structure of
cultural pillars

	Australia	Indonesia	Germany	Austria	Switzerland	Sig. (χ^2)
Media relations	79.9	85.7	97.3	91.7	88.2	0.014
Internal communication	77.2	67.9	87.8	85.0	81.4	0.015
Crisis communication	60.8	69.1	61.1	50.9	39.8	0.002
Issues management	64.6	65.5	37.3	38.0	41.6	0.000
Internet/social media communication	39.2	47.3	50.0	44.1	47.0	0.473
Government relations/public affairs/ Lobbying	48.7	63.2	37.3	26.0	36.5	0.000
Investor relations	45.2	64.9	36.5	29.2	35.7	0.001
Stakeholder management	68.0	50.9	32.8	36.5	24.0	0.000
Media production	17.3	25.9	27.5	33.9	34.9	0.059
Event management	18.2	24.1	30.6	33.3	30.6	0.217
Community relations	30.3	29.1	16.7	18.8	13.7	0.005
Media training/briefing/coaching	18.2	27.3	15.4	18.2	15.0	0.070
Sponsorship	14.5	9.3	6.8	22.8	13.6	0.033
Fundraising	1.4	7.4	0.0	0.0	3.3	0.001

Table IV.
Amount of most
important corporate
communication areas
(in per cent)

Notes: $n = 329-388$. The respondents rated each area either as most important, of average importance, or least important. The table indicates the amount of respondents who rated the respective area as most important

are established professional terms in the Anglo world but not so much in Central Europe. What is special about Indonesia is that there is a strong focus both on political communication items and on investor relations.

Accordingly, Indonesian practitioners focus more than their colleagues in the other countries on the government/parliament and public administration as political stakeholders, and on Stockholders/Investors (see Table V). Competitors also scores higher than in the other countries.

Overall, employees, customers, and print media are the most important stakeholders. Surprisingly, activists and NGOs rank very low. This is at odds with a

	Australia	Indonesia	Germany	Austria	Switzerland	Sig. (χ^2)
Employees	94.7	84.9	91.3	94.8	83.6	0.186
Customers	85.1	92.2	79.7	91.4	80.4	0.365
Print media	67.1	72.7	91.2	84.5	78.4	0.004
Broadcast media	48.7	67.3	61.5	63.0	57.8	0.032
Stockholders/investors	54.2	85.2	47.6	40.4	49.0	0.000
General public	26.7	46.4	70.6	62.1	57.3	0.000
Online media/social media	43.2	56.4	52.4	51.8	41.7	0.339
Government/Parliament	56.2	63.0	20.0	27.5	32.7	0.000
Suppliers	33.3	34.0	21.9	41.5	25.0	0.225
Local communities	27.0	25.0	25.4	25.5	21.8	0.055
Public administration	14.1	33.3	11.3	23.5	26.9	0.008
Competitors	16.7	39.2	9.5	15.4	14.0	0.000
Industry associations	29.2	26.4	8.1	11.5	10.9	0.000
Academia/experts	5.5	8.0	10.8	18.9	13.1	0.000
Political parties	18.1	0.0	14.1	5.9	9.2	0.004
Trade unions	14.1	11.8	9.5	6.1	8.4	0.126
Activist groups/non-governmental organisations	11.0	11.8	11.3	7.8	5.2	0.100
Legal institutions/courts	1.4	17.6	1.7	4.3	0.0	0.000

Notes: $n = 321\text{-}368$. The respondents rated each stakeholder either as most important, of average importance, or least important. The table indicates the amount of respondents who rated the respective stakeholder as most important

Table V.
Amount of most important corporate communication stakeholders (in per cent)

certain “textbook reality” of public relations, according to which active publics constitute the greatest challenge for large corporations. In the European countries, for example, the focus is much more on the mass media and the general public.

The factor analysis including both the CC areas and the stakeholders reveals four basic role orientations (see Table VI). Again, the inductive approach requires the allocation of theoretically meaningful “labels”:

- an orientation towards politics: government/parliament, public administration, activists/non-governmental organisations, and political parties, as stakeholders, and government relations/public affairs/lobbying, as a CC area, load high on this factor;
- an orientation towards the media: print media, broadcast media, online media, and social media, and the general public, as stakeholders, and media relations and internet/social media communication, as CC areas, load high on this factor;
- an orientation towards the market: competitors, suppliers, and customers, as stakeholders, load high on this factor; and
- an orientation towards investors: stockholders/investors, as stakeholders, and investor relations, as a CC area, load high on this factor.

We interpret the four extracted factors as different stages of openness towards the institutional environment (see Figure 2). The corporation that cares only about investors as the owners of the organisation has the narrowest perspective. This type is not willing (or does not need) to take care of other stakeholders. The market orientation includes a larger number of stakeholders, like customers, competitors, and suppliers, but they still remain in the realm of the economic system. The remaining two types

		Component			
		“Politics”	“Media”	“Market”	“Investors”
<i>Stakeholders</i>					
	Government/parliament	0.786	-0.018	-0.147	0.101
	Public administration	0.586	0.046	0.047	-0.037
	Competitors	0.080	-0.031	0.572	0.070
	Employees	0.105	-0.045	0.357	-0.069
	Stockholders/investors	0.050	0.001	0.101	0.752
	Print media	-0.037	0.786	-0.134	0.056
	Broadcast media	0.185	0.720	-0.190	0.115
	Online media/social media	-0.086	0.709	0.079	-0.125
	Suppliers	-0.153	-0.198	0.663	0.026
	Customers	-0.052	-0.087	0.529	-0.019
	Academia/experts	-0.030	0.336	0.442	-0.085
	Trade unions	0.305	0.142	0.382	0.256
	Industry associations	0.347	-0.102	0.408	0.144
	Activist groups/non-governmental organisations	0.527	0.300	0.038	0.033
	Local communities	0.454	0.158	0.131	-0.142
	Political parties	0.593	-0.011	-0.119	-0.191
	Legal institutions/courts	0.450	0.009	0.246	0.174
	General public	0.188	0.530	-0.121	-0.278
<i>CC areas</i>					
	Media relations	0.094	0.603	-0.147	0.094
	Government relations/public affairs/lobbying	0.708	-0.069	-0.123	0.142
	Internet/social media communication	-0.149	0.538	0.234	-0.283
	Media production	-0.252	0.367	0.381	-0.130
	Investor relations	0.034	0.009	0.085	0.802
	Crisis communication	0.318	0.470	-0.105	0.233
	Sponsorship	0.212	-0.009	0.113	-0.435
	Fundraising	0.322	0.001	0.349	0.056
	Event management	-0.078	0.036	0.343	-0.375
	Issues management	0.433	0.233	-0.127	0.319
	Community relations	0.432	0.039	0.168	-0.020
	Stakeholder management	0.385	-0.175	0.146	0.461
	Media training/briefing/coaching	0.263	0.388	0.242	0.096
	Explained variance	13.9	10.7	8.0	6.4
	Eigenvalue	4.3	3.3	2.5	2.0
Table VI. Corporate communication practice factors: rotated component matrix	Notes: Extraction method: principal component analysis; rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalisation, KMO = 0.744				

open up to society with an orientation either towards politics or towards the media. Theoretically, we conclude that respondents primarily make sense of their work and expectations regarding their work by applying an institutional lens: the institutional logic of the market is distinguished from the institutional logic of the political system or the media system.

The factor loads indicate instructive differences between countries (see Table VII). The media orientation in Australia is less salient than in the other countries. For Indonesia, we again see a kind of double profile: a focus on politics on the one hand, and a focus on the market and investors on the other hand. Both orientations are less important in the European countries. In Germany especially the media play a more important role.

The Indonesian results are in line with literature arguing that public relations in developing countries is rooted in political nation-building efforts (Van Leuvan, 1996; Taylor and Kent, 1999). Due to its power, the government still deserves most of the attention. However, at the same time, and especially in Asian societies, we see a commercialisation of public life (Gregory and Half, 2013) pushing public relations concomitantly towards a marketing understanding of communication. Such concurrence of political and market orientations in CC is not contradictory since political and business elites very much act within the same power sphere that controls large parts of the media system. Accordingly, Hou and Zhu (2012, p. 923) characterise public relations in China as “hybrid propaganda and market oriented business communication”. This might also hold true for Indonesia, facilitated at the expense of an independent public sphere guaranteed by a free media system. Respondents from Germany show the strongest media orientation, whereas the lowest scores are among Australian practitioners. This divergence confirms different theoretical understandings of the public sphere (Verčič, 2013). In Germany, the term “*Öffentlichkeit*” is understood more as a societal entity with its own unique logic, created and maintained primarily by the mass media. This is not in line with the pluralistic concepts of Anglo cultures, where the public sphere is just another marketplace populated by diverse publics in competition with one another. In such a setting, a soft news-oriented media system loses relevance for CC.

RQ5: links between perceptions of culture and CC practices

Finally, we correlated the three extracted cultural pillars with the four extracted CC orientations (see Table VIII). The links are weak. The strongest is the perception of a “thoughtful” cultural context correlating with a “market” orientation in CC. This is counterintuitive because “Thoughtfulness” was determined by institutional collectivism, humane orientation, and saving face, and not so much by market values, such as future orientation or performance orientation. Perhaps it is the case that the commercialisation process, especially in Indonesia, cuts people off from cultural



Figure 2.
Structure of corporate communication orientations

	“Politics”	“Media”	“Market”	“Investors”
Australia	0.28	-0.52	-0.07	0.17
Indonesia	0.68	0.15	0.51	0.63
Germany	-0.32	0.39	-0.27	-0.20
Austria	-0.32	0.14	0.20	-0.34
Switzerland	-0.25	0.04	-0.18	-0.21

Notes: *n* = 295. Sig. (ANOVA) = 0.000

Table VII.
Means of corporate communication practice factor values for each country

values, despite the fact that practitioners still fly the flag for those very values. This could explain cross-cultural similarities in CC practices that are driven by globalisation, which, to a certain extent, hover above persistent traditional values (Inglehart and Baker, 2000). In any case, we have to acknowledge weak correlations between the way CC practitioners perceive their cultural environment and the way they prioritise CC areas and stakeholders. Ultimately, the “nation variable” does make a difference, while the perceptions of culture make barely any difference at all.

Summary and conclusions

The impact of culture on CC received considerable attention in international research. Our comparative survey involves 418 respondents holding the most senior CC posts at the biggest companies in Australia, Indonesia, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. It takes a novel methodological approach by describing the cultural context from the perspective of the practitioners themselves, instead of relying on secondary sources. What interests us is how CC practitioners perceive their cultural environment (*RQ1*), how these perceptions differ from one country to another (*RQ2*), which CC practices are prioritised (*RQ3*), how the perceived importance of practices differ between the countries (*RQ4*), and to what degree cultural perceptions directly affect the importance of CC practices (*RQ5*).

On the level of culture, we identified three perceptual patterns extracted from an inductive factor analysis: “Purposefulness” primarily comprises the perception of assertiveness, a strong future orientation and performance orientation. “Thoughtfulness” is typical for a collectivist culture with a strong humane orientation and the need to “save face” in social relations. “Coterie” scores low on humane orientation. Instead, respondents perceive a high power distance and a strong influence of personal networks (*RQ1*). Differences between the countries indicate a high degree of “Purposefulness” in Australia and more balanced cultural perceptions in the European countries, whereas Indonesia scores equally high on “Thoughtfulness” and “Coterie” (*RQ2*). Theoretically, these perceptual patterns call for a dialectic cultural model, where similar observations within the same culture might be framed with “reversed signs”.

On the level of CC practices, the factor analysis extracted four underlying orientations. A focus on investors, a market focus, a political focus, and a media focus indicate different degrees of openness towards corporate environments (*RQ3*). Again, the results from Indonesia are most instructive. There, practitioners pay a great deal of attention both to the economic context (investors and market) and to the political environment. An institutional perspective allows a meaningful interpretation: in Indonesia, the political sphere and business overlap to a considerable degree (*RQ4*). Overall, there is some variance both in the perception of culture and in the prioritisation of CC practices when comparing the five countries. However, when leaving aside the “nation variable”, we identify only weak significant empirical links between cultural perceptions and communication practices (*RQ5*). Ultimately, affiliation to a country has more explanatory power for practitioners’ actions

Table VIII.
Correlations between cultural factors and corporate communication practice factor values

	“Politics”	“Media”	“Market”	“Investors”
“Purposefulness”	0.138*	-0.070	0.027	0.108
“Thoughtfulness”	0.027	0.136*	0.209**	0.093
“Coterie”	-0.059	-0.098	-0.008	0.005

Notes: $n = 225$. Pearson’s r , * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

than the cultural dimensions themselves. Consequently, we argue the case for the rehabilitation of a reformulated “nation variable”, which is not so much indicative of a homogenous culture, but instead should primarily be seen as the representation of specific institutional settings going “beyond culture” (Domm, 2014). The empirical results show that CC practitioners observe their environment primarily through an institutional lens. They focus on investors, the market, the media system, or the political system. These institutional variables are determined to a large degree by the country in which the corporation is located. Our conclusion, therefore, would be that cultures are diverse, but that, ultimately, it is first and foremost the “national” institutional setting that makes the greatest difference where CC are concerned.

Practical implications focus on the skills with which communication practitioners should be equipped when they cross the border of their home country. There are an endless number of cross-cultural training programmes aimed at making professionals more sensitive towards cultural differences. However, this is sometimes at the expense of concrete and detailed information about the specifics of the political system or the media. Admittedly, this is a rather general practical recommendation on an abstract level. It is inherent to cross-cultural survey research and indicative of its limitations. Future research may be able to overcome these limitations by adding in-depth case studies. Qualitative comparative case studies, in particular, will help us to better understand the ways in which CC practices accommodate or interfere with specific institutional and cultural settings.

After all, both quantitative and qualitative research is required to differentiate the various constellations of institutional contexts. Future theory building in international CC could particularly benefit from the rich output in the field of comparative political system and media system research. A great deal has already been achieved and the context dimensions of Sriramesh and Vercic (2009a) are worth highlighting. However, they also illustrate the normative dilemmas encountered when linear modernisation models are applied with the objective of explaining the professionalism of PR by means of the “development” status of institutional contexts. American pluralist democracy implicitly transforms into a universal institutional benchmark that allows “excellent” public relations to flourish.

When explaining our approach, we referred primarily to the empirical problems of research designs, which are often hidden behind “ideological disputes” in international CC. Our findings on the importance of institutional contexts lead us back to these disputes since they illustrate the ways in which theoretical models and normative claims overlap. It is easy to agree to adapt to a different culture, but the issue of how to relate to institutional settings that are not in line with Western ideas of democracy, media freedom and pluralism is much more contentious. Switching from the cultural contexts of CC to its institutional contexts means entering an ethical minefield that unfolds beyond consensual notions concerning cultural adaptability. Nevertheless, provided we continue to reflect on the underlying assumptions, the diversity of theoretical perspectives and normative claims can instruct fruitful debate in international CC research.

Acknowledgements

The paper presents results from the project CCCC – Comparing Corporate Communication Cultures. It is the first project of an informal research network of communication scholars currently spanning five countries: Jochen Hoffmann

(Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University, Denmark; formerly Curtin University, Australia), Diana Ingenhoff (Department of Media and Communication Research, University of Fribourg, Switzerland), Anis Hamidati (Department of Communication and Public Relations, Swiss German University, Indonesia), Kurt Luger (Department of Communication Science, University of Salzburg, Austria), and Ulrike Röttger (Department of Communication, University of Münster, Germany).

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Appendix

The operationalisation of eight cultural dimensions as adapted from the GLOBE study (House *et al.*, 2004) and two new dimensions (Saving Face, Personal Network) is outlined below. For each dimension, two items were included in the questionnaire; all are measured using a seven-point scale.

Uncertainty avoidance

In this society, orderliness and consistency are stressed, even at the expense of experimentation and innovation.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

In this society, societal requirements and instructions are spelled out in detail so citizens know what they are expected to do.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

Power distance

In this society, followers are expected to:

1 = Question their leaders when in disagreement, 7 = Obey their leaders without question

In this society, power is:

1 = Shared throughout the society, 7 = Concentrated at the top

Institutional collectivism

In this society, leaders encourage group loyalty even if individual goals suffer.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

The economic system in this society is designed to maximise:

1 = Individual interests, 7 = Collective interests

In-group collectivism

In this society, children take pride in the individual accomplishments of their parents.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

In this society, parents take pride in the individual accomplishments of their children.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

Assertiveness

In this society, people are generally:

1 = Non-assertive, 7 = Assertive

In this society, people are generally:

1 = Tender, 7 = Tough

Future orientation

In this society the accepted norm is to:

1 = Accept the status quo, 7 = Plan for the future

In this society, people place more emphasis on:

1 = Solving current problems, 7 = Planning for the future

Performance orientation

In this society, students are encouraged to strive for continuously improved performance.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

In this society, people are rewarded for excellent performance.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

Humane orientation

In this society, people are generally:

1 = Not at all concerned about others, 7 = Very concerned about others

In this society, people are generally:

1 = Not all sensitive to others, 7 = Very sensitive towards others

Saving face

In this society, saving face is a main concern in all personal relations.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

In this society, people aim for harmony and try to avoid conflicts at all costs.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

Personal network

In this society, a strong personal network is the most important factor making things possible.

1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree

If people are in trouble in this society, they can only expect help from their family or friends. 1

= Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree