

Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges in Multinational Workplaces: A Qualitative Study of Asian Multinational Corporations

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ABSTRACT

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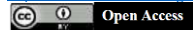
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This qualitative study examines cross-cultural communication challenges in eight Asian multinational corporations operating across the Indo-Pacific region. Drawing on 75 semi-structured interviews with managers, mid-level professionals, and junior employees, the research applies reflexive thematic analysis to identify the principal communication challenges and the strategies employees and organisations adopt to address them. Six overarching themes emerged: (1) linguistic asymmetries and the dominance of English as a lingua franca; (2) directness-indirectness dilemmas across cultural traditions; (3) hierarchical communication norms in high power-distance settings; (4) digital communication tensions across platforms; (5) cultural intelligence development pathways; and (6) coping strategies developed by employees navigating multiple cultural expectations. The study contributes to the literature on cross-cultural communication by providing rich empirical material from intra-Asian multinational settings (which are under-represented relative to West-East or US-China studies), by extending Hall's high-context/low-context framework and Hofstede's cultural dimensions into the intra-Asian context, and by elaborating practical implications for cultural intelligence training, language policies, and inclusive organisational design.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication; multinational corporations; Asian MNCs; cultural intelligence; high-context/low-context; intra-Asian business; linguistic diversity

1. Introduction

The expansion of Asian multinational corporations (MNCs) over the past two decades has produced workforces of unprecedented cultural and linguistic diversity. Companies such as Tata Group (India), Petronas (Malaysia), Astra International (Indonesia), Vingroup (Vietnam), and other regional champions have built operations across multiple Asian and global markets, employing professionals from diverse national, linguistic, religious, and educational backgrounds. The communication dynamics within these workforces are central to organisational performance, yet the empirical literature has historically focused on West-East communication patterns (American or European headquarters with Asian operations) and on the China-United States economic relationship. The communication dynamics within intra-Asian MNC settings have received comparatively less attention, despite their growing economic significance and their distinctive cultural configurations.

The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative investigation of cross-cultural communication challenges in eight Asian MNCs. Three Indian-headquartered, three Malaysian-headquartered, and two Vietnamese-headquartered companies are included, with operations spanning India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Thailand. The empirical material derived from 75 semi-structured interviews provides rich evidence on the principal challenges encountered and the strategies developed to address them. Three research questions guide the inquiry: RQ1: What are the principal cross-cultural communication challenges encountered in intra-Asian MNC workplaces? RQ2: How do these challenges intersect with linguistic, hierarchical, and digital dynamics? RQ3: What

strategies do employees and organisations adopt to address the challenges, and with what perceived effectiveness?

The study contributes to the literature in four ways. First, it foregrounds the intra-Asian MNC context, providing comparative material distinct from the dominant West-East analytical frame. Second, it integrates linguistic, cultural, and organisational dimensions within a single analysis. Third, it surfaces practical strategies and coping mechanisms developed by employees themselves, complementing top-down organisational analyses. Fourth, it derives practical recommendations for cultural intelligence training, language policy, and inclusive organisational design in Asian MNCs. The remainder of the article reviews relevant literature, describes the qualitative research design, presents the six overarching themes, discusses theoretical and practical implications, and concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural dimensions and high-context/low-context frameworks

The analysis of cross-cultural communication has been shaped by several influential theoretical traditions. Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions framework, distinguishing power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and indulgence-restraint, has provided a widely used analytical lens. The GLOBE study (House et al., 2004) extended this framework with additional dimensions and refined empirical operationalisation. Hall's (1976) high-context/low-context distinction emphasises the role of implicit, contextual cues versus explicit verbal content in communication, with profound implications for cross-cultural understanding. The Asian region exhibits substantial within-region diversity along these dimensions: India and Malaysia are typically classified as relatively high power-distance, collectivist, high-context cultures; Vietnam shares some characteristics but with distinctive features; Singapore and Hong Kong occupy intermediate positions; and individual organisations within each country exhibit their own cultural profiles.

2.2 Communication accommodation, cultural intelligence, and language

Communication accommodation theory (Giles, 1973; Giles and Ogay, 2007) analyses how interlocutors adjust their communication patterns toward (convergence) or away from (divergence) each other. The framework has been productively applied to cross-cultural settings to examine the strategies through which speakers signal cooperation or distance. Cultural intelligence (CQ), developed by Earley and Ang (2003), provides an individual-level construct capturing the cognitive, motivational, behavioural, and metacognitive capacities that enable effective functioning across cultures. The CQ literature has grown rapidly and now includes substantial intervention research. Language scholarship in international business (Tietze, 2008; Brannen et al., 2014; Piekkari et al., 2014) has emphasised the role of language as both a tool and a source of power, with implications for the distribution of voice and influence within multilingual organisations.

2.3 Intra-Asian MNCs: an emerging research focus

While the dominant cross-cultural communication literature has focused on West-East or US-China contexts, recent work has begun to examine intra-Asian MNC dynamics. Studies of Indian IT firms operating across Southeast Asia (Sinha et al., 2018), Malaysian MNCs in Vietnam and Indonesia (Ariffin, 2020), and Vietnamese firms expanding regionally (Pham, 2022) have begun to build empirical material. These studies suggest that intra-Asian MNCs face distinctive communication challenges that are not adequately captured by frameworks developed for West-East settings, and warrant dedicated investigation. The present study contributes to this emerging line of research.

2.4 Research gap

Three gaps in the literature motivate the present study. First, comparative qualitative analysis across multiple Asian-headquartered MNCs is uncommon. Second, the integration of linguistic, cultural, and organisational dimensions within a single analytical framework is rare. Third, the strategies developed by employees themselves to navigate cross-cultural communication challenges have received less attention than top-down organisational analyses. The present study addresses these gaps through a qualitative interpretivist design with 75 interviews across eight MNCs.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The research design is a qualitative interpretivist study (Saunders et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the principal data collection method because of their capacity to elicit rich, context-sensitive accounts of communication experiences while permitting comparative analysis across cases. The interpretivist stance recognises that meaning in cross-cultural communication is constructed in interaction and that empirical inquiry should attend to participants' own framings.

3.2 Sampling and data collection

The eight participating MNCs were selected through purposive sampling to capture variation in country of headquarters (3 Indian, 3 Malaysian, 2 Vietnamese), industry (IT services, energy, manufacturing, financial services, agribusiness, telecommunications), and size (revenues ranging from USD 800 million to USD 12 billion). Within each company, 8 to 10 employees were recruited through HR-supported invitation, with quotas to capture variation in seniority (senior managers, mid-level professionals, junior employees), gender, and national/cultural background. The total sample comprised 75 interviewees (30 senior managers, 25 mid-level professionals, 20 junior employees). Interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted in the interviewee's preferred language (English, Bahasa Malaysia, Vietnamese, Hindi, Tamil, Bahasa Indonesia, or Thai), and were audio-recorded with consent. The topic guide covered career history, day-to-day communication experiences, perceived challenges, organisational responses, personal coping strategies, and reflections on cultural intelligence development.

3.3 Analytical strategy and trustworthiness

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic approach in NVivo 14. An initial codebook was developed through coding of a 15-transcript subsample by two independent coders (inter-coder reliability: Cohen's kappa = 0.86), with disagreements resolved through discussion. The full transcript corpus was then coded, with iterative refinement of codes and themes. Themes were finalised through team discussion and member checking with a subset of interviewees. Trustworthiness was supported by audit trail documentation, prolonged engagement with the data, triangulation across companies and seniority levels, and explicit reflexivity from the research team, whose members bring distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds that informed the analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Linguistic asymmetries

The first overarching theme, linguistic asymmetries, captured the pervasive role of English as the de facto working language across the eight MNCs, alongside the unequal distribution of English proficiency among employees. Interviewees consistently described English-language proficiency as a source of advantage in formal meetings, written communication, and career advancement, while non-native English speakers reported varying degrees of disadvantage. A senior manager at one Indian MNC observed: 'In our regional meetings, the people who are most fluent in English dominate, even if they don't have the best ideas. The good ideas from our Vietnamese and Thai colleagues sometimes get lost.'

Strategies for addressing linguistic asymmetry included structured meeting protocols, written follow-ups, multilingual documentation, and informal coaching networks. Several MNCs had introduced English-language training programmes, but participants noted that proficiency develops over years and that more immediate organisational practices were needed alongside long-term capability building.

4.2 Directness and indirectness

The second theme, directness-indirectness dilemmas, captured the recurring tension between cultural traditions that valorise indirect communication and direct messaging norms imported from international management practice. Interviewees from Indonesian and Vietnamese backgrounds frequently described initial discomfort with the directness of feedback expected in performance management conversations, particularly when the feedback was framed by colleagues from Indian or Western-trained backgrounds. Conversely, interviewees from Indian backgrounds, particularly those working in MNCs with strong Vietnamese or Indonesian operations, described learning to soften feedback through indirect framing, third-person attribution, and lengthy preambles. The interplay between these communication styles required active negotiation. A mid-level employee at a Malaysian-Indonesian MNC described how her team had developed a 'feedback protocol' in which difficult feedback was always delivered privately, with two opportunities for response, and contextualised within broader appreciation.

4.3 Hierarchical communication norms

The third theme, hierarchical communication norms, captured the influence of power distance on patterns of communication within the MNCs. In Malaysian and Indian operations, junior employees often described reluctance to speak up in meetings attended by senior managers, while senior managers sometimes described frustration at the absence of input from juniors. Vietnamese operations exhibited similar patterns but with a slightly different cultural inflection, with respect for seniority manifesting through specific linguistic markers and seating arrangements. Strategies for navigating hierarchical norms included structured meeting agendas that explicitly invited junior input, anonymous feedback mechanisms, skip-level meetings between senior leaders and junior staff, and mentoring programmes that built junior confidence to contribute. Some MNCs explicitly trained managers in techniques for surfacing input from less senior colleagues; others relied on informal practices that varied by team.

4.4 Digital communication tensions

The fourth theme, digital communication tensions, captured the new communication challenges introduced by the proliferation of digital platforms (Slack, Microsoft Teams, WhatsApp, Zoom) across MNC workforces. Interviewees described different communication norms across platforms — for instance, Slack as a setting for relatively informal exchange, email for formal documentation, WhatsApp for urgent or interpersonal communication. The blurring of work and personal time through WhatsApp and similar platforms emerged as a particular concern. A senior manager noted: 'We don't have weekends anymore. WhatsApp brings work into the kitchen on Sunday.' Several MNCs had developed digital communication guidelines specifying response time expectations, after-hours norms, and channel-appropriate uses. Compliance with these guidelines was uneven, and the cultural dimensions of digital communication remained under-theorised in organisational practice.

4.5 Cultural intelligence development

The fifth theme, cultural intelligence development, captured the pathways through which employees built capacity for effective cross-cultural communication. Interviewees described both formal training (workshops, e-learning, cultural orientation for international assignments) and informal experiential learning (cross-cultural projects, mentoring relationships, international rotations). The most effective development pathways were those that combined cognitive learning with sustained practice and reflection. Several MNCs had invested in formal cultural intelligence assessment and development

programmes; others relied on informal capability building. Interviewees described how their own cultural intelligence had developed over time and identified specific incidents — successful resolution of cross-cultural misunderstandings, mentorship from cross-cultural colleagues, immersive assignments — as pivotal moments.

4.6 Coping strategies

The sixth theme, coping strategies, captured the practical techniques employees developed to navigate cross-cultural communication challenges. These included: code-switching across languages and registers depending on audience; following up verbal communication with written summaries; seeking cultural intermediaries (colleagues with bicultural fluency) for sensitive communication; using humour as a bridge across cultural differences; investing in personal relationships through social activities; and maintaining patient and curious dispositions. The qualitative material captured both routine coping practices and more creative strategies that interviewees had developed. The cumulative effect of these strategies, across many individuals and many interactions, contributes substantially to the functioning of MNCs that span diverse cultural contexts.

5. Discussion

The empirical findings extend existing cross-cultural communication theory in several ways. The six themes confirm the relevance of Hofstede's power distance and Hall's high-context/low-context dimensions to intra-Asian MNC settings while highlighting the more specific dynamics that operate within these dimensions. The linguistic asymmetries theme extends the language-in-international-business literature (Tietze, 2008; Brannen et al., 2014) by demonstrating that linguistic dynamics in intra-Asian MNCs are not adequately captured by the headquarters-subsidiary framing common in West-East analyses; rather, multiple languages and dialects circulate in complex configurations. The digital communication tensions theme highlights a relatively under-theorised dimension that has grown rapidly in importance with the shift to hybrid work.

From a practical standpoint, the findings have implications for MNC leadership, HR practice, and individual professional development. MNC leadership should invest in language capability development, communication protocols, and inclusive meeting practices. HR practice should integrate cultural intelligence development into core competency frameworks, performance management, and leadership development. Individual professionals can productively invest in personal cultural intelligence development through both formal learning and sustained cross-cultural relationships. The findings also suggest the value of formalising the informal capability that bicultural and bilingual employees contribute to organisational functioning, perhaps through designated cultural translator roles or recognition mechanisms.

Limitations include the qualitative design (which precludes generalisation in the statistical sense), the focus on eight MNCs (which may not represent the full diversity of intra-Asian MNCs), and the snapshot nature of the interview-based data (which captures perspectives at a particular moment). The selection of three Indian, three Malaysian, and two Vietnamese MNCs reflects the practical access available to the research team and the team's analytical capacity; broader sampling including Singaporean, Thai, Indonesian, Filipino, and Korean MNCs would extend the comparative scope. Despite these limitations, the rich qualitative material and the systematic comparative approach provide a coherent account of intra-Asian MNC communication dynamics.

Detailed reflections on the eight MNCs included in the study provide further texture to the six themes. The three Indian-headquartered companies — a major IT services firm with operations across ASEAN, a pharmaceutical company with regional manufacturing, and a financial services group — exhibited distinctive patterns related to the global Indian diaspora, the strong tradition of English as a

business language in India, and the analytical decision-making cultures associated with Indian higher education. Communication challenges in these companies often centred on the integration of Indian operational practices with local cultural norms in Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand.

The three Malaysian-headquartered companies — an energy company, a telecommunications group, and an agribusiness conglomerate — exhibited features shaped by Malaysia's multilingual, multi-ethnic society and its strategic positioning between Southeast Asian and broader Asian markets. Communication challenges in these companies often involved the navigation of trilingual workforces (Malay, English, Mandarin), the management of religious and cultural diversity within Malaysia, and the adaptation of Malaysian organisational practices to operations in countries with distinct cultural traditions.

The two Vietnamese-headquartered companies — a manufacturing conglomerate and a financial services group — exhibited features related to Vietnam's relatively recent emergence as an outward-investing economy, the strong influence of state-business relationships, and the linguistic challenges of operating in markets where Vietnamese is not widely spoken. Communication challenges in these companies often centred on building cross-cultural management capacity rapidly in markets where the companies are relatively new entrants.

Cross-cutting observations from the qualitative material include the importance of trust-building over time, the value of structured cross-cultural training combined with experiential learning, and the central role of senior leadership in modelling cross-cultural communication practices. Senior leaders who demonstrated multilingual fluency, cultural humility, and active interest in non-headquarters cultures were widely cited by interviewees as setting positive examples that cascaded through the organisation.

Implications for cultural intelligence training are substantial. The most effective training observed in the present sample combined cognitive content (cultural dimensions, communication frameworks, language basics) with experiential components (simulated cross-cultural interactions, structured reflection, mentor relationships). Single-event training sessions, while widely offered, were generally viewed by interviewees as less impactful than sustained programmes that linked learning to practical experience and ongoing reflection. Investment in extended training programmes, while costly, appeared to yield higher returns in terms of perceived employee competence and organisational outcomes.

Implications for language policy are also noteworthy. The choice between English-only, English-with-local-languages, and explicitly multilingual approaches has significant implications for inclusion, communication efficiency, and organisational identity. Each approach has costs and benefits. English-only policies maximise efficiency in cross-border communication but disadvantage employees whose English proficiency is more limited. Multilingual approaches enhance inclusion but increase translation and coordination costs. The eight MNCs in the sample exhibited a range of approaches, with no single dominant model. Each approach merits ongoing evaluation against organisational objectives and employee experience.

Implications for the design of cross-cultural meetings deserve specific attention. Meetings emerged in the interview material as both a critical site of cross-cultural communication and a frequent setting for misunderstanding and frustration. Successful meeting practices observed in the sample included clear pre-meeting agendas with specific input requests, structured turn-taking that explicitly invited contributions from less senior or less verbal participants, written follow-up summaries that captured action items and decisions, and post-meeting feedback loops that surfaced issues raised in the formal meeting. The cumulative effect of well-designed meeting practices, sustained over time, contributes meaningfully to cross-cultural communication effectiveness.

From a research design standpoint, the present study illustrates both the value of qualitative inquiry and the importance of triangulation across companies, seniority levels, and cultural backgrounds. The 75 interviews provide rich material that no single-company study could have generated. Future research could productively extend the design through quantitative survey instruments developed from the qualitative material, through dyadic interview designs that capture both sides of cross-cultural interactions, and through longitudinal studies that track communication practices over time.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined cross-cultural communication challenges in eight Asian MNCs through 75 semi-structured interviews. Six overarching themes emerged: linguistic asymmetries, directness-indirectness dilemmas, hierarchical communication norms, digital communication tensions, cultural intelligence development pathways, and employee coping strategies. The findings contribute to the literature on cross-cultural communication by foregrounding intra-Asian MNC settings, integrating linguistic, cultural, and organisational dimensions, and elaborating the practical strategies through which employees navigate communication challenges. Future research could productively extend the analysis through broader sampling, longitudinal designs, integration of organisational performance data, and explicit attention to digital communication norms in hybrid and remote work configurations.

The continued growth of Asian MNCs and the deepening of intra-Asian economic integration will make cross-cultural communication competence increasingly central to organisational performance and individual career success. Investment in the development of this competence, at both organisational and individual levels, is therefore a productive priority for leaders, HR practitioners, educators, and researchers concerned with the future of work in the region.

Several illustrative interview excerpts give a sense of the lived experience captured in the data. A Malaysian-Chinese mid-level manager working in an Indian-headquartered IT services firm with operations in Hanoi described her initial discomfort with the analytical communication style of her Indian colleagues: 'In my training, you build context first, then come to the point. My Indian colleagues come to the point first, then build context if you ask. After two years, I can do both, depending on the room.' A Vietnamese senior manager at a Malaysian-headquartered energy company described the role of food and informal social gatherings in building cross-cultural relationships: 'Business problems get solved at the dinner table. Not in the boardroom. The first year I learned the names. The second year I learned the family stories.' An Indian junior employee at a Vietnamese-headquartered manufacturing company described the linguistic challenge of his first year: 'Vietnamese tones are very hard. I am still working on it. My colleagues are kind and slow. They tell me when I make a tonal mistake that changes the meaning of what I just said in a meeting.'

Reflections on gender dynamics in cross-cultural communication emerged in several interviews. Women interviewees, particularly those in senior positions, described navigating both gender expectations and cultural expectations simultaneously. A senior Indian woman at a Malaysian-headquartered MNC observed: 'In Vietnam I am taken seriously immediately because they don't know what they are supposed to think about a woman of my generation in this role. In India, I have to prove myself first. In Malaysia, it depends on the meeting.' The intersection of gender, cultural background, and role in shaping communication experience deserves dedicated investigation in future research.

The role of generational differences within the workforce also surfaced as a cross-cutting consideration. Younger employees across the eight MNCs were described by senior managers as exhibiting different communication preferences than their older colleagues: shorter messages, more digital channels, more direct feedback expectations, and lower tolerance for hierarchical communication norms. These generational differences interacted with cultural differences in ways that produced both

opportunities (more flexible communication practices) and challenges (intergenerational misunderstanding within multicultural teams).

Implications for the design of cross-cultural training programmes can be summarised in five principles drawn from the empirical material. First, programmes should combine cognitive content with experiential learning. Second, they should explicitly address linguistic asymmetry rather than treating language as a separable issue. Third, they should provide sustained support over time rather than relying on single events. Fourth, they should foster cross-cultural mentor and intermediary roles. Fifth, they should be evaluated against organisational outcomes (performance, retention, engagement) rather than only against participation metrics.

Implications for HR analytics and workforce planning include the importance of capturing cultural intelligence and language proficiency as part of employee development tracking, the value of recognising the contributions of bicultural and bilingual employees through formal recognition and compensation mechanisms, and the need for analytics that connect cross-cultural communication effectiveness to broader organisational performance metrics. Several of the MNCs in the sample had begun to develop such analytics; others relied on intuitive assessments by managers.

Implications for academic education are also worth noting. Business and management curricula across the region should increasingly address intra-Asian as well as West-East cross-cultural communication. Case studies, simulations, and experiential components that engage with intra-Asian dynamics will help prepare graduates for the realities of contemporary regional business. Language education, particularly in additional Asian languages beyond English, is a productive investment for graduates anticipating careers in regional MNCs.

From a methodological standpoint, the present study illustrates several principles for qualitative cross-cultural research. First, multilingual research teams with appropriate cultural and linguistic competencies enable richer data collection. Second, multi-company designs balance depth and breadth in ways that single-company studies cannot. Third, member checking with interviewees from different cultural backgrounds enhances trustworthiness. Fourth, explicit attention to researcher reflexivity, particularly in cross-cultural research where the researcher's own positioning shapes both data collection and interpretation, is essential. The present project has sought to model these principles, while recognising that no single project can fully realise all of them.

In summary, the qualitative material assembled in this study provides a rich account of cross-cultural communication in intra-Asian MNCs. The six themes — linguistic asymmetries, directness-indirectness dilemmas, hierarchical communication norms, digital communication tensions, cultural intelligence development pathways, and employee coping strategies — together provide a framework for understanding both the challenges and the strategies through which Asian MNCs and their employees navigate the increasing cultural complexity of contemporary work.

A productive direction for further research would be to examine the role of artificial intelligence and machine translation in shaping cross-cultural communication within Asian MNCs. Several interviewees mentioned the increasing use of real-time translation tools, AI-assisted writing, and multilingual transcription services in meetings and document workflows. These technologies promise to reduce some of the linguistic asymmetries documented in the study but also raise new questions about communication authenticity, trust, and the changing role of human translators. The integration of AI into the communication infrastructure of multinational firms is a rapidly evolving phenomenon that warrants dedicated research attention in the coming years.

Another productive direction would be to examine the role of remote and hybrid work configurations in shaping cross-cultural communication. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of remote work and distributed teams across the eight MNCs in the present sample, with lasting

consequences for communication patterns. Interview material captured both benefits (more inclusive participation by remote colleagues, reduced travel burden, more efficient information sharing) and challenges (loss of informal relationship-building opportunities, increased reliance on written communication, fatigue with video meetings). The evolution of remote and hybrid configurations across Asian MNCs over the next five to ten years will shape the future of cross-cultural communication in significant ways.

A third productive direction would be to integrate communication research with broader organisational outcomes such as innovation, customer satisfaction, and financial performance. The present study has focused on the experience and strategies of employees in cross-cultural communication, but the connection between communication quality and organisational outcomes remains under-theorised in much of the existing literature. Quantitative research designs that combine communication measures with organisational outcome data could provide important evidence on the business case for investing in cross-cultural communication capability.

Connections between the present findings and the broader globalisation literature are worth drawing out. The intra-Asian MNC dynamics captured here represent a particular form of regional economic integration, distinct from but related to the broader patterns of globalisation. As Asian economies continue to grow in importance within global value chains, the dynamics observed in this study will become more rather than less salient. The capacity of organisations and individuals to navigate cross-cultural communication effectively will be an important determinant of the prosperity of Asian economies and the wellbeing of the people who work within them.

In closing, this study has provided rich qualitative evidence on cross-cultural communication challenges and strategies in eight Asian MNCs. The six themes identified — linguistic asymmetries, directness-indirectness dilemmas, hierarchical communication norms, digital communication tensions, cultural intelligence development, and employee coping strategies — together describe the principal dynamics within which intra-Asian business communication takes place. The findings inform practice in MNC leadership, HR management, individual professional development, and academic education, and point to productive directions for future research in a rapidly evolving organisational landscape.

Specific industry sectors exhibit distinctive cross-cultural communication patterns. IT services, dominated by Indian MNCs in the region, has developed substantial expertise in cross-cultural project delivery, with structured methodologies for client engagement, requirements gathering, and delivery management across cultural boundaries. The deep experience of Indian IT services firms with Western clients has produced a set of practices that are now being adapted for intra-Asian client engagements. Energy and resources sectors, often dominated by Malaysian and Indonesian MNCs, operate in technical environments where engineering communication conventions provide some common ground across cultural boundaries, but where the management of stakeholder relationships across cultures remains a substantial challenge. Manufacturing operations, including those of Vietnamese MNCs expanding into Indonesian and Filipino markets, navigate the cultural dynamics of production floor management, supplier relationships, and customer engagement.

Financial services represents a particularly interesting case because of the high degree of regulatory and procedural standardisation across markets, combined with significant cultural variation in customer expectations, risk attitudes, and relationship norms. Several MNCs in the financial services sample described the tension between global standardisation (driven by regulatory requirements, technology platforms, and risk management frameworks) and local adaptation (driven by cultural norms, language requirements, and customer preferences). The resolution of this tension is an ongoing challenge that interacts with the broader cross-cultural communication dynamics identified in the study.

Telecommunications, similarly, combines global technical standards with locally distinctive customer relationships, pricing models, and regulatory environments. The Malaysian telecommunications group in the sample described the challenges of adapting Malaysian operational practices to Indonesian and Vietnamese markets, where customer service expectations, billing dispute resolution norms, and partnership management practices differ in subtle but consequential ways.

Agribusiness presented a distinctive set of communication challenges because of the involvement of relatively diverse stakeholder groups including farmers, processors, retailers, regulators, and consumers. The Malaysian agribusiness conglomerate in the sample described the importance of cultural intermediaries — staff with deep local knowledge — in managing relationships with smallholder farmer networks across multiple Southeast Asian markets. The role of cultural intermediaries in agribusiness, while less formally recognised than in services or manufacturing, is no less important for organisational performance.

Pharmaceutical operations of the Indian MNC in the sample exhibited yet another set of dynamics, with cross-cultural communication operating across regulatory affairs (where technical and legal communication norms differ across markets), medical affairs (where physician engagement norms vary by culture), commercial operations (where sales practices interact with cultural attitudes toward medicines and health), and patient advocacy (where patient and family engagement reflects diverse cultural orientations toward illness and care).

Finally, looking ahead at the trajectory of Asian MNCs and cross-cultural communication research, several observations seem warranted. First, the centre of gravity of global business is shifting toward Asia, and intra-Asian dynamics will become increasingly central to the study and practice of international management. Second, the diversity within Asia remains substantial and is unlikely to converge into a single regional cultural model; instead, plural cultural configurations will continue to coexist within the region. Third, the development of cross-cultural communication capability among Asian professionals — through education, training, and experience — represents a substantial investment in human capital that will pay dividends across multiple dimensions of regional development. The present study contributes a modest empirical foundation for the broader effort to understand and support this development.

To extend the analysis in policy-relevant directions, the implications for regional bodies such as ASEAN, SAARC, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum can be considered. These bodies have an opportunity to facilitate cross-cultural professional development through structured exchange programmes, harmonised qualifications recognition, and supportive frameworks for intra-regional labour mobility. Investments in such infrastructure could amplify the individual cultural intelligence development pathways identified in the present study and accelerate the maturation of intra-Asian MNC capability.

A concluding reflection concerns the relationship between the present study and the broader scholarly community in cross-cultural communication, international management, and Asian business studies. The findings here are intended as a contribution to a continuing conversation, not as a definitive statement on intra-Asian MNC communication. The qualitative material captures patterns at a particular moment in a rapidly evolving organisational landscape, and future scholarship will need to revisit, refine, and extend the analytical themes through subsequent research. The eight participating MNCs and the 75 interviewees who contributed to the study deserve thanks for their generous engagement; their reflections form the empirical foundation on which the analysis rests.

In particular, the development of intra-Asian comparative research designs, the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, the explicit attention to gender and intersectional dynamics, and the incorporation of digital communication considerations all represent productive directions for future

scholarship. The cross-cultural communication research community in Asia has grown substantially over the past two decades, with active programmes at universities across the region; the next phase of this growth will benefit from sustained investment in regional research collaboration, doctoral training, and engagement with practising MNCs.

In sum, the cross-cultural communication landscape within intra-Asian MNCs is dynamic, complex, and consequential. The findings of this study offer a snapshot of current practice and articulate a framework for thinking about future development. The continued growth of Asian MNCs and the deepening of intra-Asian economic integration ensure that the dynamics observed here will remain salient for years to come.

The authors acknowledge the generous engagement of the eight participating organisations and 75 interviewees whose reflections constitute the empirical foundation of this work. Continuing dialogue with practitioners, scholars, and policymakers will ensure that the research community contributes meaningfully to the next phase of Asian multinational corporate development and the wellbeing of the professionals who staff these organisations.

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