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Intercultural Communication: Power distance as an influential factor in challenges in communicating with Asian business Partners

A case study of a multinational firms department in Norway

Master's thesis in International Business and Marketing

Supervisor: Paula Rice

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Faculty of Economics and Management
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Kunnskap for en bedre verden

Abstract

Communicating with those from another culture may be difficult for different reasons. Researchers have developed theories concerning different taxonomies that have proven to be useful for understanding cultural differences. One of these is Hofstede's cultural taxonomies which is much cited in later research concerning cultural differences, this thesis is no exception. The framework he presented is useful as it provides important information about the differences between countries. For this thesis, the dimension of power distance will be fundamental.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand which challenges Norwegian employees have and which influence power distance has on these challenges. A qualitative case study was conducted to understand which challenges employees in a specific firm have experienced when it comes to communicating with their Asian business partners. The case study has collected data through semi-structured interviews with employees in which has a significant track record when it comes to interacting with those from another culture and in this case, from Asian countries. The interviews revealed that employees in key positions in the firm had experiences that could be related to challenges in communicating.

Evidence obtain from the study revealed three different challenges in which employees use power distance to interpret what happens to them when communicating. These three challenges are; the concept of face, relationship, and job description. Even though this thesis intends to look at individually perceived challenges, multiple employees at key-positions mentioned the same challenges related to communicating with their Asian business partners.

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Preface

The basis of this research originally stemmed from my interest in international business and cultures in general. Having the opportunity to look into a business having intercultural relations is a great chance to acquire knowledge about how to communicate with those from another culture.

In advance, I would like to address some justifications which are relevant prior to reading the thesis. As for confidentiality reasons I have decided, in collaboration with the firm, to not use the company name anywhere, including references that pertain to company literature. The company are named “MNC” throughout the thesis, which stand for Multinational Company. The participants which has contributed with data through e-mail and interviews will be anonymized and given names. Further, this thesis intends to study Norwegian employees and their interaction with Asian business partners. “Asian business partners” are used to describe persons that work in an Asian culture and has a business relation to a Norwegian employee. Examples of Asian countries which their business partners come from are; China, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Malaysia and South-Korea.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Aim of study

The aim of this study is to increase knowledge in a field that has become highly relevant for an ever-increasing number of companies doing business abroad. Companies choose to expand across borders for different reasons. In general, most companies look for opportunities abroad because of the potential these have for expanding their business into/and developing/entering new markets. Some do it because of cost-saving opportunities and some for the potential that exists in external knowledge. External knowledge is knowledge outside of the firm, either within or outside the home country. The underlying reason is to archive competitive advantage and according to Loree, Bapuji and Crossan (2011), the ability to create, transfer, assemble, integrate and leverage knowledge is fundamental in achieving this.

With more companies striving for growth and improving profits, the term globalization is widely used to describe how the world has changed. The Peterson Institute for International Economics defines globalization as “the growing interdependence of the world’s economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investment, people, and information” (Kolb, 2019). Even though there is growing interdependence, there are still significant differences; for example, communication differences that often interrupt or create difficult situations for those who have business relationships across borders. Examples of difficult situations could be negotiations of contracts where the contributors have different understandings of the concepts used, or physical meetings where verbal and non-verbal communication differences could have an influence.

According to Rygg (2015), textbooks often used in intercultural business communication describes “culture” as the main influential factor when describing communication differences. How to behave, how to talk, what to say and what not to say are common issues for those who work across cultures. Interacting with business partners from other cultures may rise/give challenges because of inequalities that exists between cultures, some more significant than others. The main focus of this study is to investigate the differences between cultures in a business context. Ignoring culture is difficult as there are many aspects of culture that may affect different kinds of relationships in different ways. This thesis intends to look at the cross-cultural relationship between Norwegian employees and Asian business partners and

further into orientations of power distance and how it has influence in this relationship. I am narrowing it down to power distance because this is a dimension in which cultures vary and because information provided in preliminary talks gave indications that the hierarchical differences between Norway and some Asian countries is an influencing factor to the challenges in communicating.

This study aims to investigate one specific difference, which according to theory is similar in a number of cultures and different in others. According to Hofstede's research (2001), Asian cultures score relatively high and western/ Scandinavian cultures score relatively low in power distance. Understanding where a culture ranks on the power distance scale can be helpful when one is dealing with a businessperson from another culture as the differences in power are expressed in many different ways, some more obvious than others (Beamer and Varner, 2008). There are of course differences between each culture, but this thesis will focus on investigating the difference between a group of cultures that is ranked with high power distance and a culture that is ranked on the opposite end as low power distance, namely Norway. Because of the time and resources available, this research will more specifically investigate one Norwegian company that regularly communicates with people from Asian countries that are ranked as having high-power distance (Hofstede, 2001). This company is multinational and most of the communication with Asian business partners is with employees from the same company, from offices in various locations in Asia. However, communicating with persons from other businesses in Asian countries is not unusual. This thesis will look at communication with Asian business partners both internally and external to the firm. For a better understanding of the communication in the firm, a brief explanation of this is given below.

The firm in focus is multinational and one of the world's biggest in their industry. With a large number of departments in every continent, except Antarctica, they operate with regional headquarters. As with every other multinational firm, this means being present at different locations where cultures differ from one another. From Bergen, Norway to San José, Costa Rica to Johannesburg, South-Africa to Hanoi, Vietnam, the firm's workforce comprises people representing a wide variety of cultures. This thesis will specifically focus on the interaction between Norwegian employees and their business partners from Asian countries with a high score in power distance, such as Vietnam (score of 70 according to Hofstede, 2001).

Hall (1959), Hofstede (2001) and The Globe project (2004) developed theories concerning different taxonomies that have proven to be useful for understanding cultural differences. Hall (1959) in “The silent Language” showed that cultures differ in the extent to which their primary message patterns are high context or low context. A brief explanation is that high context is concerned with the use of contextual elements in communicating (such as body language, tone/voice) and low context is more concerned with communicating through language. Hofstede (2001) identified seven dimensions along which cultures vary and the GLOBE team (2004) later identified nine dimensions of culture, many of which are based on Hofstede’s dimensions.

The GLOBE project is a study of cross-cultural leadership and the focus was to understand different leadership styles and national cultures preference for these. Hofstede’s cultural taxonomy is well known and much cited in later research because the framework he presented is useful as it provides important information about differences between countries. For this thesis, I will investigate the effects of Power Distance on communication when Norwegian employees interact with their Asian business partners. There is a relatively big difference in the score between Norway and some of the Asian countries, which makes it an interesting area for investigation. One other reason for looking into this is the increased presence Asian countries have in the western culture. As a potential future employee in the field of international business, I am likely to interact with people from Asian countries. Investigating the challenges of a company may help myself and others in similar positions to enhance our knowledge about intercultural communication.

Power distance is defined as “The extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2001). With a case study of this specific firm, the objective is to understand how Norwegian employees perceive the disparity in power distance when they interact with Asian business partners. The reason for this is to understand if and how it influences the communication between people from different cultures. Throughout the thesis Asian business partners is used to describe Asian employees from the company as well as those from external firms. Norwegian employees interact with Asian business partners to a varying degree and to people from different levels in the organizations’ hierarchies.

The data for this thesis is gathered from Norwegian employees with different job descriptions and from different hierarchical levels, with the intention of capturing the “wholeness” of the

company. All of the participants have a key position at the firm, in which key position means having a managerial title. I will be looking at these employees perceptions and experiences to understand the phenomenon of intercultural communication. I want to see what happens in a business relationship when people with different cultural orientations work together and more specifically, how Norwegian employees in a firm experience communicating with those from another culture. Hofstede's orientations look at culture at the national level and not at the individual level, and that is the reason why this thesis will look at Asian cultures as the counterparty and not Asian business partners (individuals) as the counterparty.

The purpose of the study

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze and understand how individuals, as a part of a multinational company, see interactions across the different locations of their business partners and whether power distance is an influential factor in challenges they experience. This is to get better understanding of the interaction between Norwegians and their Asian business partners. A better understanding could lead to better overall communication and more effective business relationships.

With this in mind, a research question has been developed:

Do Norwegians perceive disparities in power distance to be an influential factor in challenges in communicating with Asian business Partners?

This research question mentions the "challenges" in communicating with Asian business partners with the assumption that there actually *are* challenges. This is based on preliminary conversations with employees in the firm and previous research. This study hopes explore whether these challenges are a result of individually perceived experiences which could be related to power distance. To clarify this, the participants do not need to be familiar with Hofstede's research on power distance, but this research uses the framework of power distance to investigate the experiences Norwegian employees have in communicating across cultures.

Relevance of study

Over the last thirty years, the world has changed regarding the availability of products/services. Borders are more open to movement of people and goods. There is however a difference between developed and less developed countries in this matter. According to Galor and Mountford (2014), the gains from trade in developed countries have been directed towards education and growth in income per capita. In less developed countries, the gains have been channeled towards population growth. Countries import and export goods/services in order to maintain their supply/demand, which will help economies to grow and develop (The law of supply and demand). Not all countries have the resources or skills required and therefore many countries' growth has become highly dependent on importing. The national culture of countries differ. Hofstede's (2001) study identified different dimensions in which cultures vary. The dimensions are Individualism versus collectivism, Masculinity versus femininity, Uncertainty avoidance, Power distance and Long-term orientation.

National culture does not seem to be easily affected by globalization, at least not at the same speed as the growing interdependence of the world's economies; however globalization and its impact on culture still remains under-researched (Matei, 2006; Prasad and Prasad, 2007). Spizberg (1997 p. 343) states "though we may have not become a "global village", there is no denying that the various cultures of the world are far more accessible than ever before, and that the people of these cultures are coming into contact at an ever-increasing rate".

It is important to look into what culture mean to people and how it affects our interaction. According to Smith (as cited in Jandt, 2018), culture is a code we learn and share, and learning and sharing requires communication. How we communicate differ between individuals, but not everyone assumes this. Misunderstandings and conflicts is according to Hinner (2017) the result when people assume that others think, behave and perceive the world around them like they do. Hinner (2017 p. 885) states that "culture can be one of the causes for such misunderstandings and conflicts because culture influences to a large extent how individuals perceive the world around them, what meaning they attach to what they perceive, and it teaches people how to respond to those perceptions". However, not only culture has influence on people's communication. It's also important to know that individual characteristics such as who we are, how we perceive the world and how we perceive others has influence in how individuals communicate with each other (Hinner, 2017).

People are different and communicate differently because of their characteristics. In this thesis, I am studying a firm in one specific industry, in one country and data is to be collected from individuals who belongs to the same national culture. It will be interesting looking into the different experiences and challenges these individuals has towards those from another culture. Even though this is a case study, some of the experiences and challenges identified may be similar in other companies that work at the cultural interface.

Previous research is well represented, especially with regards to Hofstede's dimensions. Conducting a case study of a specific firm that has a long experience in communication with Asian business partners could help increase knowledge regarding the importance of understanding other cultures. Different experiences from Norwegian employees may help those in similar positions (myself included) to learn from or better understand how culture influences communication. I hope to capture the richness of the phenomenon and gain in-depth knowledge about how the selected individuals perceive the disparities in power distance.

Context of the study: MNC

The company being studied is a transport and logistics company. In this thesis it will be referred to as multinational company, or MNC for short. MNC is one of the leading global freight forwarders in their industry. The company provides logistic services to industry sectors such as aerospace, automotive, retail, pharma and healthcare, oil and gas and industrials. They operate with sea freight, airfreight, contract logistics/integrated logistics and overland where they respectively are number one, two and three among their competitors. In overland logistics, they are among the top five providers in Europe. With a volume growth of 7.7%, sea freight grew more than twice as fast as the overall market which strengthened their presence as the leading global actor.

Today the MNC has approximately 82,000 employees in 1,300 locations in over 100 countries. In Europe, the MNC is present in 37 of the 44 countries listed by the United Nations, which makes them easily accessible for customers. The company has experienced substantial growth and a rapid expansion. The MNC has been present in Norway for approximately thirty years and has 350 employees in nine different locations. The locations are strategically chosen to attract customers from relevant industries such as, for instance, the

marine sector along the coast of Norway. Oslo, Stavanger, Bergen and Ålesund are the locations with the greatest number of employees and scope of work. The remaining five are subdivisions of the Oslo, Ålesund and the Stavanger departments.

The company is one of many operating nationally, exporting and importing goods to/from customers. The market is tough and highly competitive. Their global presence is one main advantage, as well their development and use of a common global data-system, which streamlines their service. The MNC is also a leading actor when it comes to development of new digital solutions to better control and monitor logistics for their customers.

With transportation of goods, using sea, air or road, the MNC is highly dependent on good communication between internal and external actors. Internal actors are MNC employees in a foreign country, collaborating with Norwegian employees on a shipment to a customer, while external actors are suppliers to a local firm (e.g. a shipyard) using MNC as their logistics coordinator for a specific shipment. MNC employees in Norway need to ensure safe and on-time transport of goods from producers or manufacturing firms to customers. An explanation of how their service work is provided is provided in chapter 4.

With a firm operating globally, several issues could affect their way of doing business. For instance, time zone differences have implications for the availability of business partners (e.g. in Shanghai, USA). The time difference between Norway and Shanghai is +six hours, meaning that the time period (considering normal working hours) for communicating verbally is limited to approximately three hours a day. Having established contact with branches overseas or other companies in different locations in a different time zone, some other issues or challenges may arise concerning communication. Understanding each other, how to behave, talk, what can or cannot be spoken about, are relevant considerations in this context.

Chapter 2: Theoretical background and framework

This part of the thesis presents the existing theory and theoretical framework on which the research question is based. Relevant concepts are defined, in order to properly explain the theory underlining this thesis.

Intercultural communication

The study of intercultural communication is relatively young, and Edward T. Hall is often mentioned as one of the first to write about how culture affects communication (Beamer and Varner, 2008). The definition of intercultural communication varies between writers. Hall's book, "*The Silent Language*", published in 1959 is listed as the first work in the field, and often mentioned as the crucial starting point. One goal of Hall's work was to extend the anthropological view of culture to include communication (Asante, Miike and Yin, 2014). Hall worked along with other anthropologists and linguists writing training materials for those posted overseas. He developed approaches and explanations to improve understanding of different cultures and communication with people from other cultures. In Hall's early work, culture is seen as primary and communication as secondary, since it is only one aspect of culture. In his later work however, he suggests that "culture is basically a communicative process" (Asante, Miike and Yin, 2014 ; Hall, 1968, p.89). Hall (1959) defines intercultural communication as a form of communication that shares information across cultures and social groups.

Samovar and Porter (1985) define intercultural communication as occurring whenever a message producer is a member of one culture and a message receiver is a member of another. Later, Collier and Thomas's (1988) define it as "contact between persons who identify themselves as distinct from one another in cultural terms". These two definitions are quite different as one is treating membership of a culture as ascribable by others, the others as avowed by the person himself (Guirdham, 1999). Samovar and Porter (1997) later refine their definition to; "the study of communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter their communication". They point out that as cultures differ from one another, the communication practices and behaviors of people will vary as a result of their different perceptions of the world. Intercultural communication is mediated by both participant sense of self as well as sense of the other and their practices.

The terms intercultural and cross-cultural are sometimes used interchangeably and Beamer and Varner (2008) refer to a distinction by Gudykunst to better understand the difference; “Cross cultural involves comparisons of communication across cultures ... Intercultural communication involves communication between people from different cultures”. Even though the terms are often used interchangeably, Gudykunst (2003) further states that “understanding cross-cultural communication is a prerequisite to understanding intercultural communication”. This simply mean that in order to know how to communicate with those from another culture, it is necessary to have substantial knowledge and be able to differentiate between your own culture and the one your communication partner represents. One could say it is about paying respect to your counterpart, investing in knowledge and getting paid in effective communication.

Lustig and Koester (1993) define intercultural communication as “symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people from other cultures create shared meanings” and cross-cultural communication as “the study of a particular idea or concept within many cultures... in order to compare one culture to one another”. This supports Gudykunst’s distinction between the two terms. The terms are therefore quite different, even though they are used interchangeably. Cross-cultural communication is more concerned with distinctions between the cultures in general, and intercultural communication is more precisely concerned about the distinction of those individuals coming from different cultures. For this thesis, the term intercultural communication is more relevant as we are looking at individual experiences which not necessarily means it could be generalized to a culture as a whole and used to understand whether if this is actually how the differences plays out.

[Intercultural business communication, barriers and communication competence](#)

Intercultural business communication is defined by Beamer and Varner (2008, p.37) as “communication by members of different cultures for business or workplace purposes”. “Business activity involves communication acts and communicators that we can study, and the field of intercultural communication focuses on those communicators and communication acts among people from different cultures” (Beamer and Varner, 2008, p.37). They exemplify that negotiators, writers of business messages, teams, and marketers generate communication acts including meetings, e-mails and reports. According to Beamer and Varner (2008), culture affects all these communication acts because the communicators are not culturally value-free.

Communication is mediated by our culture and we act accordingly. An example could be that in some Asian cultures establishing personal relationship is important in building the trust needed for a business relationship, therefore talking about oneself socially rather than discussing only the work is important. Considering a culture where direct communication is normal, this can be looked on as time wasting.

According to Washington, Okoro and Thomas (2012), recent studies have traced the failure of some international business ventures to three significant factors: lack of intercultural skills and competence, inability to communicate effectively at a global level, and failure to practice acceptable etiquette in business negotiations. The skills and competence they refer to fits under the study of communication competence, which is defined by Lustig and Koester (2010, p.65) as “The interaction that is perceived as effective in fulfilling certain rewarding objectives in a way that is also appropriate to the context in which the interaction occurs”. Washington, Okoro and Thomas (2012) suggest that a lack of intercultural competence could result in failed business ventures.

According to Lustig and Koester (2010), communicative competence is a social judgement about how well a person interacts with others. However, when the competence is achieved is difficult to assess as this is highly dependent on the context of a specific person and the specific setting and also the relationship between the interactants, the goals and the objective (Lustig and Koester, 2010). When it comes to gaining competence in intercultural communication, this depends on different characteristics of people. For example, the behavior must be appropriate and effective. According to Lustig and Koester (2010), appropriate means those behaviors that are regarded as proper and suitable given the expectations of a given culture. Effective means those behaviors that produce the desired outcomes. A situation can be effective and not appropriate or vice versa. If neither of those are achieved, a person cannot be said to have intercultural competence. Additionally, Lustig and Koester (2010) add knowledge, motivation and action as components that are needed to achieve intercultural competence. Information about people, the specific norms and the context in each culture forms individual knowledge. Motivation is about the communicator’s emotional state of mind, his/her feelings and intentions. Action is described as the actual performance of those behaviors that are regarded as appropriate and effective. Lustig and Koester (2010) state that a person can have the necessary information, be motivated by the appropriate feelings and intentions, and still lack the behavioral skills necessary to achieve competence. Gudykunst

(2001) states that intercultural communication competence increases the likelihood of successful communication and that it is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for communication outcomes.

As explained above, it seems to be possible to gain intercultural communicative competence if one focuses on the above-mentioned components, appropriate and effective behavior, knowledge, motivation and action. However, it is more complex than this. When communicating interculturally, there are many potential barriers that can interrupt or mislead the communicator. According to Jandt (2018), for a person to approach intercultural communication from the perspective of attempting to learn the norms of all cultures is an impossible task. The rules governing appropriate and inappropriate behavior are often different for each culture, and even when behaving correctly, you are likely, at some point, to do something wrong. Further, this has an influence on the effectiveness of the communication because, as Jandt (2018) states, the violation of norms would be a form of noise limiting the effectiveness of the communication.

Jandt (2018) refers to LaRay M. Barna's (1997) list of six barriers to intercultural communication. These are, anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal misinterpretations and language.

Anxiety is a body's natural response to stress, and when not knowing what to expect to do, it is only natural to focus on that specific feeling and not be present in the communication transaction. The feeling of being out of place and uncomfortable takes so much of the attention that it is difficult to sustain the focus needed (Jandt, 2018). Assuming similarity between how you communicate and how someone from a different culture communicates could result in missing out on important differences that further can interrupt the information flow. According to Jandt (2018), assuming difference instead of similarity however, can lead to one not recognizing the important things that cultures share in common.

The third barrier presented is ethnocentrism, which is described by Jandt (2018) as negatively judging aspects of another culture by the standards of one's own culture. Believing in the superiority of one's own culture, is ethnocentric. Cultural nearsightedness is, according to Jandt (2018), a less extreme form of ethnocentrism and can be described as taking one's own

culture for granted and neglecting other cultures. Cultural nearsightedness often results in assumptions that simple things are the same everywhere (Jandt, 2018).

The next barrier to intercultural communication is stereotyping and prejudice. Stereotypes are judgements made on the basis of a group membership (Jandt, 2018). Beamer and Varner (2005) states that one way of understanding our own culture, as well as another, is to use mental categories to represent groups and that these categories are often called stereotypes. According to Jandt (2018, p.45), stereotypes are harmful because they impede communication in at least four ways.

- They cause us to assume that a widely held belief is true when it may not be.
- Continued use of the stereotype reinforces the belief.
- Stereotypes impede communication when they cause us to assume that a widely held belief is true of any one individual.
- The stereotype can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the person stereotyped.

Nonverbal misinterpretations are concerned with hand signals and bodily expressions. Many of such expressions vary from different cultures and when people don't speak the same language, many resorts to hand gestures to communicate (Jandt, 2018). Hand gestures is not universal, and a firm handshake would for example not be appropriate in many eastern countries where bowing is more appropriate way of greeting each other.

Language is the last barrier presented by Jandt (2018). As with nonverbals, language differ greatly and there is an estimated of 7100 languges spoken today in which all has unique sound, words and structures (Jandt, 2018). Jandt (2018) refers to two different ways in which language affects intercultural communication. The first is translation problems (when the full meaning is not shared), and the second is linguistic imperialism (when the use of a particular language is forced on a people by those with more power).

Culture, in the meaning of national culture is frequently used as the main influential factor when communication differences are explained (Rygg, 2015). Rygg (2015) mentions some theories that explain value preferences and communicative norms as a result of someone's national/regional culture. These are Hall (1990), Hofstede (2001) and the GLOBE project (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta, 2004).

Rygg (2015) states that the theories of Hall (1990), Hofstede (2001) and House et.al (2004) portray Japan and Scandinavian countries as cultural opposites. A table of high and low context countries is listed in Jandt (2018) and examples of such are high context countries: China, Japan, Korea, American Indian and most Latin American cultures, and low-context countries: Switzerland, Germany, North America and Nordic states. According to Jandt (2018), High-context societies tend to be more hierarchical. For example, East-Asian cultures have long established cultural approaches to showing respect to elders (Sung and Dunkle, 2009). Elderly people are highly respected in Korea and in China, for example, children often care for their parents in old age. This can also be applied to a business context, where the hierarchy is more about the distinction between employer and employee and their relationship. High context countries, such as Japan, have a culture in which messages are multilevel and implicit. In low context, the messages are spelled out fully, clearly, and precisely (Beamer and Varner, 2008). This difference could result in difficulties at the workplace. In a business context, an employee in a high context culture may not express himself with words even though he is angry or frustrated. They are more likely to respect the hierarchal difference and will try to avoid losing face or cause those higher in the hierarchy to lose face. Erving Goffman (1967) defined face as the favorable social impression that a person wants others to have of him or her. This concept will be described in more detail later on. In a low context country, the employee will most likely express themselves and put thoughts into words as they tend to think that their thoughts will not be understood correctly or completely if not in words (Beamer and Varner, 2008). If high context societies tend to be more hierarchical (Jandt, 2018), this idea can be transferred to the dimensions presented by Hofstede (2001), especially power distance where followers (employees) are expected to obey their leaders without question.

Geert Hofstede's studies on cultural differences offers another approach to understanding these. His approach is based on the assertion that people carry mental programs, or "software of the mind," that are developed during childhood and are reinforced by their culture (Lustig and Koester, 2010). Hofstede located value dimensions across which cultures vary. As presented in chapter "relevance of the study", his research identified five dimensions; power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long term versus short term orientation to time. Later, two additional dimensions were added: indulgence versus restraint and monomentalism versus self-effacement. Power distance refers to the distribution of influence within a culture,

masculinity-femininity describes a culture's dominant values as assertive or nurturing, individualism-collectivism describes cultures from loosely structured to tightly integrated and uncertainty avoidance reflects a culture's tolerance of ambiguity and acceptance of risk (Jandt, 2018).

Power Distance

The term, power distance, is adopted from Mauk Mulders, who was also a Dutch social psychologist. His research (1977) was based on numerous laboratory and field experiments with simple social structures. The field experiments examined the emotional distance that separates subordinates from their bosses (Khatri, 2009). Mulder (1977) defined power distance as "the degree of inequality in power between a less powerful individual and a more powerful other; in which individual and other belong to the same social system (p.90). Hofstede extended this definition to a broader cultural concept. His definition (1997) of power distance is; "the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (p.28). Those cultures with low power distance are generally less accepting of inequalities in power than those from high power distance cultures. Jandt (2018) states that cultures with smaller power distance are more horizontal, less hierarchical, and less authoritarian than cultures with high power distance. Examples of countries/regions with a smaller power distance are, according to Hofstede, , Austria (76), Denmark (74), Sweden (69-70), Norway (69-70) and Finland (68), all Nordic countries. Countries/Regions that score relatively low, and are from Asia, is for example China (12-14), Indonesia (15-16), Vietnam (22-25), Singapore (19), South-Korea (41-42) and Japan (49-50) (Hofstede and Minkov, 2010, p.57-59). There is a significant difference between these two regions (Nordic countries and East-Asian countries). In a workplace with high power distance, superiors and subordinates consider each other existentially unequal and there is often a high salary gap between the hierarchical levels of the organization (Jandt, 2018). The gap between the levels in an organization is clear and employees often have predetermined tasks that they must fulfil. Jandt (2018) exemplifies that bosses are "kings" and that employees are "loyal subjects" who do not speak out. In a low power distance culture however, the gap is more "democratic" in the way that subordinates expect to be consulted and that the leaders are more accessible. There are varieties between organizations and countries even if they are on the same end of the scale. For example, Japanese businesses assume that people know their place and will act accordingly, but the reality may be somewhat more complicated (Beamer and Varner, 2008). There are often huge

differences between, for example, small family owned businesses, which can often be very authoritarian, and bigger firms that follow the Japanese decision-making model (Beamer and Varner, 2008).

The differences between organizations within the same culture may vary, but the aspect of having to communicate with another culture is present regardless of whom you communicate with from that other culture. To increase the ability to communicate, the taxonomies of Hall, Hofstede and House et.al allow people to use culture-specific knowledge to improve intercultural competence (Lustig and Koester, 2010).

In addition to Hofstede's taxonomy, it is also relevant to include the Globe project as this builds on (among others) Hofstede's work. The aim of the study of GLOBE was to develop societal and organizational measures of culture and leadership attributes that are appropriate to use across cultures (Hartog and Koopman, 2001). GLOBE is an acronym for Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness and are mostly concerned with leadership and to help leaders to communicate effectively across cultures. The study involved 127 investigators in 62 countries/regions and the data was collected from more than 17,000 middle managers in 951 organizations. Individuals were asked to describe both the cultural practices – what is, or what people should actually do – and the cultural values – what should be, or what is regarded as ideal – in their cultures (Lustig and Koester, 2010). Two of the nine dimensions used to describe the dominant patterns of a culture are power distance and uncertainty avoidance, included in Hofstede's dimensions as well. The remaining seven either build on the work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) or Hofstede (1980). According to Leung (2005), the results of the Globe study are consistent with previous results, and power distance and uncertainty avoidance are related to the two Hofstede dimensions. The other dimensions are Performance Orientation, Future Orientation, Gender egalitarianism, Assertiveness, Institutional collectivism, In-Group collectivism and Humane Orientation. There are differences between the dimensions presented by Hofstede and Globe and Hofstede himself has provided a critical review which, among other issues, argues that the Globe study is US centric and that it fails to capture what's intended with the questionnaire (Venaik and Brewer, 2010). However, the characteristics of the dimension high/low power distance seems to be more or less based on the same criteria. House et.al (2004 p.536) presents some characteristics which is different to countries that have either high or low power distance: High power distance societies have characteristics such as;

- Society is differentiated into classes.
- Power seen as providing social order
- Upward social mobility is limited
- Resources available to only a few
- Information is localized and hoarded

Low power distance societies have characteristics such as;

- Society has a large middle class
- Power linked to corruption and coercion
- Upward social mobility is common
- Resources are available to almost all
- Information is widely shared

There are clear differences between those national cultures identified as having high or low power distance and as mentioned, the difference between Scandinavian and Asian cultures is often exemplified as such. The definition from Hofstede on power distance has been confirmed by more recent efforts in defining cross-cultural dimensions: Project Globe (Rau, Liu, Juzek and Nowacki, 2013). The definition includes *institution* or *organization* which can for example be a company, community, school or family. This thesis looks into employees in one specific firm and their intercultural business relationships with their Asian business partners. Their Asian business partners applies to those from the same company, and also those from other businesses in Asia. The Norwegian employees is a part of the Norwegian culture, ranked as being a low power distance culture. This brings us back to the term intercultural business communication which was defined by Lustig and Koester (2010) as communication by members of different cultures for business or workplace purposes.

A significant amount of research has been conducted on power distance in relation to organizations. For example, the impact of power distance on employee behavior within an organizational context (Helpap, 2016; Sweetman, 2012; Khatri, 2009) or the value of power distance in terms of the impact it has on work outcomes (job performance, job satisfaction) within organizations (Rafiei, 2013; Shahwan, 2017). Helpap (2016) looked at participatory and programmatic strategies of communication and found that the more the strategy of the supervisor is in line with the employee expectations regarding their PD-orientation; the stronger employees will be committed to a change initiative. Khatri (2009) looked at behavioral implications in the organizations of power distance and concludes with 8 different

points. For example, (1) that employees in high power distance context are unwilling to participate in decisions and are content with their managers making decisions and giving them instructions. (2) Jobs are narrowly and tightly specified. (4) Power distance gives managers unlimited power and control over subordinates.

Concerning work outcomes, Rafiei (2013) found that power distance had significant effect on the relationship between employee participation with organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Shahwan (2016) looked at the relationship and performance of employees at the workplace. He concluded that the sample supports the traditional theory regarding the impact of culture on performance of workers by having a positive correlation between power distance and level of performance.

Additional examples of power distance effect in the workplace are Yetim and Yetim (2006), who looked at the direct effect of power distance has on job satisfaction and found that power distance is prominent among factors that explain the variation in the workers job satisfaction. Zhang and Begley (2011), who looked at power distance and its moderating impact on empowerment and team participation concluded that a high-power distance culture in China is conducive for employees' team participation, but not for empowerment. How these studies are relevant for this thesis is through their contribution to the field when it comes to including power distance as a factor influencing the organization. Preliminary talks with Norwegian employees gave an idea that challenges they experience could be a result of the differences that exists at the workplace in Norway and in Asia.

One particular relevant study this thesis is built upon is *The Consequences of Power Distance Orientation in Organizations* by Khatri (2009). This research explored the impact of power distance orientation on employee participation, nature of job descriptions, organizational communication and decision-making, discipline and control, deference to senior employees, management development, and organizational structuring and adaption (Khatri, 2009). In addition to the points presented earlier, Khatri (2009, p.7) concluded with; (3) A large communication gap exists between superiors and subordinates, (5) Age and long tenure is a bigger reason than knowledge when it comes to respect form junior employees. (6) In high power distance, decisions are made autocratically by the few at the top. (7) High PD organizations are prone to unethical behavior and (8) managers tend to micromanage and even minor decisions go to the top.

The differences between a culture with a high-power distance orientation and low power distance orientation is fundamental in creating an understanding of the challenges that is perceived by the employees from a low power distance culture. Khatri (2009) states that members of a culture share certain mindset that cause them to interpret situations and events in generally similar ways, while people from other cultures and mindsets are likely to interpret them differently. Culture in this sense is a powerful force that shapes and influence the cognitions and behaviors of people (Erez, 1994 as cited in Khatri, 2009).

Consequences of high-power distance orientation

There are examples of varying degree of power distance around the world. Many of the low power distance cultures is, as presented in subsection about “power distance”, located in the West, and especially, Nordic countries are often exemplified as such. High power distance countries will be found all over the world, but Asian cultures are often exemplified as having a high-power distance orientation. At the general level, Hofstede (2001) has discussed power distance as the perceived difference (inequality) in the amount of power (influence) that a supervisor has compared to that of a subordinate. Importantly, the magnitude of this inequality is accepted (valued) by both the supervisor and the subordinate and is reinforced by their social and national environments (Hofstede, 2001). Power distance influences the levels of participative decision-making, centralization, and formal hierarchy within organizations (Hofstede, 2001). Khatri (2009) examined the implication of power distance for several organizational behavior issues, among others, employee participation, job descriptions, organizational communication, decision making and organizational structuring and found that power distance has effect on such behavior issues.

Employee participation is the process of giving employees the authority to make decision relating to their work processes and encourage them to take responsibilities for their decisions (Khatri, 2009). According to Uma (2015 p. 99), “employee participation is the process whereby employees are involved in decision making process, rather than simply acting on orders”. This will vary across cultures. Brockner et al (2001) and Gomez, Kirkmann and Shiparo (1999) show that employees from a high power distance culture prefer lower levels of participation as compared to those from cultures with low power distance values (Khatri, 2009). Additionally, Hauff and Richter (2015) state that in high power distance cultures, employees are not encouraged to make decisions and do not expect to be consulted or empowered; they expect to be told what to do and avoid disagreement. This aligns with

Hofstede's research which stated that there is a low emotional distance between superior and subordinate in low power distance cultures and a high emotional detachment in high power distance cultures in which the subordinates prefer to depend more on superiors who have an autocratic style and are unlikely to consult with their superiors.

When it comes to an employee's job description, this refers to the job they are required to do and their tasks. McKenna (1998) states that a major managerial concern in high power distance organizations is limited to ensuring that subordinates carry out their jobs exactly the way they are told, and rarely do a job beyond this. According to Khatri (2009), jobs are narrowly and tightly specified, giving employees little discretion. In low power distance cultures however, work tasks are often less specified, and employees are to some degree able to make individual decisions, which could be regarded as an attempt at being brave, future oriented and proactive.

In companies operating in a high power distance culture, the communication between the superior and subordinates is often limited. Francesco and Chen (2000) exemplify that subordinates may view their involvement in decisions by their superiors as a sign of incompetence or weakness on the part of the superior. The subordinates want to behave in a manner that does not negatively affect their superior. This aligns with a high level of emotional detachment and general level of respect towards the superior. Another reason that subordinates do not express their disagreement, or come forward with suggestions for improvements is due to fear of losing face or causing someone else to lose face. Face is a powerful concept and even though it is not unique to Asian cultures, scholars have pointed out that the concern for face is of utmost importance in most Asian cultures (Kim and Nam, 1998). The concept of face in Asian cultures is important to understand for a successful interaction (Haugh, 2005). There are different aspects of face, such as losing face, saving face or giving/gaining face. In cultures throughout Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, losing face is a terrible thing to suffer (Beamer and Varner, 2008). Losing face, or "tiu lien" as it is in China, reflects the idea that when people feel disgraced, they do not like to show their faces in public. Some examples of ways that one can lose face are exposure to personal insult, failure to achieve goals, or being forced to give up a cherished value (Jandt, 2018). The result of losing face in, for example, China is more than just feeling embarrassed, an individual loses a part of their personal identity, who they are. Saving face however is more concerned with a desire or a wish to avoid being embarrassed, preserving one's reputation. The term giving

face is more concerned with increasing the reputation or standing, or as Beamer and Varner (2008) explains it, to make someone look good in front of others of the same collective (particularly superiors). Face is according to Beamer and Varner (2008) not only individual. It can also be collective, such as for a family or a business.

In relation to power distance, the concept of face is relevant as this can contribute to creating a gap between the hierarchical levels in the business. As Khatri (2009) states, an organization operating in a high power distance cultural milieu, a superior is expected to make decisions without consulting his/hers subordinates, because the subordinates may view their involvement in decisions by their superiors as a sign of incompetence or weakness on the part of the superior. Additionally, subordinates are unwilling to express their opinions openly due to fear of losing face or make someone else lose face. Khatri (2009) states that such behavior results in a major communication gap. The formal hierarchy found in organizations in high power distance support upon this as the distance between superior and subordinates is greater than it is in low power distance cultures. In low power distance cultures however, the communication gap between superior and their subordinates is lower. To communicate with one's superior is more common, but there are however some implications to this.

In the decision-making process, there are differences between high and low power distance countries. In societies with high power distance, the superiors make decisions without consulting with subordinates. Subordinates accept that the superiors have the power and they need no further justification (Wei, Sun, Liu, Zhou and Xue, 2017). Lachman, Nedd and Hinings (1995) also states that the decision making process in high power distance organizations is one of the non-participative type and hierarchal. Hofstede (2001) suggests that in high power distance organizations, decision making processes are centralized in a few hands and that the superiors are expected to lead and make decisions autocratically. In societies with low power distance however, the decision-making process often includes subordinate's participation. Employees consider that they have a right to participate in making decisions that concern them (Sagie and Aycan, 2003).

Intercultural communication differences between a high power distance culture and low power distance culture can vary greatly. One can imagine that such differences will have implications in the way of doing business across such cultures. Khatri (2009) concludes that in decision-making, there are great differences between a low power distance culture and

high-power distance. A result of low participation of subordinates is that decisions can be arrived at rather quickly and implemented faster but then meets the risk of these being of a limited quality (Khatri, 2009). In contrast, the decision making process in a low power distance society will take more time as there will be a high level of participation from subordinates. The decision could generate better outcomes if there are inputs from both superiors and subordinates. For example, employees at the operational level may have other experiences or perceptions than their superiors and can therefore contribute with relevant information. As explained, subordinates in low power distance cultures will be more willing to adjust to changes decided by their superior. A reason for this is that those in high power distance societies take their superiors more seriously and are forced to obey orders as the price of disobedience is high (Shahwan, 2017).

A common situation in many organizations is that the leaders are from a different culture than their subordinates. This often causes challenges, and according to Cassidy (2005), 10 to 45 percent of US expatriate leaders failed in their global assignments because leaders often lack the ability to maintain creative tension between two or more worldviews, which affects their ability to work across cultures. Rau et.al (2013), investigated German expatriate leadership in China, more specifically the cultural effects of power distance on Chinese subordinates' motivation and German expatriate job satisfaction and problem encounter. Germany is a low-ranking country when it comes to power distance unlike China. In the study, they found that a higher power distance made Chinese more likely to be motivated by their German leaders and further that a higher power distance predicted fewer communication problem encounters and higher job satisfaction for the German expatriates (Rau et.al, 2013). This study is an example of the importance in understanding differences between cultures. It is important to adjust in a manner that your business partner understands your intentions. Vague instructions may, in low power distance cultures give the desired result as subordinates are used to more freedom in their methods of problem solving. Vague instructions from the same superior in a high-power distance culture however, may result in the subordinates doing nothing at all. This because they need specific, clear information from a superior that knows exactly what result is required. As Rau et.al (2013) stated, the superior will experience fewer communication problems and a higher job satisfaction if the subordinates are treated as they are used to (high power distance) in that specific culture.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The choice of methodology is highly relevant for the outcome of a study because it underpins the research and data collection methods to be used (Opoku, Ahmed and Akotia, 2016). In this chapter, the research process will be presented, showing each step and its importance to the overall design. Firstly, the research design will be presented, followed by research method, data collection and then followed up with limitations of the study.

Research design

The design of the research is the choice of methods and techniques chosen by the researcher in order to handle the research question in the best way. Sounders et al (2009) define research design as an overall plan of a study that guides the procedures for answering the research question. It is about the strategy which the researcher chooses to use. Exploratory research design is the one this thesis will use. The primary purpose of exploratory research is to get an understanding of the phenomenon being studied, how and why it operates as it does (Johnson and Christensen, 2010 p. 379). Using exploratory research will be beneficial as such studies result in a range of causes or alternative options for a solution to a specific problem (Dudovkiy, 2019). Exploratory research is used as I intend to discover something new and interesting by working through a research topic. In this thesis, I will be looking at how people (employees) understand communication challenges using power distance framework for understanding these.

Research method: Case study

Yin (2014) describes qualitative research as collecting data from a variety of resources, evaluating the data, analyzing evaluations to produce findings and presenting the findings. Quantitative and scientific methods have dominated business research for a long time, but qualitative methods are growing in significance and are gradually becoming more respected by researchers (Walle, 2015). The method chosen best to fit this research is qualitative as this helps to better understand the perceptions the employees have on the selected phenomenon. Qualitative methods are used to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of people regarding a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). This is exactly what this thesis intends to do. By gaining a deeper understanding on whether they use power distance to understand the challenges, it may give some insight into potential breakdown in communication.

Having decided that qualitative methods are the best fit for this specific research, the next step was to find the best way of conducting this study.

This thesis is conducted as a case study. According to Yin (2012) case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context. Using a case study has both strengths and weaknesses. The great strength of using case studies is that there is no limit to a single source of data, rather, it can incorporate several different types of evidence, such as interviews, documents, artefacts and observations (Yin, 2012). To be able to catch the reality in the data, observation could be a useful addition to doing interviews in this research. In this context, investigating e-mail correspondence and/or observing or listening to phone calls between the Norwegian employees and their Asian business partners can provide data. Accessing such data requires a significant amount of work, especially when it comes to getting permission/access, and at the beginning of this research process, this formed part of the plan and purpose for using a case study. However, it is relevant to mention that the Covid-19 situation left its mark. Accessing information such as e-mail correspondence and relevant documents would have been possible had I been permitted to visit the office to access such documents and observe interactions. Lockdown restrictions complicated this and hence, a choice to omit such data was taken. Therefore, this thesis does not include this kind of data to supplement the main data collection method, which is interviews with Norwegian employees.

When case study is used as the research method, Yin (2012) states that the first element to be considered is the case of interest. In this study, the case of interest will be the Norwegians perception of power distance as influential factor in communicating with Asian business partners in MNC. The goal is to gain in-depth knowledge about the phenomenon of interest.

Data collection

Qualitative research has different options when it comes to gathering of data. In business research, Walle (2015) mentions that surveys, focus groups and interviews are often used because they tend to be relatively cheap and quick. Considering the time available and the ongoing Covid-19 situation, this thesis will use one of the methods mentioned above. Interviews will be the main data collection method as stated in the previous section.

There are different kinds of interview styles, from highly structured to open-ended (usually referred to as unstructured) with the informant having great freedom when providing responses (Walle, 2015). There are various formats, but some of the most common include structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Walle, 2015). Each one of them has special characteristics and different impacts on the data gathered. This underlines the importance of choosing the most appropriate interview format for research. For this thesis, semi-structured interviews are appropriate. Using semi-structured interviews, as with unstructured interviews, provides the informants with freedom to respond in an idiosyncratic manner (Walle, 2015). Compared to unstructured interviews, the semi-structured interview is more controlled by the researcher as it opens the possibility of steering the conversation in a particular direction. Walle (2015) states that this control should be subtle because it is important to preserve a conversational tone. The major advantage is that the materials are somewhat systematic and comprehensive, while the tone of the interview is fairly conversational and informal (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015).

The case

One important step in conducting research is to know *what* information is needed in order to answer the research question and who can provide this information. This research aims to address employees' individual perception of power distance as a reason for the challenges in communicating, and the focus is therefore to interview relevant employees in MNC.

The participants

The participants were intended to be employees in key-positions and the operational level, represented by three of the department offices in Norway. The main requirements of being a participant is that the employee has regular interactions with Asian business partners and are Norwegian. Early on, a preliminary talk was held with my contact person, which also was one of two informants from the firm.

Name of informant	Position in the firm	Relevant experience
Jenny	Operation – Sea, air, road, project	In contact with Asian business partner at least three times a week.

Claus	CEO Norway	Many years working in Asia (Singapore), and now daily contact with Asian business partners at different levels.
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Relevant information about the firm, employees and some history were provided. The informant has a significant track record in the firm, having worked there since the very first day MNC were established in this region. The next conversation was also a preliminary talk, but with the CEO of MNC in Norway. This second informant, Claus, provided relevant information about the firm and was also able to share some interesting stories and experiences which had relevance to my research. In collaboration with Jenny, they agreed on whom could be potential participants to interview, based on my requirements. I was provided contact information to four participants, all with a significant track record and with substantial knowledge from the logistics industry. To this point, these four were all employees in key-positions. Claus was also intended to be interviewed, but Covid-19 situation had him prioritize work and family instead. The next step was to find relevant individuals at the operational level. Jenny helped me with this and we agreed on me visiting the regional office to meet with potential participants from this level. However, the visit was later cancelled due to the Covid-19 situation. I therefore decided to omit participants from the operational level and continue with those four from key-positions. A more specific description of the employees' position will be given in the table below.

Thankfully, they were all able to continue being participants considering their Covid-19 related challenges at the time. As a result of the situation, the interviews were however delayed by some weeks and they were all conducted over telephone and with use of a voice recorder instead of having a physical meeting. All the informants agreed to this as the best solution given the circumstances. The informants are given names to make it easier to differentiate between them, and the following list provides some relevant information about them. Every participant has 7+ years' experience from MNC and have been in regular contact with Asian business partners as part of their job. One of the participants is a regional manager and the rest is managers for different sections within the firm.

Name	Number of years with MNC	Role	Contact and experience with Asian business partners.
Kristian (p1)	10+	Logistics – manager - sea freight (import)	<i>In daily contact with Asian business partners and has been on several business trips to Asia. Has many contacts in Asian countries and considers himself knowledgeable in Asian countries, especially China.</i>
Paul (p2)	9	Manager – industrial projects	<i>Key position in the firm today and have had two different positions in the last nine years. Is in daily contact with Asian business partners. Have had business trips to Asia while being employee in the MNC but has also experience from other firms. Have mostly visited China, but also other Asian countries such as Bangladesh.</i>
Charlie (p3)	10+	Manager – LCL freight	<i>Key-position in the firm today and have many years of experience when it comes to communicating with Asian business partners. Have significant knowledge from Vietnam and Malaysia and have also been stationed in both of the countries as of work-related purposes.</i>
Mary (p4)	19	Operational Manager – Regional department	<i>Significant track record in the firm, have also years of experience at the operational level. Is today in a key-position in one of the regional offices. Have not been on business trips to Asia, but have many years of weekly, if not daily contact with Asian business partners. Has been an employee in the MNC since it first came to the region.</i>

The interviews

The initial plan was to have physical meetings with at least two employees from each level (operational and key position). As mentioned earlier, the data collection was affected by Covid-19 situation and this resulted in some changes in the initial plan. The restrictions, change of workplace (office to home-office) and changes in daily routines for many employees made things difficult and some changes were therefore needed.

A couple of weeks before the interviews, I sent an information letter to the participants with description and information about the thesis in general, the research question and information about recording and saving of personal data (see appendix 3). Every interview was conducted by telephone and was recorded using a computer. Afterwards, the data was saved in a secure, private file, that was only accessible to me. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian as this is the first language for both myself and my informants. The length of the interviews varied between 20 and 50 minutes for different reasons. For example, due to the demands of mixing the home office with lockdown family life, or due to a sudden increase in workload. However, I was pleased that every participant was able to contribute given the situation and informants were eager to share their experience and stories. As explained in the section “Data Collection”, the interview method used was semi-structured as this made it possible for the participants to speak more freely about their experience. However, in order to stay within the relevant subject of interest, an interview guide was formed (Appendix 2). Some interviews were more dependent on me following this guide than others, as some of the participants were more open about their experiences. Some talked about issues that went beyond my interest for this research and the interview guide helped me keep some control of the interview. When findings are presented later on, some quotations will be presented. These were originally in Norwegian, but have been translated to English.

Secondary data

Secondary data is data that has a different original purpose than that of the current research. This thesis has used books, published articles and websites to get a better overview of the company, its industry and additionally to have a theoretical perspective on the relevant topic of intercultural communication.

Data analysis

Both the primary and secondary needs to be analyzed and understood before it can be used to help answer the research question. Using a tape recorder for the interviews made it possible to collect all the information that was shared. Notes were taken during interviews to help attain control over the interview and for example, be able to ask follow-up questions.

Limitations

It is important to note that this research is not without limitations. The aim of the study is to use the framework of power distance to analyze how Norwegian employees see interactions with different Asian business partners and to what extent it is an influencing factor in communication. This gives other employees and MNC a better understanding of how to deal with the matter of communication differences as a reason for different cultural backgrounds in their business partners. Since it is a case study of one specific firm, it is not necessarily relevant for other firms and industries.

Further limitations are the number of participants and their role in the MNC. Due to Covid-19, there had to be some changes in which data were collected. It would have been beneficial to include those from the operational level of MNC as their experience and daily work-load is different to those in key-positions. However, Mary has a significant track record from this level as well, and daily contact with employees at this level. This helped me understand that the differences from those who work at the operational level do not necessarily have a different perception of their communication with Asian business partners. I have not personally gathered information from those at the operational level, but Mary ensured me that employees at the operational level in Aalesund have experienced challenges in communicating with Asian business partners. I will however not be able to understand whether power distance is used to interpret these challenges.

Lastly, the Covid-19 had also implications on how to collect the data. As for simplicity and due to time limitations, a decision was made to interview participants by telephone and use a voice recorder. Had it not been for the covid-19, I would have been able to visit the local office and conduct interview with employees from both levels. Additionally, a physical interview with the CEO of MNC was planned as he was due to visit the regional office in

April. This would have been participant number 5. Due to travel restrictions and increased work-load, this person was only available for a preliminary talk.

Ethical issues

Ethical considerations are important when doing research. Keeping ethics in mind, the researcher will be able to perform a study of both relevance and meaning. As this thesis aims to analyze individual perceptions of a specific phenomenon, it is important that the researcher understands this phenomenon himself in order to associate with the informants and the organization. Using contact persons to find relevant employees was crucial as this increased the chance of them agreeing to be a participant for this study. When I contacted these employees, I informed them about the purpose of the study, how their contribution would be processed and, whether they were willing to allow me to record the interviews. Recording the interview is important as this makes it easier to analyze and understand the data in retrospect. Considering the information from the respondents is their individual perception of the phenomenon, it is important to treat the data with respect and follow the guidelines set by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. As part of the requirements of conducting research that treats personal information (voice-recording), an application had to be sent to and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. The approved application is to be found in the appendix (Appendix 1)

Chapter 4 Findings and discussion

MNC operates in a highly competitive market with many potential threats that could disrupt their business activities. On a worldwide basis, threats take the form of political situations, foreign exchange risks, regulations/compliance, emerging markets or ethical issues. Apart from these examples, there are some challenges that are as important to stay on top of as the global risks. Operating in such circumstances as MNC does, satisfactory communication with foreign business partners is a key factor to success. However, because of cultural differences between all the countries in which the firm and other businesses are located, there are certain challenges. In this chapter, I present findings, which first concern MNC and how they operate. Further, primary data gathered from the interviews is presented and discussed in line with the theory presented in chapter 2.

The correspondence with Asian business partners

Norwegian employees often communicate with Asian business partners. As many shipments are from Asian countries, this requires collaboration and teamwork to ensure that every transport arrives on time and without extra costs. Many of the employees in the firm communicate with Asian business partners daily and most of the correspondence Norwegian employees have is with fellow employees at MNC's offices in Asia. They also communicate with external suppliers and customers. Many of the employees in Norway working with Asia do have a significant track record when it comes to communicating with Asian business partners. Many years of experience is helpful when communicating across cultures and several of the employees have been on business trips to Asian countries and have, over time, established a useful contact network.

Norwegian MNC employees mostly interact with fellow employees from offices in foreign countries that are the destination for the shipment or the departure point. Local expertise is crucial when being a provider of logistic solutions. MNC has succeeded at this and is today one of the top providers. The data system in which shipments are registered are the same whether you are in Norway, Vietnam or Brazil. This makes it easier to cooperate as it helps with information flow across departments and between countries. Additionally, MNC operates using internal titles for their employees. A manager for multiple departments in Norway is titled with "FX", and the manager for multiple departments in for example China is also given the title "FX". If you are a department manager for sea, the title is "FS", for Air the title is "FA" and for overland, "FO". The titles make it easier for MNC employees to better understand who they are talking to and what to expect in terms of, for example, information. However, there might be some implications due to cultural differences.

Service procedures

The main service provided by MNC is transport of goods from supplier to customer. As stated, transportation methods are sea, air and overland. Transport by sea, with placing the goods in containers, is the most common method when transporting from Asian countries to Europe. To gain a better understanding of how goods are being transported and which role MNC has, a couple of examples will be addressed. These examples are relevant when the transportation method used, is by sea. The information is given by the informants as well as the participants.

Transport from China to Norway (1); A customer in Norway orders goods from a supplier in China. The Chinese supplier books a shipment when the goods are ready for pick up with the MNC office in China, addressed to Norway; KN in China informs the corresponding office in Norway and further discusses (often in corporation with Norwegian office) the shipping company /transportation method. The corresponding office in Norway informs the customer in Norway and is their contact person during transportation. The MNC office in China allocates transport documents and the goods are now on their way to the customer in Norway.

Transport from China to Norway (2); The customer in Norway informs the MNC office in Norway about a cargo which needs to be sent to them from a supplier in China. The MNC office in Norway contacts the corresponding office in China and informs them who the supplier and customer are, which shipping company to use and when to transport. The MNC office in China allocates documents and makes sure that the cargo is being transported as planned to the customer in Norway.

These two examples are applied to most of the goods that are transported from Asian countries to Norway. However, there is also a third procedure. This is goods that do not require a whole container, for instance a pallet. This is called LCL, which stand for less container load. In transportation of LCL, the customer calculates the price himself and books the shipment through a booking system. Later, employees at the Norwegian office receive notification of the booking and further inform the office in China, which allocates documents and makes sure that the pallet is transported as planned to the customer in Norway.

By looking at the examples provided, one can understand that the correspondence with Asian business partners is crucial in order for their service to be successful. Much of the correspondence is done by e-mail and to some degree phone calls. The correspondence mainly addresses new bookings, price inquiry, claims (damage to cargo, loss of cargo etc.), correcting document errors and arranging collection/delivery of cargo. One advantage that MNC has, across countries, is the use of common data systems to share information. This makes the above-mentioned correspondence easier as information is less likely to get lost. However, even though routines and systems are helpful in conducting the service, undesired and uncontrollable events can occur. Examples of these are document errors and claims. Document errors are a common problem and are often caused by human interaction where information shared is different from the information acquired. According to a informant at

MNC, examples of document errors could be an incorrect number of packages, weight, receivers name, and receiver address. These examples are some of the most common errors that occur regularly between Norway and Asian countries, to a greater extent than to for example United States. *When* the document errors are discovered is crucial for the kind of impact the errors have on the service. A document error discovered in the early stages is less likely to result in difficulties. However, a document error discovered too late could result in the package being delivered to a different location. Further, this could affect transportation costs, customer relationships etc. Document errors are to some degree controllable. Vigilant employees can reduce the impact of document errors as they, for example, are most likely to remember delivery addresses to long-time customers.

Claims are another example of an undesired event that can occur. Claims are serious events that often have a bigger impact on goods that are being transported. An example is damage to containers, which could result in rain/moisture damage to the goods. Other examples addressed by contact people in MNC are missing content or poorly secured goods. In combination with heavy sea or careless transportation, this has a serious impact on the goods.

If some of the above-mentioned examples occurs, multiple parties involved will be affected. In order to reduce the impact, Jenny states that good information flow across parties are highly necessary in order to find the best solution. Good information flow is however not always the case according to Jenny, who also has experience in interacting with Asian business partners. This can be for individual reasons, but also due to differences between cultures when it comes to behavior towards such challenges.

Challenges due to external factors

An important and underlying reason for this thesis is the challenges experienced by employees in the MNC when communicating with their Asian business partners. The participants have provided information in interviews and in preliminary talks. Some examples have been given that undermine their own personal experience. As stated, the participants have all a significant track record in communicating with Asian business partners and do interact at least three times per week, often every day. This either by e-mail, phone-calls or video meetings.

There are different types of challenges related to communication with people from other cultures. This thesis is concerned with challenges that may occur because of cultural differences and to what degree these challenges are influenced by the differences in power distance. Some challenges in communicating cannot be explained by cultural differences, but by external factors. An example is time difference. In communicating with Asian business partners, the time difference reduces the time in which it is possible to communicate. The time difference between Norway and Shanghai is six hours, Japan is seven hours and Vietnam five hours. In theory this means that communicating with Asian business partners, with normal working hours in mind, employees in Norway have to prioritize communication with Asian business partners in the first hours of the day. However, according to many of the respondents, the time difference does not negatively affect their ability to effectively provide their service to customers. Effective flow of information (i.e. due to technological developments) has helped them to adapt to this. In relation to power distance, this external factor is relevant as it defines whether or not it is easy or possible to establish contact with those from a different time zone and with the help from others, make contact with the correct person.

According to multiple participants, establishing contact with Asian business partners are not difficult as long as you know who to speak with. However, when it comes to those times Norwegian employees do *not know* who to speak with, they have to ask for contact information to those in charge or to those who can provide answers. Mary and Charlie mention that the response time is significant and Charlie especially states that this is because communication between the hierarchal levels in the Asian business is limited. This can align with House et.al (2004 p.536) characteristics of a high-power distance society in which information is localized and that upward social mobility is limited. Mary states that even though it takes time and effort in finding correct person, Asian business partners seem polite and helpful. It can be understood that the difficulties of finding correct contact person is because of cultural characteristics rather than their willingness to help out.

If claims are occurring, the time difference could be problematic as claims often require quick actions to prevent undesirable outcomes. Mary mentions that there have been situations in which quick answers and information are needed, but because of difficulties getting hold of correct contact persons and those with authority, undesirable outcomes have occurred. However, this was more common before they introduced the titles that are now used in MNC.

Additionally, with many years at the firm, Mary states that increased use of technology have made it easier to contact Asian business partners and easier to know who to speak with.

Power distance and challenges

Challenges in communicating is experienced by every participant and some of their individual perceived challenges are here presented. During the interviews, the participants spoke freely about their experience in communicating with Asian business partners. The participants' orientations towards power distance as a framework for understanding communication challenges was shown through the interviews. The participants did not have to be familiar with the power distance dimension as it is I, the researcher that will try to understand whether they use power distance to interpret what is happening to them when in contact with Asian business partners. In the interviews, the participants shared different experiences but often used the same challenges as a reason or contributing factor to describe the outcomes. Further in this chapter, power distance will be tied to concepts which are used to understand different challenges. In line with the theoretical framework, the findings are here presented and discussed. Experiences from the participants are presented throughout the chapter.

Power distance and face

When talking about the importance of relationships, all of the participants sooner or later mentioned the concept of “face”. According to Erving Goffman (1967), face is defined as the favorable social impression that a person wants others to have of him or her. The general knowledge related to this concept was relatively good and all of the participants mentioned it regardless of whether related questions were asked. There are many aspects of face, such as losing, saving and giving face. Examples were provided by some of the participants and Paul had an example from a business trip to China.

I was asked by one of my business partners to attend an important meeting with him. I did not know what was going to be discussed, but my business partner just told me to keep a serious facial expression and to be present. The language used was Chinese and I do not understand nor speak Chinese. I didn't say a word, but I felt that my presence was meaningful. After the meeting my business partner was very grateful for my help (Personal communication, April 17, 2020)

Paul gave this example when talking about the importance of face, and in this case, he was giving face to his Asian business partner. Paul helped his business partner not to be embarrassed or dominated by the other party at the meeting by simply being present. Beamer and Varner's (2008) explanation of giving face align with this example in which the employee from the MNC made his Asian business partner look good in front of other of the same collective increasing his reputation and/or standing. The effort it took from Paul to help his Asian business partner out was small in contrast to the outcome. Not only did he give face to his business partner, but also to the MNC department in Norway by showing that Norwegian employees are helpful.

The concept of face and its meaning is often based on the context in which it is used. Another example provided was from Kristian. As a person with leadership responsibilities, he was visiting one of MNC offices in Asia. Being in his position, he explained that communicating with Asian business partners across various hierarchical levels was normal. Over time, he had developed a business relationship with one of the Asian employees from the operational level (low-level hierarchy). The difference in power that existed between the two of them was meaningful for the Asian business partner while Kristian looked on it more as a normal relationship with a fellow employee. Khatri (2009) explains that a communication gap exists between the hierarchal levels in high power distance cultures, and as a result, senior management becomes disconnected from what is happening at lower levels and employees at this lower level becomes uncertain of what is expected from them. This can be used as an explanation to the reaction of the Asian business partner in the example provided by Kristian below.

The colleague from this office was good at his job and worked hard. When visiting the office, I went to his department to greet him and he was very happy, and he seemed surprised that a person from a higher hierarchical level took time to interact with him, especially in front of his fellow employees. I have also spoke highly of him to his bosses (which had the same position as me) and later he was promoted and is today hired in the position I had when I first got to know him. (Personal communication, April 16, 2020).

In terms of the concept of face, Kristian was giving face and his Asian business partner received face. Considering the Asian business partners reaction, one could say that Khatri's

(2009) explanation of differences in hierarchical levels can be used to understand this. If the distance between superior and subordinate was less significant, the reaction of the Asian business partner could have been less intense. Kristian states that this could never occur in a country, for example Norway, where the gap between superior and subordinate is lower, and interactions are more common both ways. For low power distance societies, this would be a far more natural situation, if not expected by the subordinates as the relationship is more democratic in low power distance societies. Jandt's (2018) description of the relationship between superior and subordinate is accurate in which he differentiates them as *kings* and *loyal subjects*. In the way Kristian described the situation, it was clearly that the Asian business partner looked at him as the king when he entered the department as a superior.

To this date, Kristian and his Asian business partner interact from time to time and he states that they have a good relationship. Kristian also mentions briefly that he easily noticed a change in behavior of the Asian business partner as his job description changed. This will be described more in detail in the subchapter *Power Distance and Job Description*. Each and every one of the participants had experienced significant differences when it came to hierarchical levels in Norway versus their Asian business partners' countries.

Norwegian employees communicating with Asian business partners should really be aware of what importance the concept of face has in Asian cultures. If being unaware of how the concept of how face works, it could lead to life lasting problems. As there are hierarchical differences in for example China, Dong & Lee (2007) states that the amount of face relies on the social position he/she holds and that the higher position, the more likely he/she will be given face. This understanding of face in relation to hierarchical levels could be used to understand why the Asian business partner in the last example was so surprised that Kristian greeted him "at the floor". It was simply because it rarely occur. As Kristian explained, he talked highly about his business partner to the superiors and it can be discussed whether this was a contributing factor to his promotion. As the concept of face has such significance for the Chinese culture, it is highly likely that Kristian's kind words alone resulted in a promotion. According to Khatri (2009), jobs narrowly and tightly specified in high power distance societies. This mean that it would be more difficult for operators to stand out in completion of their job as subordinates do mostly what's expected, no more no less. Hence, they rely more on such compliments Kristian gave his Asian business partner when for example promotion is being discussed. This undermines the importance of understanding the

concept of face and the opportunities this gives, not only for the business partners, but also the relationship you have with those you interact with.

Power distance and relationship

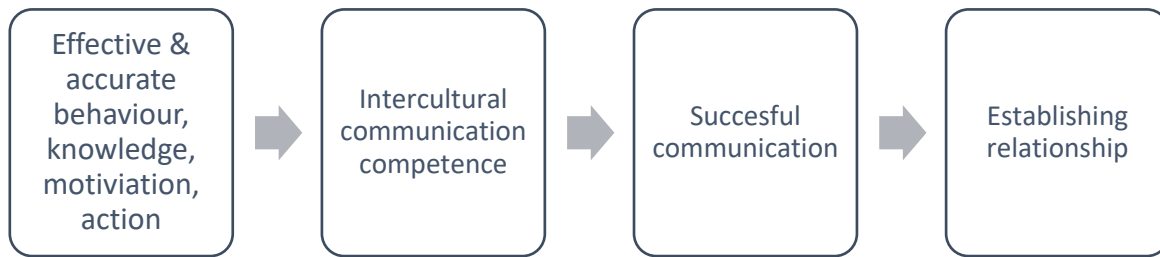
As stated, every participant has a significant track-record when it comes to communicating with Asian business partners. Countries that are being mentioned is mostly those from eastern-Asia region such as China, Vietnam, South-Korea, Hong-Kong and Malaysia. Almost every participant has also visited their Asian business partners on regular business trips which have helped them create relationships and increased their knowledge of the culture.

According to Kristian and Charlie, this is crucial in order to *really* understand whom you are talking to. Kristian also describes business trips as educational and interesting. However, from a business viewpoint, most of the trips have not provided immediate results. “*Preventive*” is a word used by Kristian to describe some of the business trips. An example provided is that a relation developed from the employees last trip suddenly was helpful to Kristian in a case, which appeared some months later. Thanks to this relationship, he was able to communicate with this business partner and was provided useful information related to the case. The combination of *relationship* and *knowledge* was also mentioned by Kristian and Charlie.

Paul has had regular business trips to a couple of high-power distance countries and one thing continues to amaze him. As an employee in a key position, he regularly interacts with Asian business partners from lower hierarchical levels. While on business trips, he usually asks subordinates to dinner, so they can form an even better relationship. The Norwegian employee experience that subordinates are willing to attend dinners and non-work-related events, but still I can feel they are uncomfortable. There could be different reasons for this, but one of them could be that they are not used to interact with those from higher levels. Even though the Norwegian employee only has good intentions, he feels the Asian business partners are placed in an unnatural position. Following the research by Rau et. Al (2013), where he studied low power distance superiors and his interactions to high power distance subordinates. Rau et.al (2013) found that high power distance approach made the subordinates more likely to be motivated, gave fewer communication problems, and a higher job satisfaction. One can understand the Norwegian employee’s willingness to create relationships, but the hierarchical differences complicates this. There could be a higher chance of developing the relationship if the superior uses a high-power distance approach when it comes to communicating with his subordinates. Some participants mentioned the importance

of adjustment. For example, Kristian talked about adjusting in order to succeed when communicating with Asian business partners. This is in line with one of the barriers listed by Jandt (2018) in which he states that assuming similarity between your home country and the one you are communicating with could result in missing out on important differences that further interrupt the information flow. Paul's experience is an example of this. He was familiar with dining with colleagues and customers in Norway and other countries, and he had never experienced any uncomfortable situations before. It is likely that he transferred the idea of having dinner as a form of relationship building arena from Norway to Asia but did not get the same results due to the differences in relationship between subordinates and superiors.

As described previously in this sub chapter, two of the participants described and used knowledge as an important factor when talking about the relationship they have with their Asian business partners. However, the way they described it, I assume that they were talking about communication competence which would be the theoretical concept to describe how well a person interact with others. Every one of their relationships differ greatly and while some are more personal, some are only work-related. Both Kristian and Charlie mention that relationships in general are difficult to develop and that it often takes time with those from Asian cultures. When they experience successful relationships, such as the example from Kristian in the sub chapter of *power distance and face*, they could be said to have accomplished the components; effective and accurate behavior, knowledge, motivation and actions, listed by Lustig & Koester (2010). However, when the competence is achieved is difficult to assess as this is highly dependent on the context of a specific person and the specific setting and also the relationship between the interactants, the goals and the objective (Lustig and Koester, 2010). This can be used to explain why Kristian and Charlie find it difficult to develop relations. There are a set of components that has to be fulfilled. Gudykunst (2001) states that intercultural communication competence increases the likelihood of successful communication. Hence, having successful communication with those from another culture could increase the chance of establishing relationships. The participants do often communicate with those at lower hierarchal levels in Asia and the reason relationship is important is based on the differences that exists between subordinates in low power distance cultures and in high power distance cultures. They have a different relationship and as Rau et al. (2013) found, a different approach is needed when communicating with those from high power distance than with those from low power distance. If the approach align with what Asian business partners are used to, the interaction will more likely be successful.



Each relationship is different, and an example has been given in which a superior from a low power distance culture communicate with subordinates from a high-power distance culture. A relationship between a superior in Norway and a superior in China will however require different behavior, knowledge, motivation and action. The same will be different for a subordinate in a low power distance culture when establishing a relationship with a superior in a high-power distance culture.

Power distance and job description

Mary describes that one major challenge in communicating with Asian business partners is that they have specific tasks and do strictly follow these. They rarely do go beyond what they're told to do. This is also experienced by Paul in which he presents an example of how straight forward and strict they follow their job descriptions. Khatri (2009) states that managers in high power distance cultures are highly concerned that subordinates carry out their jobs exactly the way they are told, no more no less. Mary states:

Employees are used to receive very detailed instructions from their leaders and do rarely go beyond what they are told to do. They do rarely take initiative because they are afraid of being held responsible (Personal communication April 15, 2020).

This explanation can be seen relevant to what Khatri (2009) says about job description. The subordinates are clearly afraid not to carry out their job according to instructions, for fear of being held responsible for any negative outcome and potentially losing their job. The managers have significant power over their employees. Mary explains further, how this is different to Norway and what implications this has. Norwegians and others from low power distance cultures do have a more horizontal communication and their job description is described by Mary as; *“with more authority than Asian business partners to make quick decisions and choices” (Personal communication, April 15, 2020)*. This can for example be price negotiation or the opportunity to make decisions directly affecting a shipment.

Norwegian employees are trusted by their superiors and at the same time, the subordinates are willing to take responsibility for their decisions. According to Khatri (2009), a high-power distance culture is more concerned with decisions being made autocratically by a few at the top. Lachman, Nedd and Hinings (1995) also states that the decision-making process in high power distance organizations is one of the non-participative type and hierarchal. Subordinates in high power distance cultures seems to have less influence and a low level of participation. Mary states that the difference between Norwegian and Asian business partners cause implications when a decision is to be made across the departments. Even if the titles are common for all employees at MNC, their job description differs greatly. An employee working at the operational level in Norway has more authority than those at the operational level in Asian countries. The idea of having common titles was to better know who to contact in the different departments, but due to different job descriptions attached to those with same titles, the idea seems to be somewhat unnecessary. However, every participant mentioned the common titles as helpful in communicating with Asian business partners. They look at it as an intervention to reduce the differences that exists between employees from different cultures. Mary describes the use of common titles as very helpful, but also limited due to cultural differences and the hierarchical systems that exists. The employee states; *“Giving employees common titles makes it easier to know who to talk with, but it does not necessary mean that they can provide you with an answer to your problem”* (Personal communication, April 15, 2020). This seems to be very accurate considering Khatri (2009) and Lachman, Nedd and Hinings (1995) regarding how the decision-making process and participation plays out differently in low and high-power distance cultures.

In pre laminarly talks with CEO Claus, he stated that the titles are helpful and intends to make it easier to know who to talk to. He also explains that there are however huge differences between Norway and many Asian countries when it comes to hierarchical levels. In Norway, there might be three management layers and in China for example, there might be eight. The use of titles has to respect that this is a part of their culture, he explains. With this, he means that high power distance cultures cannot be forced to change how the firm is organized just so the titles and job description will align with those from low power distance cultures. The job description to an employee at the lowest managerial level in Norway differ from the job description to the business partner at the lowest managerial level in for example China. It is the job description that actually shows what level they are on and what power they have. As I have stated, employees at the operational level in Norway do have more authority than those

at the operational level in high power distance cultures. Since they have the same titles but different job description, it makes sense that the participants find it difficult to contact correct person. If those at operational level need an answer to a work-related question, they would probably have to talk to the managers to those at the operational level in China.

MNC has to adapt to the differences that exists between high and low power distance cultures in the best way possible in order for the employees to have effective communication. The firm cannot simply expect employees from high power distance cultures to align with the culture of those with low power distance, or the other way around. Power distance has an effect on the workplace and research by Rafiei (2013) and Yetim and Yetim (2006) support this. Since power distance has an effect on job satisfaction, it is understandable that it is important for a business to act accordingly as to whether it is a low or high-power distance culture. Treating employees in a low power distance culture as if they were in a high-power distance culture is contradictory and will have an effect on job satisfaction.

The next example is also provided in the interviews and is related to the differences in job description between a high and low power distance culture.

Paul had this experience:

On behalf of a customer I was told to make some changes on a shipment. I delegated this further to one of the colleagues in China which I was working with. I asked him if he could fix it and after some days the customer contacted me again questioning why it hadn't been fixed. Then I found out that my colleague in China didn't do anything because he didn't receive any information from me on how to actually fix it. (Personal communication April 17, 2020).

Paul told me that this was the first time he really understood the importance of information flow and how different this was related to what he was used to in Norway. This example can also be said to align with what Hauff and Richter (2015) state when it comes to an employee's job description. They say that in high power distance cultures, employees are not encouraged to make decisions and do not expect to be consulted or empowered; they expect to be told what to do and avoid disagreement. The problem in this case was that the Norwegian superior told his Asian business partner what to do, but without using specific details about how and what result he wanted. After this experience, Paul said he really tried to understand

the culture by asking Norwegian colleagues about tips and by reading about cultural differences and learning how to communicate in a business context.

Looking more closely at the decision-making process, Khatri (2009) states that the process is centralized and lack participation from subordinates in high power distance cultures. Subordinates follow their job description, and this rarely includes being participative in decisions. This is different to low power distance cultures where employees value participation when decisions are being made. Gomez et al (1999) provided evidence that participation is not appropriate in high power distance culture because it may create an impression of managerial incompetence, furthermore employees put less value on participation in high power distance culture. Mary had experiences in which could be related to this. The participant talked basically about Asian business partners job description and an example of this has been provided earlier in this sub chapter. Mary stated, as presented earlier, that Norwegian employees has *“more authority than Asian business partners to make quick decisions and choices”* (Interview April 15, 2020). However, the real difference is that even though Norwegian employees has more authority, they often discuss and interpret with their superiors and other subordinates before a decision is made. In contrast, decisions are being made solely by superiors in high power distance cultures. Mary explains that decisions are often taken quickly by Asian superiors and that they often want quick answers and solutions from Norwegian employees. In relation to Khatri’s (2009) research, he concluded that due to quick decisions and low participation from subordinates in high power distance cultures, the quality of the decisions could be limited. With the information provided in the interviews, it seems like Norwegian employees have the opportunity to take quick decisions but at the same time emphasize the importance of quality in decisions. This assumption needs however further research. As a challenge in communicating with Asian business partners, the difference in job description seems to be one of those which complicates the communication for Norwegian employees.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze and understand how individuals, as a part of a multinational company, see interactions across the different locations of their business partners and whether power distance is an influential factor in the challenges they experience. The research question for this thesis is: *Do Norwegians perceive disparities in power distance to be an influential factor in challenges in communicating with Asian business Partners?*

MNC have had departments in Norway since 1990 and is today located at nine different locations with approximately 350 employees in which many of these regularly communicate with Asian business partners. Some have been communicating with those from another culture for many years and have therefore also experienced significant changes over the years. Communicating with those from another culture may be experienced as difficult because of the differences that exist between cultures. To better understand these and be able to communicate effectively, Hofstede's dimensions have been presented as taxonomies that have proven to be useful for understanding cultural differences. In this thesis, the focus has been on one of the dimensions, namely power distance. His research showed that Scandinavian countries score relatively low and many Asian countries score high on the power distance index. I have been looking at whether Norwegian employees have used power distance to interpret what has happened to them when communicating with their Asian business partners.

The participants have personally experienced different challenges in their years of communicating with Asian business partners. Using semi-structured interviews made it possible for the participants to speak freely about their experience and about the challenges they have or have had with Asian business partners. Even though I am looking at individual perceived challenges, the information provided has made it clear that some challenges are similar for multiple of the participants.

The first challenge presented was concerned about the concept of face. Three of the participants mentioned the concept of face as a challenge in communicating with Asian business partners, however only Paul and Kristian had specific examples of this. Both participants gave examples in which I was able to understand that power distance was used to interpret why they perceived this as a challenge in communicating. The differences that exist in hierarchal levels (between high and low power distance cultures) was mentioned by the

participants as influencing factor as to why this is a challenge. Since they are superiors, they interact regularly with those at lower levels and they have both discovered that what you say and do, has more influence on subordinates from high power distance cultures than those from low power distance cultures.

The second challenge in which the participants used power distance to interpret what was happening to them was in building a relationship with their Asian business partners. Kristian, Charlie and Paul all had experiences that could be related to relationship-building with their Asian business partners. It is interesting that all three of the participants have been on business trips and that the experiences they shared concerning relationship-building was related to this. This suggests that Kristian and Charlie have achieved a high level of insight when they mentioned that it is vital to meet your business partners in person in order to *really* know them. As superiors, they experienced that the hierarchical gap between superior and subordinate is far more significant in high power distance than in low power distance cultures. It appears that the reason that participants find it difficult to form relationships is because establishing a relationship is dependent on successful communication, which further is dependent on the participants having intercultural communicative competence. To acquire intercultural communicative competence, they need informed behavior, knowledge, motivation and action. Each relationship is different and hence requires a different “degree” of the mentioned components.

The last challenge in which participants use power distance to interpret what was happening to them, is their Asian business partners’ job descriptions. Mary and Paul had experiences related to job descriptions as a challenge when communicating with Asian business partners and it is understood that power distance is an influencing factor in this. Job descriptions in high power distance cultures are highly specified and employees rarely go beyond their job description. The hierarchical levels in high power distance cultures results in difficulties for Norwegian employees as it complicates how information is shared. It is possible to see that participants use power distance to interpret what is happening to them because of the experiences they have had. For example, through looking at the authority Norwegian employees at the operational level have versus the authority an Asian business partner in the same position has. Additionally, it is visible through experiences related to the decision-making process.

Implication of study

There are three different challenges in which it was found that the participants used power distance to interpret what happens to them when communicating with Asian business partners. The challenges of face, relationship and job description. There was a total of four participants which provided data, every participant in managerial positions at MNC. By looking into the challenges, it could be possible for other employees at the firm to broaden their knowledge about how to *actually* understand these challenges.

Some employees could find it difficult to form relationships with those from high power distance cultures. The identification of power distance as a reason for this challenge could help them on the way in acquiring knowledge and hence potentially gain intercultural communication competence which potentially leads to successful communication and further, a relationship. Even if the participants in this thesis are from managerial positions, this might also be applicable to those at the operational level as we are still looking at low vs high power distance.

The participants also used differences in power distance to interpret what's happened to them when talking about experiences related to the concept of face. The concept of face as a challenge in communicating is important to respect as of the potential negative effects it could have when communicating with Asian business partners. Each of the participants which shared their experiences related to face had examples which was related to business trips and their physical presence in the culture. Employees which don't have had any physical meetings with Asian business partners might not use power distance to interpret this as a reason for challenges and hence never be able to understand why Asian business partners consider face so important. MNC can provide employees which don't understand these with examples so that they have the potential to develop an understanding to face relation to power distance.

The last challenge in which participant used power distance to interpret the communication is their Asian business partners' job description. MNC can help employees in understanding that their Asian business partners' job description is different as because of their culture. Using power distance to interpret the difference in job description can increase the understanding of the other culture and result in a more effective communication between Norwegian employees and their Asian business partners.

Suggestions for further research

The aim for this study is to study intercultural communication and further power distance in relation to communication challenges. Previous research has focused on different job characteristics in relation to power distance and also characteristics which differ between countries with high vs low power distance. Few has looked into a specific company from the logistics industry, to study the dimension of power distance in relation to challenges. What makes this research unique is that no research exists to my knowledge on communication with Asian business partners in MNC Norway. Suggestions for further research would be to include operational level and look into which challenges is perceived from the lowest hierarchical levels. Future investigators should also look into other industries and other companies to see whether there is other challenges that is described by those from low power distance culture communicating with business partners from high power distance culture.

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Appendix 1: Approved application from Norwegian Centre of Research Data

NSD Personvern

20.02.2020 09:47

Det innsendte meldeskjemaet med referansekode 402502 er nå vurdert av NSD.

Følgende vurdering er gitt:

Det er vår vurdering at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet vil være i samsvar med personvernlovgivningen så fremt den gjennomføres i tråd med det som er dokumentert i meldeskjemaet 20.02.2020 med vedlegg. Behandlingen kan starte.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til NSD ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: nsd.no/personvernombud/meld_prosjekt/meld_endringer.html

Du må vente på svar fra NSD før endringen gjennomføres.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige kategorier av personopplysninger frem til 10.06.2020.

BRUK AV SKYPE

Det er oppgitt at det kan bli aktuelt å gjennomføre intervjuet via Skype. Vi minner om at bruk av denne tjenesten må avklares med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon. NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake. Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

NSD vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet

- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: åpenhet (art. 12), informasjon (art. 13), innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), underretning (art. 19), dataportabilitet (art. 20).

NSD vurderer at informasjonen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

NSD legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og eventuelt rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

NSD vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!

Appendix 2: Interview guide

Below is the interview guide which was used. The participants were all eager to talk and share information. As a result of this, not every question was needed to be asked. The interviews were in Norwegian and interview guide below has been translated to English.

Interview guide

Semi-structured interview

Introduction:

- *Introduce yourself and getting to know each other*
- *Inform participant (purpose of this thesis)*
- *Refer to information letter (confidentiality and anonymity)*
- *Recording of the interview.*

General questions:	
- Can you briefly explain your position and job description?	- <i>What do you work with?</i>

- In which situations do you communicate with Asian business partners?	- <i>Physical meetings, phone-calls, e-mail, video meeting.</i>
- How often do you communicate with Asian business partners?	- <i>Where do they work (which country / business)?</i>
- Do you have any experience working abroad?	- <i>If stationed in Asia, where and for how long?</i> - <i>How did you experience the cultural difference?</i>
Focused questions:	
- How would you describe your general knowledge about Asian cultures? - How do you experience the work culture in where your Asian business partners come from?	
- How do you experience the difference, if any, in hierarchy between Norwegian and Asian businesses?	
- Which challenges have you experienced related to communication with Asian business partners?	- <i>How do you handle these challenges?</i>
- If any problems occur, how do Asian business partners handle such situations? -	- <i>Are they insecure, distancing themselves away from the situation, problem-solver, delegate further</i> -
Before ending the interview:	
- Do you have any additional information which could be relevant regarding what you have experienced in communicating with Asian business partners?	
- Any questions to the thesis in general?	

Appendix 3: Information letter to participants

Information letter in Norwegian sent to the participants prior to the interviews. When conducting the interviews, I was referring to this letter. Regarding using tape recorder and having the consent from the participants to use their personal data, an oral confirmation were given at the very start of the interview sessions.

Oppgaven jeg skriver tar for seg én bestemt bedrift. Jeg har valgt å avgrense oppgaven til å kun ta for seg ansatte i Norge. Utover dette er utvalget av deltakere tilfeldig valgt på bakgrunn av hvem som har erfaring/ nyttig informasjon å dele om temaet. Forslag er blitt gitt av kontaktperson i firmaet.

Temaet er interkulturell kommunikasjon, altså kommunikasjon mellom personer som har ulik kulturell bakgrunn. Jeg er ikke interessert i kommunikasjonen *mellom* norske ansatte, men spesifikt kommunikasjonen du som ansatt har med personer fra en annen kultur. Motkulturene som jeg har valgt å inkludere i oppgaven er i hovedsak Asiatiske kulturer.

Årsaken til at jeg velger Asiatiske kulturer er på bakgrunn av forskjellen som finnes i maktdistanse (distansen mellom leder/ansatt). Denne maktdistansen er som kjent større i Asiatiske kulturer og innebærer at de med mindre makt aksepterer at makten er ujevnt fordelt. I nordiske land er maktdistansen lavere og ansatte har ofte mer å si når beslutninger skal tas. Det er ofte lettere og mer naturlig å kommunisere med en leder i land med lav maktdistanse, slik som i de nordiske landene.

Som kjent oppstår det ofte problemer/ misforståelser når man kommuniserer med asiatiske forretningspartnere. Blant andre utfordringer kan ofte språk være et hinder for god informasjonsflyt. En annen utfordring kan være å komme i kontakt med korrekt person dersom noe skal forhandles eller må diskuteres.

Problemstillingen er som følger:

Do Norwegians perceive disparities in power distance to be an influential factor in challenges in communicating with Asian business Partners?

Oppfatter nordmenn forskjellene i maktdistanse som en påvirkende faktor til utfordringene når man kommuniserer med asiatiske forretningspartnere?

Gitt situasjonen vi har nå, tror jeg den beste løsningen vil være å gjennomføre videomøte der vi snakker litt om dine erfaringer når det gjelder kommunikasjon med asiatiske forretningspartnere. Setter ikke noe bestemt tid på hvor lenge intervjuet vil vare da dette avhenger av tiden du er villig til å bruke på dette samt mengden relevant informasjon du vil dele. Ettersom flere har hjemmekontor er det også mulig å kjøre et kortere intervju dersom tiden ikke strekker til, men da trenger jeg at du er tilgjengelig for mulige oppfølgingsspørsmål over mail eller SMS i etterkant. Jeg kommer til å ta opp samtalen, men bare dersom du gir samtykke til dette. Informasjonen du deler vil bare være tilgjengelig for meg og vil bli slettet i etterkant. Alt sensitiv informasjon blir anonymisert. Du vil sammen med alle andre være «en ansatt» i firmaet. Til opplysning har jeg også vært i kontakt med daglig leder i Norge angående denne masteroppgaven. Han er klar over omfanget og hvilken informasjon jeg er ute etter.

Dersom du har noen spørsmål finner du kontaktinformasjon nedenfor.

E-post:.....

Telefon:.....

