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Cross-cultural communication in the digital age

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of digitalization on cross-cultural communication processes. A sample consists of 393 young adults (aged under 30 years) from seven countries (Bulgaria, Egypt, Germany, Morocco, Portugal, Romania, Ukraine) representing different regions in Europe and Africa. The results indicate that new generations (Millennials and Generation “Z”) are highly interested in cross-cultural communication; they believe that digitalization significantly simplifies cross-cultural communication processes including facilitating language barriers problems. The discussion of the findings includes the analyses of opportunities provided by new technologies in the era of digital globalization.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; digitalization; digital skills; culture.

INTRODUCTION

EVERY day the world becomes more interconnected. We live in a fast-changing, digitally globalized environment. One of the major drivers of such changes is the emerging role of new generations: “Millennials” – born in 1980-1995, and Generation „Z“ – born after 2000. These “living-online”, “digitally-thinking” young people have changed dramatically the social and business landscape of our planet. Goods, services, finance, people and data flows are much faster and easier nowadays. Digitalization became a reason to another major shift in social and business life: it opened access to global markets to SMEs (small and medium enterprises) and even individuals. Social media and other digital platforms significantly facilitated all these processes. Now they match job seekers with employers (nearly 400 million professionals have profiles on LinkedIn), freelancers with assignments (some 40 million people find freelance work on digital platforms), small start-ups get capital on platforms such as Kickstarter etc. Nowadays some 50 million SMEs are using Facebook (world biggest social network with more than 2 bln users) and some 30 percent of their fans are cross-border (McKinsey report, 2016). For many years global business used to be

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a privilege of large multinational corporations operating significant amounts of financial resources. Now you can “operate globally” just using your Facebook or Instagram account or selling hand-made toys on Amazon or Ebay. Such opportunities along with the facilitation of travelling and communication in general have fostered significantly the interest to cross-cultural communication skills.

MAIN AIM OF THE STUDY

Is to explore the role of cross-cultural communication in modern social and business environment and the opportunities digitalization provides to facilitate cross-cultural communication processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross-cultural communication is aimed to improve and facilitate the interaction between partners, employees, clients and managers representing different nations or cultures (Adler, 1991). Cultural differences might “lead to miscommunication, which can and does cause conflict” (Triandis, 2012), but they might also become a competitive advantage for global companies (Luo, 2016). According to Barker et al. (2017): “sensitivity to diversity now demands a strategic understanding of the importance of cross-cultural communication competence in every action in organizations, communities, and nations throughout the world”.

The efficiency of cross-cultural communication depends on many factors. Glover and Friedman (2015) note “Functioning successfully within different cultures can be a struggle for many professionals and, as the world changes; it’s become clear that dealing with other cultures, both domestic and international, requires competence in both identifying and transcending cultural boundaries”. Language barriers, differences in values and standards of behavior, lack of experience, lack of trust, and lack of knowledge about other cultures or stereotypical thinking are among the most widespread obstacles for cross-cultural communication (Lifintsev, Canavilhas, 2017).

Hofstede and his colleagues provide deep analysis of national cultures’ dimensions, which represent independent preferences for one state of affairs over another that distinguish countries from each other. The Hofstede model of national culture consists of six dimensions including power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long term/short term orientation, indulgence/restraint (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede et al., 2010; Minkov, 2017). Hall (1989) describes high context and low context cultures: while in low context cultures the words spoken have direct meanings, in high context cultures communication is a complex process where all non-verbal elements (e.g., rituals, non-verbal communication, roles etc) mean as much as verbal communication.

Lichy and Stokes (2018 forthcoming) prove that models grounded on essentialist assumptions, display weakening explanatory power in digital contexts: e.g. age rather than gender or national characteristics is a key factor that influences the way in which individuals engage with the Internet. It is extremely important because of the further digitalization of organizations.

Digitalization can be defined as “the adoption or increase in the use of digital or computer technology by an organization, industry, or country etc.” (Brennen, Kreiss, 2014). The role of digital competence in organizations is widely acknowledged by the scholars (Malekifar et al., 2014; Vieru et al., 2015; Shahlai et al., 2017). Colbert, Yee and George (2016) emphasize that digitalization reduces authenticity in terms of less face-to-face communication and interactions characterized by less fully present participants.

On the other hand, Hesse (2018) discovers that “digitalization moderates the influence of contextual and conditional changes on the outcome of leadership, and facilitates leaders’ communication practices and thus affects the outcome of leadership”.

Google’s chief economist, professor H. Varian (2005) noted, “information technology is a great leveler”. He widely popularized the term “micro-multinationals” to describe small companies operating globally. Great example of such “equality” (with large companies) is the ability of micro-multinational businesses to export successfully their goods and services. For example, nearly every eBay-enabled SME is an exporter (Ebay report, 2016). In addition, it is also extremely important especially for developing economies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A sample of 393 young adults (male: n=174 / 44.3%, female: n=219 / 55.7%) from seven countries – Bulgaria (n=45 / 11.5%), Egypt (n=31 / 7.9%), Germany (n=102 / 30.0%), Morocco (n=63 / 16.0%), Portugal (n=30 / 7.6%), Romania (n=47 / 12.0%) and Ukraine (n=75 / 19.1%) participated in an online survey. We have chosen these seven different countries (see table 1) to have a broader perspective regarding the aim of our research. Three countries represent Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine), one Western Europe (Germany), one Southern Europe (Portugal) and two countries represent Northern Africa (Egypt, Morocco).

Table 1. Some basic indicators of analyzed countries

Country	Population, mln, 2017*	Official language(s)	EF English Proficiency Index, 2017*	Individuals using the Internet (% of population), 2016**
Bulgaria	7,1	Bulgarian	57,34 (moderate)	60
Egypt	94,7	Arabic	46,51 (very low)	41
Germany	80,7	German	62,35 (high)	90
Morocco	33,7	Moroccan Arabic	47,91 (very low)	58
Portugal	10,8	Portuguese	58,76 (high)	70
Romania	21,6	Romanian	59,13 (high)	60
Ukraine	44,2	Ukrainian	50,91 (low)	52

*www.ef.com/epi/

**<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS>

Regarding the aim of our research, we did not include countries with English language as the only official language to analyze opportunities that digitalization provides to facilitate cross-

cultural communication between people using their non-native language (given the fact that English is the most widespread international language).

We collected opinions of the respondents from nations with different cultural dimensions' indicators (Table 2) which is important to analyze cross-cultural differences. We used the data from the official website of Geert Hofstede centre (2018) to illustrate cultural differences between the selected countries.

Table 2. Cultural dimensions in analyzed countries (G. Hofstede 6-D model)*

Country	Power distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertainty avoidance	Long-term orientation	Indulgence
Bulgaria	70	30	40	85	69	16
Egypt	70	25	45	80	7	4
Germany	35	67	66	65	83	40
Morocco	70	46	53	68	14	25
Portugal	63	27	31	99	28	33
Romania	90	30	42	90	52	20
Ukraine	92	25	27	95	55	18

* www.geert-hofstede.com

The Hofstede model's dimensions are as following (Hofstede, G., Hofstede G. J., & Minkov, M., 2010; the official G. Hofstede centre website, 2018): power distance (illustrates the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept that power is distributed unequally); individualism / collectivism (distinguish the societies where people are more concerned on personal goals and achievements from the societies where people feel more comfortable working in groups); masculinity / femininity (expresses the domination of the traditional "male" or "female" values in different societies); uncertainty avoidance (shows the attitude of society's members to uncertainty and ambiguity); long-term orientation / short-term orientation (expresses how "pragmatic" or "long-term oriented" the society is); indulgence / restraint (shows the role of the rules and standards in people's everyday life). The relative positions on these dimensions are expressed in a score on a 0-100 point scale.

Our sample consists of countries with different expressions of the cultural dimensions' indexes. Countries as Ukraine and Romania have very high PDI (power distance index) while Germany represents a group of lower power distance countries. All European nations (excluding Portugal) in our sample are long-time oriented and both African cultures are short time oriented which is typical for this continent. Germany and Morocco are more masculine societies while Ukrainian, Portuguese and Bulgarian cultures are most feminine in the sample.

The majority of the participants were students and graduates of universities, all aged under 30 years to match the criteria of being representatives of the Generation "Y" (Millennials) or Generation "Z". The survey was conducted during the period January 2018 to August 2018 primarily in Svishetov and Varna in Bulgaria, in Cairo in Egypt, in Heilbronn in Germany, in Marrakesh in Morocco, in Covilha and Braga in Portugal, in Cluj-Napoka and Suceava in Romania as well as in Kyiv and Lviv in Ukraine.

The respondents were given three statements regarding the aim of the research:

1. Cross-cultural communication is an essential skill in our globalized world.
The skills of cross-cultural communication (dealing with the representatives of different cultures) can help you in both personal and business issues.
2. Digitalization significantly simplifies cross-cultural communication.
Digital communication technologies (e-mail, social networks, messengers etc.) make cross-cultural communication easier due not only to their speed and accessibility but because they are more “impersonal” compared to traditional “offline” meetings. Digital cross-cultural communication is less affected by cultural peculiarities compared to face-to-face communication.
3. Language barriers are less of an obstacle during online (digital) communication compared to offline (face-to-face) communication
Digital cross-cultural communication (via e-mail, social networks, messengers etc) significantly simplifies language barrier problem compared to face-to-face communication

To achieve higher quality data (Revilla et al., 2013) we offered the respondents an AD (agree-disagree) scale with 5 answer categories (rather than 7 or 11):

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree.

Given the number of possible answer categories in each question (statement) of our survey (five), we considered the answers receiving more than 20% of responses as dominant. The statement can be considered as confirmed if “agree” and “strongly agree” categories got more than 40% of responses in total.

RESEARCH RESULTS

We hypothesized that cross-cultural communication skills are highly important for the young people (Millennials and Generation “Z”). They are mobile, digitally educated, and open for new incentives and projects no matter in their own countries or abroad. On the other hand, there are some serious obstacles on the way to effective cross-cultural cooperation (and primarily language barriers). New digital technologies have changed traditional ways of social and business interactions including communication. We summarized the mentioned topics in three hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1. Millennials and Generation “Z” representatives consider cross-cultural communication skills as essential due to their “digitally globalized” lifestyle.

Hypothesis 2. Digitalization (digital communication technologies: e-mail, social networks, messengers etc) significantly simplifies cross-cultural communication.

Hypothesis 3. Language barriers are less of an obstacle during online (more “impersonal”) communication compared to offline (face-to-face) communication.

The results of the survey are presented in tables 3, 4 and 5.

Table 3. S1. Cross-cultural communication is an essential skill in our globalized world

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral / neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
TOTAL	2.8%	2.0%	3.8%	48.9%	42.5%
NATIONALITY					
<i>Bulgaria</i>	6.7%	0.0%	2.2%	46.7%	44.4%
<i>Egypt</i>	6.5%	3.2%	6.5%	54.8%	29.0%
<i>Germany</i>	1.0%	3.9%	2.0%	49.0%	44.1%
<i>Morocco</i>	1.6%	0.0%	3.2%	46.0%	49.2%
<i>Portugal</i>	6.7%	3.3%	6.7%	40.0%	43.3%
<i>Romania</i>	4.3%	0.0%	6.4%	36.2%	53.2%
<i>Ukraine</i>	0.0%	2.7%	4.0%	61.3%	32.0%
GENDER					
<i>Male</i>	4.6%	1.7%	5.7%	54.6%	33.3%
<i>Female</i>	1.4%	2.3%	2.3%	44.3%	49.8%

Table 4. S2. Digitalization significantly simplifies cross-cultural communication

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral / neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
TOTAL	1.0%	4.3%	15.5%	49.4%	29.8%
NATIONALITY					
<i>Bulgaria</i>	0.0%	8.9%	11.1%	57.8%	22.2%
<i>Egypt</i>	6.5%	3.2%	25.8%	35.5%	29.0%
<i>Germany</i>	1.0%	3.9%	22.5%	51.0%	21.6%
<i>Morocco</i>	0.0%	1.6%	7.9%	49.2%	41.3%
<i>Portugal</i>	3.3%	6.7%	0.0%	46.7%	43.3%
<i>Romania</i>	0.0%	4.3%	21.3%	48.9%	25.5%
<i>Ukraine</i>	0.0%	4.0%	13.3%	49.3%	33.3%
GENDER					
<i>Male</i>	0.6%	5.2%	14.9%	48.3%	31.0%
<i>Female</i>	1.4%	3.7%	16.0%	50.2%	28.8%

Table 5. S3. Language barriers are less of an obstacle during online (digital) communication compared to offline (face-to-face) communication

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral / neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
TOTAL	2.3%	11.7%	18.1%	44.0%	23.9%
NATIONALITY					
<i>Bulgaria</i>	0.0%	13.3%	17.8%	51.1%	17.8%
<i>Egypt</i>	9.7%	12.9%	9.7%	48.4%	19.4%
<i>Germany</i>	1.0%	17.6%	17.6%	47.1%	16.7%
<i>Morocco</i>	0.0%	9.5%	11.1%	39.7%	39.7%
<i>Portugal</i>	3.3%	6.7%	10.0%	33.3%	46.7%
<i>Romania</i>	6.4%	8.5%	29.8%	38.3%	17.0%
<i>Ukraine</i>	1.3%	8.0%	24.0%	45.3%	21.3%
GENDER					
<i>Male</i>	2.9%	12.1%	20.1%	35.6%	29.3%
<i>Female</i>	1.8%	11.4%	16.4%	50.7%	19.6%

The results of the survey proved that cross-cultural communication skills are highly important for young people. 90.4% of the respondents have chosen “agree” or “strongly agree” for statement one (“Cross-cultural communication is an essential skill in our globalized world”).

The majority of the respondents confirmed that digitalization opens new opportunities to improve the efficiency of cross-cultural communication by simplifying the process of dealing with other cultures’ representatives. 79.2% of the respondents have chosen either “agree” or “strongly agree” for statement two (“Digitalization significantly simplifies cross-cultural communication”).

Most participants confirmed that digitalization also simplifies language barriers problems: 67.9% of the respondents have chosen either “agree” or “strongly agree” for statement three (“Language barriers are less of an obstacle during online (digital) communication compared to offline (face-to-face) communication”). All the respondents’ mother tongues are non-English. On the other hand, the majority of cross-cultural communications are being conducted in English so we can note that digital communication channels (e.g., messengers etc) can facilitate these processes.

The results of the survey confirmed all three hypotheses mentioned in our study. We also noted that the correlation between indicators of Internet usage in the countries, English language proficiency and the results of our survey is low. For example, people from countries with “very low” level of English language proficiency (Egypt, Morocco) and respondents from the countries with “high” level of this indicator (Germany, Portugal, Romania) all consider digitalization as real facilitator of cross-cultural communication including its role as a “helper” reducing language barriers problem.

The correlation between national mentality (Table 2) and the attitude to the role of the digitalization in cross-cultural communication process is also relatively low. Respondents representing nations with low indicator of indulgence (people more restricted by the rules) have similar attitude

to the need in cross-cultural communication and the role digitalization plays with their colleagues from the nations having high indulgence indicator.

We can explain such similarity in results noting that all our respondents represent new generations (Millennials and Generation Z). These young people are well educated and we can hypothesize they may have many similar features no matter of the nationality mainly because of their global thinking highly influenced by frequent use of internet and social media.

DISCUSSION

Social and business environment trends foster the need of cross-cultural communication skills. Cross-cultural interactions tend to be more “frequent, horizontal, unstructured, temporary, sporadic, and across global locations” (Zellmer-Bruhn & Gibson, 2014). Individuals are looking for new experience discovering new countries and cultures. Companies are looking for new business opportunities entering new markets or searching for cheaper resources abroad and supply chains can be interpreted as global multinational value chains (Wellbrock and Hein, 2018; Göpfert and Wellbrock, 2013). Multinational corporations rely always more on multinational teams to achieve higher efficiency in decision-making processes and to boost innovations. Earley and Mosakowski (2000) state that multicultural teams out-perform monoculture teams, especially when performance requires multiple skills. Ochieng and Price (2010) note that “cross-cultural communication provides the invisible glue which can hold a dislocated multicultural project team together”.

In modern society intellectual capital becomes dominant and the role of knowledge is increasing in importance (Lazarenko, 2014). The amount of people working in a culturally diverse globalized environment is increasing dramatically. Kraimer, Takeuchi and Frese (2014) describe global work context as the one including any job-related activities that involve interacting with people from other countries (customers, colleagues, partners etc). Further globalization makes it more important to explore cross-cultural interactions than cross-cultural differences (Gelfand et al., 2017).

The findings of our research demonstrate that digital age tools do simplify the process of cross-cultural communication: for many people it is easier to deal with a representative of a different culture when they are not “face-to-face”, especially when language barriers are a real obstacle. Online translators, autocorrecting etc. can make a person more confident during cross-cultural communication processes.

The first generation that has been characterized as “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) or “net generation” (Tapscott, 1998) is the Millennials (born roughly between 1980 and 1995). These people are highly dependent on information and communication technologies (ICT) in both personal and business issues. Social networks and the online environment are some of the essential elements in their lives (Eastman & Liu, 2012). Generation “Z” representatives (born after 1995) cannot even imagine life without internet, social networks and mobile applications which significantly simplify the networking process (including cross-cultural communication with representatives of other cultures).

The boost of Internet usage fostered the emergence of a global culture where people can easily access information that allows them to understand the socio-cultural context of their co-workers (Canavilhas, 2015). Exploring Facebook, Instagram or LinkedIn profile of your partner or colleague can provide some very important data for future cross-cultural communication. Usage of WhatsApp, Viber or other messengers can simplify communication processes not only because they are cheap and convenient, but also because digital communications erase some cross-cultural differences. Text messages solve the problem of different accents: Chinese businessmen will have less problems texting to their London based partners (comparing with offline meeting); you do not have to care about national customs concerning shaking hands, hugging or tea ceremony when you make online calls to your business partners from abroad etc.

The emerging role of social networks is another factor fostering the importance of digital communication. People now use social media more often than corporate websites when searching for information on a company, brand, or product (Men & Tsai, 2014). In addition, companies build effective communication strategies with their clients from all over the world that demands cross-cultural communication skills.

We emphasize on language barrier as one of the main obstacles for effective cross-cultural communication and the majority of our respondents confirmed that digitalization partly helps to solve this problem. Being the most widespread, popular and needed international language, English is a “must-have” skill for both personal and business issues for people all over the world. Many multinational corporations from non-English-speaking European countries use English as their official corporate language (Lauring, 2008), but not everyone from a non-English-speaking country is fluent in English. Face-to-face conversation with your partner with a significantly higher level of English might be rather confusing for both parties. In this case, digital technologies can make your communication less uncomfortable.

On the other hand, sometimes-online communication is just not enough to build real trust between people. It is probably impossible to impress or persuade your partner with non-verbal techniques chatting with him via one of the messengers or even talking to him by Skype.

The results of our research proved that digital technologies can simplify cross-cultural communication. This is another evidence of the importance of digital information and communication skills. Digital skills are seen now as crucial in the 21st century because they “drive organizations’ competitiveness and innovation capacity” (Van Laar et al., 2017) and communication being one of the core skills in general is definitely influenced heavily by technological progress.

CONCLUSIONS

Digitalization is one of the megatrends of modern world along with globalization and growing impact of new “living-online” generations. Our research proved that these young people are interested in cross-cultural communication and they realize and witness opportunities digitalization provides to facilitate this process. Analyzing key economic and social trends, we can hypothesize the growing impact of technologies on human lives. We can also forecast further globalization providing more opportunities for businesses and individuals. Digital communication (especially cross-cultural communication) skills will become more and more important in the nearest future.

In our further research, we would like to concentrate on the combination of traditional communication skills and digital competences.

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