

# Cultural study report – south korea

[Business](#)



Intercultural Business Communication 2011 Abstract This report has reviewed the culture of Korea by using Hofstede's five dimensions of national culture (1997). Culture is defined and critique of the five dimensions is discussed, followed by the analysis of Korea culture that shows significant contrasting cultural values with Western countries. Moreover, stereotypes of Korea seem related to the power distance and collectivism culture, deriving the strong bond in nationalism and respect to seniority. Regarding interpersonal communication, interaction is more indirect and passive with silence, which is perceived in four meanings: truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance.

Non-verbal in particular plays its important role when communicating with Korean. Recommendations are given to student who might want to go to Korea for placement or working experience after graduation. 2 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 Table of Contents 1 Introduction 1. 1 Background information of Korea 4 5 2 Literature review 2. 1 2. 2 2.

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INTRODUCTIONThe world is becoming a global market for rising and emerging businesses, more and more enterprises (e. g. HSBC, IBM, Coca-Cola etc. ) expand their business to foreign countries or spread over into the other continents (e. g.

Asia). Employees are given more opportunities to work overseas and may encounter plenty of challenges and difficulties in foreign countries with different culture (Luthans and Doh 2009). When I was doing my Higher Diploma, I was selected to work in the Economic and Trade Office of Hong Kong Government in China as an intern. During the time, I met a lot of officials from different place and culture, one of them mentioned that the geographical mobility of students nowadays was relatively low; they were not willing to work out of their home country and explore new environment, which could widen their sights and enrich their experiences, this phenomenon also weaken the competitiveness of a country in long-term (Bonin et al. , 2008). As a result, overseas working experience at an early stage would be beneficial to students and encourage them to get prepared before they face the real challenge in the society after graduation.

For myself as an international student, although placement year is not compulsory, I am willing to work in one of the most advanced technology-leading countries after graduation, Korea (South) (stated as Korea in the following). Its importance in the global economy is growing rapidly (Steers, 1999), especially its research and development in broadband technology that is currently leading the world (State of Internet Report, 2010), it attracts me to start my career path there. However, cultural factors should 4 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 011 also <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-study-report-south-korea/>

be considered carefully, different cultural customs can cause negative effects for business (Chaney and Martin, 2007). 1. 1 BACKGROUND OF KOREA Korea's population is one of the most ethnically and linguistically homogenous in the world, virtually all Koreans share a common cultural and linguistic heritage. Korean society remains highly imbued with Confucian values and beliefs, moreover, along with other Asian countries, Korea has been recognized to have very contrasting cultural values with Western countries (Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998).

Over the past several decades, the Republic of Korea has achieved a remarkably high level of economic growth, which has allowed the country to rise from the rubble of the Korean War into the ranks of the Organization for Cooperation and Development (OECD). Today, South Korea is the United States' seventh-largest trading partner and is the 15th-largest economy in the world. 5 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 2. LITERATURE REVIEW Culture includes an extensive number of dimensions and values. To facilitate cultural analysis, aspects or dimensions that are universal to all cultures have to be identified (Ronen, 1986), particularly in the area of business.

In this report, one widely accepted theory of cultural studies, Geert Hofstede's (1967) five dimensions of culture model will be applied in analysing the culture of Korea. Culture will be defined at the beginning, which will be followed by critique of Hofstede's theories of cultural dimensions. The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Research Project will also be introduced in purpose to provide a more comprehensive background of major researches regarding <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-study-report-south-korea/>

cross country cultures carried out in past decades for reference. 6 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 2. 1 Cross Country Cultures In general, culture refers to the result of human interaction. (Joynt & Warner, 1996).

Culture is about how would a group of people solve and deal with problems (Schein, 1992); Hofstede (1997, p. 20) described “ culture is like water to fish. We live and breathe through it. ” Culture has to do with shared ideas, the way a group of people conceptualize and represent the world and life to themselves (Christie, 2003). Moreover, culture suggests standards for what is right and what is wrong (norms); what is good and what is bad (values); what one can do and how to do it (Goodenough, 1961). Hence, the cultural diversity is shown in the model of culture (Trompenaars, 1997).

The Explicit Artifacts and products of the society Norms and Values Guide the Society The Implicit Basic assumptions Guide people behavior Figure 2. 1 Model of Culture The outer ring refers to artifacts and products of the society that are observable, such as language, food and art. The second layer consists of the norms and values, which are formally or informally guiding the society. The core contains basic assumptions that guide individual? s behavior; with these assumptions, people are able to organize themselves more effectively in problem solving and interacting well with each other within the same culture. When we are trying to understand a culture, we get to know the outer observable layer first, then go deeper to the norms and values and lastly the core assumptions of a culture. Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 2.

2 Cultural Dimensions Several competing frameworks exist by which to analyze the phenomenon of culture (cf. Hall 1960; Hofstede 1991; Trompenaars 1993). In particular Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions have been widely accepted and repeatedly validated over time in business context (e. g. , Hoppe, 1990; Sondergaard, 1994).

Hofstede was first of few who provide a composite picture of culture by examining its subparts to analyze culture in five dimensions, Power Distance Index, Individuality, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance Index and Long-term Orientation. Hofstede research was being criticized ever since it was published; he summarized five most stated criticisms of his approach (Hofstede, 2002): 1. A study of the subsidiaries of one company cannot provide information about entire national cultures. Hofstede: What were measured were differences between national cultures. Any set of functionally equivalent samples from national populations can supply information about such differences. The IBM set consisted of unusually well matched samples for an unusually large number of countries.

The extensive validation in the following chapters will show that the country scores obtained correlated highly with all kinds of other data, including results obtained from representative samples of entire national populations (Ibid). 8 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 2. Nations are not the best units for studying cultures. Hofstede: True, but they are usually the only kind of units available for comparison and better than nothing (Ibid). 3.

Surveys are not a suitable way of measuring cultural differences. Hofstede: They should not be the only way (Ibid). 4. The IBM data are old and therefore obsolete. Hofstede: The dimensions found are assumed to have centuries-old roots; only data which remained stable across two subsequent surveys were maintained; and they have since been validated against all kinds of external measurements; recent replications show no loss of validity (Ibid). 5.

Four or five dimensions are not enough. Hofstede: Additional dimensions should be both conceptually and statistically independent from the five dimensions already defined and they should be validated by significant correlations with conceptually related external measures; candidates are welcome to apply (Ibid). Hofstede's research gives regularity that shapes shared values. He adopts realist and deterministic assumptions (Williamson, 2002); although there are limitations of using Hofstede's theories in analysis, these give us guidance when evaluating cultures before moving to working in different countries. On top of theories, other factors, such as tradition and customs, language and geographical factors should also be regarded. 9 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 2.

3The GLOBE Project The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Research Project is a multi-phase, multi-method program of cross cultural research in which investigators over the world are examining the inter-relationships between societal culture, organizational culture, and organizational leadership. About 170 social scientists and management scholars from 61 countries representing all major geographic regions throughout the world are engaged in this long-term programmatic <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-study-report-south-korea/>

series of cross-cultural studies (over 10 years). The meta-goal of GLOBE is to develop an empirically based theory to describe, understand, and predict the impact of specific cultural variables on leadership and organizational processes and the effectiveness of these processes (Oaks, 2004). This research has been considered among the most sophisticated in cultural analysis to date, Leung (2006) commented a collaboration of Hofstede and GLOBE researchers could be an intellectual spark for moving the field forward and an influential review on the major factors characterizing global cultures. GLOBE still largely depends on Hofstede's original dimensions though.

As we do here in describing the general cultural context for Korea, due to the complexity and scale of this research, GLOBE will not be applied in analysis in this report. 10 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 3. ANALYSIS OF CULTURE IN KOREA Hofstede's five dimensions South Korea Asian Countries (avg. ) 89 72 60 35 18 39 27 54 66 50 35 25 85 75 71 United Kingdom PDI IDV MAS UAI LTO Diagram 3.

Hofstede's five dimensions in comparing South Korea, average of Asian Countries and United Kingdom The differences between Korea and United Kingdom are clearly shown in the above diagram, it shows the two cultures are fundamentally in great contrast according to the five dimensions. In particular the Uncertainty of Avoidance Index, Korea has a considerable difference in comparing with the average of Asian countries.

Each dimension will be discussed in the following. I. Large or small power distance: Power distance explains the way a society handles inequality among its members. It is defined " as the extent to which the members of <https://assignbuster.com/cultural-study-report-south-korea/>



institutions” (family, school and community) “ and organizations” (places of work) “ within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 28). Basically, higher power distance refers to countries in which people strictly obey their superiors? instructions.

In Korea, staff acknowledged 11 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 the boss? s authority simply based on the formal hierarchy level of position within the organization, they seldom bypass the chain of command. Centralized organizational structure and autocratic eadership are more likely to be occurred (Luthans, 2009). II. Individualism vs. collectivism: “ Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family” (Hofstede, 1997, p. 51).

In collectivist societies, people tend to stay in groups and take care of each other in exchange of loyalty; harmony is valorized within the social environment. Asian countries tend to have low individualism (collectivism instead), so as Korea. It has tight social network and strong belief in group decision (Deresky, 1997). In business context, decision making process is usually longer than individualistic countries, they try to make decision that is agreed by all people in order to keep its consistent in operations, which might possibly miss some valuable market opportunities. III.

Masculinity vs. femininity: Hofstede defined Masculinity as “ a situation in which the dominant values in society are success, money, and things” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 419 – 420). It stands for a society in which social gender roles are sharply differentiated. High masculinity countries concern about

earnings, status, recognition and challenge. Masculinity of Korea tend to be low compare with either the other Asian countries or the UK, which indicates Korean concern for relationships, others and quality of life more.

The workplace is perceived as lower stress and a friendlier atmosphere (Luthans, 2009). 12 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 IV. Strong or weak uncertainty avoidance: Uncertainty avoidance is defined as “ the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain and unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these. (Hofstede, 1997, p. 113). People in strong uncertainty avoidance countries do not like uncertainty and tend to believe in and rely on experts and their knowledge.

Uncertainty avoidance of Korea is especially high that scores 83, which is also much higher than the average of Asian countries. It demonstrates Korean need a relative higher sense of security and might feel uncomfortable in an unfamiliar environment with unknowns around. As a result, formal rules and procedures are provided to secure greater career stability (Deresky, 1997). V. Long-term or short-term orientation: “ the extent to which a culture programs its members to accept delayed gratification of their material, social and emotional needs. ” Defined by Hofstede (2001, p. 500). This fifth dimension was added lately and less well known than the others. Generally, long-term oriented countries like Korea focus more on long-term benefits in which short-term profits could be sacrificed and try to strike for long-term goals (Deresky, 1997). 13 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 4. STEROTYPES OF KOREA

Hofstede's theories give us a broad idea of a culture according to the five dimensions.

Apart from that, people within the same culture might act diversely; they might have different identical sets of norms, values and assumptions.

Cultures with norms that are different significantly tend to describe the other in terms of extremes. " Using extreme, exaggerated forms of behaviour is stereotyping. " (Trompenaars, 1997, p. 26) Stereotyping reinforce the differences of different cultures and reduce the chance to achieve cooperation and communication (Luthans, 2009).

So what are the stereotypes of Korea generally perceived by the other people? . 1 Unified Nation and Sports Culture " Koreans have developed a sense of nation based on shared blood and ancestry. The Korean nation was " racialized" through a belief in a common prehistoric origin, producing an intense sense of collective oneness. " Gi-Wook Shin, Director at Shorenstein Asia Pacific Research Centre, said. Koreans have its uniqueness and autonomy that were developed by a unitary nation.

Yi Kwang-su, a key figure during colonial rule, claimed that bloodline, personality, and culture are three fundamental elements of a nation and that " Koreans are without a doubt a unitary nation in blood and culture. Such a view is widely accepted among Koreans. 14 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 Korean have a great belief in their nation, the strong nationalism united them. For instance, in 2006, I was impressed deeply by a scene on television. Fans carried a large South Korean flag over their heads in South Korea, during their national team's

World Cup match against Switzerland in Germany on June 24, 2006. Source:  
[http://www.](http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/south-korea-world-cup)

[globalpost. om/dispatch/south-korea-world-cup](http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/south-korea-world-cup) President Lee Myung-bak claimed “ South Korea sees sports and, more to the point, victory in sports as the most effective way to extend the national brand. ” 15 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 4. 2 Obsession of respecting the senior? “ I met 2 Korean girls so far but not all at once within a period of time and they always ask for me age. The thing is we are around the same age 20’s but they also both told me asking ones age is a Korean culture thing, is it so important about age? ” (Forum AsianFanatics, 2009).

The question was raised by a young man who lived in the UK. People may describe Korean is somehow too rigid regarding issue of ages or seniority. However, respect for others according to seniority is a pillar of Korea’s Confucianist traditions. Seniority is based on age, position in the family, job position, being a teacher, and the list goes on (zkorean, 1997). Respecting the senior is strictly ruled in Korea, especially in business context, junior are expected to interact with senior with different set of “ behaviours”, including languages, attitude and behaviours, which show their respect (Keating, 2009).

The junior staff should obey the superior? s demands without questioning, which is generally regarded as unequal relationship but the unwritten social rule. Korean would be expected to behave appropriately in every occasion according to their age, gender, social role and social status. When Korean

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introduce themselves, they are used to tell their age, despite how many days older, as long as one is older, he/she has to be treated as a senior by anyone who is younger than him/her. Sometimes, Korean? s “ obsessions” in tradition is usually associated with impatience or bad-tempered and becoming a negative stereotype perceived by foreigners. 16 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 5. 5.

1 INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION Verbal communication Importance of talk: silence: Belief about talk refers to our evaluations of the functions of talk and silence (Wiemann et al. , 1986). Higher level of anxiety associated with verbal communication appears in Korean more than in western cultures. Silence is considered as an important part of communication, they perceive silence in four meanings: truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance. Gudykunst, 2004) Passive topic management and turn-taking: Koreans are used to let partner to start a conversation first and then give response accordingly. They like use back-channeling (i. e, brief vocal responses: “ uh-huh”, “ yes”, “ I see,” etc. ) to give response to topic change. Compare with western cultures, they have relative passive attitudes towards topic management and turn-taking (Lim & Choi, 1996). Negotiation styles: In a negotiation process, Koreans are characterized as courteous listeners among Asian countries. In general, Koreans regard saying ‘ no’ is impolite and something to be avoided at all costs. It can be difficult to get at the truth of their intentions.

Unhappiness and disagreement will usually be voiced very vaguely through the use of such phrases as ‘ we will try’ or that might be difficult but we will

explore the idea. Nor 'yes' necessarily mean 'yes'. It might simply mean 'I have heard you' or 'I recognise that you have made a point.' 17 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 Due to this vagueness of meaning, it is very often necessary to go over the same point many times, trying to extricate more meaning as time progresses. This obviously has the effect of making meetings longer and can be somewhat frustrating.

It is important to maintain patience and politeness at all times (Lewis, 1996).

They always keep harmony during negotiation. 5. 2 Non-verbal

communication Non-verbal communication functions in several different

ways (Argyle, 1975): it... ? Supports speech by supplying additional

information about the content, providing feedback and controlling

synchronization; ? ? ? Communicates attitudes to others and negotiates

interpersonal relations; Expresses emotions; Conveys information about

personality Emotion Expressions: Koreans do not usually show their emotion

through facial expressions. They believe animated facial expressions " are

associated with the projection of their emotions. "(Samovar, et.

al, 1998). Smile is another sign of emotion which is rooted in one's culture.

In Korean culture, " Lack of smiling by Koreans has often been

misinterpreted as a sign of hostility. " (Samovar, et. al, 1998).

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2011 Contact and touch: Korean requires clearly defined personal space in

formal situations. Korean culture is a low-contact culture, where people

speak, stand and sit in a quite distance. During the course of conversation,

they have very little physical contact and avoid touching when meeting together. Korean people, like other Asian people, seldom kiss the members of the opposite-sex in public occasions (Keating, 2009). Face concerns: Face in collective cultures is based on the interdependent self construal.

Gudykunst (2004) states that Koreans have more other-face concerns (e. g, the face of the people with whom we are interacting) than USA and Japanese. However, Koreans have less self-face concerns than Japanese and Chinese. There also is a distinction between personal and positional face in Korea (Lim & Choi, 1996). Personal control is the face negotiated in interactions. Positional face, is attached to the position a person fills in the social system (e.

g, professor, physician) and people filling the positions are expected to behave in certain ways across situations. The amount of positional face is a function of how high the social position is in the social system. They try to maintain their position face. Hence, they behave in ways that meet the social expectations of their position in Korea. 19 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 6. CONCLUSION This report has reviewed the culture of Korea by using Hofstede's five dimensions of national culture, although there are limitations of Hofstede's dimensions, essential information can be obtained as guidance before going to work in another country with different culture.

When we are trying to get to know a culture, we follow the model of culture; get deeper from the observable explicit layer to the core assumptions of culture. In the analysis, Korea does show significant contrasting cultural

values with Western countries. Korean has larger power distance, tend to be collectivism, femininity, high uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation, these suggest Korean to work in harmonic group in which obeying seniors and group decision making will be appreciated, also in order to avoid uncertainty and risk, comprehensive planning is more likely to be carried out before implementation. Moreover, stereotypes of Korea seem related to the power distance and collectivism culture, deriving the strong bond in nationalism and respect to seniority. Regarding interpersonal communication, one may possibly encounter indirect, passive interaction with silence, which is perceived in four meanings: truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance. Non-verbal in particular plays its important role when communicating with Korean.

Further research would be carried out in a more in-depth analysis, especially making use of the GLOBE report together with the Hofstede's dimensions. In conclusion, basic review should be made before going to a new country in purpose to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding among cultures. 20 Case Study Report on South Korea Intercultural Business Communication 2011 7. RECOMMENDATIONS According to the analysis made, recommendations will be given to students who are willing to go to Korea for placement or working experience after graduation. Korea is characterized as large power distance, collectivism, femininity, high uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation, all these display a contrast in cultural values in which students might probably feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable when they first encounter such situations because of culture shock (Gaw, 2000). Research before departing is definitely needed for preparation.



According to Korea, sometimes silence is the golden rule when dealing with problems; take observation as the strategy rather than questioning would be possibly more beneficial. As mentioned in „ stereotypes of Korea? , Koreans concern their nationalism and respect to senior very much, offending either of them would probably lead to serious consequences. In communication, be aware of the customs and traditions, a country like Korea with long history is usually consists of certain extent of norms in daily life; in particular when greeting someone, it shows your respect with a correct address to a person. Indirect communication is a feature of Korea, be patience will always be a good attitude. In business context, Koreans are likely to work in groups and respect group decisions, outperforming than the others is not usually be appreciated. I would suggest students to have an attitude of learning and exploring when first come to an unfamiliar country; avoid making too much mistake at the beginning that might deeply affect your confidence in handling challenges in work.

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