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Examining the Dynamics of Cultural Interaction in Virtual Environments

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Abstract

This article aims to highlight the aspects of intercultural communication in the virtual environment, mainly focusing on the interaction of virtual teams composed of carriers of different cultures. The methodology is based on principles of impartiality, tolerance, and cultural relativism. The primary research focuses on the interaction of cultures in virtual teams engaged in project tasks and the advantages and challenges of intercultural virtual communication. When working in virtual teams, attention is focused on cultural characteristics, referring to the methodology proposed by Geert Hofstede and his colleagues. Using the 5-D model of national culture, examples from India, France, China, Denmark, the USA, and Brazil were analysed to understand the specifics of cultural diversity and its potential for virtual communication to ensure practical international cooperation. Particular attention was paid to cultural differences and their impact on intercultural interaction. Among the general aspects of intercultural virtual communication, we highlighted cultural differences and their impact on intercultural interaction, and using these differences to enhance the effectiveness of team virtual work and create a comfortable virtual environment; explicit (visible) and implicit aspects of culture; differences in time zones affecting organisational moments and the need

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to consider cultural differences when planning synchronous and asynchronous communication formats; differences in workplace culture (organisation of the virtual office). For successful intercultural communication, it is necessary to clearly understand cultural diversity and cultural relativism, avoid cultural appropriation, and communicate with carriers of different cultural traditions and social groups for one's cultural enrichment.

Keywords: virtual space; global virtual teams; cultural diversity; cultural differences; cultural intelligence; cultural relativism.

Introduction

During the first decade of the 21st century, the number of Internet users reached 2 billion people. According to forecasts, with such a pace of technological growth, practically the entire population of the planet will be online by 2025 (Schmidt & Cohen, 2015). Therefore, studying cultural diversity and its adaptation to intercultural communication in the virtual environment is necessary to develop effective strategies for human development in new conditions.

Identifying and considering aspects of cultural interaction in the virtual environment have scientific and practical significance for the virtual economy, forming a comfortable psycho-emotional environment for virtual global teams and developing effective virtual management.

The article aims to identify the aspects of interaction between different cultures in the virtual space, particularly in business and economic communication.

Literature review

With virtual technologies' rapid integration into various spheres of life, applied research on specific groups of people, business companies, and cultural projects has become increasingly important. These studies highlight intercultural communication and the prospects for effectively utilising cultural differences and shared cultural values. Among such works is the study of cultural diversity and the characterisation of intercultural communicators by Dumitraşcu-Băldău and Dumitru-Demitraşcu (2019). International communicative competence, as a necessary condition for proper interaction and communication with people from different cultures (exemplified by Malaysia), has been the subject of research by DeWitt *et al.* (2022). The focus on post-colonial discourse in academic research has led to numerous publications on cultural appropriation (Cruz *et al.*, 2023; Finkelstein & Kimberly, 2022). Language is necessary for virtual communication, whether symbolic writing or verbal communication. The most common language for

communication in the virtual space is English (WebEnglish), which has developed and continues to develop its specific “virtual traits,” a subject of academic interest (Montero-Fleta *et al.*, 2017; Potolia & Derivry-Plard, 2023; Osadcha, 2023). In the virtual context, intercultural communication is closely related to knowledge and understanding of body language (Fouts, 2021). One of the critical problems of intercultural communication is trust/mistrust. Therefore, successful interaction through the development of cognitive skills is necessary for effective cultural interaction (Sokolova, 2023). Developing effective strategies for intercultural communication and intercultural effectiveness is the subject of research by Fantini (2020). According to the researcher, developing intercultural competence helps establish intercultural relationships and a sense of comfort in an international environment. Globally, this contributes to trade development, the harmonisation of political relations, peace, social justice, and equality (Fantini, 2020). Erin Meyer analyses the impact of cultural differences on international business, focusing on specific cases of the influence of cultural background on the business environment in various countries worldwide (Meyer, 2014).

Cultural diversity in virtual teamwork is often depicted as paradoxical. National culture can strongly influence how people perceive information regarding their actions, behaviour, and reactions, leading to misinterpretations and misreadings. This means there is a filtration through one’s cultural lens (Dreo *et al.*, 2002). At the same time, cultural diversity can enhance creativity and the effectiveness of the work done and improve team interaction by increasing the number and diversity of ideas and reducing groupthink (Winkler & Bouncken, 2015).

Interaction between different cultures in virtual space, one of the highly dynamic trends of cultural globalisation, remains a focus of attention for theorists and practitioners in the social humanities.

Methodology

General and unique methods of cultural studies were used to write the article. A comprehensive approach allowed for the thorough investigation of the problem of interaction between different cultures in the virtual space, focusing on specific aspects that became the subject of our research attention. Induction and deduction methods were applied to analyse scientific literature in intercultural virtual communication studies. This allowed us to systematise and structure information according to the logic of the article’s presentation. To study the impact of cultural diversity on virtual teamwork and its significance for team processes and productivity in a virtual environment, we systematically reviewed the scientific literature to identify previous empirical studies focusing on multinational teams. The analogy method allowed us to trace the specifics of cultural diversity in different countries worldwide and its impact on virtual communication, particularly during the work of virtual multinational teams. The content analysis and historical-comparative

method were used to analyse the experience of intercultural interaction and the advantages and risks of such virtual communications. This also allowed us to conclude the necessity of a comprehensive approach to studying the interaction of different cultures in the virtual space both from a historical-cultural perspective and a geographical-spatial one. We used the case method to demonstrate specific examples related to the practical application of knowledge of various aspects of the world's cultural diversity to achieve effective virtual communication, focusing on countries such as India, France, China, Denmark, the USA, and Brazil. Methods of generalisation and forecasting were used in formulating conclusions and recommendations regarding the advantages, challenges, and prospects of intercultural communication in the virtual environment. The cultural approach allows us to look at the research problem through the lens of meaning-making concepts, understanding the role and place of the virtual environment in the existence of 21st-century humans through the prism of cultural diversity and its potential to improve intercultural competence, develop cultural empathy, and raise awareness of cultural relativism.

Results

We propose to highlight the following aspects of intercultural communication in virtual space.

Differences in Cultural Values

Sociologist Geert Hofstede and his colleagues and students developed an algorithm for using statistical data to analyse cultural values. Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is one of the leading theories in intercultural communications (Annamoradnejad *et al.*, 2019). Cultural dimensions allow us to consider cultures according to several parameters:

Power Distance (Low/High). In cultures with high power distance, power distance is one of the most essential parts of social and public life. Power holders are privileged social strata due to their high-ranking positions. Values include authoritarian leadership style, social inequality, and a culture of hierarchy. Criticism or opposition to power is unacceptable (China, North Korea, Russia). In cultures with low power distance, the prevailing understanding is to minimise social inequality. Value orientations include equality, individual freedom, and respect for the person (Austria, Denmark, USA, Finland) (Vranceanu & Iorgulescu, 2016).

Collectivism–Individualism. This criterion analyses the degree of encouragement of social ties versus individual independence. Collectivist cultures prioritise group goals over individual ones. These cultures have a rigid social structure, with a clear division into social groups, where each member is guaranteed a certain level of attention and care in exchange for loyalty to the existing system (India, Japan,

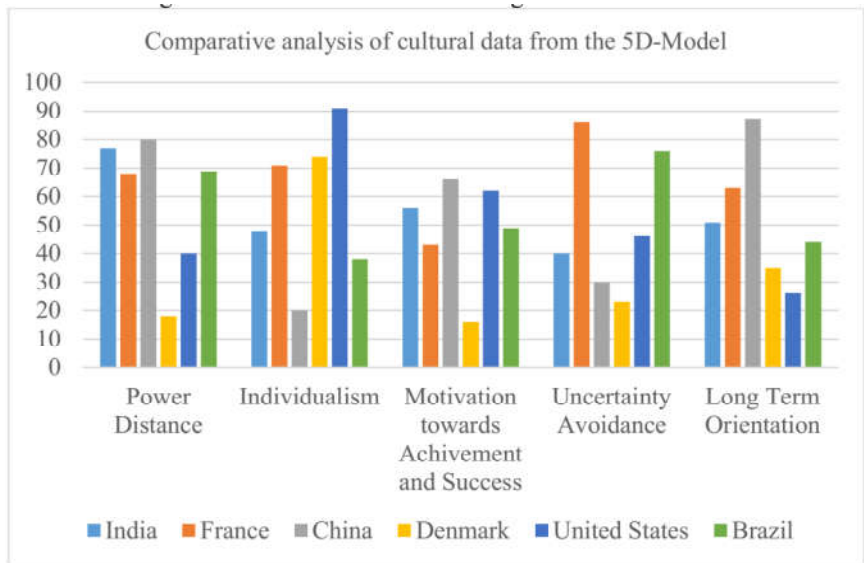
and Middle Eastern countries). Individualist cultures are characterised by greater material well-being of their members, the choice of behaviour and lifestyle, and a free social structure where everyone takes care of themselves and their loved ones. They are characterised by competition, unlike the cooperation and collaboration of collectivist cultures (Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Ukraine, Sweden) (Szabolcs & Molnarne, 2018).

Motivation. This is the degree of social approval of using forceful methods or, conversely, not taking the initiative, not striving for leadership positions or success in its socially acceptable form. The first type of motivational orientation includes Austria, the United Kingdom, Venezuela, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Mexico, and Switzerland. The second includes Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Finland, Chile, Sweden (Cimpeanu *et al.*, 2011; Aleqadat, 2021).

Uncertainty Avoidance. This is the degree of societal tolerance, attitude towards the unknown, the other, the unusual, traditionalism and the desire to adhere to established rituals, traditions, norms, and dogmas. Cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance experience constant stress and fear in situations of uncertainty, unpredictability, and instability. This leads to high aggressiveness and rejection of people with different behaviours, lifestyles, and cultural values. To reduce uncertainty, members of such cultures prefer clear instructions, written confirmations, schedules, and timetables (Greece, Germany, Peru, and Japan). Cultures with a low level of uncertainty avoidance more easily accept unpredictable events and unexpected situations, viewing them as an adventure or challenge and a push to action (Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Finland) (Szabolcs & Molnarne, 2018).

Long-term Orientation. This refers to the attitude towards change. A culture oriented towards the long term perceives the world as constantly moving; therefore, it is always necessary to prepare for the future (Australia, USA). In a culture oriented towards the short term, the world is seen as stable, created once and for all. Thus, the moral standard is the past; its institutions should be followed as time-tested and proven (India, China) (Milosevic, 2018).

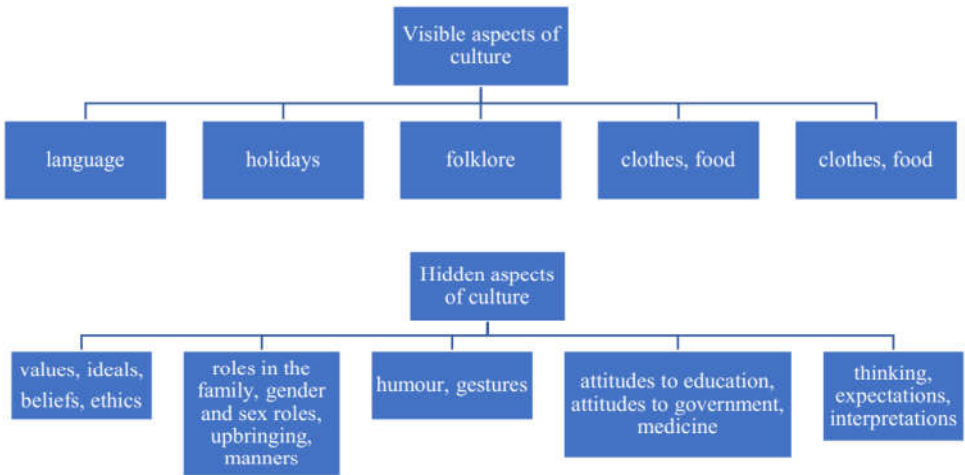
Based on these criteria and taking advantage of the opportunities provided to researchers by the 5-D model of national culture developed by Geert Hofstede and his colleagues and followers, we propose a comparative analysis of the cultural characteristics of countries that are geographically distant from each other and have different historical, cultural, and religious traditions. In the context of globalisation and virtualisation, interaction between representatives of these countries can be effective if attention is paid to these cultural differences, which are a strength of the interaction when building communications.



Source: Hofstede (2001)

Figure 1: Comparative analysis of the 5-D models of national culture using the examples of India, France, China, Denmark, the USA, and Brazil

Explicit (visible) and hidden (without cultural empathy and intercultural awareness, it is not easy to see and understand) aspects of culture



Source: Stewart (2006)

Figure 2: Visible and invisible aspects of culture

Considering visible and invisible aspects of culture in intercultural interaction is an effective tool for enhancing work efficiency. Visible aspects of culture include how we interact and live, our appearance, culinary and gastronomic preferences, the language of communication, leisure activities, folklore traditions, and artistic preferences and practices. The core of culture, however, lies in its invisible aspects – its axiological system, moral and ethical principles, behavioural models, and ways of thinking. Combining knowledge of visible and invisible aspects of culture in intercultural communication leads to a deeper understanding of cultural differences and insights into the motivations, behavioural reactions, and interpretations of different people from various cultural backgrounds.

Key aspects of intercultural communication in the virtual space are: (1) language of communication; (2) body language; (3) intercultural communicative competence; (4) cultural empathy (Jiang & Wang, 2018; Hrisca, 2011; Mutheu, 2023; Taylor, 2021).

Differences in workplace culture, i.e. in the organisation of virtual offices

After thoroughly reviewing colleagues' work on intercultural communications in virtual teams, we noted the increasing necessity of considering the cultural characteristics of representatives from different ethnicities, religions, and social groups when collaborating in virtual spaces. We also analysed recommendations from intercultural communication specialists, paying attention to their advice on navigating cultural differences. To explore cultural interaction and its specifics in virtual spaces, we selected various countries to illustrate the aspects of intercultural communication when setting up virtual offices. There are cultural differences and their impact on virtual communication below.

India. The culture of this country is characterised by an indirect communication style and an inability to say “no” (lack of knowledge is perceived as failure and disgrace). A high level of emotionality is also typical. For representatives of Indian culture, it is essential to maintain a clear hierarchy (for example, greeting the most senior person first, then the rest of the team), social stratification, and strong corporate ties. Friendship is prioritised over business relationships. The culture is distinguished by ethnic diversity, demographic composition, and linguistic variety. The religious factor plays a leading role in communication and behavioural patterns. The Indian negotiation culture has philosophical and worldview roots embedded in the Vedic tradition. Hence, there is flexibility, a capacity for consensus-building, high tolerance for representatives of other cultures, broad-mindedness, and a value-driven perception of different civilisational forms, with attention to intuition. They expect the same sensitivity and attentiveness from others towards their culture and values (Qureshi, 2022).

France. For the French, essential values are family, work, and friends. They are cautious in trusting social communications and tolerant about personal matters. However, politics and religion are on the periphery of their axiological orientations.

Overall, France is distinguished among European countries by a high level of secularisation and weak religiosity (Belot & Cautres, 2010). There is a specific attitude towards the English language in this country rooted in historical reasons.

China. The Chinese are known for “thinking before speaking.” They also place great importance on their traditions and context and expect similar respect from others. Notably, the Chinese do not like to turn on video during meetings (Wang, 2024).

Denmark. Danes do not like to spend time on formal conversations and social topics, at least no more than good manners require. They can even be shocked by their directness in actions. They are focused on completing the task without distractions and are just as direct and open when expressing their views to management (Schmidt, 2013; Hervik, 2004).

The USA. Americans have a pronounced desire to dominate conversations. They prefer yes/no questions and are specific and efficient in communication, aiming for success and leadership. American culture is low-context, meaning spoken words carry more weight than other signs and symbols of communication (Eller, 2015; VanAlstine *et al.*, 2015).

Brazil. Brazilians are high-context communicators, emotional, and family-oriented. They prefer phone calls and video chats as communication tools. However, they might struggle with fluent English. Still, the younger generation is increasingly mastering the language, so this issue will likely become less significant over time (Oliveira & Campos, 2021).

To improve communication with representatives of Indian culture, it is necessary to provide a clear work schedule, agree on all meetings in advance, follow their format and regulations, set deadlines and timings, and pay attention to individual conversations. Clip tasks (short presentations, quick polls in the chat, etc.) will be practical. It is also essential to ensure that the meeting or negotiations do not fall on a holiday, as sacred time and its proper observance are vital for Indians and do not intersect with work or other activities. Regarding hierarchy, this cultural tradition has a solid historical background. Therefore, it is not worth trying to neutralise this aspect of culture. It should be perceived as a cultural feature and treated with respect and understanding. It is also worth remembering that punctuality is not mandatory, and communication may be cancelled, especially if it is related to paramount family matters. Indian culture is high-context, so attention should be paid not only to the direct meaning of what is said but also to the cultural subtext (hints, intonations, non-verbal communication signs) (Nishimura *et al.*, 2008; Qureshi, 2022). We have focused so much on Indian culture because, with the growth of the global virtual economy, the presence of specialists from India is noticeably increasing in various industries: pharmaceuticals, clinical research, banking, IT, and various virtual services.

To improve communication with representatives of French culture, it is necessary to rely on the aesthetic perception of the world of the French, including the use

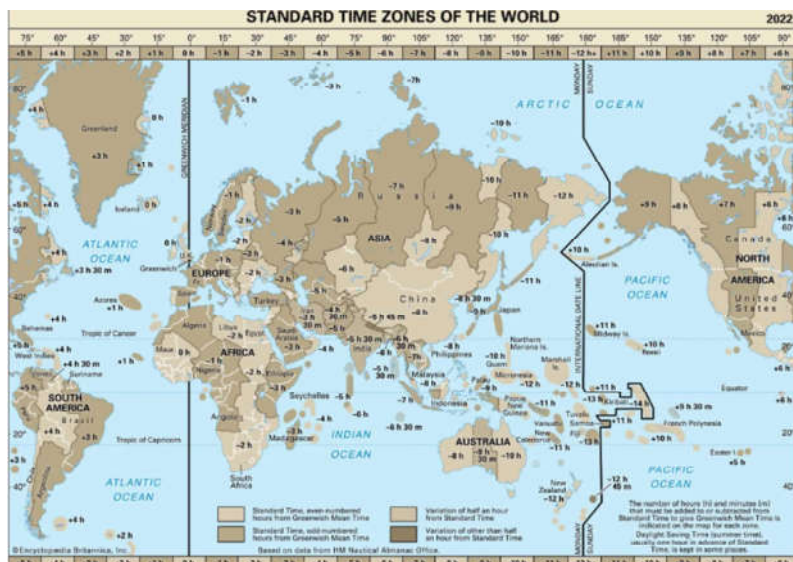
of metaphors in conversation. To improve communication with representatives of Chinese culture, it is crucial to have clear and well-planned tasks and to provide an opportunity to express their opinions and vision of solving the problem (Upton, 2022). To improve communication with representatives of Danish culture, it is worth focusing on email correspondence and clear and specific tasks, but without pressure or encroaching on freedom of action. To improve communication with representatives of American culture, more attention should be paid to the cultural characteristics of other people, avoiding cultural stereotyping. To improve communication with representatives of Brazilian culture, it is advisable to consider the choice of communication technology (giving preference to verbal and visual contacts) (Overcoming Cross-Cultural Challenges in Virtual Work, n d.; How is Trust Established in Cross-Cultural Work Relationships?, n d.; Fallon, 2021; Cultural Diversity in a Virtual Work Environment, 2021).

Differences in time zones and, accordingly, in working hours

This problem is particularly relevant for the IT sector, where employees and many clients are located in different parts of the world (Figure 1). Cultural differences must be considered to minimise the challenges of time zone differences, precisely when planning asynchronous (email, voice message) or synchronous (chat, phone, and video calls) types of communication (Sivunen *et al.*, 2016; Rey, 2023).

Cybertime is nonlinear, which allows virtual teams to be in touch around the clock; however, tact and cultural empathy, along with the use of asynchronous communication methods, help avoid conflicts and misunderstandings that may arise due to time zone differences (Krawczyk-Bryłka, 2016). For example, Americans tend to be very mindful of time, as the phrase “time is money” is one of the foundations of their business culture. In contrast, Indians perceive time differently, more indifferently (Stewart, 2006).

When considering various aspects of intercultural relations in the virtual space, knowledge of the cultural characteristics of different people, the influence of various factors on these characteristics (communication language, cultural context, country of residence), and the ability to build practical cooperation based on this knowledge are essential competencies in the context of virtualisation.



Source: Gregersen (2024)

Figure 3: Map of world time zones (time zone)

Discussion

The globalisation of economic processes and the rapid development of the virtual economy (Mancuso *et al.*, 2023) have highlighted the importance of understanding and tolerating the world's cultural diversity. This diversity creates a unique and inimitable human living environment and is a resource for the community's economic, political, and spiritual prosperity and sustainable development. Therefore, issues related to the impact of cultural differences on the effectiveness of human interaction in team activities, particularly in virtual business environments, have come to the forefront. Today, a significant amount of work is carried out by global virtual teams that are geographically, linguistically, mentally, and religiously distant from the physical world. The main difference between such and traditional project teams is that they do not work together in the same physical space; they are complex from a technological point of view and the perspectives of social communication and dynamics (Kultenko, 2022). The activities of such teams have been actively used since the 1990s to accelerate global competitiveness and increase global clientele due to technological advancements. However, for successful virtual communication and project execution, behavioural adaptation driven by the understanding and acceptance of cultural differences is a significant factor (Gafni & Goldstein, 2020; Olson & Olson, 2003).

Since global virtual teams, as previously mentioned, are often spread worldwide, the technology significantly simplifies communication and information exchange among team members while providing access to a more excellent range of skills and abilities. This helps reduce the time needed to complete a task or project overall. Proper organisation of cultural interaction also enhances the effectiveness of the company/organisation itself and improves the emotional microclimate. In addition to overcoming geographical and time barriers, such teams help overcome intercultural misunderstandings (Shachaf, 2008). Notably, for the successful operation of a virtual team composed of members from different cultures, the initial influence comes from the participant's age and the country's reputation. Later, cognitive abilities (Perry, 2023) and knowledge of the English language (Osadcha, 2023; Uzun, 2014) become more significant.

The most demanded skills for intercultural communication in the virtual world include: (1) the ability to think logically and reason; (2) language proficiency (reading, writing, speaking, listening) (Montero-Fleta *et al.*, 2017); (3) critical thinking (particularly valued are attention to detail, openness, and intellectual curiosity) (Wool, 2021); (4) the ability to plan and prioritise; (5) the ability to analyse data and create one's brand/image; (6) the ability to write clearly and structurally, contextualise one's thoughts for others to read, and understand what others have written, especially those from different cultural traditions and languages (Salceanu, 2021; Cooks-Campbell, 2023).

For successful communication between people from different cultures, intercultural communicative competence is necessary. A vital aspect of this competence is the ability to step outside one's usual cultural paradigm and realise that a fixed worldview can be an obstacle to seeing things from different, unfamiliar perspectives (Fantini, 2020). In other words, in the context of an intercultural situation in virtual space, cultural empathy becomes essential. This involves showing interest in other cultures, openness to new ideas and interpretations of cultures, understanding cultural practices, cultural heritage, and values, and recognising the difficulties and misunderstandings that can (and do) arise between people from different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communicative competence and cultural empathy lead to understanding another culture's history and forming emotional connections with representatives of one's own cultural tradition. Knowledge of other cultures allows for critical evaluation of the cultural viewpoints and practices of one's own and others' cultures. All the above aspects are necessary for successful virtual communication and to develop flexibility and adaptability. Additionally, in today's globalised world, it is worth considering that ethnic or national identity is only one source of cultural identity; people may have multiple cultural self-identifications (Holliday, 2016).

Virtual intercultural communication on a global scale has several problems, the most noticeable of which are: (1) lack of trust (Sokolova, 2023); (2) lack of cultural knowledge; (3) time factor (differences in time zones and biological rhythms) (Anawati & Craig, 2006).

Among the problems of virtual intercultural interaction are also highlighted: (1) misinterpretation and misunderstanding; this is especially noticeable in written communication, in the absence of “body language,” reading emotions, and non-verbal signals, which significantly improve the perception and understanding of information and contexts during face-to-face communication (Fouts, 2021); (2) cultural appropriation, without proper understanding, awareness, and respect for the elements of the culture being borrowed (e.g., using sacred music for entertainment); such actions can result in offence, aggression, and other misunderstandings on a cultural basis (Cruz *et al.*, 2023; Finkelstein & Kimberly, 2022).

Jane Jackson offers the characteristics of ethical intercultural communicators: (1) a clear awareness of the motto “all different – all equal”; (2) active interaction with people of different groups (religious, gender, people with disabilities); (3) the ability to listen and hear, refraining from making judgments about people, mainly because of their language or ethnic origin; (4) asking patient questions to confirm or clarify the meaning of the message; (5) recognising the possibility of misunderstandings based on language and/or cultural grounds; (6) studying other languages and cultures for better communication and interaction with people of different cultural traditions; (7) understanding cultural contexts and situations; (8) valuing intercultural interaction; (9) recognising cultural diversity and being aware that one person cannot represent an entire community or culture; (10) striving for a comprehensive review of intercultural interaction; (11) treating people from other cultures with respect and dignity (Jackson, 2024).

Intercultural communication in the virtual space is a source of numerous options for cultural interaction and spiritual and emotional enrichment and inspiration, despite the challenges and problems that arise and will arise due to cultural differences. This is almost unanimously affirmed by scientists and leaders of international corporations, politicians, analysts, and managers (Anawati & Craig, 2006; Gandhi & Patel, 2018; Fouts, 2021).

Conclusion

Despite cultural globalisation and the virtualisation of many areas of life, national, ethnic, and religious differences, which are components of cultures, significantly affect intercultural virtual communication. Cultural diversity remains one of the decisive factors in organising effective virtual communication, particularly in the business and economic spheres, meaning national culture prevails over corporate culture. Globalised structures and companies face problems of cultural differences and interactions in the virtual space when working on joint projects and in the long term.

Therefore, cultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence in various countries are essential for practical cooperation – from ordinary employees to top managers. For the successful organisation of intercultural virtual cooperation,

we recommend relying on the methodology of sociologist Geert Hofstede, who conducts a comparative analysis of the cultural characteristics of national cultures and countries. Various aspects of cultural interaction in virtual communications can be considered based on these indicators. His theory of cultural dimensions provides the opportunity to compare cultures internationally.

Essential aspects of intercultural interaction in the virtual space include the language of communication (usually WebEnglish), body language and non-verbal signals of cultural communication, and cultural empathy. Intercultural communicative competence is based on knowing one's culture and accepting other cultures, interacting with carriers of other cultural values, and respecting their views and value orientations. Cultural empathy arises from the ability to listen to and hear others, refrain from making judgments, avoid stereotypical perceptions of another culture, and recognise cultural differences as factors that can contribute to cultural awareness and, at the same time, become sources of misunderstandings and conflicts (due to language barriers, personal cultural background, social distance). Treating it as a valuable communication opportunity and understanding cultural contexts and situations is necessary for successful intercultural interaction.

In intercultural virtual communication, it is essential to consider time zone differences and cultural differences based on local traditions, religion, value priorities, and the context of the culture and its visible and invisible aspects. Adapting to different cultures in a virtual space should be considered a learning process, forming a perception of the other. As a result, value orientations and identities change, and new social-communicative skills are acquired.

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