# Upward Intercultural Communication in Multinational Company: What Matters the Most

## Annie Susanto[1*], Yunita Budi Rahayu Silintowe[1], Rosaly Franksiska[1], Johnson Dongoran[1]

[1]Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Indonesia

**ARTICLE INFO**

**ABSTRACT**

Effective communication is necessary at work, especially when it involves different cultures. To avoid cultural conflicts, parties involved in communication should realize the barriers hindering the communication process. This research explored and mapped the upward intercultural communication barriers within multinational companies in Indonesia and the factors contributing to those barriers. This qualitative research involves 16 employees from nine multinational companies as informants. In this research, the superiors and the subordinates are from different cultural backgrounds. The informants of this study were selected through a snowball approach, starting at several companies in an industrial area in Central Java. The informants were contacted and given several questions such as age, length of employment, and superior's characteristics as a control variable. The next step was an interview of informants using open-ended interview guides. For triangulation, after all the interviews, FGDs were held two times, and last, for confirmation, the informants were asked to comment on or revise the data. The general barriers found in this research were semantics (in terms of language), physical (in terms of physical distance), and contextual (in terms of working system disapproval). The factors contributing to those barriers are stereotypes, perceptions, and educational backgrounds and experiences.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is a crucial factor in all kinds of human interactions (Mahmud et al., 2020). In the context of workplace interaction, effective communication within organizations enables the members to build commitment, reputation, and trust, as well as increase the sense of belonging and engagement (Verghese, 2017). Due to the globalization era, more and more multinational companies exist in many countries (Tengimfene, 2020). Within multinational companies, different cultures mingle and interact (Abugre, 2018). In general, culture is defined as a set of beliefs, ideas, assumptions, norms, attitudes, and ways of thinking that are passed down for generations (Ramlan et al., 2018; Sood, 2021). Culture will influence all aspects of one's life, shape the thoughts, and affect the behavior, including the way of communicating (Liliweri, 2016; Sood, 2021).

Thus, it is inevitable that intercultural communication barriers exist whenever individuals from different cultures meet and interact (Castillo, 2018). Later on, communication failure and frustration might happen (Mulyana, 2016). The challenge of intercultural communication within multinational companies is related to the diverse cultural backgrounds among the employees (Tran, 2016) and such a situation has the potential to cause communication barriers (Ramlan et al., 2018). Several research concerning intercultural communication had been done previously, but these researches were mostly discussing intercultural conflicts on teacher – students' context or taken place at educational institution for educational purposes (Sabirjanovna, 2022; Uukkivi, 2016; Noma, 2009; Othman & Ruslan, 2020; Ihtiyar, 2018; R'boul, 2020). Little or few studies that can be found that discuss specifically intercultural communication in employer-employee context.

*Corresponding author
E-mail addresses: annie.susanto@uksw.edu

Within organizations, there will be upward, downward, and horizontal communication (Thanh, 2014). Upward communication is more likely to have problems or obstacles, since perceived inconveniences are easier to happen (Subhakaran & Dyaram, 2018). The possibility of having communication problems or obstacles is even greater and more complex when the subordinates and the superiors are from different cultural backgrounds (Unser, 2018). The first purpose of this research is to empirically explore and map the upward, intercultural communication barriers within multinational companies in Indonesia, in which the superiors and the subordinates are from different cultural backgrounds. The second purpose is to find out the factors contributing to those barriers. Thus, this research is a preliminary one for further studies regarding intercultural barriers of upward communication in Indonesian context.

Upward communication, as the term implies, is the flow of information through the communication process between subordinates and superiors or from lower to upper levels of the organizational hierarchy. The concept as well as the importance of upward communication were analyzed by Tourish & Robson (2006) as cited by Pralea & Ryabicheva (2020). Upward communication is supposed to enable those in lower levels of hierarchy to freely and genuinely express their opinions or feelings regarding their jobs or any other urgent issues at work (Tian, et al 2020 in (Kalogiannidis (2020)). However, subordinates might be reluctant to give critical views (Ruck et al., 2017) or try not to stand out of the crowd (Pralea & Ryabicheva, 2020). It is also likely to happen that subordinates deliberately manipulate information to exaggerate or to impress (Mittal & Randhawa, 2021).

The terms intercultural and cross-cultural are sometimes used interchangeably. Gudykunst (2003) makes this distinction: "Cross-cultural involves comparisons of communication across cultures but intercultural communication involves communication between people from different cultures." Intercultural business communication is communication by members of different cultures for business or workplace purposes (Varner & Beamer, 2011). This research focused on intercultural communication by applying cultural dimensions in explaining interactions, involving intercultural psychological processes, and focusing on the process as well as the result of communication. Thus, this research is supposed to map the barriers in upward, intercultural communication within MNCs in Indonesia, in which the superiors are foreigners and the subordinates are local people.

Tuleja (2022) explained in her book that intercultural communication means using communication with people who are different from us. This concept was proposed earlier by Gudykunst (2003) as a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures. Unfortunately, a range of barriers might happen when communicating with people from other cultures, such as stereotyping, perception, attitude, culture shock, physical aspect, motivation, split of attention, emotion, language, non-verbal message, communication media and filtering. Stereotyping is valuing judgment about people (Braslauskas, 2020; Jenifer & Raman, 2015), while perception is viewing what is said from one's own mindset (Lázár, 2017). Attitude is a guide to general thinking and one's views of life (Tuleja, 2022). Culture shock is a result of unfamiliarity with the new surroundings (Hamze, 2020). Chaney & Martin (2014) in Lázár (2017) stated that physical aspects such as time, environment, comfort and needs may create obstacles to effective communication. While motivation as the listener's mental inertia also plays an important role in communication (Lázár, 2017; Zhang & Zhou, 2021). To achieve effective communication, one must not have a split of attention or attention constraints (Holm et al., 2020). Emotion or personal feelings of the listeners contributed to the effectiveness of communication as well (Lázár, 2017). Different languages spoken by the speakers and listeners and also the use of vocabulary beyond the comprehension of the listeners can become a barrier in intercultural communication [Hamze (2020), Lázár (2017), Tuleja (2022)]. Non-verbal or non-word messages (Lázár, 2017) conveys different meanings in different cultures and may create communication barriers. While the act of filtering or not conveying certain information (Thanh, 2014) seems to be the right choice to avoid more problems but sometimes it becomes a barrier itself.

Last but not least is communication media, which means the methods of gaining or providing information, which include emails or any other web-based data repositories, telephones, and the direct, face-to-face conversations (Aros & Gibbons, 2018). In today's work environment, communication media or channels (Unser, 2018) come in different sizes, shapes and functions, which add another complexity to effective communication. Thus, this research is supposed to find out the factors contributing to the barriers in upward, intercultural communication within MNCs in Indonesia, between foreign superiors and Indonesian subordinates.

## 2. METHOD

This study used interviews and focus-group interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the verbal and nonverbal cues. Interviews were held to gain information concerning issues of intercultural

communication between subordinates and their foreign superiors. Focus group discussion was expected to be able to highlight or share opinion on certain topics and compare their responses to those of the other participants (Acocella, 2012). During the interviews and FGDs the informants were given the freedom to express deeper and broader answers. By doing so, much more information was expected to be obtained. This practice could benefit the research because the process of sharing and comparing could lead to revealing new information or additional information triggered by the discussion.

The informants of this research consist of 16 employees from nine multinational companies. Three companies are from the garment/textile industries, one company is a shoe manufacturer, and the other one is a food manufacturer. Others are from the industry of fashion, chemicals, biotechnology and hotel. The informants must fit into the criteria, that is having a superior coming from countries other than Indonesia. The superiors of these informants are South Korean, China, European, Indian, Pakistani, Singaporean, Malaysian. Seven of 16 informants were male, eight others were females.

Informants were briefed on the nature of the study prior to the FGD session. Firstly, some preliminary questions regarding the informants' identity were being asked to ensure that the informants matched the criteria set by the researchers. Next, the main research questions asked are: "In general, in what ways do you have upward communication barriers with your foreign superiors?"; "In what ways do you have communication barriers with your foreign superiors due to some cultural differences?"; "What communication problems do you have with your foreign supervisors due to stereotypes, perceptions, attitudes, culture shock, physical aspects, motivation, split of attention, emotion, language, non-verbal aspects, communication media, filtering, different cultural backgrounds, and different job experiences?"

Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of all informants. Six interviews were held to six informants, and three FGDs were held involving 10 informants. The focus-group discussions were carried out in semi-structured fashion. Each interview and focus-group session lasted around one to two hours. A set of 18 questions exploring upward intercultural communications was used as the guidance during the interviews as well as the FGDs. All six sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed right after the sessions were over. Transcriptions averaged 8-10 pages for each session. The next step is coding, patterns of answers or themes were categorized and analyzed. Excerpts from the transcripts that displayed the same theme were presented throughout this article along with the analysis followed by discussions on each category.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### General Barriers

Interview results revealed that 5 informants generally never experienced upward communication barriers with their foreign superiors. Some of them stated that getting used to working with them was the main reason.

> *"Barriers...err...not really. Since we are used to using English and also, culturally, we are used to having foreign supervisors, and they are also used to local people, something like that. (Nov)"*

On the other hand, general obstacles in communication did not happen because those foreign superiors had been working in Indonesia for quite a long period.

> *"As for me, my supervisor has been here for quite long..so, he can understand Indonesian language...so we communicate fluently in Indonesian...cannot speak English...his Indonesian is fluent...all terms in shoes marketing he literally understands them all... (Adt)"*

Language with an accent, which was perceived as unusual, also became a general communication problem between the subordinates and the foreign superiors, especially at the initial stages. Just as stated by a secretary for an Indian manager, after working for him for quite a long period, the secretary was getting used to the manager's accent.

> *"Well, initially, since he first came here, he speaks "pure English", and he is from India, so his accent makes it difficult to understand him.... (Lin)"*

Another barrier which generally happened was due to language problem, such as the superior trying to speak Indonesian using standard language, having limited vocabulary, or using Google translate so that it was difficult to understand, and giving incomplete answers when communicating through WhatsApp.

*"Yes.... but gradually he is more fluent in using Indonesian language, and is able to chat with us. However, the Indonesian language being used is very literal or standard...which is...different from what we usually use...just like what we are using right now...usually he can't speak like this... (ErH)"*

*"Relying on Google translate. So, the Google translation is not from Korean to English...not from Korean to...he does as he wishes. For example, like this...he sends something like this "thank you for your order" ...what does this mean..."*

*"He cannot speak English at all. So, whenever...err...and he's not familiar with technology. For sure. So, everything, the director's email...so I'm used to having direct coordination. So, regarding the emails, the problem is, actually I'm the one who is replying to the emails. If it is his email. Especially in English...so for the emails using English about...from the vendors...well, I'm the one who replies... (Bet) "*

Physical distance, when the superiors and subordinates were in different locations, became a barrier in communication. Even though this kind of barrier happened only to one informant, it needs proper attention especially during this pandemic era, in which most work is done remotely.
As for another informant, he stated that the general obstacle in communicating with foreign superiors was due to different working methods or working systems, so that adequate effort to adapt was needed.

*"Well, there is..with this new supervisor, with this one, he keeps on refraining himself, actually he is not really creating a distance, but it seems like his style is hierarchical, Maam...so when he needs to reprimand us, if he needs to reprimand me he doesn't do it directly, I mean, if I did something wrong..why is it like this...why is it so..he conveys this to my manager, he doesn't want to reprimand me directly...makes it slower...well, yes...however, in reprimanding, the path is already correct...if we want to have a discussion we feel bashful, since the intensity of seeing him is low, so when there's something, such as the manager wants to convey something, it will be..well, a little bit stuck. (Rir)"*

In general, the upward communication barriers faced by the subordinates were due to working methods/systems which had not been previously communicated, language and physical distance (when the superiors and subordinates are not in the same area). Communication barriers can be categorized into three areas, they are: semantics (the messages being sent are encoded and decoded differently by the senders and the receivers), physical, or contextual (the senders and the receivers have different perspectives) (Eisenberg et al., 2010).

Different people coming from different backgrounds perceive things differently, and it may cause miscommunication, ineffective communication, delay of information and filtering. Educational backgrounds and experience contributed differently for each interaction. The bigger the gap of educational background and work experience between superiors and subordinates, the bigger the communication barriers. Thus, the upward communication barriers found in this research can be categorized into semantics (in terms of language), physical barrier (in terms of physical distance), and contextual barrier (in terms of working system disapproval). Working environment in terms of physical environment can be the source of communication barriers, as explained by Yusof & Rahmat (2020). In this research, the physical environment was due to the physical distance between the superiors and the subordinates.

**Intercultural Barriers**

Initially, some respondents stated that they had no communication problems in general. However, when they were asked about cultural barriers, they admitted that there had been some problems. The barriers in communicating with the superiors due to cultural differences were caused by different characters, behavior, as well as different understanding of national holidays in Indonesia, compared to those of the superiors' home country. While the example of the problem regarding personal character differences was the attitude of being direct or being to the point in conveying something.

*"Just being frank, say it as it is...whatever he wants, he must have it. If we're still doing something, just for a while, it can't be. It's a must. Once he calls, it must...must...must be quick. That's surely his culture, should be instant...that's what I perceive...the good thing is the way he speaks is nice...he rarely gets angry...the most important thing is just quickly go there. Otherwise, he'll be shouting, come on, quick-quick... (Adt)"*

*"I have 2 Taiwanese bosses, one of them is here in my office and my director is a Taiwanese. He focuses on performance, he is performance-based, I think. Such as, I give you this target, you have to set when to finish it. That's what he is like, that's all. (ErH)"*

Another cultural barrier regarding behavior was the demands for quick work and the obligation to greet every morning. Different work culture was obvious and was clearly seen from the Korean superior who always demanded progress reports on the job which had not been finished yet. Besides that, the staff were

obliged to be in the office and those who were mostly around were often perceived as having the best performance. As a result, there was the habit of "face-seeking" or the efforts to be seen as the best one by the superior.

> *"As for the work culture (of Korean supervisors), it is always about the demands to be quick. Finish it quickly, do it quickly. They are always like that. So, whenever we meet, they ask about it. Later on, when we meet again, they'll ask again, whether I have finished it or not. Again and again, they keep on asking. As long as we haven't reported or haven't finished the job, he'll ask about it. Surely, he will always ask. (ErJ)"*

> *"Yes, there is, every morning I have to bow my head (to my Korean supervisor). Every time we meet, I have to bow my head. Then, about having to ask for permission to go somewhere. Then, every morning, upon arriving, we have to shake hands. If we don't shake hands before 7 o'clock, I'll be considered as being late. Just like that. (Bet)"*

One of the informants had a Pakistani superior. The problem came from Pakistani work culture, which believed that subordinates should be forced to do their jobs or should be treated harshly with "iron fist". While in Indonesia it is not acceptable and raises communication problems between subordinates and superiors. Another cultural problem that influenced work performance was the Indian supervisor's surprise at the abundance of national holidays which were considered as too many and were regarded as disturbing the work process in the company.

Language barriers happened at the beginning of interactions between subordinates and their foreign superiors regarding accents and jargons. These problems faded after a longer period of interactions. The physical barriers included convenient time to discuss work, difficulties in seeing the superiors, environmental problems of having many guests, procrastination or forgetting something, the superiors must lead two divisions located quite far from each other, the superiors often do the field works, limited time of the superiors staying in the office. Lastly, the working system hindered the communication process in terms of demands for fast response, the need for subordinates to report or greet every morning, the perceived notion from superiors thinking that subordinates needed to be closely monitored.

**Factors that Contribute to Barriers**

Through the next interviews, the factors causing communication problems were being elaborated. Some factors obstructing the communication with the foreign superiors were stereotypes, different perceptions, different attitudes, culture shock, physical aspects (the environment, time, personal needs, and physical media), motivation to communicate, split of attention, personal feelings or emotion, different language, non-verbal or body language misunderstanding, communication media being used, filtering, different educational backgrounds, and different work experiences.

Having foreign superiors, some of the informants admitted having some kind of initial stereotyping in their minds, such as perceiving the foreign superiors as rigid people, Indians were hard workers, Pakistanis were stern, and so on. Klimova & Semradova (2012) explained that stereotypical thinking might happen because someone believes in the old habits or lingers in the old habits and ignores the new information, since he is already comfortable with or getting used to it. Later on, the informants found out that some of those previous perceptions were not true, while some others and most of them were true. For example, one informant had two Pakistani supervisors who had opposite characters, one of them was gentle while the other one was harsh. Stereotyping creates communication barriers, especially if the superiors are too fierce in reprimanding the subordinates in front of many people.

> *"One of them is...well...he's gentle. I must say...even if he's angry, he'll call us and talk to us one on one, he's never being frontal during a meeting...but the other one, when there's something, even if he is not really comprehending the problem, but he'll just blow up and when he's angry, he'll directly show it regardless the situation, he'll directly show his anger... (Yun)"*

> *"I have a prior imagination that Indians must be like that, they must be harsh (Lin)"*

Different perceptions also created upward communication barriers between subordinates and superiors. Different perception that happened to eight of the informants was on the messages being conveyed, while for three other informants, it was on work methods and work rhythms. Whenever the messages received were perceived differently, later on they would also be transferred differently and incorrectly. Other problems regarding different perceptions were related to bureaucracy and production steps in Indonesia which were considered as long-winded. Such things-built communication barriers between subordinates and superiors.

> *"He wonders why it takes so long whenever we propose certain permits. The only solution is trying to explain this to him. But we need to comprehend it well, because if we just show him that it is like this, he won't comply, because the weakness is he doesn't understand the local regulations, so when we say that this is the regulation, well it is like that. The same thing with production, there are steps that must be done. We all have had such a mentality. So, when he asked to skip certain steps and the production people were afraid of failures during the process, then we had a fierce debate. Then we gave in and had simulations. The problem is we deal with chemicals, we are worried that if we skip some steps, unexpected things might happen, he is not that patient about it, and there are many other similar incidents (Yun)"*

The upward communication barriers between superiors and subordinates from different countries which are related to stereotyping are different perceptions, different attitudes, and cultural shock (including psychological and social barriers). According to Antos et al. (2008) such barriers are divided into three types; field of experience, filtering, and psychological distance. Psychological distance did not seem to be a barrier in this research, since the informants were not able to keep the distance with their superiors or avoid communicating with their superiors. The problems due to fields of experience also dominated the communication barrier in this research and this was in line with the research done by (Haiyudi, 2020). Field of experience includes someone's background, perceptions, values, and needs and expectations bias. If there are no overlapped fields of experience between the sender and receiver of a message, then the communication tends to be impeded. It is like trying to see something by peeping through the needle's hole, which results in having limited view.  Some informants of this research had ever worked with or had foreign superiors, while for some other informants, it was the first time for them to have foreign superiors. Upward communication barriers were more likely to happen among subordinates who had superiors from other countries for the first time.

The next discussion is on filtering as the cause of communication problems. Filtering factor also belongs to psychological and social barriers. Filtering is more likely caused by each individual's needs and interests [Antos et al. (2008), Lunenburg (2010)]. Someone tends to be interested in something that he/she can comprehend or is interested in. In doing the upward communication, the subordinates often filtered the messages being conveyed to the superiors. According to the informants, this was done in order to be more diplomatic and to get better solutions. Some other purposes were to make the message clearer and to avoid confusion as well as misperception.

> *"... the way foreigners talk is to the point, is it a or b.... well, yes...it is based on the purpose, they put the "why" first, as for Indonesian people we start with the "what" and then followed by the "why" ... (Fra)"*

There were three informants who had never done the information filtering since they were used to conveying any messages as they are. They preferred to avoid filtering because they were afraid that it may result in some kind of misunderstanding.

> *"Never done this...as for the other Departments, it's very rare because they have their own Head of Department...as for the messages from the guests, they are being conveyed as they are...all of them are... (Rir)"*

> *"...afraid of having a misunderstanding, that's why it's more often being conveyed as it is...if it has been filtered and then they directly know it from that person, he'll get angry... (Nen)"*

The interesting finding of this research was that, for some respondents, filtering became a way of conveying a message more effectively and more well-targeted. However, the filtering process can only be done if the actor has enough confidence to do it. This can be seen from three informants who had never done the filtering, not because they felt it was unimportant, but more of fearing the negative impact of doing it.

When the informants were given a question related to attitude, that is "Is your agreement/disagreement with the message or the senders of the message (the superiors) hinders you in doing the upward communication?", seven of them answered no while nine others said yes.

> *"He is some kind of person who thinks that, well...let it as it is, let them introspect...sometimes it frustrates me...it is more about...why should you, as my superior, you don't direct us without further ado, so that the root of the problem can be revealed, then he can solve it... because...just like me...I am now at the position...well let's say as a staff. I don't have the power to corner my opposition...he is the one who has the power to oppose...something like that. That's what makes me...what makes me... (ErH)"*

> *"Oh yes, there is. What a coincidence..well, this is quite funny, Sir, my boss accidentally dislikes me...doesn't like me..and he informs me about it...it's something quite shocking for Indonesian people, but that's not the same for him...he mentions it..and I also reply, oh that's fine, it's okay if you don't like me, as long as...I mean my job...I mean my work performance...but he is extremely to the point, however he doesn't describe in details on what aspects, he*

> *won't let me know…so this is quite personal…so it's not about my work…he dislikes me personally, I myself don't know why…well there is…I deliberately try to show that I..I am capable for this position, it's like that, I show it through my work, as for personal dislike, that's something else. However, since there's some kind of personal dislike, eventually some communication barriers do exist. As a result…the impact is on that… (Lia)"*

The first time working with or interacting with superiors coming from certain foreign countries, most informants had culture shocks. Two informants experienced culture shocks during the first six months, while other informants were surprised that their superiors only believed in certain trusted people and they easily showed their anger in front of the others. The culture shocks experienced by the informant having an Indian superior was caused by the superior's loud and sometimes fierce voice. Some other things perceived as weird by another informant having a superior from Hong Kong were: the one celebrating birthday was the one who should get a treat; emails should be answered promptly even if the content is a 'no' answer; this particular foreign superior was always late and unorganized, which was perceived as totally different from other foreigners that the informant knew in general.

> *"As for this one, the problem is the birthday celebration, Ma'am… so, in his culture, the one celebrating the birthday is the one who will get some treats form the others…while at work, when there are incoming mails, they should be replied immediately, yes, he's like that, he says that it is like that in there/in his country, as for me, when the answers are not ready yet, then I delay replying those emails, but he insists that whether the answers are ready or not, you need to give a prompt reply, just say that I have received your email…he's not punctual, my previous boss from Singapore was much more on time, aah…if he had an appointment, he would be very punctual, really on time, he even arrived before (Ret)"*

During the process of upward communication with foreign superiors, physical aspects (such as environment, time, personal needs, and physical media) may create barriers. In this research, the physical barriers which often exist were the difficulties in seeing the superiors, environmental problems of having many guests, procrastination or forgetting something, the superiors must lead two divisions located quite far from each other, the superiors often do the field works, limited time of the superiors staying in the office, the obligation of getting the supervisor's permission prior to seeing the superiors, and the superiors' habit of giving comments on the subordinates' personal aspects.

> *"Ahh…maybe it is because there are certain hours of the boss having so many meetings, but then a buyer is coming, ahh…some people are there at the office, but each of us handles our own buyer, so, whenever a foreign buyer comes, the meeting can be all day long, so we won't have time for urgent things such as asking for some signatures or agreements, such things become very difficult to do, that's all. (Dwi)"*

> *"As for my superior, I must go through my supervisor first, for example I want to see a certain superior, I should go through the supervisor, then this supervisor will be the one who contacts the superior, and then, as for the meeting, I should wait until a certain time previously set. (Nen)"*

The above-mentioned things would surely hinder the communication process in the company.

> *"Yes, it is such a way so that we…well, this is for the sake of all of us, it's something like that, Ma'am…as for myself, actually it's very clear, why should there be a intermediary, if at the end the purpose is the same, it's something like that…that's all what I mean… (Ind)"*

The upward communication process with foreign superiors includes the motivation aspect, such as what motivates the subordinates' willingness to listen to their superiors. In this research, the reasons were the informants' respect to the superiors, the superiors' authority and power, the superiors' being smart, and the informants' feelings of having a need for superiors.

> *"…why are we willing to listen? Well, surely because it is part of my job. However, sometimes…. why should I be the one who is listening, I wish to be listened to, at least sometimes…so that our communication will be two-direction, Sir…why is it always on me…it's true, isn't it…he also needs to listen to what we are going to convey, that's it. (Lia)"*

Even though the above-mentioned things motivated the subordinates to listen to their superiors, there were times when the subordinates wished their superiors to listen to them. On the other hand, there were also the moments when the subordinates felt like they did not want to listen to their superiors. The reasons were: the superiors explained things which were considered as unimportant by the subordinates, gave rambling or winding explanations, wasted the time, as well as when different opinions or different thoughts existed between the superiors and the subordinates.

> *"aaa…I deal with the machines, too, since I am at the production, well..sometimes my boss doesn't understand that particular machine, but he, he wants it to be like that, then he often mentions his previous experiences, it is like this, but actually the machine is different, that's what I think, so sometimes he can be, like this..like this…I have been there for quite long, so I said, it can't..it can't be like that, boss, but he insists, so here deep in my heart I think of him as someone who knows nothing but behaves like he knows everything. Just like that. (And)"*

In doing the upward communication, have the subordinates ever failed to understand something being communicated by the superiors? Most informants answered no, because their superiors demanded direct responses when communicating with them and tasks were given one by one. While those who had ever failed to understand the messages being conveyed by their superiors, it was because at that time they were in the middle of talking on the phone or typing something then suddenly the superiors asked for something, or the instructions were given at a glance, or when they were in the middle of doing something, they were assigned another task and could not refuse.

> *"As for me, maybe more…more often…more often..what I mean is..I'm in the marketing, my main duty is marketing…I must err….must..err…what do you call it…be the representative of the company, too…which means whenever he's not in, I must be the representative, too…it often happens to me…I am asked to do this and that…it's not yet finished, but I must do the marketing, too..and when I'm doing the selling, I won't be available in there all the time…(Ind)"*

Another barrier to upward communication is the emotional condition of both the communicant and communicator, or whether they are having good personal feelings or not. Most informants stated that personal feelings influenced them during the process of upward communication, and only one informant declared that good or bad personal feelings had never impacted him in communication.

> *"…well, it doesn't really make me reluctant to see him, Ma'am, but it's true that I speak much less because I'm holding my tears, Ma'am, I'm afraid that I will shed my tears in front of my superiors, surely, I will be asked about it, Sir… (Nov)"*

> *"Yes, for sure the personal feelings, especially the negative ones, will disturb, that's something common for normal people, since we're not robots. (Fra)"*

As previously mentioned, language is the most common communication barrier especially in the communication process with the superiors from different countries. After having a deep interview, it was found out that the language barriers were caused by the subordinates' difficulties in interpreting the message, the superiors speaking so fast that it was difficult for the subordinates to understand, the superiors' pronunciation made it difficult for the subordinates to comprehend (for example, when a superior from Hong Kong speaks English), especially if the conversation was done on the phone, and there was a word in Indonesian that sounded like Indian but with different meanings, or when the superior was using the incorrect term in Indonesian, such as "*bahwa*/about" which is written as "*bawah*/downward".

> *"The speed in speaking…. his accent is so typical of foreigners that it is hard to understand…it takes time and sometimes I have to ask him to repeat… (Rir)"*

> *"When we are having a meeting among the management, or during the meeting we are trying to explain…there's a friend who explains inaccurately…well, we must laugh, then…this kind of thing happens several times. We have weekly, routine meetings. That's where we feel more…more of a team, since we are updating, presenting, discussing things in there…Language is more intensely used in there, then, such things happen, the language barrier…yes, that's unique…since not everyone can speak English well…so we have to ask again and again…since we cannot really convey something accurately in English. Our English is Indonesian English, that's the possibility…so, sometimes they are also confused about what we are talking about, so they usually try to explain what they comprehend and then ask back, is that correct? (Adi)"*

Those things became the barriers for the subordinates to communicate with the superiors. While problems regarding pronunciation did not really exist when the superiors and the subordinates were having face-to-face conversations since the subordinates could read the lips. Language problems could be solved if the subordinates immediately confirmed with the superiors on the message being conveyed. Language problems would not happen if the superiors had been working in Indonesia for a long period.

Non-verbal communication might become the cause of intercultural communication barriers between the subordinates and the superiors, because people from different countries have different body language with different meanings. One informant felt uncomfortable or was disturbed by the superiors using his hand to show a certain direction or staring at the subordinates from top to toe. Another non-verbal

communication problem was that the superior felt offended when the subordinate took a deep breath in the middle of their communication process.

> *"It really is very common for us to have a perception such as..why are you looking at me from top to toe like that, but probably it's something common for them…(Nov)"*

> *"...it happened that one day I drew a deep breath, if you do something like that it means you are refusing, that's what he said, so, try hard not to, not to take a deep breath like that. (Ret)"*

In non-verbal communication, the communication is done through facial expression, hands movements, or any other forms of body language. Taras et al. (2011) stated that culture influences one's behavior. Superiors and subordinates coming from different countries with different cultures will have different forms of non-verbal communication, which enable the ineffective communication to happen. However, this research revealed that most informants found out that non-verbal aspects had never caused ineffective communication. Only two informants stated that sometimes non-verbal communication caused ineffective communication or inhibited the communication process between the superiors and subordinates. Meanwhile, the informants who stated that non-verbal communication did not hinder their communication even found it as a useful way to increase the communication effectiveness.

Communication activities need the media to make it easier to convey the messages to other parties. The research result revealed that direct, verbal communication as well as communicating through WhatsApp were mostly used by the subordinates to their superiors, followed by emails, phone calls, memos, and other online media such as WeChat and Skype, due to distant locations. According to the informants, out of all communication media, the effective methods were direct or verbal communication, WhatsApp, emails, memos, and Skype.

> *"As for me, I prefer talking directly…. the most often is talking directly, then followed by whatsapp, and then email. I rarely email him, though… (Adt)"*

> *"...as for me, firstly is verbal communication…secondly, I choose emails. Since with emails we' ll have authentic proofs. We, accounting people, need the authentic ones. If I email him, that must be something really crucial, it's something that he needs, I don't prefer emails. Because I prefer talking to him…while in emails…he surely uses English in his emails…it is well-ordered, whatever he wants to say is well-structured. So everyone who reads that email will understand…I like it better if he does this…the third for me is by phone…. (ErH)"*

Based on the above-mentioned research result, it is known that the use of technology has an important role in communication. Lunenburg (2010) stated that technology has a role in semantic barriers. In this research, the use of technology did not create barriers in the upward communication process. On the contrary, it turned out to be a good medium in facilitating upward communication. Even though most informants admitted the great help of technology in the communication process, direct face-to-face communication was always the best choice regarding communication with the superiors coming from different cultures. For some informants, having different educational backgrounds with the superiors become the obstacles in communicating with them. For instance, in the garment industry the subordinates did not really comprehend some certain jargon or specific terms (related to machines) being used by the foreign superiors. This especially happened when the superiors had certain educational backgrounds which were in line with their current position, for example in Production.

> *"...as for special terms in machinery, I am the one who learns a lot from my boss, by asking him directly, yes of course, as for those specific terms, I didn't major in mechanical engineering, so I learn and learn… (Lin)"*

> *"If it is because of the different levels of education, well...I don't think so, Ma'am, but maybe because his major is in garments, while I'm a secretary having some general knowledge. So, quite often I don't get the essence of what he's saying… (Nov)"*

Besides the educational background, different working experience was also an obstacle in the upward communication process. Upward communication problems existed not only because of the superiors having longer work experience, but also because the superiors were still new in the company. The informants got some problems when they did not understand the instructions and needed more time to learn about it or browse the net. While the new superiors considered their work method as newer and better than the one done by the subordinates. Based on the new superiors' previous experience in the previous company, they demanded that the subordinates must follow suit.

*"But he insists that this new method should be applied, and I must listen to him, Ma'am, otherwise he'll...well, I must follow suit, otherwise...but he thinks that the new way is better...what do you think, do you think so? (And)"*

*"It can be on the workflow, so it's like he overturns everything. However, since according to him it is the most correct way to shorten the time, well...we just follow him, such as the "posting", he instantly changes it. (Ret)"*

In this research, the problems due to the limited overlapped field of experience between the superiors and subordinates dominated the communication barriers. This is in line with the research done by Haiyudi (2020). Different educational backgrounds as well as working experiences are inevitable, since there are many possible combinations of both of these. However, as explained by Kenesei & Stier (2017), flexibility is needed to overcome this inevitable obstacle. Further, Kenesei & Stier (2017) also stated that both superiors' and subordinates' personal characteristics as well as the ability to adapt, have an important role in determining whether the education and experience gaps will become significant barriers or not.

## 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results of this research, the general barriers identified were semantics (in terms of language), physical barrier (in terms of physical distance), and contextual barrier (in terms of working system disapproval). The factors contributing to those barriers are stereotypes, different perceptions, different educational backgrounds and experiences. Stereotyping is inevitable, and it occurred based on previous experience or knowledge from the subordinates' point of view. This research is not without limitation. The researchers did not do the data cross-checking from the superiors' point of view. Recommendations for multinational company to evade communication barriers caused by intercultural issues, company should hire employees that have exposure to intercultural differences, and have a high cultural intelligence or cultural awareness. Problems of upward intercultural communications could be mitigated if employees are aware of different culture and could act accordingly. Future employees who are willing to work for a multinational company need to sharpen their cultural intelligence by exposing themselves to various cultures.

## 5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## 6. REFERENCES

Abugre, J. B. (2018). Cross-cultural communication imperatives: Critical lessons for Western expatriates in multinational companies (MNCs) in sub-Saharan Africa. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, *14*(2–3), 170–187. https://doi.org/10.1108/cpoib-01-2017-0005

Acocella, I. (2012). The focus groups in social research: Advantages and disadvantages. *Quality and Quantity*, *46*(4), 1125–1136. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-011-9600-4

Antos, G., Ventola, E., & Weber, T. (2008). *Handbook of interpersonal communication — University of Helsinki*. https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/en/publications/handbook-of-interpersonal-communication

Aros, S. K., & Gibbons, D. E. (2018). Exploring Communication Media Options in an Inter-Organizational Disaster Response Coordination Network using Agent-Based Simulation. *Elsevier*. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0377221718301280

Braslauskas, J. (2020). Effective creative intercultural communication in the context of business interaction: Theoretical and practical aspects. *Creativity Studies*, *13*(1), 199–215. https://doi.org/10.3846/cs.2020.12094

Castillo, J. S. (2018). A Study of Cross Cultural and Communication Barriers that Exist when Trying to Conduct Business between U.S. Based Companies and South America. *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 186. https://login.ezproxy.javeriana.edu.co/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fdocview%2F2130630104%3Faccountid%3D13250

Eisenberg, E. M., Goodall, H. L., & Trethewey, A. (2010). *Organizational communication : balancing creativity and constraint*. 392.

Gudykunst, W. B. (2003). *Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication | SAGE Publications Inc*. https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/cross-cultural-and-intercultural-communication/book226099

Haiyudi, S. A. (2020). Psychosocial barriers of high school students in english class: A case study in pongok Island. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, *8*(11), 5569–5575.

https://doi.org/10.13189/ujer.2020.081160

Hamze, M. M. (2020). The Challenges Facing Expatriate Managers Working in Foreign Countries. *Management and Economics Review*, *5*(1), 160–173. https://doi.org/10.24818/mer/2020.06-13

Holm, D. B., Drogendijk, R., & Haq, H. ul. (2020). An attention-based view on managing information processing channels in organizations. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, *36*(2), 101106. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scaman.2020.101106

Ihtiyar, A. (2018). Interaction of intercultural service encounters: Personality, intercultural communication and customer satisfaction. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, *30*(1), 2–22. https://doi.org/10.1108/APJML-01-2017-0014

Jenifer, R. D., & Raman, G. P. (2015). Cross Cultural Communication Barriers in Workplace. *International Journal of Management*, *6*(1), 348–351. www.jifactor.com

Kalogiannidis, S. (2020). Impact of Effective Business Communication on Employee Performance. *European Journal of Business and Management Research*, *5*(6), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.24018/ejbmr.2020.5.6.631

Kenesei, Z., & Stier, Z. (2017). Managing communication and cultural barriers in intercultural service encounters: Strategies from both sides of the counter. *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, *23*(4), 307–321. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766716676299

Klimova, B. F., & Semradova, I. (2012). Barriers to communication. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *31*(2011), 207–211. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.12.043

Lázár, T. (2017). Some Sources of Misunderstandings in Intercultural Business Communication. *International Journal of Engineering and Management Sciences*, *2*(3), 91–101. https://doi.org/10.21791/ijems.2017.3.9.

Liliweri, A. (2016). *Konfigurasi dasar teori-teori komunikasi antarbudaya*. https://opac.perpusnas.go.id/DetailOpac.aspx?id=1183933

Lunenburg, F. C. (2010). Communication : The Process , Barriers , And Improving Effectiveness. *Schooling*, *1*, 1–11.

Mahmud, N., Zulfikri, N. K. M., Ismail, I., & Miskam, Z. (2020). Barriers to Effective Communication in An Organization: A Case Selected Multinational Company in Malaysia. *E-Academia Journal*, *9*(1), 1–11.

Mittal, R., & Randhawa, V. (2021). Perceived Deception in Upward Organizational Communication: An Examination of Information Manipulation Theory. *Indian Journal of Extension Education*, *April*. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ritu-Mittal-2/publication/351080891_Perceived_Deception_in_Upward_Organizational_Communication_An_Examination_of_Information_Manipulation_Theory/links/6083b023881fa114b423cee5/Perceived-Deception-in-Upward-Organization

Mulyana, D. (2016). *Komunikasi lintas budaya : pemikiran perjalanan dan khayalan*. https://opac.perpusnas.go.id/DetailOpac.aspx?id=975451

Noma, H. (2009). How unique is Japanese culture ? A critical review of the discourse in intercultural communication literature. *Journal of International Education in Business*, *2*(2), 2–14.

Othman, A., & Ruslan, N. (2020). Intercultural communication experiences among students and teachers: implication to in-service teacher professional development. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, *14*(3–4), 223–238. https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-04-2020-0024

Pralea, D., & Ryabicheva, O. (2020). *Critical Upward Communication in Higher Education Institutions : A Qualitative Study of Student Feedback Critical Upward Communication in Higher Education Institutions : A Qualitative Study of Student Feedback Authors : Diana Pralea , Olena Ryabicheva Lun*. *November*. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12271.87206

R'boul, H. (2020). Re-imagining intercultural communication dynamics in TESOL: culture/interculturality. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, *14*(2), 177–188. https://doi.org/10.1108/JME-03-2020-0016

Ramlan, S. N., Abashah, A., Samah, I. H. A., Rashid, I. M. A., & Radzi, W. N. W. M. (2018). The impact of language barrier and communication style in organizational culture on expatriate's working performance. *Management Science Letters*, *8*(6), 659–666. https://doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2018.4.025

Ruck, K., Welch, M., & Menara, B. (2017). Employee voice: An antecedent to organisational engagement? *Public Relations Review*, *43*(5), 904–914. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.04.008

Sabirjanovna, P. Z. (2022). A Model for Developing Student's Communicative Competence by Teaching Them Intercultural Communication. *Galaxy International Interdisciplinary Research Journal (GIIRJ)*, *10*(11), 680–683.

Sood, H. (2021). A Study on Cross - Cultural Management Strategies Followed by MNCs across the Globe. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, *2*, 1247–1261.

Subhakaran, S. E., & Dyaram, L. (2018). Interpersonal antecedents to employee upward voice: mediating role of psychological safety. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*,

*67*(9), 1510–1525. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPPM-10-2017-0276

Taras, V., Steel, P., & Kirkman, B. L. (2011). Three decades of research on national culture in the workplace: Do the differences still make a difference? *Organizational Dynamics*, *40*(3), 189–198. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2011.04.006

Tengimfene, A. (2020). *Effectively Managing in Cross-Cultural Business Environments of Multinational Companies* (Issue December). https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/79664/Tengimfene_Effectively_2020.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Thanh, P. T. P. (2014). *Internal Communication Issues in Multinational Corporations Case : Outotec Filters*. Saimaa University of Applied Sciences.

Tran, B. (2016). Communication (intercultural and multicultural) at play for cross cultural management within multinational corporations (MNCs). *International Business: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*, *January 2016*, 1781–1811. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-9814-7.ch082

Tuleja, E. A. (2022). *Intercultural Communication for Global Business: How Leaders Communicate for Success* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Unser, F. (2018). *Upward communication and senior leader behaviour – the possibilities and challenges of developing an inclusive , open culture within a multinational enterprise* [University of Salford Manchester]. http://www.frederik-unser.com/docs/uniSalford/SIBM_A2_2018_v5c.pdf

Uukkivi, A. (2016). Personal factors supporting intercultural communication in e-learning of information sciences. *Library Review*, *65*(1–2), 20–32. https://doi.org/10.1108/LR-01-2015-0002

Varner, I. I., & Beamer, L. (2011). *Intercultural communication in the global workplace*. 503.

Verghese, A. (2017). Internal communication: practices and implications. *SCMS Journal of Indian Management*, *14*(3), 103–113.

Yusof, A. N. A., & Rahmat, N. H. (2020). Communication Barriers At the Workplace: a Case Study. *European Journal of Education Studies*, *7*(10), 228–240. https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v7i10.3299

Zhang, X., & Zhou, M. (2021). An exploration of Chinese students' perceived barriers to effective intercultural communication. *Journal of Language and Cultural Education*, *9*(2), 11–31. https://doi.org/10.2478/jolace-2021-0008