

# UNDERSTANDING UNDEREXPLORED COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CAUCASIAN EXPATRIATES IN JAKARTA'S CORPORATE SECTOR

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## ABSTRACT

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This article explores the underexplored communication challenges experienced by Caucasian expatriates working in Jakarta's corporate sector. In this business sector in Jakarta there are many significant intercultural communication challenges that take place for Caucasian expatriates that need to be addressed. Therefore, this study investigates how Caucasian expatriates deal with underexplored communication challenges such as stereotypes, different communication styles, language barriers, religious customs, workplace misunderstandings, and also Orientalist perceptions. These communicative dynamics are analyzed in relation to their impact on Caucasian expatriates' adaptation, psychological well-being, and workplace productivity. To examine these issues, the research uses a qualitative approach utilizing in-depth interviews to gather data from Caucasian expatriates who have experience working in Jakarta's corporate sector. The data were analyzed using the grounded theory that allows for the emergence of key themes and patterns in challenges related to communication and adaptive strategies. The findings from the data reveal frequent misinterpretations, unclear expectations, and cultural communication norms that hinder smooth workplace interaction. Based on the results, this research proposes practical strategies to improve aspects such as communication, intercultural awareness, and professional integration for Caucasian expatriates. Additionally, it offers recommendations for companies in Jakarta's corporate sector to promote more inclusive environments. By providing actionable insights, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of intercultural communication issues and supports the development of more effective communication practices in Jakarta's corporate sector.

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## 1. Introduction (bold, 12 pt)

The increasing number of Caucasian expatriates in Jakarta's corporate sector reflects the city's rapid development as an international hub within Indonesia and also Southeast Asia. In this setting, there are multinational corporations continuing to expand into the country, and Jakarta has emerged as a central point for international business. This rise in global talent brings economic benefits, but also contributes to greater communicative challenges within the workplace. In particular, between Caucasian expatriates and Indonesian employees. To expand on this, Jakarta is widely regarded as a culturally diverse city, but many Caucasian expatriates encounter unexpected cultural and thus also communicative barriers that affect both their professional life and personal integration which should be addressed due to its negative impact.

General studies on expatriate adjustment are already widely available (Hack-Polay, 2020; Zhou et al., 2023). However, specific communication-related challenges in cultural-sensitive environments such as Jakarta's corporate sector remain underexplored. This research seeks to fill that gap by examining the actual lived experiences of Caucasian expatriates navigating intercultural communication in their work in this corporate sector.

This study is mainly guided by Trompenaars' Seven Dimensions of Culture, which provides a structured framework for analyzing the cultural value differences that influence aspects such as communication and conflict resolution in the workplace. Key dimensions such as individualism versus communitarianism and universalism versus particularism are particularly relevant in this study for understanding the tensions and misunderstandings that may arise because of the various cultural backgrounds between Caucasian expatriates and Indonesian employees.

The Cross-cultural Adaptation theory is a supporting theory in this research which explores how individuals collaborate and integrate into their professional lives. According to Aririguzoh (2022), this form of communication involves adapting one's communication style to align with different cultural backgrounds. However, this adaptation is far from straightforward. Many Caucasian expatriates are used to communication styles grounded in directness, clarity and being individual-performance oriented. These norms can contrast sharply with the more relational, and indirect styles often seen in Indonesian corporate culture which can lead to misunderstandings or tension (Papadakis et al., 2022). Such disconnects can hinder relationships, impact productivity, and create emotional strain.

To complement the Trompenaars framework, this study also utilizes the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which explains how individuals adjust or resist adjusting their communication style in response to cultural differences (Batta, 2022). CAT helps to illustrate how the Caucasian expatriates attempt to integrate through different usage of speech, tone, or interpersonal behavior. Alternatively, they keep parts of their identity when dealing with cultural pressure.

In addition, Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory is used to understand the emotional and psychological processes the Caucasian expatriates go through when adapting to unfamiliar cultural norms. It frames adaptation as a dynamic, non-linear process that involves both unlearning and internalizing behaviors (Papadakis et al., 2022). This is important for analyzing how the Caucasian expatriates cope with cultural dissonance and communicative stress over time.

Lastly, the Organizational Culture Theory is used to gain insight into workplace-specific norms, such as informal expectations, leadership behavior, and hierarchical structures that shape daily communication patterns. As Osodlo et al. (2021) highlight, these internal cultures are often unspoken and difficult for outsiders to navigate without prior experience.

Importantly, these communication barriers are not neutral. Hafez Joudeh and Atheeb (2020) argue that colonial legacies and lingering Orientalist perceptions still inform how Westerners, thus in this case the Caucasian expatriates, are viewed in formerly colonized societies such as Indonesia. As a result, Caucasian expatriates may be seen as more authoritative by default, reinforcing symbolic hierarchies in the workplace. This dynamic can foster both unearned privilege and underlying resentment which can further complicate mutual respect and workplace harmony.

As Dousin and Sulong (2021) emphasize, Caucasian expatriate challenges are not only professional but also deeply psychological. Being excluded from informal communication networks, misunderstanding indirect cues, or struggling to interpret unspoken norms can lead to cultural fatigue, isolation, or even burnout. These difficulties accumulate and may affect the Caucasian expatriates' job performance, confidence, and overall well-being.

Therefore, this study investigates the underexplored communication challenges experienced by Caucasian expatriates in Jakarta's corporate sector. It explores how cultural mismatches, stereotypes, language barriers, and workplace norms shape their ability to adapt, collaborate, and succeed. By analyzing their lived experiences through a grounded, theory-informed approach, this research aims to provide both empirical insights and practical recommendations for fostering more culturally inclusive communication within Jakarta's evolving corporate environment.

## **2. Method (Cambria Bold, 12pt)**

This study employs a qualitative grounded theory approach within the constructivist paradigm to examine the underexplored communication challenges faced by Caucasian expatriates in Jakarta's corporate sector. Guided by the assumption that meaning is co-constructed through social interaction (Gallardo-Alba et al., 2021), the constructivist paradigm supports a deep inquiry into how individuals interpret and adapt their communication within unfamiliar cultural contexts. This approach is especially relevant for understanding how Caucasian expatriates make sense of indirect communication, workplace hierarchy, and unspoken norms which are elements often taken for granted in local corporate settings but unfamiliar to foreign professionals.

The study applies the grounded theory as proposed by Charmaz (2006), which allows researchers to systematically collect and analyze qualitative data to generate theory grounded in participants' lived experiences (p. 2). Grounded theory is suitable for capturing complex, dynamic communication phenomena. In particular where pre-existing theory may not fully explain intercultural misunderstandings or adaptation. As White and Cooper (2022) believe, grounded theory enables researchers to explore what the participants say, but also how they construct and negotiate meaning in interaction.

The data were collected from seven participants using purposive sampling. Criteria included self-identifying as Caucasian, working for more than one year in Jakarta's corporate sector who engage in daily intercultural communication with their Indonesian colleagues. Participants were recruited through expatriate events and networking on LinkedIn. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in person or online, depending on the participant's preference, and lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. The interview guide focused on communication-oriented themes including misinterpretation, language barriers, indirectness, religious norms, and perceived stereotyping. Questions were open-ended to allow for narrative exploration and for follow-ups which were used to clarify communication-related incidents and reactions.

The data were analyzed using grounded theory's three-stage coding process. First, open coding was conducted to identify significant communication challenges. This was followed by axial coding, which grouped related codes into categories such as "communication style mismatch," "managing indirectness," "symbolic privilege," and "navigating unspoken expectations." Finally, selective coding identified core communication patterns and adaptive responses that shape the Caucasian expatriates' workplace experiences. This included the development of a central theme around communicative dissonance which is about how the Caucasian expatriates confront, adapt to, or resist unfamiliar communication norms. To ensure reliability and depth, memo-writing was used to reflect on researcher interpretations and reduce bias (Psaroudakis et al., 2021). Researcher reflexivity was also incorporated to acknowledge positionality as a Caucasian foreigner who lives near Jakarta, Indonesia.

The research took place between June 2024 and June 2025 in Jakarta, Indonesia, across multiple corporate environments. The use of in-depth interviews allowed for rich exploration of sensitive communication challenges that may be invisible in surveys or surface-level observation. The methodology is replicable in other cultural contexts where Caucasian expatriates face similar identity-based communicative pressures. By focusing specifically on communication as both a barrier and a tool for adaptation, this study offers an empirically grounded understanding of how Caucasian expatriates navigate complex intercultural workplaces.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This study explored the lived underexplored communication challenges experienced by Caucasian expatriates in Jakarta's corporate sector using a constructivist paradigm together with the grounded theory approach. Based on the in-depth interviews with the Caucasian expatriates from various Western countries, the implementation of the research activities effectively fulfilled the study's goal which is about uncovering the underexplored communicative dissonances which allowed the researcher to develop a context-grounded theoretical framework. The results demonstrated that the chosen methodology, which is the constructivist paradigm, purposive sampling, and iterative open-axial-selective coding was extremely appropriate for revealing holistic insights into expatriate communication adjustment in complex cultural settings such as Jakarta's corporate sector.

The grounded theory was definitely effective in creating an understanding from the participants' experiences on how Caucasian expatriates navigate the communication challenges of Jakarta's corporate sector. The open coding stage revealed granular codes such as "fear of offending," "no direct confrontation," and "struggling to read indirect cues," which were later clustered through axial coding into broader communication-related categories such as ambiguity management, hierarchical politeness, and adaptive silence. In the final selective coding phase, a dominant pattern emerged whereby communication dissonance is the core regarding adaptation being experienced as a cultural surprise but also as a continual, and performative negotiation.

The results reflect the goals of the constructivist research which emphasizes that knowledge is co-created and shaped by subjective interpretation. During the in-depth interviews, the participants did not mention that the underexplored communication challenges are fixed misunderstandings but rather described them as ongoing processes of meaning negotiation which is framed by cultural, institutional, and relational dynamics. For instance, one participant highlighted how his intention to provide "constructive criticism" was perceived as "rude and insensitive.". This illustrates a clear misalignment in feedback expectations. Such moments displayed that intercultural communication goes beyond language because it requires deep interpretive labor.

To enhance the data analysis, Table 4 provides a selection of interview quotes tagged for emotional and organizational impact. For example, the statement "It made me question

whether I'm respecting their culture properly..." was seen as both emotional discomfort and interpersonal tension which showcases the psychological complexity behind intercultural encounters. Another quote said that "Indonesians respect hierarchy. They respect the position of their manager," was similarly tagged for interpersonal tension. These brief narratives highlight how power distance, indirectness, and cultural sensitivities ripple through everyday exchange which influences both perceptions and professional outcomes.

Additionally, Table 4 has been constructed to present a focused selection of quotes that specifically relate to the underexplored communication challenges. They are tagged for interpretative insight to examine the use of established indicators within qualitative research. In particular, theoretical which confirms the reliability of the data. After the seven interviews were conducted, there were no new communication challenges that emerged, which aligns well with Charmaz's (2006) standard for saturation in grounded theory. In this research, the researcher used a memo-writing process that further ensured analytical reflexivity. This enabled the researcher to document theoretical insights and navigate potential bias due to shared identity between the researcher and his participants.

This research also affirms and extends existing theoretical frameworks. Hall's (1976) high- vs. low-context communication theory was reflected in participant reports which discusses that Jakarta's work culture emphasized harmony, subtlety, and avoidance of direct refusal. In contrast, the Caucasian expatriates' home cultures prioritized clarity and transparency. For example, many interviewees struggled to interpret polite refusals like "maybe later" or "we will consider," which often masked unspoken disagreement. The lack of explicit rejection led to confusion, inefficiency, or misinterpreted intentions.

Moreover, the findings resonate with Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1998) dimensions of culture. Especially the "specific vs. diffuse" relationship spectrum. To elaborate, multiple interviewees reported difficulties understanding the overlap between professional and personal interactions in Jakarta, where relationships often extend beyond the formal workspace. This relational emphasis blurred boundaries and added even more complexity to professional communication and especially when expectations were unspoken but culturally assumed due to unspoken rules.

There are plenty of general studies on Caucasian expatriate adaptation in East Asia. However, this study offers a Jakarta-specific focus by examining how religious norms and Islamic values shape professional communication in Jakarta's corporate sector. For example, multiple participants said they tried to avoid sensitive discussions during Ramadan out of respect. Even if it meant postponing important decisions during their work. The combination of religious etiquette with a high-respect hierarchical culture added additional complexity to communicative expectations, and especially for the Caucasian expatriates that are unfamiliar with such practices.

The study also extends on the Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles, 2016), showing that accommodation in this context often involved far more than adjusting linguistic style. Participants discussed during the in-depth interviews that changing their speech tempo, softening tone, avoiding assertive body language to avoid being perceived as overly critical. These shifts were strategic and also reflected emotional and cultural adaptation. However, these shifts were sometimes accompanied by feelings of inauthenticity.

Theoretically, the study contributes a fresh perspective on intercultural workplace communication by introducing the concept of a new theory about "communication dissonance" as a central and recurring dynamic. Here, the Caucasian expatriate adjustment was not just viewed as a predictable or linear sequence of stages because the findings reveal it to be a fluid and evolving process. The Caucasian expatriates continually renegotiate their communicative approaches in response to new interpersonal encounters. For instance, they were shifting workplace norms which indicates that adaptation is a continual effort instead of a one-time resolution.

In terms of practicality, the study offers actionable insights for multinational companies, HR departments, and expatriate support services for the Caucasian expatriates. For

example, onboarding programs for this group should not just be about functional orientation but should also include scenario-based training on indirect speech patterns, culturally appropriate conflict avoidance, and respectful hierarchy navigation. The presence of bilingual colleagues who serve as “local mentors” should also be organizationally recognized and supported. These individuals can help bridge communication gaps not solely through translation, but also by contextualizing meaning and mediating expectations.

Tables 1 through 4 further clarify these findings. Table 1 presents the anonymous backgrounds of the seven Caucasian expatriates that highlights their diverse roles and durations of stay.

**Table 1. Open Coding: Illustrative Quotes and Preliminary Communication Themes**

| <b>Interviewee</b>   | <b>Quote</b>   | <b>Preliminary Communication Theme</b> |
|----------------------|--|--|
| <i>P3 (Floris)</i>   | “Indonesians will never answer any questions directly...”          | Indirectness in Verbal Expression      |
| <i>P4 (Kirill)</i>   | “You are wrong on something and people don’t tell you about it...” | Lack of Direct Feedback                |
| <i>P2 (Emmanuel)</i> | “People were very much submissive to the hierarchy.”               | Formality and Power Distance           |
| <i>P5 (Sam)</i>      | “Rather than tell me, she just wouldn’t do it.”                    | Conflict Avoidance                     |
| <i>P7 (Scott)</i>    | “They give you a load of preamble or context...”                   | Frustration with Over-Explanation      |

Table 2 shows the key axial codes related to the underexplored communication challenges which shows the consistent complexities dealt with by the participants often avoided direct conflict and preferred not saying things openly.

**Table 2. Axial Coding Categories Related to Communication Challenges**

| <b>Axial Communication Category</b> | <b>Description</b> | <b>Representative Codes</b> |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------|
|                                     |                    |                             |

|                                |   |   |
|--------------------------------|---|---|
| Indirect Communication Styles  | Communication is implicit, with high reliance on tone, body language, or silence.     | Indirectness, passive language, euphemisms        |
| Feedback and Correction Norms  | Avoidance of open critique leads to confusion or delayed improvement.                 | Lack of feedback, saving face, soft correction    |
| Language and Meaning Gaps      | Misunderstandings even in English due to cultural semantics or politeness strategies. | Misreading “yes,” interpreting silence            |
| Hierarchical and Formal Speech | Communication filtered through authority; junior staff avoid challenging superiors.   | Deference, rigid tone, status-based communication |
| Informal Workplace Talk        | Difficulty understanding informal bonding rituals or gossip norms.                    | Surface-level relationships, exclusion            |

Table 3 selectively compiles quotes from the participants capturing the emotional undertones and cognitive strategies used to interpret communication norms in Jakarta’s corporate sector.

**Table 3. Participant Demographic Overview**

| Interviewee          | Nationality | Job Role / Sector | Years in Jakarta |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|------------------|
| <i>P1 (Andreas)</i>  | German      | General Manager   | 5                |
| <i>P2 (Emmanuel)</i> | French      | Headhunter        | 10               |
| <i>P3 (Floris)</i>   | Dutch       | CEO               | 9                |
| <i>P4 (Kirill)</i>   | Czech       | Legal Officer     | 6                |
| <i>P5 (Sam)</i>      | American    | CEO               | 2                |
| <i>P6 (Sander)</i>   | Dutch       | Head of Retail    | 10               |
| <i>P7 (Scott)</i>    | British     | Teacher           | 12               |

Table 4 presents quotes tagged for emotional and organizational impact related to communication. This offers empirical grounding for the conceptual claims made in this study. These tables confirm the saturation and thematic coherence across diverse perspectives.

**Table 4. Communication-Related Quotes Tagged for Impact)**

| Quote  | Impact Tag(s)                               | Explanation  |
|--|---|--|
| “It made me question whether I’m respecting their culture properly...”                       | Emotional Discomfort, Interpersonal Tension | Reflects internalized concern about cultural missteps and relational strain. |
| “Indonesians respect hierarchy. They respect the position of their manager.”                 | Interpersonal Tension                       | Reveals tension in navigating hierarchical communication expectations.       |
| “They don’t speak directly, they do things behind the back of the boss.”                     | —   | Highlights indirect communication style; lack of direct feedback.            |
| “It helps if you explain why you're doing something. They want to understand your thinking.” | —   | Demonstrates adaptive strategy for communication alignment.                  |

The implications of this research are both scientific and societal. Scientifically, there should be greater attention to context in communication research. Jakarta's blend of global economic ambition and local cultural embeddedness creates a uniquely demanding communication environment. Here, Caucasian expatriates are constantly required to adjust to what they say but also to how, when, and to whom. Societally, the research underlines the need for intercultural sensitivity in global workplaces which advocates for inclusive structures that acknowledge and accommodate communicative diversity rather than expecting Caucasian expatriates to assimilate unilaterally.

In summary, this research has achieved its objectives by producing a holistic, empirically grounded understanding of underexplored Caucasian expatriate communication challenges in Jakarta’s corporate sector. The combination of methodological rigor, context-sensitive interpretation, and the newly built theory, ensures that the findings are both academically credible and also practically relevant. By focusing on communication as a dynamic, relational, and culturally situated phenomenon, this study provides a valuable contribution to the evolving field of intercultural communication and expatriate adjustment for Caucasian expatriates in Southeast Asia.

In a more broad sense, this research aligns with Gallardo-Alba et al.’s (2021) constructivist perspective that sees knowledge construction as an iterative and context-sensitive process. It is also believed by Gallardo-Alba et al. 's (2021) that participants’ meaning-making evolved over time, shaped by interactions, failures, and learning moments. This

reiterates that intercultural communication cannot just be solely taught but must be approached as an evolving dialogical practice.

It also affirms Ling's (2017) claim that the constructivist paradigm allows for a holistic and contextualized understanding of social realities. The insights generated were not merely abstracted from participants but deeply embedded in their lived realities. Such as how they adjusted their body language and expressions during meetings at work, navigated silences in group settings, or interpreted body language in ways different from their cultural intuition.

Furthermore, this research reinforces Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory proposition that theoretical frameworks should emerge instead of being imposed upon the data. The core concept of "communication dissonance" was not a predefined construct but emerged from reflection and comparative analysis across interviews. It represents how Caucasian expatriates continuously negotiate their identities and manage misunderstandings while trying to maintain their professional efficacy.

Because of its theoretical contributions, this study strengthens the argument that intercultural communication should be seen not as a mastery, but as a relational, context-dependent, and emotion-filled practice. It highlights how the Caucasian expatriates' communicative strategies are shaped by institutional hierarchy, religious sensitivities, and ambiguous power dynamics thus not solely by individual traits or misunderstandings.

Therefore, the findings in this research are a great contribution to the literature on expatriate adjustment, offering a specific case in Jakarta that helps deepen existing academics. It calls for more context-dependent, ethically sensitive, and experientially grounded approaches to understanding communication in postcolonial, multicultural, and religiously complex environments such as Jakarta's corporate sector. The study informs future academic research and also holds practical relevance for business leaders, cross-cultural trainers, and other expatriate groups navigating similar terrains.

In conclusion, this research displays that communication should not be treated as a neutral skill but as a site of negotiation, identity expression, and power interaction. It encourages the corporate companies in Jakarta to consider how workplace structures, training programs, and intercultural policies can better support Caucasian expatriates in adapting and thriving within communicatively unfamiliar environments.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The lived experiences of Caucasian expatriates in Jakarta's corporate sector reveals how communication is far more than a tool for exchanging information between them and their Indonesian colleagues. In fact, it is a dynamic process of identity negotiation, emotional adaptation, and cultural interpretation. Grounded in the constructivist paradigm and developed through a grounded theory approach, this study examines the "communication dissonance" as a central dynamic shaping expatriate adaptation for the Caucasian expatriates. This concept displays how Caucasian expatriates confront, adjust to, and sometimes resist Jakarta's indirect, hierarchical, and relational communication norms. Their strategies are not passive adjustments, but active performances of cultural learning and personal boundaries, often influenced by emotional tension and organizational constraints.

It is made by using the lens of Trompenaars' cultural dimensions, Communication Accommodation Theory, Organizational Culture Theory and the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory. By doing so, this study reveals that adaptation is not a linear journey but rather is a continual act of reflexivity where Caucasian expatriates shift speech patterns, tone, and even

body language. The goal here is to not just “fit in” but also to maintain professionalism, avoid offending their Indonesian colleagues, and preserve dignity in an unfamiliar terrain: Jakarta’s corporate sector. Such situations experienced by the Caucasian expatriates are deeply rooted in Jakarta’s unique culture where religious customs, unspoken hierarchies, and symbolic postcolonial residues shape how the Caucasian expatriates are seen and how they must communicate to thrive in this environment.

These underexplored communication challenges are individual but their implications are structural. To elaborate, the findings in this research emphasize the need for organizational systems that do not assume assimilation but rather support intercultural communication. This includes scenario-based onboarding, local mentorship from Indonesian colleagues, and profound discussions of communication expectations. Without such support, the Caucasian expatriates face professional inefficiencies but also emotional fatigue and relational breakdowns that will reduce their long-term integration.

At its core, this study contributes to the academic and practical discourse by proposing a new lens: ‘communication dissonance’, which helps to understand how cultural complexity is lived, felt, and managed in real corporate spaces such as Jakarta’s corporate sector. It affirms that communication in global workplaces must be understood not as a neutral skill, but also as a context-bound, emotionally laden, and power-sensitive practice. For Caucasian expatriates in Jakarta’s corporate sector and beyond, thriving in diverse environments means more than linguistic competence because it also requires humility, awareness, and support systems that recognize the depth of cultural negotiation embedded in every conversation.

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