Communicating Corporate Social Responsibility Across Cultures: A Comparison of U.S. and Japanese Websites

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Abstract

Given the increasing importance of globalization, tailoring a message to individual markets is becoming a common occurrence for multinational businesses. Despite this, some corporate activities have not been examined for their effectiveness across cultures. One of those activities is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This study explores CSR in an intercultural context using a cross-cultural comparison of the websites of Cargill and Bank of America Merrill Lynch, two U.S.-based firms with a significant business presence in Japan. Using a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we coded the United States and Japanese market websites of both firms to uncover patterns in how CSR efforts are communicated. Then we overlaid Hofstede's (2005) Cultural Dimensions framework to determine its utility as a tool to guide companies' efforts in producing CSR messages for different cultures.

Literature Review

❖ CSR encompasses actions on the part of the firm that further the needs or goals of an identifiable stakeholder group or a larger societal collective (Waldman, de Luque, Washburn, & House, 2006).
❖ Firms participate in CSR for a number of reasons including for financial benefit, for societal good and because of personal and ethical beliefs of executives (Garriga & Mele, 2004; Kreng & Huang, 2011).
❖ In the United States, firms typically implement CSR for the benefit of the firm and benefits to society are a secondary objective (Witt & Redding, 2012).
❖ Japan and the U.S. have significant economic ties while varying greatly in cultural dimensions (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). In other words, CSR is often motivated out of the desire to remain competitive in the global market (Wirthlin, 2004).
❖ These two countries make the top two for Internet use (Fukukawa & Moon, 2004).

Methodology

❖ Grounded Theory is a research method that is used to formulate hypotheses though the comparison of conceptualized data and can be applied to both qualitative and quantitative data. Textual data is read and re-read to identify key variables and the interrelationships between them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).
❖ The text of each CSR webpage was coded individually by each group member and that data was grouped into key themes which were compared among group members in order to identify commonalities between themes.
❖ Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory is commonly used by companies to improve and develop their intercultural communication strategies. The dimensions of Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/Femininity, and Long-term Orientation were applied to our data to identify the cultural values inherent within each artifact and to determine whether and to what extent these companies were using the framework to adapt their communication cross-culturally (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

Research Questions

❖ What patterns are present in Cargill and Bank of America Merrill Lynch's cross-cultural communication of their CSR efforts online?

❖ To what extent are Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions apparent in CSR messages for different cultures?

Results

Individualism/Collectivism:
❖ Cargill
   ◆ The company appeared to adapt its CSR communication according to Hofstede's framework with both countries. The Japanese webpage emphasized the well-being of a society as a whole while in comparison the U.S. webpage stressed the company's individual business practices.
      ▪ Japan examples of thought units: Community Infrastructure and Community Health
      ▪ U.S. examples of thought units: Business Conduct and Ethics

Long-Term Orientation
❖ Cargill
   ◆ The American webpage emphasized specific, short-term goals.
      ▪ Examples of thought units: Conservation.
   ◆ The Japanese webpage emphasized long-term or open-ended project or goals.
      ▪ Examples of thought units: Environment and Improvement/Development.

Masculinity/Femininity
❖ This cultural dimension was not prominent in the analysis of the CSR webpages.

❖ Bank of America's webpages had no substantial differences for any of the cultural dimensions applied.

From our Thematic Analysis, we derived the following thought units and put examples of the text from each webpage under each thought unit.

Cargill, U.S. Thought Units

Commitment
   "Our commitments"
   "commitments on business conduct"
   "fulfill our promises"
Compliance
   "comply with laws"
   "company policies"
   "beyond compliance goals"
Business Conduct
   "business conduct"
   "key business differentiator"
   "business obligations"
Ethics
   "ethical… conduct"
   "respecting human rights"
   "good civic behavior"
Values
   "absolute integrity"
   "accountability"
   "responsibility"
   "guiding principles"
Conservation
   "reducing environmental impact"
   "protecting and conserving the environment"
   "carbon emissions reduction"
   "conserve natural resources"
   "positive, measurable improvements"

Cargill, Japan Thought Units

Globalization
   "global commitments"
   "around the world"
   "world's population"
Innovation
   "environmental innovation"
   "solutions"
   "sound science"
Community Economics
   "local economic base"
   "local agriculture"
   "development"
Community Infrastructure
   "developing infrastructure"
Community Health
   "health of our communities"
   "vitality"
   "nourish people"
Environment
   "preserve and protect"
   "environmental footprint"
   "resource stewardship"
Improvement/Development
   "improve the quality"
   "responsible economic development"
Values
   "high standards"
   "leadership"
   "reputation for integrity"

Bank of America- Merrill Lynch, U.S. Thought Units

Philanthropy
   "philanthropic efforts"
   "direct charitable giving"
   "signature philanthropic program"
Local Community
   "healthy neighborhoods"
   "local heroes"
   "critical community needs"
Initiatives
   "programs"
   "solutions"
   "initiatives"
Volunteerism
   "volunteers donate"
   "1,000,000 hours"
   "give their time"
General Goals
   "meaningful change"
   "direct resources"
Individuals
   "community leaders"
   "nonprofit visionaries"
   "individuals"

Bank of America- Merrill Lynch, Japan Thought Units

Community
   "community development"
   "local societies"
   "Tokyo"
Natural Disaster/ Reconstruction
   "earthquake"
   "disaster assistance"
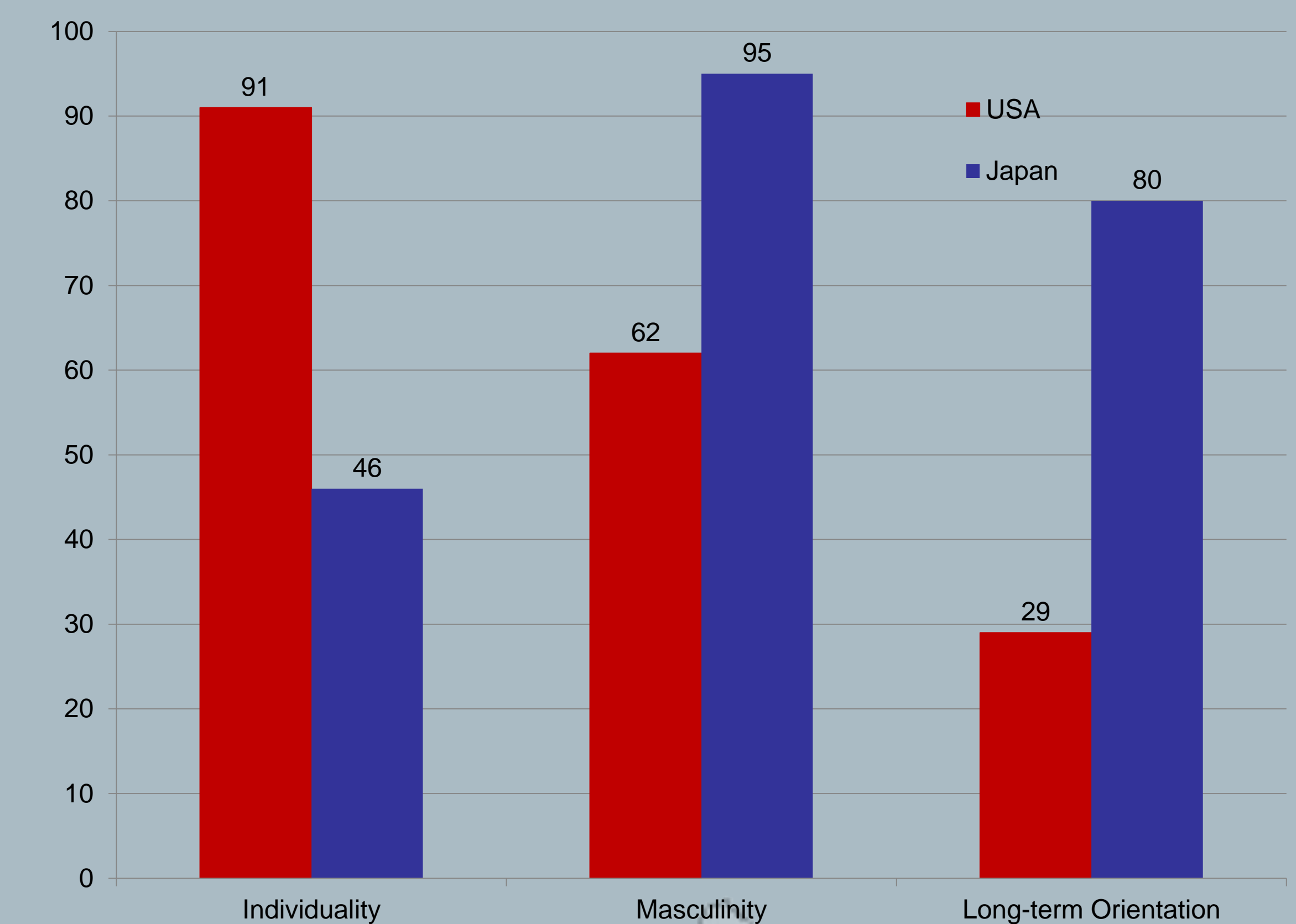   "Japan's biggest crisis"
Assistance
   "support activities"
   "economic assistance"
Positivity
   "actively engaging"
   "enthusiasm"
   "vigorously developing"
Philanthropy
   "philanthropic efforts"
   "financial contributions"
   "sponsor"
Volunteerism
   "employees"
   "participate individually"
Aid Recipients
   "the abused"
   "the disabled"
   "homeless citizens"

Japan-US Country Comparison based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (Hofstede, 2012).

Implications

❖ The presence of the dimensions of Individualism and Long Term Orientation demonstrate that Cargill does tailor CSR messages to the cultural attributes of the market.
❖ The applicability of some of Hofstede's cultural dimensions suggest that they be further studied as a tool for CSR message construction.
❖ Bank of America-Merrill Lynch's CSR webpage shows that not all organizations alter their use of language in different cultures.
❖ In regards to CSR messages, Hofstede's cultural dimension of Masculinity may not be applicable when analyzing the words or phrases used.

Limitations

❖ Due to time constraints we were not able to apply Hofstede's cultural dimensions of Uncertainty Avoidance and Power Distance to our data or to analyze additional webpages and businesses.
❖ Without the resources to accurately translate Japanese into English, we had to limit the Japanese webpages we used to those that were already available in English.
❖ With more time and resources, it would be beneficial to expand our study to include additional companies and perform a more in-depth analysis of Hofstede's dimensions in their entirety.
❖ It would also be useful to include an analysis of these webpages' visual rhetoric, as this study focused exclusively on textual analysis.

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