

Self-Regulatory Focus as a Mediator of the Effect of Culture on State Communication Apprehension: A Japan-China-US Comparison

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Abstract: Japanese, Chinese, and American university students were compared regarding their communication apprehension across situational contexts (teacher and stranger). Self-regulatory focus (promotion and prevention foci) was investigated to see if they affect state communication apprehension, and the mediation role of self-regulatory focus on the relationship between culture and state communication apprehension was probed. A survey was conducted to collect a total of 943 samples from Japan ($N = 267$), China ($N = 367$), and the United States ($N = 309$). The results indicated significant differences among Japanese, Chinese, and Americans in their state communication apprehension and self-regulatory focus. Students in these three countries differentiated their anxiety more toward interpersonal status discrepancy. Promotion and prevention foci affected state communication apprehension and mediated the effect of culture on anxiety with communication targets. Discussion on self-regulatory focus as an explanatory framework for communication apprehension was raised.

Keywords: Culture, promotion focus, prevention focus, state communication apprehension

1. Introduction

Communication apprehension has a rich history of research, having first been defined by McCroskey (1977) as fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons, and has been identified as the number one fear of American adults, surpassing the fear of heights, disease, financial problems, snakes, and even death (Dwyer & Davidson, 2012; Motley, 1988). Those with a high level of communication apprehension tend to avoid situations in which they will encounter others (McCroskey, 1977).

Language teachers often notice that Asian students, such as Japanese and Chinese, are more reluctant to speak up in class. Empirical studies have shown this to be true (Hsu, 2004; Pryor, Butler, & Boehringer, 2005) and attributed this to personality factors, such as self-esteem, introversion versus extroversion, and social anxiety (Campero-Oliart, 2020; Jibeen, et al., 2019; Patterson, & Ritts, 2012); Yamini, & Shafiei, 2011). However, few studies have probed into the situational and relational factors behind such communication apprehension, namely, in what social situations and toward what kinds of people they are apprehensive. This study focused on status differences, i.e., power discrepancies between themselves and their interaction partners, in which we contend that Japanese and Chinese are more sensitive than Americans, who are more likely to prefer communication on an equal basis (Tsui & Windsor, 2001).

When discussing state communication apprehension, we focused on the self-regulatory focus (consisting of promotion and prevention foci) that could impact students' anxiety.

According to Higgins (1997), everyone has two basic needs: promotion-focus, emphasizing personal growth and development, and prevention-focus, aiming at seeking security. Those who are promotion-oriented will seek to gain approval from others. Hence, they will actively seek to communicate with other people. In contrast, those who are prevention-focused desire to avoid situations in which they may lose face due to their incompetence in communication. These two foci could give new insight into why people might feel anxious when facing others. We assumed that promotion-focused individuals actively engage in communication to appeal to others. Those who are prevention-focused try to avoid situations in which they might appear communication incompetent. This study aims to verify the effect of culture on state communication apprehension and to explore the mediating effects of self-regulatory focus (promotion and prevention foci) on state communication apprehension.

2. Literature Review

2.1 State Communication Apprehension

While communication apprehension originated as more of a personality concept than situational, later studies identified it as a state rather than a trait. McCroskey (1977) defined state communication apprehension as the actual response of fear or anxiety concerning a given communication situation, such as public speaking. However, state communication anxiety can also occur as a function of dyadic interactions during the acquaintance process (Richmond, 1978). Such anxiety can result from normal communication encounters with a specific target individual. Therefore, state communication apprehension is viewed as experiencing fear in certain situations, such as communicating with someone who can judge or evaluate that person, but not with someone less likely to exert influence. Booth-Butterfield and Gould (1986) found that people's cognitive, affective, and psychological tendencies differ according to the context of communication, as they may experience fear in particular situations, such as job interviews, doctor's physical exam, or academic evaluation by the teacher (Ayres, et al., 1998; Kearney & McCroskey, 1980; Richmond, et al., 1998). Of course, state apprehension runs hand in hand with trait apprehension, as someone with high trait apprehension is likely to experience state apprehension across many communication contexts. However, those with low trait apprehension may seldom experience state communication apprehension in any context (McCroskey, 2009).

Several reasons can lead to communication anxiety, which includes willingness to communicate, communicative competence, and shyness (Babapoor et al., 2018; Jibeen et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2023). Other than that, those who were confident with their communication competence or language ability were less likely to be anxious during interaction (Wang et al., 2023). Moreover, an individual's level of communication anxiety can also be affected by social personality. Opt and Loffredo (2000) asserted that introverts experience more communication apprehension than extroverts when faced with situations where they must openly express themselves. University students' communication apprehension is related to academic achievement and learning preference. Students with higher communication anxiety preferred divergent and assimilative learning styles and had poor academic performance, while those with lower communication anxiety preferred accommodative learning styles and had better outcomes (Al-Shboul et al., 2013; Russ, 2012).

This study focused on theories of fear of negative evaluation and uncertainty, suggesting a model for explaining the multifaceted nature of state communication apprehension. Watson and Friend (1969) defined fear of negative evaluation as anxiety about being judged by others, distress about being negatively evaluated, avoidance of evaluative situations, and prediction that others will judge oneself negatively (p. 449). A highly formal situation where

one is placed in a subordinate position may make one feel s/he is being evaluated and may trigger state communication apprehension. Following the theory of fear of negative evaluation, some people may prefer to keep silent while attending a meeting as they are afraid of making mistakes or saying something inappropriate, hence offending other group members, or simply appearing clumsy (Richmond, Heisel, Smith, & McCroskey, 1998). Therefore, fear of negative evaluation and uncertainty have been implicated with communication avoidance (Booth-Butterfield & Gould, 1986; Wheelless & Williamson, 1992), and one situation that fits this context is that of a college student's state communication apprehension while communicating with a professor (who has the power to evaluate them), as compared to a stranger (who does not influence them).

Furthermore, our study aims to shed light on the potential effect of uncertainty on students' state anxiety. Uncertainty reduction theory mainly focuses on the initial interaction between individuals, claiming that people need information about their communication targets to reduce uncertainty (Berger, 1975). In any circumstance eliciting social anxiety, state communication apprehension would have different patterns of manifestation. When an individual is placed in a novel situation or in a surrounding where s/he must interact with someone unfamiliar, state communication apprehension is felt due to the lack of information (values, beliefs, routines, attitudes, etc.) about that person. A study conducted by Comadena (1984) confirmed that a higher degree of ambiguity tolerance, the degree of acceptance of or even attraction to the lack of information (Arquero et al., 2017), predicted lower anxiety during the interaction.

While talking about cultural differences, the notion of strong versus weak uncertainty avoidance is frequently discussed. Societies characterized by high uncertainty avoidance, like those of Japan and China, maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant towards deviant persons and ideas (Hofstede, 2011). For instance, on 13 March 2023, the Japanese government announced the easing of mask-wearing guidelines, deciding whether to wear masks is left up to individuals in most situations ("Japan to ease", 2023). However, around 74% of Japanese people wear face masks as usual even after the government eased the COVID-19-related protocol (Ishimoto, 2023). A similar situation also occurred in China, where people kept wearing masks even though the Chinese government announced the end of their mandatory wearing. These two cultures are also characterized as tight cultures (versus loose; Gelfand, 2019). In contrast, loose cultures like the United States prefer a more relaxed atmosphere where people act based on practicality rather than rules and are more tolerant of deviation from the norm.

From this, we predicted that Japanese and Chinese students would have higher state communication apprehension than Americans when communicating with strangers. According to Watson and Bossley (1995), two out of every 10 individuals might experience some form of communication anxiety in specific situations. Therefore, in Japan and China, university students may experience anxiety while communicating with their teachers, who have higher status and more power than they do, compared with strangers, who are full of uncertainty.

2.2 Self-Regulatory Focus

Self-regulatory focus looks at how people approach situations in which they are positively reinforced versus those in which they could face negative consequences. Higgins (1997) proposed the regulation focus theory, distinguishing between promotion (accomplishments and aspirations) and prevention (safety and responsibilities) foci by examining the relationship between the intrinsic (ideal-self) or extrinsic (ought-self) motivation of a person and how they achieve their goals.

One's orientation to these foci is often affected by culture. Western cultures, being individualistic, socialize people to be independent, to solve problems by themselves, to be assertive, and to emphasize the ideal self. Higgins (2012) notes that promotion focus, prevalent in independent cultures, increases the sense of personal success in making progress toward achieving one's goals. In comparison, Asian cultures emphasize collectivism and place a much higher value on agreeableness and acquiescence, hence people are taught to exercise patience with other people, maintain harmonious relationships with others, emphasize benefits to the group over personal profit, and be accepted by society or people in their immediate surroundings (Johnson et al., 2011; Realo, et al., 1997; Taras, et al., 2010). From this, it would appear that Westerners are promotion-focused, while Asians are prevention-focused. To this effect, Weber et al. (2005) found that interdependent-oriented Chinese emphasized rules, regulations, and social norms much more strongly than Americans, who were more oriented toward self-interests. Therefore, we predicted that individuals with a promotion focus communicate proactively with others to appeal to their self-worth. On the other hand, those with a prevention focus may be reluctant to communicate with others for fear of appearing incompetent and have the need to avoid negative evaluations of themselves.

Another culture-specific factor is facework, also called face protection or "Mien-tzu" (Ting-Toomey, 2017). In Japan and China, which are recognized as high-context cultures, people adopt other-oriented face protection, having more concern about the communication targets than themselves. Those with a prevention focus like to feel secure without being a standout, while those with a promotion focus emphasize self-face concerns targeting personal gain and accomplishment.

Under this framework, we assume that individuals with a promotion focus are motivated to actively self-present themselves, communicating proactively with others to seek their approval and respect. On the other hand, those with a prevention focus will be more cautious about appearing aggressive and may even want to avoid communication to prevent themselves from being perceived as an incompetent speaker. Lee, Aaker, and Gardner (2000) suggested that Western people, with a dominant independent self-construal, place more emphasis on promotion-focused information, while Eastern people, with higher interdependent self-construal, are more prevention-focused.

2.3. Hypotheses

This study examines whether Japanese and Chinese are more likely to experience communication apprehension than Americans in two different contexts: communicating with teachers and strangers (see Figure 1). Given the above arguments, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1. Japanese and Chinese have significantly higher state communication apprehension than Americans.

H2a. Japanese and Chinese are more prevention-focused than Americans.

H2b. Americans are more promotion-focused than the Japanese and Chinese.

H3a. Promotion focus will negatively mediate the effect of culture on state communication apprehension.

H3b. Prevention focus will positively mediate the effect of culture on state communication apprehension.

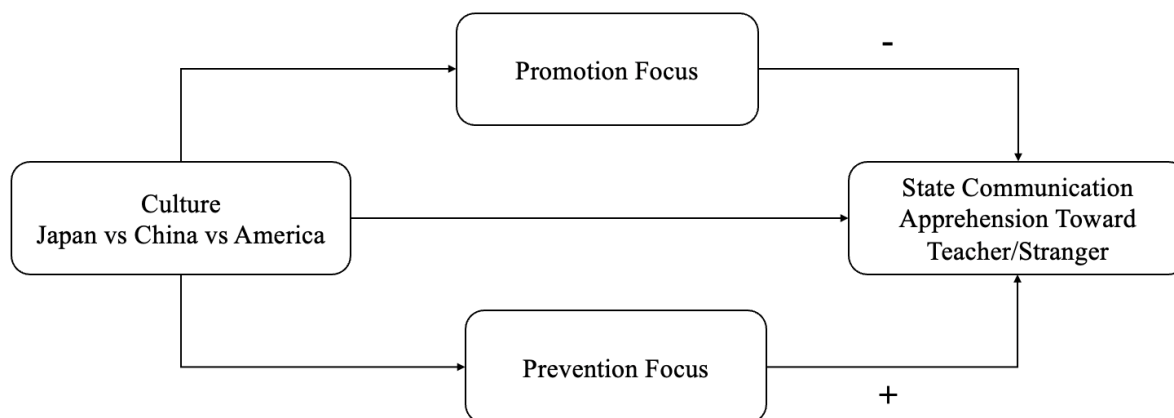


Figure 1. The proposed model of the study.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Nine hundred and forty-three university students ($M_{age} = 19.78$, $SD = 1.85$, 421 men, 522 women) from Japan ($N = 267$, $M_{age} = 18.80$, $SD = 0.99$, 128 men, 139 women), China ($N = 367$, $M_{age} = 20.04$, $SD = 1.56$, 195 men, 172 women), and United States ($N = 309$, $M_{age} = 20.33$, $SD = 2.35$, 98 men, 211 women) voluntarily participated in this study. Participants who identified their nationalities with their respective countries were included, while international residents were not. Participants were recruited by convenience sampling, and course credit was offered for full participation.

3.2 Procedures

Participants completed an online questionnaire in the respective languages of each country (i.e., Japanese, Chinese, and English). A self-report online questionnaire was set up on Qualtrics, requiring approximately 20 min to complete. At the beginning of the survey, there was a consent form that gave a thorough introduction to the study and an explanation of the procedures, the contents, the demands, the risks, anonymity, and confidentiality of the survey. There were two options at the bottom of the webpage regarding their willingness to participate: agree and disagree. Those who clicked agree went to the next page to complete the questionnaire. After finishing the questionnaire, there was a debriefing form about whom they could contact anytime they wanted to withdraw.

3.3 Measurements

We used the Situational Communication Apprehension Measure (SCAM; Richmond, 1978), which included 20 items on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 (extremely inaccurate) to 5 (extremely accurate). The context of communication was the last time s/he communicated with “someone who had a supervisory role over you” in the original study. In subsequent studies, the target changed to other contexts, such as “talk with one of your subordinates,” “talk with your teacher outside class,” and “meeting with your physician”. We specified the situational contexts as “the most recent time you interacted with your teacher or a stranger” in this study. Also, the response categories were modified into five-point Likert-type scales

from 1 (extremely inaccurate) to 5 (extremely accurate). The face validity and reliability of the instrument were in the range of 0.85 to 0.90 (Richmond, 1978). SCAM was available in Chinese (Shek, 1988; Wang, et al., 1999) but not in Japanese, so we conducted back-translation on the items. Table 1 shows the internal consistency reliabilities for both teachers and strangers.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities for each scale by culture.

	Japanese			Chinese			Americans			Differences
	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	Mean	SD	α	$F (df = 940)$
SCAT	2.70	0.56	0.89	2.46	0.60	0.92	1.98	0.56	0.89	116.75 ***
SCAS	3.05	0.54	0.88	2.47	0.65	0.93	2.32	0.68	0.91	105.10 ***
PRO	3.32	0.51	0.59	3.39	0.55	0.59	3.49	0.59	0.59	6.59 ***
PRE	3.49	0.61	0.67	3.53	0.58	0.60	3.34	0.84	0.77	6.81 ***

Note. *** $p < 0.001$. SCAT = State Communication Apprehension Toward Teacher. SCAS = State Communication Apprehension Toward Stranger. PRO = Promotion-focused. PRE = Prevention-focused.

The Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001) was used to measure promotion and prevention foci. The RFQ consisted of 11 items rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (never/certainly false) to 5 (always/certainly true). The internal reliability was 0.73 for the promotion focus (6 items) and 0.80 for the prevention focus (5 items). This scale was available in Japanese (Yamagami, 2008) and Chinese (Yao et al., 2008). However, the reliability of RFQ has not been reported to be good, $\alpha = 0.53$ for promotion focus and $\alpha = 0.60$ for prevention focus (Shepperd et al., 2016). As can be seen in Table 1, the reliability of the promotion focus was inadequate (<0.60) across all three cultures, and this has been noted in the literature as an inherent issue with the scale.

4. Results

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) through multigroup simultaneous structural equation (SEM) to test the factor structure equivalence of the scales across cultures. For SCAM, 2 items (item 6 and item 10) were eliminated as they failed to meet a minimum criterion of having a standardized factor loading above 0.4. The CFA for the two-factor solution of RFQ (AGFI = 0.82, GFI = 0.94, CFI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.04, $\chi^2(130) = 308.71$) and one-factor solution of SCAM (AGFI = 0.85, GFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.92, RMSEA = 0.05, $\chi^2(318) = 1733.31$) yielded goodness-of-fit indices that were adequate for both self-regulatory focus and across the three cultures, so further analyses were not required. We adopted the criteria for the goodness of fit by Baumgartner and Homburg (1996) and Doll et al. (1994) studies, which indicate that AGFI, GFI, and CFI values above 0.8 are sufficient for determining the goodness of fit.

4.1 Testing the Cultural Differences

One-way ANOVAs were conducted to test the effect of culture on state communication apprehension by targets and on self-regulatory focus. The main effect of culture was significant for state communication apprehension with teachers ($F(2, 940) = 116.75, p < 0.001$), with Tukey's HSD tests indicating that Japanese students ($M = 2.70, SD = 0.56$) had a higher level of state communication apprehension with teachers than both Chinese ($M = 2.46, SD = 0.60, p = 0.000, 95\% CI = [0.14, 0.35]$) and Americans ($M = 1.98, SD = 0.56, p = 0.000, 95\% CI = [0.60, 0.83]$). In addition, the Chinese had significantly higher state communication

apprehension than Americans ($p = 0.000$, 95% CI = [0.37, 0.58]). Likewise for strangers, the main effect of culture was significant ($F(2, 940) = 105.10$, $p < 0.001$), with Tukey's HSD Test showing that Japanese ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.54$) had more anxiety than both Chinese ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.65$, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI = [0.46, 0.70]) and Americans ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 0.68$, $p = 0.000$, 95% CI = [0.60, 0.85]). Moreover, Chinese students' anxiety was higher than that of Americans ($p = 0.009$, 95% CI = [0.03, 0.26]). H1 was confirmed.

Promotion focus indicated a significant main effect of culture ($F(2, 940) = 6.59$, $p < 0.01$). Tukey's post-hoc tests revealed that Japanese ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.51$) had a lower level of promotion focus than Americans ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.59$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI = [-0.28, -0.06]). No differences between Japanese and Chinese were found, as well as between Chinese and Americans. For prevention focus, a significant difference was confirmed across cultures $F(2, 940) = 6.81$, $p < 0.01$, with post-hoc comparisons indicating that Japanese ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.61$, $p = 0.025$, 95% CI = [0.02, 0.28]) and Chinese ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.58$, $p = 0.001$, 95% CI = [0.06, 0.31]) were higher in prevention focus than Americans ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.84$). There was no significant difference between the Japanese and Chinese. H2a and H2b, therefore, were partially supported (see Figure 2).

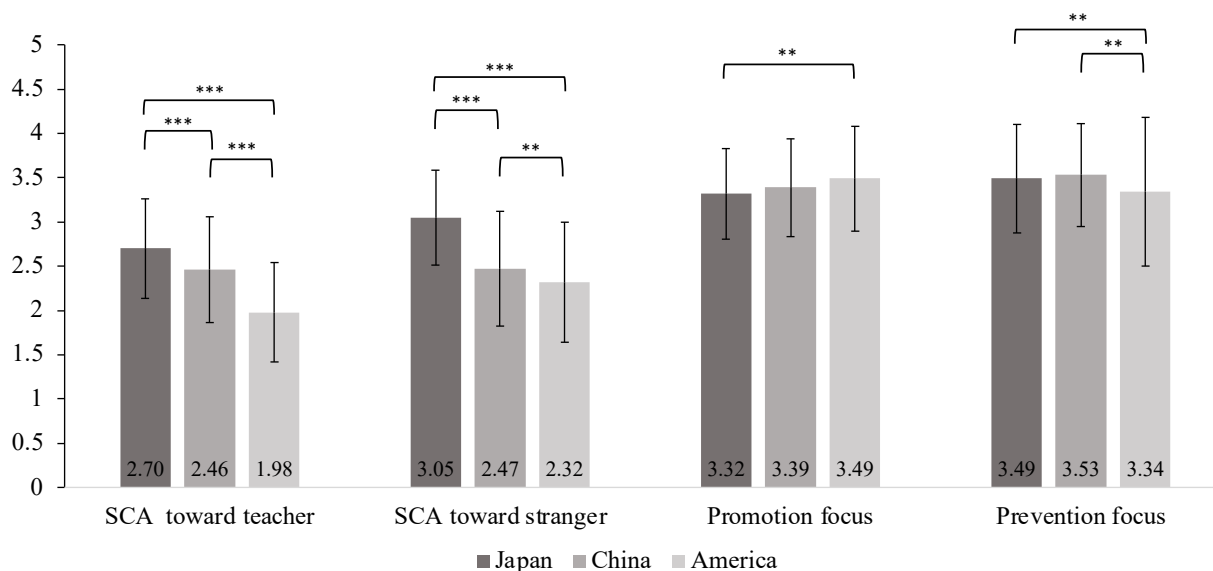


Figure 2. The effect of culture on state communication apprehension and self-regulatory focus. Note. ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. SCA = State Communication Apprehension.

4.2 Testing the Mediation Model

To determine whether there is a mediating effect of promotion and prevention foci on the impact of culture on state communication apprehension toward each target, we conducted mediation analyses using Process Macro for the SPSS 22. Culture was entered as the independent variable, state communication apprehension for teachers and strangers was the dependent variable, and promotion and prevention foci were added as the mediating variables. The model was bootstrapped 5000 times, and indirect effects were partially standardized as we adopted a dichotomous dummy variable (culture).

First, the total effect of culture on state communication apprehension toward teachers was significant ($\beta = -0.36$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.41, -0.31]), as was the direct effect of culture on promotion focus ($\beta = -0.35$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.39, -0.30]). The indirect impact of culture

on state communication apprehension toward teachers was significant via promotion focus ($\beta = -0.04$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.07, -0.02]$) and prevention focus ($\beta = 0.01$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $[0.00, 0.03]$). Thus, the effect of culture on state communication apprehension toward teachers was mediated by both promotion and prevention focus (see Figure 3).

Second, the total effect of culture on state communication apprehension toward strangers was significant ($\beta = -0.36$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.41, -0.31]$). The direct effect of culture on promotion focus was significant ($\beta = -0.34$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.39, -0.29]$), as well as the indirect effect of culture on state communication apprehension toward strangers via promotion focus ($\beta = -0.04$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.07, -0.02]$), and prevention focus ($\beta = 0.01$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI $[0.00, 0.03]$). Thus, the effect of culture on state communication apprehension with strangers was mediated by both promotion and prevention foci, confirming H3a and H3b (see Figure 4).

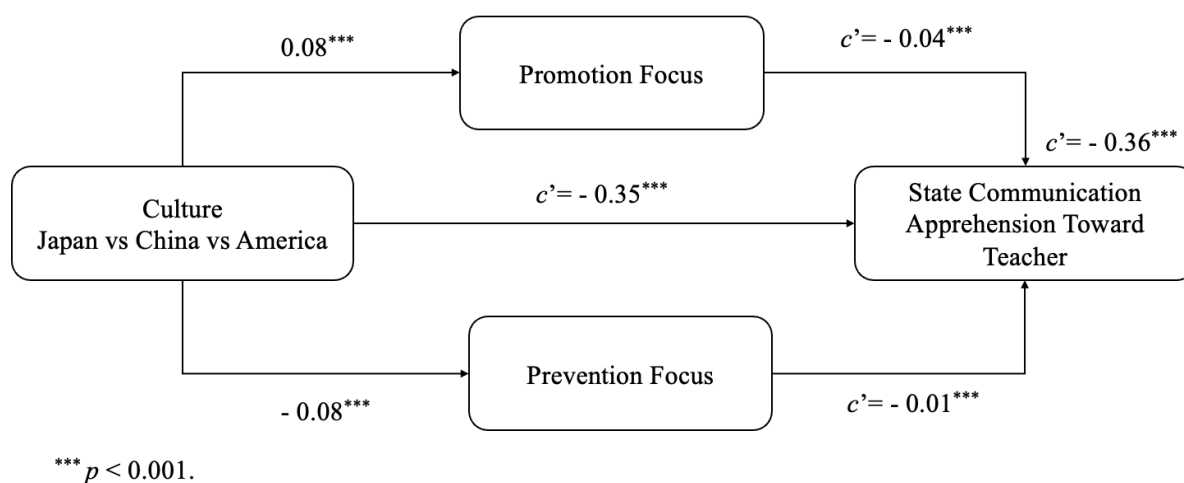


Figure 3. The effects of culture on state communication apprehension toward teachers mediated by self-regulatory focus.

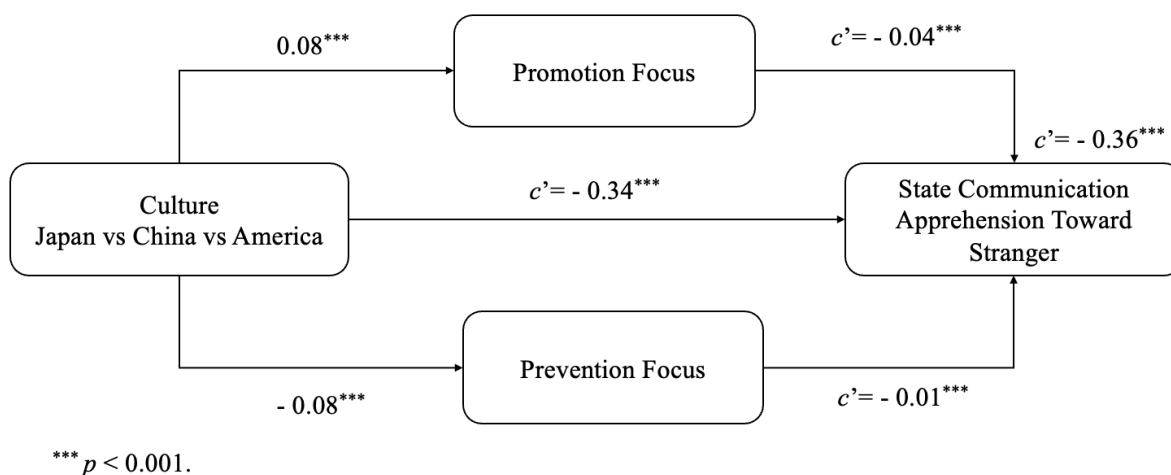


Figure 4. The effects of culture on state communication apprehension toward strangers mediated by self-regulatory focus.

5. Discussion

The primary goal of this study was to identify what caused Japanese and Chinese students to have more state communication apprehension while communicating with teachers and strangers compared to Americans and to determine whether self-regulatory focus would mediate the effects of culture on state communication apprehension. The results revealed cultural differences in state communication apprehension toward both teachers and strangers, differences in the levels of promotion and prevention foci, and the mediating effects of promotion and prevention foci between culture and state communication apprehension.

First, Japanese and Chinese students had significantly higher state communication apprehension than Americans. These findings were consistent with existing studies, which indicated higher general or trait anxiety in Japanese and Chinese compared to Americans (Hsu, 2004; Pryor et al., 2005). Perhaps the former two follow the principle that talking less is better than talking worse (Hazel, Keaten, & Kelly, 2014), and they have more fear of negative evaluation. However, Japanese and Americans are similar in that they are more anxious about communicating with strangers than teachers. Additionally, due to the fear of uncertainty, people were more anxious toward people they met for the first time than about teachers and people they are familiar with.

Second, Japanese and Chinese have a prevention focus than the Americans, while the latter have a higher promotion focus. This can be explained by the emphasis of the two former cultures on the concept of face (顔 mientsu). Japanese and Chinese are known to have a strong public self-awareness, hence are highly concerned about how they reflect upon others (Sugiyama-Lebra, 2004), and may be hesitant to engage in communication that might make them look incompetent, or obtrusive. In contrast, Americans actively seek opportunities in which they can stand out, and have others approve of their self-worth, thus they do not hesitate to promote themselves, or as Markus and Kitayama (1991) illustrate in the adage, “The squeaky wheel gets the grease” versus “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” Perhaps these foci were behind Heine and Lehman’s (1997) findings that Americans like to self-enhance themselves, while Japanese tend to self-deprecate.

Third, promotion focus negatively mediated the impact of culture on state communication apprehension, while prevention focus was a positive mediator. Promotion and prevention foci, thus accentuate the effect of culture on state communication. Promotion focus may be an impetus for students to appeal to their teachers to achieve higher grades, allowing them to overcome their communication apprehension, while prevention focus urges them not to appear overly eager or impertinent.

5.1 Limitations

This study had some limitations that should be addressed in future attempts. First, this study used a convenience sample collection method. We collected American data in Southern California, with a higher concentration of Asians than the typical American sample. Second, our communication scenarios did not adequately account for the status of the stranger, i.e., whether they were of higher or equal status. Asians, in particular, might be sensitive to power distance, i.e., whether their partner may be higher in status than they are, in which case they would take on a more low-keyed self-presentation (Hofstede, 1983).

5.2 Implications and Future Directions

This study offers several theoretical and practical implications. We approached state communication apprehension from a psychological perspective, suggesting that personal goals (to excel = promotion, versus playing it safe = prevention) and motivation

(internal/external) of goals would affect state communication apprehension. Our results throw light on the potential mechanism of culture to influence state communication apprehension through self-regulatory focus. Our study also examined the state communication apprehension of Japanese and Chinese students by looking at the mechanism behind it.

In the practical sense, this study gives new insight into the status quo of state communication apprehension of Japanese and Chinese university students. As McCroskey (1977) noted, student-based communication training was derived in the 1940s in American education, but Japan and China have been slow in adopting such education. Given the rapid internationalization occurring in these countries, addressing the issue of training young people to be able to deal with intercultural encounters without anxiety has never been more crucial. Introducing communication competence-related courses and coaching university students in Japan and China, perhaps as compulsory general education, is suggested, to offer even students not majoring in communication the chance to become equipped with the necessary communication competence to succeed in their post-graduation endeavors.

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