Review

Cross-cultural analysis in online community research: A literature review

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ABSTRACT

Cross-cultural online community research can support theoretical generalizability, increase methodological robustness and give insights into user online behavior. The objective of this paper is to review the existing literature on comparative cross-cultural online community research in order to investigate the current state of the literature, extract conceptual patterns and identify methodological and emergent issues. This will inform the development of the field, map out research delimiters, and set out guidelines for future research. The findings from the literature review demonstrated five key areas of methodological difficulty in cross-cultural online community comparative analysis; sampling form, country selection, number of cultures compared, participant type and interpretation of data. Key themes that emerged from the literature included the use of the nation state as a unit of culture, a lack of definition of the concept of online community, and the impact of current theory on cross-cultural online community analyses. Recommendations in the areas of methodology, definition and theory are provided. These findings should be of interest to both specific online community researchers, and those in other multidisciplinary fields where online communities are being used as a research environment.

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Contents

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1. Introduction to cross-cultural online community research

'Online communities' is the term used to describe a group of people with a common interest or a shared purpose, whose interactions are governed by policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and law, and who use computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness (Preece, 2000). There are many different types of online communities that serve a wide range of purposes and motivations for their users. These can include discussion based communities (e.g. IGN Boards), task/goal oriented communities (e.g. UsingEnglish.com), virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life) and hybrid style communities (e.g.eBay.com) (Stanoevska-Slabeva & Schmid, 2001).

Researching the effects of culture on online communities has been identified as a key challenge for the future development of the field (Chan & Li, 2010; Jin, Lee, & Cheung, 2010; Kim, Park, & Jin, 2008; Lin & Lee, 2006; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002; Shu & Chuang, 2011; Wang, Carley, Zeng, & Mao, 2007). The rapid proliferation of online networks and communication platforms has increased collaboration between cultures on a global scale. As this phenomenon increases, a better understanding of how culture plays a part in its development is essential (Hara, Shachaf, & Hew, 2010; Lee, 2009).

Cross-cultural analysis is one method of investigating, developing and comparing cultural issues in an online community. Research into online communities is an emerging field, and a review of the current literature that uses a cross-cultural analysis of online communities can inform the development of this field by identifying knowledge gaps, detecting problematic methodological and conceptual issues, and setting out guidelines for future research. Due to the new and emergent nature of this field, this introduction will provide an overview of the key issues and theories surrounding cross-cultural online community research.

Cross-cultural research is a methodology most commonly used in the social, anthropological and psychological sciences. The methodology arose as a reaction against the tendency in psychology to ignore cultural variations and consider them nuisance variables (Kagitcibasi & Poortunga, 2000). It can be defined as an approach where 'one or more units in two or more societies, cultures or countries are compared in respect of the same concepts and concerning the systematic analysis of phenomena, usually with the intention of explaining them and generalizing from them'(Hantrais & Mangen, 1996, pp. 1–2). It aims to discover variations that are not present in one single social setting (Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999), and find relationships in variables under circumstances where they have been modified by cultural conditions (Delva, Allen-Meares, & Momper, 2010). The aspect of comparison is important in cross-cultural research, in that in order to adequately interpret findings, researchers must systematically compare data from two or more cultures. Ultimately, the goal of this methodology is to discover and explain differences of behavior and development among humans, with the aim of achieving a deeper understanding of individuals (Manaster & Havighurst, 1972).

Cross-cultural online community research involves comparing two or more cultures across single or multiple online communities. This could be, for example, comparing French and German user content across a single online community (e.g. Facebook). Alternatively, it could involve comparing users across two or more distinct online communities, for example, surveying users from Chinese and US online wedding communities.

A literature review of cross-cultural studies of online communities has not been previously performed. A review of this type is necessary as it can help direct future theoretical study, identify gaps in the current research and demonstrate the significance of using a cross-cultural analytical methodology with online community research. In this research we use the term 'online communities' to denote the full range of online community types. This includes traditional community discussion forums (Chiou & Lee, 2008), communities of practice (Li, 2010), social networking sites (Chapman & Lahav, 2008) and collaborative authoring communities such as Wikipedia (Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Ang, 2006). Within these 'online communities' there can be large differences in community motivation, purpose and orientation, which can effect cultural development and analysis. However, as this type of literature review has not been previously completed, and in order to provide a wide-ranging picture of cross-cultural research in the online community field, all community types will be included in the review.

The following sections outline the rationale underlying the use of a cross-cultural methodology for online community research, and the key theories behind cross-cultural research.

1.1. Key issues in online community cross-cultural research

Research into online communities is at an exploratory, developing and dynamic phase, with membership and activity of these communities increasing at a rapid rate (Big-boards.com, 2012; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011; Shin, 2010). The advent of online communities has had considerable global and cultural implications (Posey, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010) and can often result in the blending of cultural values and norms (Grace-Farfaglia, Dekkers, Sundararajan, Peters, & Park, 2006). Following these developments, the purpose of cross-cultural analysis in the area of online community research is both varied and significant. It ranges from enhancing and increasing the generalizability of online community theory, to addressing methodological issues in online community research. On a more practical level, it allows for valuable insights in the design, moderation and facilitation of online communities by understanding how cultural differences influence community development. This section explains the growing importance of cross-cultural online community research, with a particular focus on theory, methodological issues, the informing of design decisions and providing insights into user behavior.

1.1.1. Theoretical issues

A globalized world has generated new cultural collaborations and escalated cross-cultural communications (Lewis & George, 2008). The technological revolution, and the birth of online communities, has facilitated and strengthened these cultural networks. However, it can be difficult to generalize research findings from a single case study, based in a specific culture, to the wider online population because of this increase in cultural diversity. Cross-cultural research is one method of investigating the globalized online space and its implications for wider cultural, economic and social interaction. This methodology can strengthen the applicability and generalizability of research findings.

In the context of online communities, examining the differences in patterns of online behaviors between cultural backgrounds has been identified as potentially improving the generalizability of results (Chan & Li, 2010; Chen, Chen, Lo, & Yang, 2008; Choi, Kim, Sung, & Sohn, 2011; Chou, Lee, Chang, & Lin, 2009; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Lin & Lee, 2006; Wang, 2011). Improving the generalizability of online community research has been identified as an important activity for future directions in the literature. It can boost research robustness (Jin et al., 2010), identify patterns in the literature (Chan & Li, 2010), complement existing research (Shu & Chuang, 2011) and help advance future research (Ridings et al., 2002).

The work of two cross-cultural theorists dominates cross-cultural analysis in online community research; Geert Hofstede