Contextuality and computer-mediated communication: a cross cultural comparison

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to assess the applicability of Hall's cultural dimension of contextuality to computer-mediated communication (CMC) in internet forums. A content analysis of 376 postings from German (a low-context culture) and Indian (a high-context culture) internet forums was conducted. The results partially validate the explanatory power of contextuality. Congruent with Hall's cultural perspective, it was found that Indians disclose less private information in online discussions than Germans. Furthermore, Indians used more emoticons than their German counterparts, reflecting the higher importance of nonverbal communication in high-context cultures.

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1. Introduction

The Internet has often been regarded as inherently global in nature, particularly due to its ability to cross national boundaries and its capacity to make space and distance irrelevant (Döring, 2003). However, while computer-mediated communication (CMC) can promote what Giddens (1990) described as the stretching of relations across space and time, researchers have become increasingly aware of the fact that online spaces do not exist in a cultural void (Avgerou, 1996; Han, 2003; Khiabany, 2003; Ma, 1996; Marcus & Gould, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2000). The current study attempts to investigate cultural aspects of web communication and, in particular, to assess the applicability of Hall's (1976) low/high-context framework of intercultural communication pertaining to internet forum communication. Hall's work promises to be an interesting point of departure to explore the interplay between CMC and culture. First, it focuses directly on communication patterns as manifestations of culture (Dahl, 2004); second, its validity in new media contexts has been assessed only partially.

This research is an attempt to provide an answer to whether Hall's cultural dimension of contextuality will enable insightful understanding and add to the existing debate on CMC.

2. Contextuality

The concept of contextuality was introduced by Edward Hall (Hasenstab, 1999). Due to its linguistic focus, it is one of the most widely-used concepts in research pertaining to language patterns across cultures (Adler, 2001; Chen & Starosta, 1998; Dahl, 2004;

Han, 2003; Triandis, 1994). Hall distinguishes between high and low-context cultures that differ in terms of the amount of contextual information that is necessary for the "transaction" of information. With reference to this, he states:

> High-context transactions feature pre-programmed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message. Low-context transactions are the reverse. Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context. (Hall, 1976, p. 101).

To paraphrase this, high-context cultures rely on shared background knowledge to interpret a message, whereas low-context cultures explicate all necessary information (Hall, 1982). Accordingly, low-context cultures typically communicate directly, explicitly and verbally. Information tends to be detailed and precise and the communicator expects that what is communicated is taken literally. Factual knowledge is emphasized and members of low-context cultures are often perceived as cold and distanced (Hall & Hall, 1990). In contrast, the communication of high-context cultures can be characterized as nonverbal, indirect, formal and emotional. Information is usually conveyed tacitly, for example, by using allusions. Members of low-context cultures often perceive high-context communication as polite but evasive (Hall, 1976).

In order to interpret indirect messages, detailed background information or "context" is necessary and the latter is normally acquired in close personal relationships. Accordingly, personal contact is crucial for effective communication. As Hall and Hall (1990) state: "In high-context cultures, interpersonal contact takes precedence over everything else. Wherever people are spatially involved, information flows freely" (p. 23). This tendency is especially pronounced for sensitive information. In view of this,

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members of high-context cultures typically discuss private matters only within their personal networks (Trompenaars, 1994).

Generally, Asian cultures are regarded as high in context, whereas Western nations are characterized by a low-context cultural orientation (Han, 2003). Although there is little empirical data on the exact position of particular nations on the low–high-context continuum, rich anecdotal evidence supports the broad classification of Eastern nations as high-context and Western cultures as low-context (Dahl, 2004; Hall, 1976). For example, in the USA, the "time is money approach" means that making a deal will take place after a brief introductory period. This contrasts with China, where businesspeople first want to learn about the personal background of their partner(s) and want to establish an atmosphere of mutual trust before the actual business agenda is addressed (Hasenstab, 1999; Martinsons & Westwood, 1997).

The categorization of Asian cultures as high in context and Western cultures as low-context is supported further by similar cultural variability constructs. For example, Asian nations are typically collectivistic (a construct with close conceptual links to a high-context cultural orientation), whereas Western nations are individualistic (a concept that corresponds to a low-context cultural orientation) (Chua & Gudykunst, 1987; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Chua, 1988; Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998). Table 1 summarizes the most important differences between high and low-context cultures.

In summary, Hall's low/high-context framework provides a set of clear-cut, easy-to-observe differences in the transmission of information between Eastern and Western nations, and therefore remains one of the most widely-used cultural dimensions in research into intercultural communication (Dahl, 2004).

3. CMC in internet forums

Internet forums are a very popular form of communication. Google Groups, the largest directory of internet forums, currently lists more than 10,000 internet forums worldwide (Döring, 2003). An internet forum can be defined as a "virtual discussion board" (Stegbauer, 2001, p. 59). The central unit of internet forums are postings. Postings are small pieces of text that are published online in reply to other postings or serve to initiate discussions (Höflich, 1996).

A fundamental characteristic of CMC in Internet forums is the reduction of communication channels to visual, text-based information. Consequently, a wide range of social and socio-demographic background variables such as 'race', age, gender and physical appearance are not immediately available (Mettler- Meibom,

Table 1
Differences between high and low-context cultures.

Characteristics	Low-context	High-context
Nature of information	Implicit and contextual	Explicit and detailed
Communication style	Direct, verbal, explicit, distanced, cool and factual Logic and facts are important	Indirect, nonverbal, implicit and less factual Communication is not only a means to convey a message but also helps to establish personal relationships
Cues needed for interpretation	Verbal and explicit information	Nonverbal and implicit information Social background information is important to interpret messages
Social relations	Loose personal networks	Tight personal networks

Source: Adopted from Hall (1976), Hall and Hall (1990), and Hasenstab (1999).

1990; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). The reduction of communication channels and the ensuing lack of social cues are credited for two characteristics of CMC: increased self-disclosure and visualization of nonverbal information content (Döring, 2003).

3.1. Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure can be defined as "the act of revealing personal information to others" (Archer, 1980, p. 183). Increasingly, scholars have come to acknowledge that self-disclosure is a multidimensional construct (Göring, 2001). Various and often contradictory components of self-disclosure have been identified. For example, Chelune (1976) emphasizes the valence of self-referential statements and Derlega, Winstead, Wong, and Greenspan (1987) propose that the social desirability of self-descriptions is crucial for understanding the level of self-disclosure. Despite the diversity of approaches, many studies discriminate between the breadth or the amount of self-disclosure and the depth or intimacy of self-disclosure (Cozby 1973; Göring, 2001; Post, Wittmaier, & Radin, 1978).

Generally, it is believed that the level of self-disclosure is higher in CMC than in face-to-face (FTF) communication situations (Döring, 2003). This is attributed to the fact that the lack of social and socio-demographic cues increases anonymity during CMC. With regard to this, McKenna and Bargh (2000) claim that "under the protective cloak of anonymity, users can express the way they truly feel and think" (p. 62).

Early laboratory studies have pointed to the fact that anonymity in CMC leads to reduced social inhibitions (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). Subsequent research has shown that this anonymity translates into increased self-disclosure. For example, Joinson (2001) found that relative to FTF communication, CMC is conducive to self-disclosure and that levels of self-disclosure were higher in visually anonymous CMC situations than in non-anonymous situations. These results were validated by Harper and Harper (2006), who reported that students felt less afraid to disclose personal information in weblogs (blogs) than in FTF communication. In similar vein, Tidwell and Walther (2002) have shown that CMC interaction encourages direct and intimate uncertainty reduction behaviours.

Field research pertaining to online communication patterns also supports the hypothesis that anonymity facilitates the revelation of private information. With reference to this, Ma (1996) reports that college students self-disclose more often in online interactions than in FTF communication situations. This meshes well with research by Wilkins (1991), as well as that of Parks and Floyd (1996), in which they indicate that members of internet forums often exchange highly personal information when communicating. Furthermore, qualitative research points to an increased willingness to self-disclose during CMC. Sandlund and Geist-Martin's (2001) ethnography on former lovers reconnecting via e-mail show how Internet communication promotes the provision of intimate and even risky information. In similar vein, Rosson (1999) concludes that "users seem to be quite comfortable revealing personal – even quite intimate – details about their lives in this very public forum" (p. 8).[1]

Finally, research on CMC applications unrelated to the Internet yield similar results. Greist, Klein, and VanCura (1973) indicate that in comparison, patients reveal more symptoms and undesirable behaviour during CMC than during FTF communication. Robinson and West (1992) indicate that during psychiatric interviews, patients are more honest in their answers when completing

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[1] *Note:* Rosson (1999) used content analysis to explore postings on the "Web Storybase" website.