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Emergent Patterns of Switching Behaviors and Intercultural Communication Styles of Global Virtual Teams During Distributed Decision Making☆

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explain the distinctive patterns of intercultural communication styles exhibited during the distributed decision making process in global virtual teams (GVTs). The study applied Hall's (1976) high context vs. low context theoretical lens to a corpus of archival online messages ($n = 1600$ emails) generated by the United Nation World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) Civil Society. By using email as a primary medium for global collaboration, the GVT comprising of Civil Society participants was engaged in decision-making processes among different teams. The goal is to bring multi-stakeholders together in developing policy on the roles and utility of information communication technology for development of the Information Society. Our findings show that culture and the cultural values to which team members subscribe do influence the way decisions are made and communicated in three distinct phases—problem identification, proposal making and solutions. In addition, the results found evidence of an interesting behavioral pattern we call “switching,” in which an individual's communication style changes depending on purpose, roles, situation, and people—another form of context-based mode of online communicative behavior. This evidence of switching behavior is crucial because it shows that intercultural communication styles are fluid rather than fixed.

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1. Introduction

In his book *Beyond Culture* (1976), renowned cultural theorist Edward Hall argued that “Culture is communication and communication is culture” (p. 191). For the past four decades, his theory about the relationship between communication and culture has been further tested and confirmed by other intercultural communication scholars like Warner-Söderholm (2013), Kim (2008, 2005), Kinsky et al. (2001), Ting-Toomey (1999, 2009), and Gudykunst (1997). Hall introduced a dimension called ‘context’ and this study focuses on it, as it is the dimension with the strongest connection to communication issues. Context refers to the situational and informational aspect of message sharing. With the contextual element, Hall pointed out the importance of the ability to glean shared meanings from non-verbal or paralinguistic cues between people from different cultural backgrounds. Language and the silent language are both critical in establishing common ground (Clark, 1996). Obviously, then, the common ground challenges are

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amplified when people with different cultural values attempt to comprehend indicators, cues, or signals based on their own preferences for and experiences with non-verbal cues or verbal cues (Cassell and Tversky, 2005; Pekerti and Thomas, 2003).

Practical applications of Hall's theory have also grown as multinational corporations (MNCs) have attempted to meet the myriad challenges that arise when people of diverse cultural backgrounds work together. These problems include clashes of communication styles, misinterpreted messages due to reliance on non-verbal cues, bold/blunt statements perceived as impolite, and ambiguous or indirect messages, which may lack meaning for someone of a different culture. As a result, cross-cultural competencies are crucial for success in today's rapidly globalizing and virtual workplace, in which there is no dominant monoculture; instead, we find a wide range of work values and business practices in the form of heterogeneous team members from diverse cultures. In this kind of environment, team members and managers must be culturally competent so as to make the most of their human capital and thereby maintain a competitive advantage. Yet oftentimes employees are hired without the necessary competencies to meet the demands of a complex culturally-attuned teamwork environment. Leaders cannot assume that their teams will be comprised of members from a single culture; it is far more likely that they will need to manage and lead members of many nationalities under one roof, under one organization.

Although Hall defined – and I will discuss – context as having two extremes, high context and low context, it is useful to bear in mind that context is a continuum, and despite their cultural backgrounds people may fall anywhere along the continuum from high to low. As previously defined, context can also explain why in some cultures messages are implied through non-verbal means while in others they are verbally written or spoken. In a 'context culture' (high on the context spectrum) people depend largely on non-verbal cues conveyed by the other person's behavior or word choice to fully interpret messages. In a context culture, the words chosen are indirect, tactful, polite, and ambiguous. Conversely, in a 'content culture' (low on the context spectrum), messages are interpreted directly from the exact words that are written or spoken. The words chosen are direct, succinct, and specific. Examples of high context cultures include Malaysia, India, China, Sweden, Thailand and many more (the majority are Eastern countries), whereas low context cultures include the US, the UK, Germany, Australia and many Western European countries.

Global virtual teams (GVTs) are an increasingly prevalent organizational structure. Yet their effectiveness has not been thoroughly investigated by empirical research in fields such as cross-cultural management and international business (Brooks and Pitts, 2016; Harzing et al., 2011; Shenkar, 2011; Henderson, 2005; Janssens and Brett, 2006). At present, only a few studies in the area of management practices and issues (e.g., decision making process, negotiation styles, leadership roles and characteristics, communication patterns, and trust) have examined or confirmed the effects of culture and cultural values on GVTs (Ladegaard and Jenks, 2015; Lockwood, 2015; Duran and Popescu, 2014; Uzun, 2014; Daim et al., 2012; Dekker et al., 2008; Henderson, 2005). Related field such as information systems clearly shows the absence of studies which explore, explain or predict the nature of GVTs as affected by culture (Lilian, 2014; Olsen and Olsen, 2012; Kayworth and Leidner, 2002; Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1998).

Today, many MNCs employ GVTs to enable their employees to collaborate by engaging virtually rather than face to face, offering the luxury of working at a distance without the need to travel thousands of miles and opening team projects up to collaboration with members from different countries and cultures. Chudoba and Maznevski (2000) define GVTs as groups that (1) are identified by their organization(s) and members as a team; (2) are responsible for making and/or implementing decisions important to the organization's global strategy; (3) use technology-supported communication substantially more than face-to-face communication; and (4) are composed of members who work and live in different countries. Computer-mediated technology (CMC) makes this possible, enabling people to collaborate without regard to constraints of time and space. In support of this, Zakaria (2009) asserts that GVTs can be defined as teams whose members are separated by time and space, and (more importantly) differ in national, cultural, and linguistic attributes, and whose functioning is heavily dependent on CMC.

The purpose of this study is to present research findings on patterns of intercultural communication among different cultural orientations in one GVT (WSIS Civil Society), how these differences affected members' participation in the decision-making process via email, and how members modified (switched) their behavior in certain situations. This study explores the overarching research question, "How does culture impact global virtual teams' participation in decision making processes?" Beneath this, are three sub-questions: What intercultural communication styles are used during the globally distributed decision making process in the virtual environment? What culturally-attuned behaviors can be observed when team members collaborate at a distance? In what ways can and do team members accommodate one another's diverse communication patterns? These questions are highly relevant given today's borderless world of GVTs, and the challenges are multiplied by cultural confrontations and dynamics between the leader and the team as well as among members of the team itself in a virtual work environment.

By applying Hall's high vs. low context cultural dimensions (Hall, 1976), the study provides valuable insights into, and a concrete foundation for, a better understanding of the unique effects of culture on communication and collaboration during decision making process in a GVT setting. In addition, by addressing the research gaps on GVTs, culture, and communication, this study suggests useful directions for future research in two areas: 1) developing new criteria for GVT leaders' intercultural communication competency, and 2) formulating guidelines and strategies that will help GVTs to engage in accommodative behaviors, also labelled as 'switching behaviors' in this study.

2. Theory and prior research

2.1. Theoretical lens: Edward Hall high context vs. low context

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1976) examined factors that influence intercultural understanding and thus enhance or impede effective communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. His work led him to formulate a cultural

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