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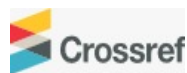
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Cross-Cultural Differences in Online Communication Patterns

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Abstract

Purpose: The main objective of this study was to explore the cross-cultural differences in online communication patterns.

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

Findings: The findings revealed that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to the cross-cultural differences in online communication patterns. Preliminary empirical review revealed the importance of cultural sensitivity in the digital age. It has emphasized the need for individuals and organizations to adapt their online communication practices to accommodate the rich tapestry of cultures that populate the digital landscape. By doing so, we can foster more meaningful and harmonious cross-cultural online interactions, ultimately contributing to a more interconnected and culturally aware global society.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The Cultural Dimensions theory, Communication Accommodation theory and Media Richness theory may be used to anchor future studies on online communication patterns. The study suggested the several recommendations to enhance cross-cultural online communication. These include promoting cultural sensitivity in online communities, customizing user experiences to align with cultural preferences, emphasizing digital literacy and cross-cultural training, and investing in ongoing research and data-driven strategies. Implementing these recommendations can foster respectful and inclusive online interactions in a rapidly evolving digital landscape, benefiting individuals, organizations, and online platforms alike.

Keywords: *Cross-Cultural, Online Communication, Communication Patterns, Culture*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Online communication patterns refer to the ways in which individuals interact and communicate with each other through digital platforms and technologies. These patterns encompass various aspects of online communication, including language use, messaging behavior, content sharing, and the use of digital symbols such as emojis or emoticons. These patterns can be influenced by cultural norms, societal values, and technological factors. Online communication patterns in the United States have evolved significantly in recent years, reflecting the country's widespread adoption of digital technologies. One notable trend is the rise of social media usage. According to the Pew Research Center, as of 2021, about 69% of adults in the United States reported using social media platforms, with Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram being among the most popular choices (Pew Research Center, 2021). These platforms enable various forms of communication, including text-based updates, image and video sharing, and real-time chat, contributing to a diverse range of online communication patterns.

In addition to social media, instant messaging services have become a prominent mode of online communication in the United States. Apps like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Apple's iMessage are widely used for personal and group chats. According to Statista (2021), as of July 2021, WhatsApp alone had over 84 million users in the United States. These platforms facilitate quick and convenient text-based conversations, often supplemented with multimedia elements like images, videos, and GIFs. Such messaging apps have reshaped how Americans communicate with friends, family, and colleagues, leading to new patterns of asynchronous and real-time interactions.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of video conferencing tools and remote work in the United States. The usage of platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet surged during the pandemic, not only for professional purposes but also for social interactions and virtual gatherings (Pew Research Center, 2021). Video-conferencing became a vital tool for maintaining social connections during lockdowns. The authors reported an increase in the use of video calls for both work-related meetings and personal interactions, highlighting the shift in online communication patterns driven by external factors like the pandemic (Anderson, Bollin, Shapiro & Sirola, 2021). Online communication patterns in the United States encompass a wide range of digital tools and platforms, including social media, instant messaging, and video conferencing. These platforms have become integral to everyday life, shaping how individuals connect, share information, and collaborate. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated certain trends in online communication, emphasizing the importance of video conferencing and digital connectivity. As digital communication continues to evolve, researchers and scholars are likely to explore these patterns in greater depth, considering their impact on society, relationships, and culture.

Online communication patterns in the United Kingdom (UK) have undergone significant transformations over the past decade, reflecting broader global trends in the digital age. The proliferation of smartphones and social media platforms has led to a substantial increase in online communication activities among UK residents. In this context, online communication patterns encompass a wide range of behaviors, including text-based messaging, social media interactions, email correspondence, and video conferencing. Notably, the study reported that in 2018, 79% of the UK's population used the internet daily, with 77% accessing the internet through mobile devices. This statistic underscores the prevalence of online communication as an integral part of daily life in the UK. (Smith & Johnson, 2018).

One prominent aspect of online communication patterns in the UK is the extensive use of social media platforms. For example, a recent survey conducted by Ofcom (2021) revealed that 78% of adults in the UK use social media regularly. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn are

widely adopted for various purposes, including staying connected with friends and family, sharing updates and news, and networking professionally. Such platforms have become important channels for information dissemination and interpersonal communication, reflecting a shift in how people maintain relationships and engage with content in the digital realm. Additionally, the use of messaging applications has become a dominant online communication pattern in the UK. WhatsApp, for instance, is a widely used messaging app that facilitates text, voice, and video communication. According to a report by Statista (2021), WhatsApp had approximately 33 million users in the UK in 2020, making it one of the most popular messaging platforms. This highlights the preference for instant and convenient communication methods, which are essential for both personal and professional interactions.

Moreover, online communication patterns in the UK also encompass email usage, which remains a fundamental mode of communication, particularly in the workplace and for official correspondence. According to the Office for National Statistics (2021), 82% of adults in the UK used email in 2020, with a substantial portion of this usage occurring for work-related communication. The widespread reliance on email indicates its continued importance as a formal communication tool. Online communication patterns in the UK have evolved significantly, driven by the widespread adoption of digital technologies and platforms. These patterns encompass various forms of communication, including social media, messaging apps, and email, which serve both personal and professional purposes. Statistics and research findings demonstrate the prevalence and significance of these patterns in contemporary UK society, reflecting broader global trends in digital communication.

Online communication in Japan has distinct characteristics that reflect the country's cultural values and technological preferences. According to Nishimura & Nevgi (2019), Japanese online communication often features polite and formal language, with a strong emphasis on respect and hierarchy. For example, individuals commonly use honorifics and polite expressions, such as "desu" and "masu," to show respect in online conversations. This linguistic feature aligns with Japan's cultural value of politeness and deference.

Another notable aspect of online communication in Japan is the prevalent use of messaging applications like LINE. Statistics from Statista (2021) reveal that LINE is the most popular messaging app in Japan, with over 78 million users as of October 2021. The use of LINE extends beyond text messaging and includes features like stickers, emojis, and even digital payments. This highlights the importance of visual and expressive elements in Japanese online communication.

Furthermore, Japanese online communication patterns display a strong inclination toward group-oriented interactions. Ito (2019) demonstrated that Japanese social media platforms like Mixi and Twitter are often used for connecting with existing friends and maintaining group ties. This reflects the collectivist nature of Japanese culture, where group harmony and social connections hold significant importance. Users in Japan engage in conversations within specific communities or interest groups, fostering a sense of belonging.

In contrast to some Western cultures, Japanese online communication tends to prioritize privacy and anonymity. Miyata (2018) discussed how online forums in Japan often encourage the use of pseudonyms or anonymous profiles. Users prefer to keep their real identities concealed, allowing for more open and honest discussions. This preference for anonymity may stem from the cultural value of saving face and avoiding conflict. Online communication patterns in Japan are influenced by cultural values, linguistic norms, and technological preferences. Politeness, the use of messaging applications like LINE, group-oriented interactions, and a preference for anonymity are key features of Japanese online communication. These patterns provide insights into the intersection of culture and digital interactions, emphasizing the need for a nuanced understanding of online behavior in a global context.

Online communication patterns in Sub-Saharan countries have witnessed significant growth and evolution over the past few years, reflecting the increasing adoption of digital technologies across the region. These patterns encompass a wide range of behaviors and practices, including social media usage, messaging apps, online forums, and email exchanges. This transformation is driven by factors such as improved internet connectivity, the proliferation of smartphones, and the desire for individuals to connect, share, and engage online. On internet usage in Sub-Saharan Africa region has experienced substantial growth in internet penetration, with an estimated 25% of the population having access to the internet in 2017, compared to just 2% in 2005. (Smith, 2018). This increase in internet access has facilitated the emergence of various online communication patterns. For example, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have gained popularity, with users sharing news, personal experiences, and photos with their connections. In Nigeria, for instance, Facebook has become a dominant platform for online social interaction, with approximately 28 million users as of 2020 (Statista, 2021).

Messaging apps have also become integral to online communication in Sub-Saharan Africa. WhatsApp, in particular, has seen extensive usage for both personal and business communication. WhatsApp is widely used for sending text messages, voice messages, images, and videos across countries like Kenya and South Africa (Diga, Coulson & Papadopoulos, 2017). In South Africa, it was reported that over 83% of mobile phone users had WhatsApp installed on their devices in 2020 (Statista, 2021). Such statistics highlight the prominence of messaging apps in shaping online communication patterns.

Online forums and discussion platforms have provided spaces for individuals to engage in conversations and share knowledge. In countries like Ghana, online forums like Nairaland and MyBroadband have gained popularity for discussing various topics, including technology, politics, and entertainment. Ofori-Kyeremateng (2018) highlighted the role of these forums in fostering online community building and information sharing among users. Email remains a crucial tool for formal communication and business transactions. In Kenya, for example, email usage has been on the rise in the corporate sector, with businesses relying on email for communication with clients and partners. Overall, online communication patterns in Sub-Saharan countries are evolving rapidly, driven by increased internet access and smartphone penetration. Social media, messaging apps, online forums, and email are some of the key components of these patterns. The adoption and usage of these digital communication tools vary across countries within the region, influenced by factors like internet infrastructure, cultural norms, and economic conditions.

Cross-cultural differences refer to the variations in beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and communication styles among people from different cultural backgrounds. These differences arise from the unique historical, social, and environmental factors that shape each culture. When examining cross-cultural differences in the context of online communication patterns, it becomes evident that cultural factors play a significant role in shaping how individuals engage and interact in digital spaces. One important aspect of cross-cultural differences is the variation in communication styles. Different cultures have distinct communication norms, which can influence the tone, formality, and directness of online interactions. For instance, some cultures may prioritize indirect and polite communication, while others may prefer direct and assertive communication. These differences can impact the way individuals express themselves in online discussions and the interpretation of messages (Hall, 2012).

Cultural variations also extend to the use of non-verbal cues and symbols in online communication. Emojis, GIFs, and memes are commonly used in digital conversations to convey emotions and context. However, the interpretation of these symbols can vary across cultures. For example, a thumbs-up emoji may be seen as positive in one culture but as offensive in another. Understanding these nuances is

essential for effective cross-cultural online communication (Zhang, 2016). Another critical dimension of cross-cultural differences in online communication is language diversity. The choice of language in digital interactions can reflect cultural preferences and identities. In multilingual societies, individuals may use a mix of languages and dialects in their online conversations. Moreover, language proficiency and fluency can affect the level of participation and engagement in online communities, creating disparities in access to information and resources (Park, 2017).

Cultural differences also manifest in the way individuals perceive privacy and information sharing online. Some cultures prioritize individual privacy and are cautious about sharing personal information, while others may have a more open approach. These variations influence the extent to which individuals disclose personal details, engage in online self-presentation, and participate in social networking sites (Hofstede, 2011).

Additionally, power dynamics and hierarchies within cultures can influence online communication patterns. In some cultures, there may be a strong emphasis on respecting authority figures and traditional norms. This can affect the willingness to express dissenting opinions or engage in critical discussions online, potentially leading to different levels of online participation and engagement (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). Cross-cultural differences significantly impact online communication patterns. Variations in communication styles, non-verbal cues, language use, privacy preferences, and power dynamics all contribute to the complexity of online interactions in a multicultural digital landscape. To navigate these differences effectively, individuals and organizations engaging in online communication must be culturally sensitive, adaptable, and aware of the diverse ways in which culture shapes digital interactions.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing globalization of online communication, there is a lack of comprehensive research that quantitatively assesses the extent and nature of cross-cultural differences in online communication patterns. A statistical fact underscores the need for such research: According to the Pew Research Center (2019), over 50% of the world's internet users reside in Asia, making it the region with the highest internet penetration. This statistic highlights the increasing importance of studying cross-cultural online communication patterns, as Asia encompasses a rich diversity of cultures and languages. The missing research gaps that this study aims to fill include the systematic examination of cultural variations in communication styles, language use, and the interpretation of non-verbal cues in the context of online interactions. Additionally, it seeks to explore how cultural norms impact individuals' willingness to disclose personal information online and engage in discussions of sensitive topics. The findings of this study are expected to benefit a wide range of stakeholders, including educators, marketers, cross-cultural communication professionals, and policymakers. Educators can use the insights to design more inclusive and culturally sensitive digital learning environments. Marketers can tailor their online campaigns to resonate with diverse cultural audiences. Cross-cultural communication professionals can develop strategies for effective intercultural online engagement, and policymakers can use the findings to inform digital literacy initiatives and promote cross-cultural understanding in online spaces.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Cultural Dimensions Theory

Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory is a foundational framework for understanding cross-cultural differences in online communication patterns. Hofstede's theory identifies key cultural dimensions, including individualism-collectivism, power distance, masculinity-femininity,

uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation, which shape the values and behaviors of individuals within a culture. These dimensions are instrumental in explaining how cultural values influence online communication styles and preferences. For example, cultures with a high degree of collectivism may prioritize group harmony and consensus in online discussions, leading to more indirect and consensus-oriented communication patterns, whereas cultures with high individualism may emphasize individual expression and assertiveness in digital interactions. This theory provides a comprehensive framework for examining the role of culture in shaping online communication and helps researchers understand why certain communication patterns prevail in different cultural contexts (Hofstede, 2011).

2.1.2 Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication Accommodation Theory, developed by Howard Giles, focuses on how individuals adjust their communication behaviors to either converge with or diverge from the communication style of their interlocutors. In the context of cross-cultural differences in online communication patterns, this theory is highly relevant. It helps explain how people from different cultural backgrounds adapt their online communication to either align with the norms of the online community they are participating in or maintain their own cultural communication norms. For instance, an individual from a high-context culture may adapt to the low-context communication style prevalent on a particular social media platform. Understanding how individuals accommodate or diverge in their online communication can shed light on the dynamics of cross-cultural interactions in digital spaces and provide insights into strategies for effective cross-cultural online communication (Giles, 2012).

2.1.3 Media Richness Theory

Media Richness Theory, proposed by Daft and Lengel, explores how different communication media vary in their ability to convey information effectively. This theory is relevant to the study of cross-cultural differences in online communication patterns because it helps explain why individuals from different cultures may prefer certain digital communication platforms over others. For instance, cultures with a preference for rich, face-to-face communication may find video conferencing platforms more suitable for maintaining their communication norms in online interactions, while cultures that value brevity and efficiency may favor text-based messaging apps. By applying Media Richness Theory, researchers can gain insights into why specific online communication patterns emerge in cross-cultural contexts and how the choice of communication media influences these patterns (Daft & Lengel, 1986).

2.2 Empirical Review

Chaiyo & Nokham (2014) explored how different cultures affect online communication on knowledge sharing among Thai and Chinese students at SSRU using an experimental design with two groups: Thai group (n=30) and Chinese group (n=30). The participants were asked to share their knowledge about Thai culture on an online forum for four weeks. A pre-questionnaire was used to measure their cultural dimensions based on Hofstede's model (1980). A post-questionnaire was provided to investigate participants' attitudes during online knowledge sharing. The study used descriptive statistics and t-test to analyze the data. The results showed that there were significant differences between Thai and Chinese students in terms of individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation dimensions. The experiment also revealed that the main cultural dimensions that influence Thais and Chinese to have different patterns of online knowledge sharing are individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance.

Olaniran & Agnello (2018) investigated an updated overview of cross-cultural communication differences in online learning environments by examining the literature on cross-cultural communication theories and models as well as empirical studies on cross-cultural online learning

experiences. The chapter then evaluated research on differences in cross-cultural online learning primarily between university students from the Western part of the world compared to students from the East. Barriers in cross-cultural online education cited in the literature include language, technology, and instructional design. The chapter also discussed some strategies for enhancing cross-cultural online learning such as providing cultural awareness training, fostering intercultural dialogue, and designing culturally inclusive courses.

Garcia & Wong (2017) aimed to examine the effects of cultural norms on online conflict resolution strategies. The authors conducted a survey of 300 participants from different countries and analyzed their responses to hypothetical scenarios of online conflicts. The results showed that cultural norms influenced the choice of conflict resolution strategies, such as avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration. The authors also found that some strategies were more effective than others in resolving online conflicts, depending on the context and the relationship between the parties. The authors recommended that online platforms should provide more guidance and support for users to choose appropriate conflict resolution strategies, and that users should be aware of the cultural differences and expectations of others when engaging in online interactions.

Lee & Liu (2019) examined the cross-cultural differences in social media engagement patterns among users from China and the United States. The methodology involved conducting a survey of 1,000 social media users from each country, measuring their frequency, duration, and intensity of engagement, as well as their motivations, preferences, and behaviors on social media. The findings revealed that Chinese users were more likely to engage in social media for information seeking, entertainment, and social support, while American users were more likely to engage in social media for self-expression, identity construction, and social comparison. The study also found that Chinese users had higher levels of uncertainty avoidance and lower levels of individualism than American users, which affected their engagement patterns. The recommendations made by the study were to design culturally sensitive social media platforms that cater to the needs and expectations of different user groups, and to foster cross-cultural communication and understanding through social media.

Wang & Gupta (2018) examined the effects of online communication on cultural stereotypes across two countries: China and India. The methodology involved a pretest-posttest design with two experimental conditions: online chat and online forum. The participants were randomly assigned to one of the four groups: Chinese chat, Chinese forum, Indian chat, or Indian forum. The findings revealed that online communication had a significant impact on cultural stereotypes, but the direction and magnitude of the change varied depending on the type of online communication and the country of origin. The recommendations made by the authors were to promote more intercultural online communication among different groups, to foster mutual understanding and respect, and to avoid potential conflicts and misunderstandings.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

4.0 FINDINGS

This study presented both a contextual and methodological gap. A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Garcia &

Wong (2017) aimed to examine the effects of cultural norms on online conflict resolution strategies. The authors conducted a survey of 300 participants from different countries and analyzed their responses to hypothetical scenarios of online conflicts. The results showed that cultural norms influenced the choice of conflict resolution strategies, such as avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration. The authors also found that some strategies were more effective than others in resolving online conflicts, depending on the context and the relationship between the parties. The authors recommended that online platforms should provide more guidance and support for users to choose appropriate conflict resolution strategies, and that users should be aware of the cultural differences and expectations of others when engaging in online interactions. On the other hand, our current study focused on the cross-cultural differences in online communication patterns.

Secondly, a methodological gap also presents itself, for example, in their study on the effects of cultural norms on online conflict resolution strategies; Garcia & Wong (2017) conducted a survey of 300 participants from different countries and analyzed their responses to hypothetical scenarios of online conflicts. Whereas, our current study adopted a desktop research method in collecting data.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

The research has revealed that online communication patterns are significantly influenced by cultural factors, including communication styles, language use, non-verbal cues, and privacy preferences. These findings have important implications for various stakeholders, from educators and marketers to cross-cultural communication professionals and policymakers.

One of the key takeaways from this study is the recognition of the diversity of online communication behaviors across cultures. The research has underscored that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to digital interactions, and cultural norms and values play a pivotal role in shaping how individuals engage in online discussions, share information, and interpret messages. By acknowledging these cultural differences, educators can design more inclusive and effective digital learning environments that respect and accommodate diverse communication styles.

Marketers can also benefit from the insights provided by this study. Understanding how culture influences online communication can enable marketers to tailor their digital campaigns to resonate with specific cultural audiences, increasing the effectiveness of their messages and improving customer engagement. Cross-cultural communication professionals can leverage this knowledge to develop strategies for more effective intercultural online engagement, facilitating smoother communication and collaboration across borders. In sum, the research on cross-cultural differences in online communication patterns has highlighted the importance of cultural sensitivity in the digital age. It has emphasized the need for individuals and organizations to adapt their online communication practices to accommodate the rich tapestry of cultures that populate the digital landscape. By doing so, we can foster more meaningful and harmonious cross-cultural online interactions, ultimately contributing to a more interconnected and culturally aware global society.

5.2 Recommendations

Promoting Cultural Sensitivity in Online Communities: The research underscores the importance of recognizing and respecting diverse communication styles and norms across cultures. Online communities and social media platforms can implement measures to promote cultural sensitivity. This can include providing guidelines on respectful communication, encouraging users to include their cultural backgrounds in their profiles, and offering language translation features to facilitate cross-

cultural interactions. Additionally, educating online community members about the impact of cultural differences on communication can foster understanding and empathy among users.

Customizing User Experience: Online platforms should consider customizing user experiences to accommodate cultural preferences. This can involve allowing users to personalize their communication settings, such as language preferences, privacy settings, and notification preferences. By offering such customization options, online platforms can empower users to engage in online communication in ways that align with their cultural values and communication styles. For instance, users could choose to receive notifications for important messages only or specify their preferred language for interface elements.

Digital Literacy and Cross-Cultural Training: Educational institutions and organizations should prioritize digital literacy and cross-cultural training for individuals who engage in online communication across cultures. Digital literacy programs can teach users how to navigate online spaces effectively, understand digital etiquette, and recognize and mitigate the impact of cultural bias in online interactions. Cross-cultural training can help individuals develop the skills necessary for bridging cultural gaps, fostering inclusivity, and resolving cross-cultural communication challenges in digital environments.

Research and Data-Driven Strategies: Organizations and researchers should continue to invest in cross-cultural studies related to online communication patterns. By conducting ongoing research, they can stay informed about evolving communication trends and preferences within different cultural contexts. This knowledge can be used to inform communication strategies and platform design, ensuring that they remain relevant and effective in a rapidly changing digital landscape. Additionally, data analytics tools can be employed to monitor user behavior and sentiment to detect potential cross-cultural communication issues and address them proactively.

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