

Cross-Cultural Code-Switching Behaviors of Global Virtual Team Members during Swift Trust Formation

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Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the process of cross-cultural code switching (C³S) between high-context (HC) and low context (LC) global virtual team members during the knowledge-sharing and social network exchanges. We will introduce a cross-cultural code-switching framework in a virtual setting and develop propositions to explain how GVT members attempt to switch their communicative behavior based on two theoretical lens which are: Giles Communication Accommodation Theory (1973) and Hall (1976) high context and low context theory. This paper offers several propositions to illuminate the process of code-switching behaviors among GVT members during the socialization process and explores ways these behaviors help to develop swift trust. It considers whether or not developing swift trust is possible and if so, how? We will provide future research directions in our concluding remarks.

Introduction

A compelling reality faced by multinational corporations (MNCs) of today is that workers are no longer constrained with the typical 9-5 jobs, in a collocated workspace with homogenous team members. Instead, MNCs need to be prepared to manage flexible work structures in which their human resources are made up of heterogeneous team members, collaborating and networking anywhere on the globe. However, with such non-collocated work landscape, global virtual teams (GVTs) are challenged in terms of creating the swift trust formation among employees that is necessary for high-performing teams during the socialization stage in the early phase of a teamwork process [1]. In the late 1990s, MNCs have begun using GVTs, a novelty work structure comprising multicultural team members who operate at different geographical locations with disparate time zones and space orientation; teams largely rely on the use of computer-mediated communication tools [2].

As a key scholar in the field of intercultural communication, Gudykunst et al. [4] emphasized that socialization process is the most appropriate way for people to learn about their own values and others' values. The socialization process in a GVT can be accomplished through knowledge-sharing activities. During a knowledge-sharing activity, knowledge related to the project is shared and transferred. Thus, team members need to acquire an understanding of the cultural differences and diverse communicative behavior

of other team members in order to sustain effective knowledge sharing and improve team performance. However, knowledge sharing in a GVT involves team members who are geographically dispersed and come from different cultural backgrounds; therefore, diverse communication styles and an inability to rely on non-verbal cues could lead to severe miscommunication [5]–[11].

Miscommunication due to the cultural diversity in intercultural communication in a virtual environment has created problems, especially during knowledge sharing. Daim et al. [5] and Lockwood [9] asserted that miscommunication negatively affects the virtual business environment. During knowledge sharing in a face-to-face environment, interactions typically involve working with partial or incomplete information. For example, team member A knows what he perceives, but not necessarily what team member B perceives or has in mind. The miscommunication exacerbates the knowledge-sharing process, as team members A and B are unable to achieve a consensus understanding regarding their shared knowledge. Hence, intercultural communication issues in a GVT require an innovative solution, and one of the solutions is to adjust or modify team members' communicative behaviors to accommodate the cultural differences—a behavior known as cross-cultural code switching (C³S) [12], [13].

No previous studies explore GVT in detail in terms of how it influences swift trust formation. According to Javenpaa and Leidner [14], swift trust is high level trust forms at the inception stage of teamwork, what is commonly known as the formation or orientation stage when people work together at a distance. It is undeniable that the need to trust strangers during virtual collaboration is the reality for GVTs since they operate in a distributed and global working environment. Trust takes on a heightened importance in this situation because teams need to develop it rapidly during the transfer of knowledge.

On the other hand, scholars in the fields of cross-cultural management and international management have extensively debated the impact of culture on work practices and values [15]–[18]. They have concurred that cultural differences exist between Western and Eastern management practices and processes, such as decision making; negotiation; and leadership and communication styles in face-to-face teams. However, in the context of GVTs, cultural impacts are not fully understood, specifically in the virtual socialization processes. It is further argued that as globalization perseveres, the use of GVTs in multinational corporations is becoming more prevalent. As such, problems with intercultural communication and virtual collaboration among team members using technology will intensify because not all people are comfortable working with others using a limited non-verbal cues medium such as email.

Yet, certain people find social media network and computer-mediated technology—the synchronous tools like Skype, Instant Messaging, Twitter, and etc.—and asynchronous tools like email to be efficient strategies for operating across the globe despite technological limitations as lack of cross-cultural understanding. Indeed, with the rise of the global market and the global information society, it is likely that GVTs will integrate a greater variety of cultures than ever before when there is no boundary in collaboration.

According to Gudykunst et al. [3], the socialization process is the most appropriate way for people to learn about their own values and others' values. The socialization process in a GVT can be accomplished through knowledge-sharing activities. During a knowledge-sharing activity, knowledge related to the project is shared and transferred. Thus, team members need to acquire an understanding of the cultural differences and diverse communicative behavior of other team members in order to sustain effective knowledge sharing and improve team performance. However, knowledge sharing in a GVT involves team members who are geographically dispersed and come from different

cultural backgrounds; therefore, diverse communication styles and an inability to rely on non-verbal cues could lead to severe miscommunication [5]–[11].

There is a need to explore and understand the process of cross-cultural code switching behaviors and how they promote swift trust during knowledge sharing and social networking. To date, there has been a lack of empirical studies on C³S on knowledge sharing in virtual environment. Past studies only discuss the C³S concept [13] and similar concepts to C³S, like cultural-frame switching (CFS) [19]. So far, only several studies have investigated the reason people attempt such switching behavior [20]–[22] and the factors that influence the switching process [21], [23]. No previous studies explore GVT in detail in terms of how it influences swift trust formation.

In this paper, we clearly acknowledge that there are gaps in the literature of IS, cross-cultural management, and international management. Due to that, the study to be undertaken aims to address the intercultural communication practices that are unique to GVTs and the emergent of cross-cultural code-switching behaviors that have not been examined the GVT context. Such in-depth understanding will thus contribute to the aforementioned interdisciplinary fields. Thus, our key research question is: how do cross-cultural code switching behaviors among and within GVTs occur during knowledge sharing that promotes swift trust among members? This paper offers several propositions to illuminate the process of code-switching behavior among GVT members and swift trust formation during knowledge sharing.

Literature review

This section will provide a brief review of literature related to this study such as intercultural communication in virtual settings, the cross-cultural code switching (C³S) concept, and knowledge sharing (KS) in a global virtual team (GVT).

What is global virtual team?

Due to globalization, traditional work structures have increasingly been supplanted by the advanced virtual work structures: the global virtual team (GVT). In an early GVT study, Jarvenpaa, Knoll, and Leidner [24] simply describe GVT as an example of a “*boundaryless network organization form where a temporary team is assembled on an as-needed basis for the duration of a task and staffed by members from different countries*”(p.29). Zakaria, Amelinckx, and Wilemon [25] describe a GVT as a work structure that “*require[s] innovative communication and learning capabilities for different team members to effectively work together across cultural, organizational and geographical boundaries*” (p.1). In recent years, GVT scholars have described the GVT as a work structure that is composed of people from diverse cultural backgrounds [27]; team members collaborate primarily via digital technologies such as email and videoconferencing [28] and work in different countries working together towards making and implementing decisions important to an organizational strategy [29].

Business deals between different countries and cultures can involve embarrassing communication mistakes with negative consequences. This can happen with face-to-face communication, but virtual communication, reliant on technology, poses even greater challenges. In terms of intercultural communication, A study by Daim et al. [5] demonstrated that intercultural communication blunders was the main problem facing GVTs. The issue stemmed from individuals’ incapability to maintain effective communication due to cultural differences. Shachaf’s [10] observed that cultural diversity led to miscommunication as team members from Asia practiced different communication styles from team members from the West. A recent study by Sundar [29] echoed Shachaf’s and Daim’s findings that revealed miscommunication was one of the main

challenges in a cross-cultural virtual workplace in addition to language and different business practices. In order to address those challenges, Sundar [29] points out that team leader must be able to adapt to the different business practices and communicate with caution.

Cross-cultural code switching

Individual communication styles are shaped by culture and by communicating; communication also spreads culture. In the business world, globalization has resulted in the growth of communication across countries. This phenomenon requires people to have the capability to communicate effectively with people from different cultures. It is not necessary for people to accept or like cultural differences but to be willing to adapt or adjust to differences in communication styles and cultural practices. Andrew Molinsky [13] introduced the term “cross-cultural code switching” (C³S) for cross-cultural communication in a foreign setting [13]. C³S was adopted from the code-switching concept in linguistics. Molinsky defined the C³S concept as “*the act of purposefully modifying one's behavior, in a specific interaction in a foreign setting, to accommodate different cultural norms for appropriate behavior*” (p.623). The C³S concept concerns how people shift their behavior when communicating in a foreign setting. Molinsky's main assumption is that people attempt to switch their communication styles because they would like to accommodate for different cultural norms for appropriate behaviors. The switching process will then lead to creating a desired social impression during the interaction in a cross-cultural setting. As the C³S concept is relatively new, there is a lack of past studies on it.

Knowledge sharing in GVT

In a global virtual team, though team members practice different communication styles based on their own cultures they have to communicate effectively to ensure the fluency of knowledge flow within team. A study by Velmurugan et al. [11] found that the people, culture and the technology influence the knowledge-sharing process in a GVT. For example, personal insecurities made people reluctant to share their knowledge because they had a low level of trust for other team members and were afraid to be perceived as incompetent [11], [32]. Staples & Webster [32] assert that knowledge sharing is highly influenced by the interdependence of tasks. They empirically demonstrated trust among team members was influenced by task interdependence. Kauppila, Rajala, & Jyrama [32] identify facilitating factors that help to improve virtual team performance: 1) establishing virtual teams for knowledge sharing, 2) using a collaborative software system to support knowledge sharing.

GVT and swift trust

Trust takes on a whole new meaning on global virtual teams. The cultural diversity within global virtual teams contributes to challenges in communication, relationship building, trust development and team work. Mockaitis, Rose, and Zetting [33] found that trust development and cultivating group loyalty are time consuming in GVT because of different cultural values among team members, Pinjani and Palvia [29] agree that time zone, language and cultural differences present obstacles to trust development and mutual understanding among team members in GVT. Robert, Denis, & Hung [36] agree that trust is gradually developed over time; but in GVT, trust formation has to take place swiftly. Swift trust is an outcome of ad hoc or temporary teams that collaborate on important and complex tasks over a relatively short period of time [37]. Focusing on trust formation, trust takes on a whole new meaning in global virtual teams. Despite challenges, each team member has to rapidly develop trust in order to perform work well [38]. A high trust

development in a short period of time prior to initial interaction is called swift trust. However, swift trust is fragile due to cultural differences among team member in GVT [24]. By understanding the culture effect in swift trust formation in GVTs, we will be able to develop intercultural awareness and understanding among team members.

Theoretical framework

This section will provide a brief review of the theoretical framework used in this study. The communication-related theories used in this study are Hall high-context and low-context (HCLC) and communication accommodation theory (CAT).

High-Context and Low-Context (HCLC)

Edward Hall [30] introduced a theory of high-context and low-context culture to explain the concept called “context.” Hall explains it by using three concepts: context, information and meaning. The system of meaning can be looked at based on a continuum that has two extreme points—high and low. This system allows us to understand the approaches, mannerisms and styles that are manifested in one’s communication styles. It explains how preferences may be determined by cultural values. He stressed that context acted as a medium to carry the meaning of the message [31]. In terms of high-context and low-context dimensions, Asian was categorized as high-context culture (HC), meanwhile German-speaking countries (e.g. Austria and Switzerland) were categorized as low-context cultures (LC). For high-context people, communication revolves around the context, and information lies within the context, thus some of the information is not verbalize and people are expected to “*read between the lines.*” On the other hand, low-context culture does not “*beat around the bush*”; people will utter information straightforwardly.

Communication Accommodation Theory

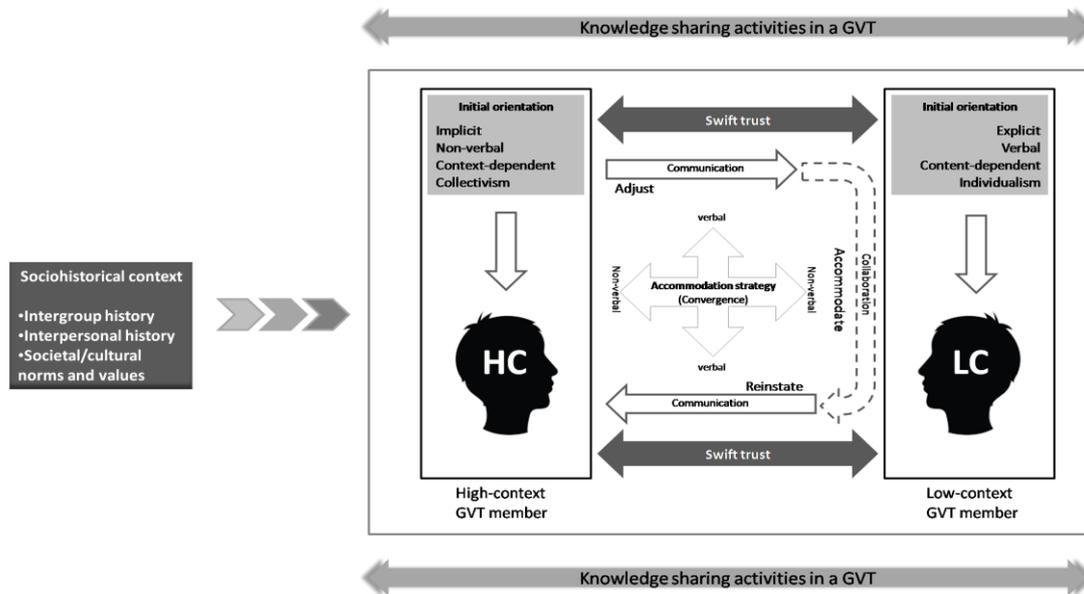
Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) helps to understand the adjustments individuals make during the interaction; either they converge toward or diverge away from other. CAT is comprised of two main accommodation strategies: convergence and divergence [39], [40]. Convergence refers to the strategy of individuals to adjust or adapt their communicative behavior in such a way to become similar to another person and reduce the dissimilarities in interactions [39], [41]. The convergence process enhances the similarities in terms of speaker and listener communicative behavior [42]. People accommodate their communication behavior because they seek to decrease social distance, earn respect and seek approval of the interlocutor [39]. By accommodating their communicative behavior, people emphasize the common social identities between them. This enables them to achieve consensus in negotiations and develop a good relationship. In contrast, divergence behavior is illustrated when a speaker accentuates the differences in his or her communicative behavior to emphasize his distinctness from his interlocutor. The main motivation that drives people to diverge is to increase or maintain social distance even though the act might negatively influence the quality of the interaction [39].

Cultural code switching behavior: propositions

In this study, we develop a cross-cultural code-switching framework of GVT members for swift trust formation during KS activity. Based on Figure 1, the process of communication between GVT members is based on two different cultures, which are HC and LC. The communication process is captured during a knowledge-sharing activity in virtual team collaboration. In the early phase of teamwork, HC and LC members have distinctive intercultural communication styles. According to Hall (1976) [30], high context

members are context dependent, use an implicit, non-verbal style and subscribe to collectivistic culture. For Eastern cultures such as Thailand, Malaysia, China, India or Japan, decision making patterns and KS activities are based on patience and cooperation, consensus-building, and participative management. People generally do not use a confrontational approach when conflict arises; instead they use a diplomatic and polite way of indicating or expressing disagreements through the use of non-verbal gestures. In order to build swift trust, they will try to accommodate and build relationships.

Figure 1. A Cross-Cultural Code Switching Framework for GVT



In communication accommodation theory, socio-historical context shapes initial orientation of an individual. Gallois et al. [41] affirmed that socio-historical context is the key influence on individual initial orientation as it describes how an individual treats his or her interlocutor during an interaction. In this study, we focus on how HC and LC cultures affect cross-cultural code switching. We believe that the socio-historical context of GVT members is deeply rooted in cultural values. Furthermore, intercultural communication also influences both initial orientation and outcomes of communicative behaviors. For example, Chen, Okumus, Hua, & Nusair [42] and Gudykunst et al. [3] agree that when involved in conversation, an HC individual expects their listener to be able to read between the lines, and communication is much less verbal [45], [46]. A recent study by Zakaria, Yusof, Hiroshi, & Muton [45], confirmed that HC people use implicit and unclear statements and are more likely to employ emoticons/emojis to represent their non-verbal cues in a virtual environment. Furthermore, Gudykunst et al. [3] believe that communication of HC is used predominantly in collectivistic cultures. They also reported that collectivistic cultures use indirect messages, also typical for HC culture. Based on the aforementioned studies and the theoretical lens they provide, we begin with the premise that the sociohistorical context of an HC individual is highly influenced and shaped by their initial orientation, and we propose:

Proposition 1a: *High context GVT member's initial orientation is implicit, non-verbal, context-dependent and collective, which is rooted in their socio-historical context.*

On the other hand, communication of low-context cultures is direct and consists of explicit messages that are simple and clear; such individuals also value logical and linear communication [31], [49]. America is a good example of a low-context culture, because Americans are more likely to engage in linear thinking and place less emphasis on personal

relations at work. When it comes to decision-making, their decisions tend to be based on fact rather than intuition [50]. An individual from a low-context culture tends to be more direct and jump straight to the subject matter. They also use brief, assertive and concise words in their messages and only provide lengthy messages when giving detailed instructions. These characteristics are in line with Zakaria et al. [48] who reported that the low-context people in their study depended on textual content to convey the message. Thus, based on past studies on low context cultures, we formulate our next propositions as follow:

Proposition 1b: *Low context GVT member's initial orientation is explicit, verbal, content-dependent and individualistic, which is rooted in their socio-historical context.*

Wang, Fussell, & Setlock [51] reported that their Eastern (representing HC culture) respondents were able to adapt to the differences in communication styles when working with a group of Western (representing LC culture) colleagues in order to overcome the communication styles inconsistencies. One finding of this study was supported by Anawati & Craig [12], who verified that people were able to not only adjust their communication styles, but were able to adjust their communicative behavior when communicating interculturally, virtually. However, the Anawati & Craig [12] findings did not specify which culture(s) showed flexibility in terms of adjusting their communicative behaviors. Zakaria [53] in her study reported that HC individuals show a tendency to switch their online communicative behavior during a decision-making process in a GVT work structure as compared to an LC individual. Furthermore, Zakaria & Cogburn [52] also found that HC individuals demonstrated a good collaborative attitude during a virtual collaboration through email despite the lack of non-verbal cues. These three studies demonstrate the capability of HC individuals to adapt and adjust their communicative behavior to accommodate cultural differences, in line with C³S concept. The ability to accommodate differences in communicative behavior will induce swift trust. Thus, our next proposition is:

Proposition 2a: *High context GVTs accommodates the differences in communicative behavior during KS through C³S in order to promote swift trust for relationship-building.*

Furthermore, Wang, Fussell, and Setlock [48] conducted a study in a laboratory environment with university students of mixed nationalities (American, Hong Kong, Chinese and Taiwanese) currently residing in the United States and fluent in English. The purpose of the study was to examine the influence of individual cultural backgrounds, cultural composition and communication mediums on group brainstorming sessions. They found that the Americans were unaware of the cultural differences and therefore did not adapt. Results from Croucher et al. [53] and Kim et al. [54] studies were consistent in finding that America matches Hall's descriptions of low-context culture. According to Cardon [55], Americans are direct and prefer the rational approach over the emotional when handling conflicts. They will first employ a task-oriented approach to achieve their goals, and then slowly build a relationship. This lead to our next proposition:

Proposition 2b: *Low context GVTs demonstrate their communicative behavior during KS through C³S by jumping straight to the subject matter and use a task-oriented approach to get goals met and then use a relationship-oriented style to to build their swift trust.*

Our aim is to understand to what extent GVT members switch their communicative behavior during KS and explore the process of C³S demonstrated by them in GVT work structure. As we know, the initial orientation of GVT is highly influenced by a socio-historical context which can be characterized as in Proposition 1; we also propose that

during the KS, GVT accommodates differences via C³S as in Proposition 2. Thus, these two propositions lead to our third proposition:

Proposition 3 –GVT C³S during KS shows convergent communicative behavior both verbally and non-verbally.

Conclusion and future research directions

In this paper, we developed several varied propositions about cross-cultural code switching of GVT members from HC and LC culture during knowledge sharing activities. The first proposition highlighted that HC GVT members' initial communication orientation is based on implicit, non-verbal, context-dependent and collectivistic culture, while LC GVT members' initial orientation is based on explicit, verbal, content-based and individualistic culture; all communication is deeply rooted in socio-historical context. In the second proposition, we argue that, HC GVT members, because of greater flexibility and adaptability in their communication styles, will be more inclined to engage in a code-switching behavior. In accommodating differences, HC GVT members use a converging strategy, both verbally and non-verbally, during the KS activity. With the given C³S framework and its propositions laid out in this paper, we hope it will be able to guide future research on cross-cultural code switching during KS in such a novelty virtual work structure. Clearly, there are an insufficient number of empirical studies that fail to investigate such significant behavior in a globally-distributed collaboration phenomenon such as GVTs. Future studies need to further explore cross-cultural code switching in GVTs in different communication activities such as negotiation, decision-making and other aspects of business communication to further understand the process. In addition, future studies should aim to investigate what characteristics and behaviors of global leadership are necessary to manage the communication behaviors of GVT members and determine what kinds of cross-cultural training should be offered by multinational corporations to develop effective communication styles for high-performance GVTs.

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