

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN MULTICULTURAL TEAMS

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ABSTRACT

Global virtual teams (GVTs) often face challenges in distributed decision-making due to diverse intercultural communication styles and dynamic team behaviors. This study investigates the emergent patterns of switching behaviors and intercultural communication styles within GVTs, focusing on how these factors influence decision-making processes. By analyzing case studies and communication logs, we identify key patterns in how team members adapt their communication styles and strategies to align with the cultural and contextual demands of distributed environments. Findings reveal that effective teams exhibit fluid switching behaviors that accommodate intercultural differences, fostering alignment and consensus. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of cultural intelligence and communication adaptability in mitigating misunderstandings and enhancing collaborative decision-making. The insights provide a framework for improving GVT performance through targeted interventions and training programs.

Keywords: *global virtual teams, intercultural communication, distributed decision-making, switching behaviors, cultural intelligence, team adaptability, communication styles*

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-Søderholm (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

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.

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

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)

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

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.

THEORY AND PRIOR RESEARCH

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 dimension called "context." Context explains the way people evaluate and interpret the meaning of information that they receive. Hall stipulates that context comprises a system of meaning for information. It provides a model that enables people to comprehend communication forms ranging from purely non-verbal such as hand gestures, body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice to purely verbal aspects such as written text or spoken words.

Context is a continuous variable that reflects how much reliance a culture places on non-verbal cues in order to communicate: the heavier the reliance, the higher the culture's context. Although context is a continuum, this study focused on the two extreme descriptive poles, high context and low context. Using context as a dichotomous variable highlighted the differences in a more distinctive manner. Hall also argues that although people may use both high context and low context communication, only one style is predominant at any given moment (Gudykunst et al., 1996). Besides context, Hall described several other dimensions that vary across cultures, for example the meaning and importance of "time" and "space." He focused on these two dimensions in his first book, *Silent Language* (1959).

Hall observed variations between cultures not only in language but also in a communication phenomenon that goes beyond the use of language. This language of behavior, which he called "silent language," constitutes elaborate prescriptions of how people handle time, spatial relationships, attitudes towards play, work, and learning and more. He asserted that people frequently consider "time as an element of culture which communicates as powerfully as language" (p. 128) metaphorically known as time talks. The dimension of space on the other hand provided the notion of physical boundary that separates every living thing from its external environment, as he revealed, space speaks.

In the field of cross-cultural management and intercultural communication, many studies have established that high context people place great emphasis on non-verbal cues when they communicate (Andersen et al., 2003; Gudykunst and Kim, 2002; Gudykunst et al., 1988; Hall, 1992). Intercultural communication is defined as interaction between people of diverse cultural backgrounds with distinct communication patterns, preferences, and styles (Gudykunst, 1997; Holtbrugge et al., 2012; Novinger, 2001). Hall (1976) established that different cultures use different communication styles, and that these differences affect the ability to collaborate. Using what he called high context vs. low context, Hall explained that communicative behavior is strongly rooted in a person's cultural background. For example, in high context cultures (e.g., Malaysia, Korea, Japan, or France), people put more emphasis on non-verbal cues while in low context cultures (e.g., US, UK, Italy, or Australia), people rely more on spoken or written words.

Culture often manifests in a person's communicative behaviors. Several studies have established that communicative behaviors vary across and within cultures, and that these variations can be explained by Hall's cultural dimension of context (Cardon, 2008; Kittler et al., 2011; Warner-Søderholm, 2013). The concept of high context and low context communication styles is also well-supported by other studies such as Bresnahan et al. (2002); Gudykunst et al. (1996); Gudykunst (1988); Kim (2005); Kittler et al. (2011); LeBaron (2003); and Pekerti and Thomas (2003). The avoidance of misunderstanding and misinterpretation requires comprehension of not only what is said but also how things are said – i.e., the communication style used for generating ideas, exchanging opinions, sharing knowledge, and expressing ideas (Goettsch, 2014; Keller, 2014).

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

The theoretical underpinning developed by Hall (1976) stresses that to high context people, context matters as much as, or more than, content. Context in this sense includes situation, behaviors, time, and space when they communicate. Given the intense effects of globalization, computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools have become more significant for globally distributed collaboration. In the early studies of CMC, findings clearly showed that email as an asynchronous tool lacks non-verbal cues and immediate response (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Fulk et al., 1990; Sullivan, 1995; Trevino et al., 1987). Several studies that looked at the effects of culture on the use of asynchronous computer-mediated communication showed that the absence of non-verbal cues and immediate feedback resulted in lower levels of satisfaction for high context people (Chung, 1992; Montoya-Weiss et al., 2001).

Based on those studies it can be argued that for high context people email may not be the most effective mode for communication or collaboration. Furthermore, Chung (1992) argued that high context people would normally feel less satisfied at the early encounters because they are not able to develop relationship and maintain information due to the absence of non-verbal cues. Even though the characteristic of email would restrict high context participants at the initial stage, subsequently they do overcome such limitations, for example, at a later stage of their collaboration and communication. On the other hand, low context participants face much less difficulty in using email as they often use the functions to describe details and use logical and linear form of communication.

Culture and use of computer mediated communication

According to Olaniran (2001), the implications of cultural effects on CMC and the question of compatibility between cultural values and technology have not been sufficiently researched. Amant (2002) echoes this assessment, claiming that research studies of intercultural communication and CMC must be aligned to arrive at a full understanding of online intercultural communication. This study thus begins to fill a gap that exists in both bodies of literature. Without doubt, email as an asynchronous form of computer-mediated communication offers an enticing and useful vehicle for people to collaborate and work in a distributed environment. In fact email is one of the most prevalent forms of CMC in organizations (Harasim, 1993; Markus, 1994; Xiao, 2013). People no longer must be in the same location; geographical barriers appeared to collapse with the notion of global village (Ohmae, 1990). Yet, cultural differences still persist, and culture-related uncertainties and anxieties increase when people first encounter each other even via CMC (Würtz, 2005; Xiao and Huang, 2015) or in the context of global virtual teams or distributed environment (Duranti and Almeida, 2012).

The deterministic theory of 'filtered out cues' introduced by Sproull et al. (1984) and (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986) reiterates that email as a lean medium does not provide the non-verbal cues that are necessary for high context cultures. Sproull et al. (1984) also argued that people communicate or behave similarly when face-to-face and when in an online environment – the same norms, boundaries, and regulations are followed. If this is the case, then email as a communication or collaboration tool may marginalize or disadvantage high context people because of the absence of important elements of their communication (Ou et al., 2016). Low context people however would benefit or at least would not be handicapped by the use of such technology because they are not dependent on the missing elements (Hall, 1976; Würtz, 2005).

As Olaniran (2001) pointed out, the social information processing theory introduced by Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) showed that culture can affect the perception of a medium's appropriateness (other factors included job position and communication networks). This theory suggests that cultural differences may impact an individual's choices, attitudes, and perceptions even when simply considering the use of CMC. As Olaniran (2001) states, "If one accepts the idea that meanings are influenced by culture, then perceptions of CMC media attributes and social interaction would reflect the nuances of cultural differences in norms and beliefs in multinational (intercultural) and multi-domestic (cross-cultural) organizations, according to social information processing theory" (SIP) (p. 87). The theory also helps explain why certain CMC are seen as more appropriate than others in some cases. These cultural influences demonstrate the importance of designing a culturally sensitive CMC to ensure compatibility between cultural values and communication technology.

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

Cultural effects on GVTs

Over the past decades, only a few studies have looked at the impact of culture on certain management practices or issues (e.g. decision making, conflict, leadership, knowledge sharing) in the context of GVTs. Many of the research works were conducted using a cross-cultural study (David et al., 2008; Espinosa et al., 2003; Fuller et al., 2006; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Kayworth and Leidner, 2001; Massey et al., 2003; Pauleen and Yoong, 2001; Shachaf, 2008). Those authors collected data from varied work location of the team members, e.g. New Zealand, Britain, Hong Kong, USA, India, Norway, Europe, Mexico, and many more.

In specific, Shachaf (2008) found that culture facilitates and enhances intercultural communication between the team members despite them being non-located or at a distant. Interestingly, while her findings showed a positive sign of cultural influence on GVTs, other study showed a contradicting finding—one which showed that cultural influence is a barrier to achieve effective performance of GVTs such as a study from Kayworth and Leidner (2001). They point out that variety of work practices, cultural diversity, and employee mobility significantly impact performance in a negative way. Thus, organizational culture must be supportive of the new work structure as well as compatible with the cultural values that team members hold to.

According to Zhang et al. (2007), culture is the principal influence in a typical multicultural team since members come from different parts of the world, and this introduces new challenges to working at a distance. Their study investigated the influence of culture, social presence and group diversity on group decision making. Surprisingly, the use of computer-mediated communication can mitigate the impact of majority influence, and thus the impact of culture is reduced when working at a distance.

For example, Zhang et al. (2007) argued that the dominance of a particular person is reduced in GVTs because people are not able to observe the non-verbal cues (e.g., tone of voice, gestures, body movements) that are important indicators of superiority in high context cultures, yet may not be as crucial for low context cultures when communicating. In the absence of these non-verbal cues, people in virtual teams learn to collaborate using only the explicit cues that are available to them (for example, the written text of an email) to decode the meaning of a communication and to form messages in reply that contain what is essential or necessary for productivity and the achievement of goals. Cultural influences such as diverse communication styles become less obvious, and team members learn how to communicate effectively using the technological tools that are best suited for the tasks to be carried out.

While the dominance of certain members, including majority influence, becomes less salient when teams work at a distance, the impact of group minorities also becomes less apparent. For example, people who subscribe to high context cultures might not be actively participating in the discussion; instead, they prefer to use the non-verbal cues available within the chosen technological tool to express agreement, support or consensus without the need to be outspoken or blunt. In a similar vein, silence can also be balanced by the use of emoticons to express a level of commitment and participation: team members could use symbols such as “like” or “smiley face” or “thumbs up” to indicate approval or agreement. On the other hand, if group minorities decide to keep silent, this silence is less obvious at a distance than in a face-to-face environment.

When Paul (2006) and Paul and Reuben (2004) examined a similar issue of individualism-collectivism cultural dimensions to understand its impact on conflict management in virtual teams, they found that collectivistic values facilitate teamwork and consequently motivated participants to demonstrate a collaborative conflict management style rather than a competitive one. In a virtual work environment, people are often looking for strategies to enhance their effectiveness, thus, one's cultural orientation becomes a crucial issue to evaluate in each of the team members.

As a conclusion, the results regarding the impact of culture on GVTs seemed to point in two different directions. Most of the findings suggest that culture does influence team members' ability to work in a virtual environment, and thus measures should be taken to help mitigate such impacts to enhance virtual team performance. On the other hand, culture also improves global virtual teams because without the option of face-to-face communication

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

and collaboration, members who prefer not to experience a face-conflict situation in a confrontational manner can resort to technology as a medium. Given the conflicting results from past studies, it seems evident that in the context of virtual teams, many more studies need to be undertaken to confirm cultural effects, in particular in the international management and organizational behavior research domains, so as to bridge the gap between GVT and cultural effects.

Thus, by identifying and exploring intercultural communication patterns and styles as well as switching behaviors through the lens of Hall's cultural dimension of context, the present study shows the effects of culture on GVT members, thereby contributing to the literature in several interdisciplinary fields including cross-cultural management, intercultural communication, and information systems. The results of this study will help explain the behavioral challenges facing multicultural GVTs. Consequently, the findings help to bridge the huge gaps in these bodies of literature. This study also enriches our understanding of the important forms of intercultural communicative behaviors that are exhibited during the distributed decision making process, and which are necessary for effective and efficient virtual collaboration among people of different cultures in multinational corporations.

GVTs and accommodation behaviors

Bond and Yang (1982) looked at the “accommodation behaviors” used by bilinguals, and found that people will only respond to a situation when the culture is in accord with the language they are using. Studies by Benet-Martinez et al. (2002), Hong et al. (2000) and Ramírez-Esparza et al. (2006) described a similar concept they called “cultural frame switching,” which affects language among bilinguals as much as it affects personality. In support of this, Qiu et al. (2013) suggested that culture strongly influences these switching behaviors. They found that, in a virtual context, bicultural individuals exhibit flexible sharing behaviors. Related studies such as Hardin and Higgins (1996), Leung and Chiu (2010) and Levine and Higgins (2001) all claim that people can easily switch their behaviors contingent upon cultural context, as shown when they communicate or participate in ways that are compatible with the other culture(s).

An interesting recent study by Ou et al. (2016) on individual communication contextual preferences when using interactive systems for knowledge sharing found that Chinese who are generally theorized as high context cultures preferred low context communication styles which are direct and explicit. They concluded that the Chinese are demonstrating a change of communicative behaviors due to the influence of Western practices and styles at workplace as well as have a Western education that changes their perceptions and lifestyles. However, this study also pointed out that people changed their styles based on a context they are in given the people and relationship established.

Although only a few studies observed these “switchers” and “reverse patterns,” they offer concrete empirical evidence that people who participated in this globally distributed environment did learn to acculturate to one another. People are willing to change their habits, values, attitudes, and behaviors to suit different situations, purposes, and people. The emergence of switching behaviors is thus not only well supported in face-to-face cross-cultural encounters, but also offers insights into the phenomenon of globally distributed collaboration. Empirical studies in cross-cultural management have established that in any cross-cultural experience, the initial encounter is the most frustrating and poses many problems (Bochner, 1982; Okoli, 2001) but that eventually people will adapt and acculturate to their new environment (Kim, 2005). According to Kim (2005), cross-cultural adaptation is “the evolutionary process an individual undergoes vis-à-vis a new and unfamiliar environment” (p. 379).

METHOD: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ARCHIVAL EMAIL MESSAGES

Qualitative content analysis was employed in this study of archival email messages because it is an unobtrusive research technique and well suited for understanding distributed collaborative team decision-making behaviors. The data is used as it occurs in its most naturalistic setting, thus ensuring external validity. I obtained the secondary data set from the official website of The World Summit on Information Society (WSIS). Quantitative analysis was also used, but only for profiling of the respondents and calculating frequency counts of decision-

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

making behaviors. This study explored the impact of culture on the communicative behaviors of one GVT comprised of civil society members during the first phase of WSIS. The qualitative data analytic framework is based on deductive coding analysis, using codes generated from theory and literature reviews. In this study, the deductive analysis included (a) classifying the decision-making behaviors into one of three decision-making activities (Adler, 1997; Kingdon, 1995) and (b) identifying the discernible patterns of intercultural communication styles based on the analytic framework of high context and low context (Hall, 1976; Triandis, 1995; Gudykunst et al., 1996). This culture-based analysis yielded rich and in-depth descriptions of the effect of culture on participation by Civil Society members in the distributed decision-making process during WSIS.

It is important to note that cultural analysis relies on basic assumptions derived from high context and low context cultural orientations. In other words, the analysis is based purely on the messages that are encoded; as such, culture is an indicator of an individual's behavior as demonstrated in their email messages. However, as numerous studies have demonstrated, culture has many layers and can be measured from many angles, including gender, nationality, profession, organizational culture and many more. Due to the fact that the abovementioned type of information was not systematically and fully available in the archival data set, the analysis applied in this study uses only high context and low context archival email messages to illustrate the characteristics of the GVT members and their cultural values. In other words, culture is deduced from the messages. Once the behaviors were coded using the cultural codes, I conducted a second level of analysis by correlating the country variables with the culture variables to tease out whether or not nationality is a good indicator of high context/low context communication styles and cultural values.

Moreover, this analysis was useful in checking the validity of Hofstede's cultural framework which assigns context types based on nationality, not at an individual level. This study, by contrast, looked at cultural values at the individual level (e.g. what communication styles do people use to propose an idea or suggest a solution?) because with the rise of globalization, individuals' behaviors are more often context- or situation-dependent and thus not necessarily rooted in their national background. Through this second level of analysis, this study explored the assumptions made about culture, and decided that the cultural analysis would be based on the GVT email messages using a high vs. low context theoretical lens.

Research context

The World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) was an international conference that was held in two phases: WSIS I in Geneva (December 10–12, 2003) and WSIS II in Tunis (November 2005) (<http://www.itu.int/wsis>). This conference was sponsored by the United Nations (UN) and organized by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) that specifically addresses issues relating to the role of information communication technology (ICT) policy-making processes in influencing and shaping global governance outcomes. Overall, the goal of WSIS was to develop a global ICT policy framework to deal with challenges posed by an information society (WSIS, 2003). WSIS played an important role as an avenue for global dialogue, discussion, and consensus building in the acceptance of norms, rules, principles, values and decision-making processes among multiple teams of stakeholders (Klein, 2005). WSIS as a process attempted to encourage an inclusive and broad pool of contributors from three main stakeholders: government, the private sector, and Civil Society.

This study chose to analyze WSIS Geneva because that phase most closely reflected the dynamics of human collaboration in a globally distributed environment. The global virtual team members' primary goal for this phase was to make decisions regarding the content of two documents (Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action) including resolving questions such as what principles were to be accepted and included, what problem areas should be looked at for further action plans, and so on. The content of the archived email messages covered a broad range of topics, from administrative information to technical issues, from questions of translation to specific wording of sentences in the two documents. The team members are divided into different Caucuses and working groups during the UN WSIS meetings. The teams need to engage on policy making concerning the utility, roles

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

and functions of using information communication technology as a platform to ensure a well-rounded inclusive participation of the three main multiple stakeholders as abovementioned.

During WSIS Geneva, Civil Society participants used email in the form of a listserv as their primary vehicle for communication and collaboration among GVT members. The team members came from all parts of the world – Asia, Europe, Africa, North America, and South America. With the capability of email, they did not need to meet in face-to-face encounters, though many had the opportunity to do so. Interestingly, the email list generated many successful negotiations and exerted a strong influence on the process. Many email lists were created and organized by Civil Society (CS), including CS Plenary, CS Content and Themes, CS Bureau, Thematic Caucuses and Working groups such as Cultural and Linguistic Diversity, Gender, Youth, Media, Person Disabilities, and many more (www.wsis-cs.org). Although this study provides a brief general overview of the entire WSIS event in the following section, this study's focus is on the most important, prestigious, and largest group, the CS Plenary, because it offered the most data for understanding the collaborative behaviors from a cultural standpoint. Also, this list was the main medium for bringing together participants from other teams/groups or caucuses to discuss problems and agenda items ranging from infrastructure issues, resources, and language, to Civil Society structures and many more.

Data analytic framework

After the preliminary coding phase, the decision-making stages were reduced to three instead of four stages. Although in the initial decision making process framework, I identified four stages based on both Kingdon's (1995) and Adler's (1997) models, in the end I integrated the “responses and deliberation” stage with the other three stages because the data showed that team members continuously provided responses in a cyclical process that fed back into the other three stages. Thus, “responses and deliberation” could not be considered a separate stage. Instead, it plays the role of a “feeder” into the overall process. Thus, in this study, I focused on effective participation during three stages of decision-making: (1) problem identification, (2) proposal making including idea generation and giving suggestions or expressing opinions, and (3) solution. In order to content analyze the decision making process, I used deductive coding based on an integrated three sequential stages after taking into consideration the two different theoretical frameworks as abovementioned. The dimensions and codes were discussed with others in the research team and with professional colleagues, resulting in further modifications for clarity.

Following the modifications and refinement mentioned above, the final decision making category had three codes: 1) problem identification, 2) proposal making and 3) solutions. This resulted in a relatively parsimonious code scheme but at the same time provided sufficient richness to understand the phenomenon being studied. Categories were also designed to be mutually exclusive (Neuendorf, 2002). These revisions were made in order to improve the way the data were to be analyzed.

The codebook was developed in a hierarchical structure to enable a multilayer coding process, beginning with the decision making process as the first layer. Second, we coded each decision making behavior by matching it against a variety of intercultural communication styles. Finally, we refined the diverse patterns to identify three distinct sets of behaviors: high context, low context, and switching.

For the content analysis, this study conducted two stages of inter-coder reliability testing. Neuendorf (2002) suggested that pre-testing of the coding scheme should undergo inter-coder reliability test. Upon arriving at reliability at this stage, the coding scheme can be considered final because the dimensions and categories have been refined and clarified. In the first phase, during the pilot stage, I employed three (3) coders who were instructed to apply the preliminary coding scheme to a sample data set of 100 messages. The level of inter-coder reliability agreement was 75%, an acceptable level. The coders then discussed the differences and resolved all confusions and misunderstandings about the codes that they had applied. In the second phase, I conducted a three-week training session for all three (3) coders in order to further facilitate and enhance their coding competency. After the coding scheme was revised, the coders assessed the data set according to the different aspects, decision-

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

making, and cultural orientation. Each coder then independently coded the data. Subsequently, the inter-coder reliability increased to 92%.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Descriptive analysis: national identity and communicative behaviors

The analysis focused on the communications of fifty ($n = 50$) active GVT members (out of $n = 135$ members) during the distributed decision making process and compared their cultural behaviors with national identity in order to understand whether participants showed consistent patterns of behaviors. The main reason for focusing on the fifty active members was that analysis of individual messages and level of participation clearly demonstrated that these members were heavily engaged during the decision-making process. In looking at the relationship between behaviors and national identity, four patterns were observed (see Fig. 1). Based on their participation in the distributed decision making process, the other 85 members showed less obvious communication patterns and therefore were less useful for elaboration or presentation in this study.

The first and second types of behavioral pattern, called high and low context behaviors, showed that 70% of participants ($n = 35$) reflected a consistent pattern of behaviors for either high or low context as predicted by their national identity. The distribution of high vs. low context was as follows: high context ($n = 16$) and low context ($n = 19$). This indicates a strong relationship between national identity and cultural behaviors in that participants' behaviors in the email or distributed environment showed similar patterns of behaviors with the way they would communicate in face-to-face encounters—i.e. high context and low context patterns.

The second type, called “inconsistent behavior,” was exhibited by 12% of participants ($n = 6$). These showed contradictory behaviors, meaning their communicative behavior was the reverse of what their national identity would have predicted. People that one would expect to be high context based on their nationality instead behaved in a low context manner and vice versa. Note that “inconsistent” as used here refers only to the behavior being contrary to expectations based on national identity – for example, a person from Japan demonstrating low context communicative behavior, while Japan is considered a high context culture.

The last type of behavior was particularly interesting. The findings showed that 18% of Civil Society participants ($n = 9$) switched their behaviors during their email collaboration. In other words, participants not only behaved in a manner inconsistent with their national identity, but they also switched their behaviors depending on situation, purpose, and relationship.

Empirical model of WSIS Civil Society distributed decision making processes

Based on the Civil Society team members who most actively contributed to the decision making processes, an empirical model was developed which I call the “Intercultural Online Communication Model of Decision Making Processes” (refer to Fig. 2). This empirical model illustrates that: (1) the decision making process is driven by global virtual team members from diverse cultural backgrounds; (2) they use email as their primary medium of participation; and (3) their team goals were to produce two specific documents within specific timeframe for the United Nation Summit on Information Society.

The analysis found that the problem identification and proposal making activities were more significant as compared to the solution stage. Moreover, before a viable solution was reached, two iterative stages took place among the participating team members – namely, responses and counter-proposal making – that posed numerous challenges. Since the decision making in WSIS Geneva was part of a policy-making process, Civil Society GVT members seemed to be heavily engaged in contributing to the agenda set by its more prominent members. These discussions became more directed and received more participation with the existence of an agenda. The primary initial findings of this study were that the decision-making process is cyclical or iterative

rather than sequential, and second that the process becomes more complicated with the participation of hundreds of people (civil society) who collaborate as GVTs compared to just a few key decision makers, as is often the case in organizations. In addition, response and deliberation appears not as an isolated stage but as a supporting stage

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

that continually feeds into the other three stages. This model also explains the decision-making processes in light of Hall's high vs. low context dimension. Several unique features were evident in the globally distributed Civil Society decision-making processes in terms of the way people approach, manage, and strategize the process.

Cultural impacts on WSIS Civil Society decision making processes

The central question is, "How does culture impact globally distributed WSIS Civil Society global virtual team members' contributions during the decision making process?" Based on a broad analysis of overall participation in the decision making process, findings showed significant differences between high and low context orientation. Culture, in the form of intercultural communication styles and cultural values, does indeed have an impact on the manner in which members participate in the decision making process and the strategies they employ. This was visible in the behaviors of Civil Society members at all stages, from the initial expression of their concerns through presentation of their views and opinions, responses to and deliberation on proposals, up to the final stage in which they reached consensus or solved a problem. It is clearly noted that in each of the decision making stages it was evident that people take distinct approaches, strategies and ways in managing the process.

This model also provides an understanding of the complex process as illustrated in the dynamic behaviors that resulted from cultural differences. For example, during the first stage (problem identification), high context participants would often beat around the bush and use indirect words to implicitly express their concern, problems or real intentions, whereas low context participants would straightforwardly express their problems and concerns using concise and explicit words: Examples of high context communication styles:

"I am sorry but I do not see why we need to discuss the structure of CS again, coming back to issues that have previously already been clarified. I do fully agree with you that transparency is very important, but I believe the current system, where the CS Contents and Themes Group, as well as the CS Bureau report back to the CS Plenary works just fine."

I think there should be joint discussions on this and other questions of common concern, so I am circulating to these lists (there are no contentious personal views, I hope). It concerns guidelines for the allocation of speaker slots at the PrepComs etc." Examples of low context communication styles:

Certainly, issues such as Jeffrey Gerber's comments on the Plenary, if he is to chair the Bureau, need clarification and agreement they cannot be ignored. And this is a non-contentious way of doing that which all sides the integrity of their views."

We discussed the need to work immediately on coordination and logistics plan for PrepCom III. Lisa Larry has asked that we submit at least a rough outline of our logistical needs this week. Rolf Bauer has drafted a document outlining these needs, based on discussions at the end of PrepCom II and as a result of our experiences during the Intersessional."

During the second stage, proposal making, high context participants would take their time to make proposals and then deliberate. They also avoided any confrontation or disagreements. When they did disagree, they expressed it late in their messages and in an indirect manner. On the other hand, low context participants would jump straight to the point, say their piece succinctly, and then make a decision. If they had any disagreements, the first sentence or paragraph would be a clear statement or assertion of the disagreement. Based on the email messages, it was evident that the proposal making activities arose from the problems discussed or agenda items set in the plenary list discussions. When the participants responded to a problem or agenda, they often presented their ideas in the form of a proposal. For example, one low context member communicated their proposal directly to the point as follows:

I strongly support the idea that the name of Mrs. Farah would be suggested to Secretary General Kofi Annan as well as to the president of the PrepComs and ITU for addressing the General Assembly of the WSIS on behalf of the CS.

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

Thank you for your comments regarding my prior message! I think Adrian is addressing one important procedural issue that we should take the decision making power to nominate for speaking slots. First, that should be sorted out. And basically fully agree with Alim that the nomination of Mrs. Farah for a key speaker could have very strong message itself. And IF we decide to use the speaking slots for our strategy, I fully support that idea.

In contrast, high context members generally adopted a more formal tone when they wanted to propose something:

I'd just suggest that these networks also commit themselves in the inclusion and support of DCs Education networks (as far as there are or will be in a foreseeable future) and Institutions such as Universities, high schools and especially technical (Engineer) schools.

Why not stress particularly those institutions pertaining to the ICT sector? This would be a positive act of solidarity between the North and the South (between "haves" and "have nots") Regards, Jaquelin Floss

For the last stage (solution), high context participants would normally send a note of appreciation to participants who had contributed to the decision making process and then announce the decisions made. Low context participants used a different approach; they would quickly inform others of what transpired and what decisions were made, and only then thank the contributors. Because the process is cyclical and iterative, the length of the decision making process is dependent on the cultural dimension. For example, high context participants generally take longer to make decisions than low context participants (Adler, 1997). They also sometimes offered an endorsement with reservations, as shown in this example:

At other times, people could not endorse a document because they disagreed so strongly with the language. With a firm tone and straightforward manner, low context GVT members would announce their decision:

All, Participants agreed to remove the last paragraph of the Governance section. The latest document is attached, without endorsements.

Given the three stages, the following Table 1 provides the comparison of culturally-attuned behaviors between decision making stages and intercultural communication patterns when people engage in the decision making processes from a general overview (see Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of culturally-attuned behaviors between decision making stages and intercultural communication patterns.

Culture/decision making	High context	Low context
Problem	Seldom used words like 'problems' explicitly—beat around the bush when expressed concerns or issue	Jumped straight to the point and clearly stated problem upfront like 'is there a wireless connection?'
Proposal	Begin their proposals with formal tone, e.g. "Dear all..." Provided a context first by using indirect phrases, then only expressed views	Begin their proposals with a goal statement and assertion Stated their points in succinct and clear manner
Solution	Presented their decisions in appreciative and courteous manner	Informed others of their decisions in a direct and precise manner

With respect to the decision making process of the GVTs, the findings showed that both cultural orientations contributed an almost equal number of emails, participated almost as frequently in the three stages, and provided substantial expertise and shared knowledge on the topics under discussion among the members. Therefore, it can be inferred that people of both high and low context orientation demonstrate strong collaborative behaviors despite differences in their communication styles and cultural values. Hall's theoretical lens was applicable as well as valuable to explain the behaviors observed in this distributed environment because it is consistent as in face-to-face.

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

High context and low context communicative behaviors

The findings of this study are based on intercultural communicative behaviors rooted in a person's cultural values. Following Hall's argument that "Culture is communication, and communication is culture," (p. 191, 1976) the characteristics of both high context and low context were deeply analyzed to uncover interesting mannerisms, styles and patterns. This culturally-attuned analysis was performed on the content of the emails GVT members exchanged during the distributed decision making processes, and thus did not take into consideration gender, nationality, age or socio-economic status.

In this study, we found evidence that high context behaviors reflected a subtle, polite, and tactful communication style, with long-winded statements; people subscribed to values that were collective and they focused on relationships where context and process mattered. On the other hand, low context behaviors showed assertive, blunt, succinct, and precise language, gave accurate, and detail descriptions and specific instructions; people demonstrated a regard for self-opinion and interests and focused more on task or product as the outcome.

In the present study, Civil Society participants who used indirect communication style seemed to demonstrate such behaviors. They not only displayed politeness and tactfulness in their messages, but also sometimes excessively apologized – a key sign of not wanting to offend other participants. Conversely, low context participants expressed opinions and intentions more freely and more often said exactly what they meant, what they wanted people to understand. Individuals expressed themselves in a more explicit manner that fully supplies the situational elements needed to understand the text (Hall, 1976). In a low context culture, individuals tend to convey important messages with explicit verbal codes and sometimes this causes conflict. At worst, high context cultures may view straightforward messages and explicit words as attacking, rude, out-spoken or unacceptable.

However, in some instances high context people are also capable of producing short or terse messages because they want to conceal their feelings or intentions from strangers. Thus, the question of 'whom I am talking to' is instrumental in deciding what and how much information to contribute. This short message sometimes can be too restricted in its use of words to the extent it loses its meaning. Such an act of concealment, however, can be easily decoded or interpreted by the in-group members, thus serving as a boundary to selectively exclude outsiders, as mentioned above. High context people want to protect the feelings of the people that they are in regular contact with, especially their in-group members (Triandis, 1995). Hence, when they want to avoid confrontation, they will write long messages, to the point that the messages can be incomprehensible to the low context audience who considers the message to be without substance or quality. But because of their strong need for a harmonious environment and avoidance of conflicts, high context can also produce extremely effective diplomatic, and tactful messages through their 'politeness' strategy (Ferraro, 1997; Okabe, 1983).

Participants from low context cultures are more apt to separate issues from people ("don't take it personally"), while participants from high context cultures are more likely to blend the two and may take personal affront to a professional disagreement. Work and personal issues are integrated thus oftentimes work disagreements are perceived as personal conflicts. The consequence for Civil Society participants is that participants from low context cultures are more apt to view disagreements as an integral part of knowledge sharing – not only acceptable but even a positive activity that encourages creative discourse – while high context participants may perceive open disagreement and confrontation as highly insulting, and as causing both parties to lose face (Ting-Toomey, 2009; Zakaria et al., 2004).

The way people arrive at a decision varies significantly from one culture to another since conflict is viewed differently based on the cultural context. Cultural differences may also affect the decision-making process, with individuals from low context cultures responding in a direct, confrontational way and expecting quick answers while high context participants respond to conflict in an evasive and non-confrontational manner, leading to an indirect, inactive approach to resolution. This was reflected in the actions of Civil Society participants on the Civil Society Plenary listserv. For example, a member may persist on answer with remark such as, "What an interesting

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

question! I'm waiting impatiently for the answer” or “Will there be computers in the drafting room? And will there be any Internet access other than the Internet café (which presumably will be much in demand)?”

Low context people believe in being honest no matter how ugly the truth is, while high context believe in protecting and maintaining face in order to create a harmonious relationship (Ting-Toomey, 1999). Culture thus results in different communication styles, with low context using directness and explicit communication while high context is quite the reverse, employing indirectness and implicit communication. Moreover, low context people believe that in order to accomplish a task, any truth that makes it easier to carry out that task in a more effective way should be stated, and that emotion and work are two separate entities (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2000). Oftentimes this may appear as an insensitive approach but low context people are expressive and true to their intentions. This behavior also means that they are willing to self-disclose what they feel rather than maintaining a reserve, unlike high context participants who are more hesitant to self-disclose. In his discussion of an ‘inner-directed’ cultural dimension, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2000) suggested that such a dimension refers to ‘fairness,’ defined as “letting each side fire an equal number of verbal blasts at each other” (p. 262). People are free to debate until things are clarified. Like this particular message from Steven Osborne:

Are we so ignorant of history? This has always been the tactic employed by those in power: split dissent into ‘moderates’ and ‘radicals,’ offer the moderates a place at the table, then crush the ‘radicals’ while the moderates look the other way...and happily ignore the timid suggestions of the moderates.

Before I go further, I'll clarify that I am speaking as someone who truly supports the CS Plenary process, has been involved on the ‘inside’ since the first preparatory meeting, who has spent large chunks of time over the past two years drafting documents of all kinds - suggested changes to governmental language, sentences for civil society language, and statements from ‘outside’ events.

Most of the low context Civil Society participants seemed to use this approach when they presented their argument on selecting the speakers. Sometimes the process went on and on because some parties could not be satisfied with the solutions proposed.

Cultural values and GVTs

High context people who subscribe to cultural values such as collectivism and relationship oriented put priority on collective efforts and relationships and these values in turn enable them to work in this collaborative environment. On the other hand, low context people's high need for achievement and goal orientation also are valuable skills in the decision making process. Therefore, from both perspectives, Civil Society participants were indeed capable of acculturating or adapting to the new structure of working together using email as the communication mode. They were able to work with each other despite their differences. This also means of course that the ‘adaptation’ factor is one of the alternative explanations evident in this study.

A different approach was taken by high context participants whom (Trompenaars, 1984) would consider the ‘outer-directed’ people, those whose cultural values appreciate a harmonious situation, and who do not want to create any disharmony. This proved to be true for high context Civil Society participants; they tried to state their opinions in a diplomatic manner and with less contentiousness. Even when they had to disagree with or contradict someone, they did so in a modest or apologetic manner or by initiating such messages with a question. A message from Rince Plum exemplified such tactic,

I'm sorry, but your accusation about me was clearly not made tongue in cheek, It was clearly made seriously and in anger, and I think that the persons who were standing with me when you made it can testify to that.

I agree with the general thrust of your argument. In fact I would take it a step further and say that while we are fighting for ways to keep ourselves at the table instead of huddled in the lobby or shouting in the street...”, we also are developing our own methods of reaching consensus and solutions to these IS issues. So we continue to work with the flawed modalities that we are offered to a point, and we develop our own better mechanisms among ourselves, and invite other stakeholders to join us.

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

The analysis of active participants in the WSIS decision making processes has clearly shown that high and low context participants contributed almost equally in the three stages—problem, proposal and solution. However, when the findings were further explored in terms of how does culture impact global virtual teams' participation in decision-making processes, both cultural orientations showed differences in light of strategies, approaches, and mannerism that people employ during decision-making processes. Thus, it was evident that in each of the stages of decision making processes, participants showed unique behaviors dependent on whether a person is high or low context. Table 2 provided a detailed comparison between high vs. low context behaviors of WSIS Civil Society decision-making processes based on sub-category such as indirect, ambiguous and collectivism for high context members while direct, detail and individualism for low context members.

The emerging patterns of switching behaviors

Besides the expected results related to Hall's high vs. low context orientation, the findings also presented an interesting new pattern of behavior which I have called “switching behavior.” Members switched their behaviors from high-context to low-

High context	Examples of email messages
1. Indirect	<p>The characteristic of the message is implicit. Words used are polite, apologetic, and in non-confrontational manner as to avoid open discussion, or debate.</p> <p>“Could you be so kind and tell me about the roundtables and such, I'd like to meet with you to talk about the issues.”</p> <p>“I'm afraid that such approach will be too wordy, but will at least, solve problems. To simply say “physical” without mentioning visual, hear, cognitive and learning, is not acceptable. It is better for us to seek for the most inclusive term in this international document, rather than trying to narrow it down, I think. Again, I confirm, the term “physical” is not inclusive.”</p> <p>“Women, indigenous people, disabled people and many other groups are also human, yet they have received their own paragraph in recognition of their specific needs and interests in the information society. Unless you are opposed to all of those groups being included, your argument is not logically consistent. In any case, I'm glad to see that our recommendations were adopted, and the Youth Caucus looks forward to working with CS further on the Visionary document(s).”</p> <p>“Please permit me to post multiple lists since it concerns all of them: Regarding the wording for “persons with disabilities”, at this point, we had better stick to the best available UN standard language to form a consensus namely “persons with disabilities”.”</p>
2. Ambiguous	<p>Provide lots of background information when communicating, and use lots of references before expressing opinions. Lengthy sentences to show disagreement.</p> <p>e.g. I hope you don't mind that ICC this.... (Use 162 words to say how she feels about a situation)</p>
3. Collectivism	<p>Refer to the group they belong to. Use a lot of collective voice to refer to self and others like “We, they, us.”</p> <p>e.g. It then becomes <u>our</u> task, not to be joyful for a seat in the peanut gallery, but to make <u>our</u> participation meaningful: to insist. To make demands. To take stands where <u>we</u> need to.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “We'll be here supporting as much as possible.” • “We are asking for Spanish translation of our documents” • “We will come out (hopefully) with concrete plans...” • “A big round of applause will be the least we can do. And we must also try to outreach our work towards Tunis.”

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

Low context	Examples of email messages
1. Direct	Use straightforward and explicit statement to express opinions, or express disagreements. Use confrontational strategy, not afraid of conflicting or contradictory opinion. e.g. Thanks for your thoughtful message. The Tunisian system is different. It is different from the US, China, Nigeria or any other country. (Don't delay opinion. Response directly—right to the point) “Please, do something!” “I support Steven's 5 points” “I still can't see it in any of my mail folders. Where did you send it?” “Not sure what you mean by this - please explain...” “Vince, would it be possible to summarize your observations from the discussion?”
2. Detail	Provide long and detail explanations and instructions when making proposal • “I have two changes to suggest: (1) broaden the debate, (2) do it inclusive and open...” (each of these suggestions were detailed out with 322 words) • “Please find some elements of information on Overpasses: The number of Overpasses for civil society has been increased to a total of 800. Out of these, 150–200 will be handed to the WEMF organizers The only reason why you were invited to put together lists of names was to ensure rapid distribution as well as keeping track of Overpasses. Also, if some persons are absent during distribution, it is easier to distribute to the next person in line. The lists should be ready by 9 Dec. AM. Please note that Overpasses ARE NOT nominative, and thus are transferable. As such, no photos are required. Each family/group is responsible for managing their own Overpasses. It is very important to ensure that Overpasses are returned to the respective focal points, so that they can be re-used. Your suggestions on how you intend to proceed to recuperate them efficiently will be very useful.”
3. Individualism	Use first-person and direct voice and it is based on one's personal feelings and opinions like “I, my, you” e.g. “And my personal perspective is that what needs to be changed is the system.” “I would suggest to not limit...” • “I believe that we can successfully...” “I also agree that Sean's five points reflect the reality of the process...” “I've collated all the different overpass lists...”

context and vice versa based on situations, purposes, and people. The majority of the participants showed consistent patterns of behaviors in terms of the manner in which they communicated and the cultural values they exhibited. However, notably, nine participants showed a unique behavior in that there was no dominant pattern of either high or low context. Rather, they demonstrated “switching behaviors,” a 50/50 mix between high and low context behaviors. They posted a high number of emails, participated frequently, and made substantial inputs to the decision making process. Based on the breakdown of their participation in the three distinct decision making stages, they showed a higher percentage of contributions in comparison with high and low context participants (see Table 3). For example, when compared with high context, participants with switching behaviors contributed 12% more, and compared with low context participants, they contributed 9% more. Their contribution was more significant than both high and low context participants were, particularly because this category was only 16% of the total active participants (n = 55) – thus 16% of the participants contributed 30% of the decision-making messages (n = 1095).

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

In further detail, Table 3 shows the ranking of the participants based on the number of emails they contributed to the decision making process. Steven Osborne (shaded) was most effective within this group because all (100%) of his emails in the virtual

Table 3: Ranking participants with ‘switching’ behaviors based on contributions to decision making process.

Name	Decision-making messages	Percentage	Non-decision making messages	Percentage	Total messages posted in listserv
Kathryn Betty ^a	81	67%	40	33%	121
Rolf Bauer	41	53%	36	47%	77
Blanche Baldemar	39	78%	11	21%	50
Jaquelin Floss	34	72%	13	28%	47
Allan Patrick	33	80%	10	20%	41
Amanda Diego	31	57%	23	43%	54
Fredrick Marlin	25	83%	5	12%	30
Steven Osborne	21	100%	0	0%	21
Gerard Grosvenor	20	83%	4	17%	24

^a All the names given in this study are fictitious for the purpose of protecting the identity of the participants.

plenary listserv contributed to the decision making process. Several others also had a high percentage of contribution to decision making; for example, Allan Patrick (83%), Fredrick Marlin (83%), Blanche Baldemar (78%), and Jaquelin Floss (72%). Although Kathryn sent most messages over the six-month period, only 67% of her messages were related to the decision making process; the rest of her messages were more concerned with information sharing activities.

The following analysis concentrated only on the solution-related activity for the three different cultural groups because this is the most critical area for the decision making process. From this analysis, it is apparent that low context participants geared their efforts much more towards solutions than did high context participants, with a difference of 24% (see Table 4). However, a comparison between low context participants and the ‘switching’ participants showed only a minimal difference, under 10% (n = 3 messages). In essence, the contributions made by low context participants were the highest, accounted for 37% of the messages, and next is switching behaviors, accounted for 34%, and the least is high context participants, accounted for only 28% of the messages.

In a closer look at the relation between numbers of messages contributed vs. the number of participants participating, the ‘switching’ participants were most effective. Findings indicated that ‘switchers’ contributed most of their efforts to this activity. They had the least number of participants that participated in this stage (7%, n = 7) yet 34% of their messages contributed to this activity. Overall, more participants engaged in responding to solutions either by disagreeing with the decisions arrived at (i.e., failing to endorse a document, or failing to remedy a problematic situation), or by offering alternative solutions in order to reach a viable consensus. They engaged less in real actions or solutions, or in endorsing the documents drafted (47% of messages accounted for real solutions vs. 53% for responses).

Although instances of switching and reverse patterns were small compared to instances of consistent high or low context behaviors, they do offer concrete empirical evidence that acculturation occurred during participation in this globally distributed environment. People were willing to change their habits, values, attitudes, and behaviors to adapt to the situation, purpose, and people.

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

It is noteworthy that this study found that people switch their behaviors under different circumstances or situations. First, participants behaved differently in each of the decision making stages. For example, participants from a low context culture would first clearly assert their concerns or state their problems, but then when they engaged in proposal making, they were more flexible and used a more relationship-oriented approach (Rolf began one proposal message with “first, a big thanks for Kathryn to get this going” and ended it with the warm wish “All the best, Rolf”). On other occasions, low context participants adopted more tactful strategies when discussing problems or issues, and then became more assertive when giving their ideas or views. In still other cases, they could be very tactful and diplomatic when presenting their problems, but employed a task-oriented style when acting on a problem or demanding a quicker solution. Similarly, high context participants were observed using more aggressive tactics when addressing problems or defending their proposals, and becoming more assertive when responding to solutions because they want a problem to be solved.

Second, purpose appears to be a key trigger of switching behavior. If the purpose of the message was instrumental, such as changing some language in a document or nominating a speaker, high context people sometimes became more assertive in their tone and sent more task-oriented messages using a straight-to-the point approach. If the purpose was affective, such as information sharing or relating to another participant, low context people altered their behaviors to use a more diplomatic and friendly communication style and included messages that were more relationship-focused.

Table 4: Breakdown between messages and number of participants contributing to solution activities.

Cultural behaviors	Messages	No. of participants
High Context	29 (28%)	13 (35%)
Low Context	38 (37%)	17 (46%)
Switching	35 (34%)	7 (19%)
Total	102 (99%) ^a	37 (100%)

^a Please take note that the total percentage calculated for this category does not equal to 100% due to rounding error.

Finally, participants switched their behaviors when they were responding to certain individuals. Some participants used a very personal tone in their messages when corresponding with people they already knew outside the email (based on evidence in the messages). For example: “Hi all, I totally agree with Steven's five points. Not in the sense of ‘I like his ideas’ but as ‘That's how it is. Period.’” In this instance, Rolf offers a straightforward response to Steven's proposal. At other times he used a more formal and general tone: “We have put the CS priorities document online at...”.

In short, this study's findings contribute to the development of a cross-culturally attuned theory for understanding and describing effective participation in globally distributed collaboration based on accommodative behaviors that I have dubbed “switching behaviors.” In essence, GVTs have demonstrated that when they engage virtually, they are dependent on context but not necessarily at the end points of high or low context. Instead, team members can switch their behaviors between those two extreme contextual points.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The continuing globalization of the workforce creates new challenges, which require cross-cultural competencies capable of address the complex divergences present in GVTs. GVTs as an innovative work structure and environment is more complex in this digital age. Thus, multinational corporations need to rethink and re-strategize their vision and mission, organizational culture and values, and practices and procedures so as to successfully manage their GVTs. In particular, an in-depth understanding of this study was thus tightly focused on the concept of context, specifically high context and low context. Because this study analyzed email messages, we were able to identify patterns of behaviors discernible from the individual's messages rather than relying on characteristics of national cultures such as Japanese or American.

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

The findings in this study also established that culture does matter in the form of intercultural communication styles and the cultural values that participants subscribe to. Significantly, there were distinctive patterns of online cultural behaviors displayed by high context and low context as evident in the strategies, approaches, and communicative mannerism in which people participated in the distributed decision making processes. Despite the distinctive communication characteristics of the two groups, high context participants contributed almost equally with low context participants in the decision-making processes. Participants from both cultural orientations demonstrated high collaborative behaviors, while strongly maintaining their communication styles and cultural values with minimal inverse effect on participation in decision-making activities. Besides high vs. low context behaviors, evidence of an emerging behavioral pattern called ‘switching’ was also found, in which an individual's behaviors changed depending on purpose, situation, and people.

As for theoretical implications, the present study contributes to the field of cross-cultural management and intercultural communication through its analysis of the emergent patterns of switching behavior, which sheds light on how people modify their usual mannerisms and styles of communicating when working with people from diverse cultures. Although this unique behavior is only supported by a limited number of studies as yet, such findings help build a more solid foundation to build cross-cultural competencies for GVTs by exploring the reasons why, and the ways and conditions in which, communication behaviors are culturally attuned.

Similarly, this study suggests two managerial implications for multinational corporations: First, firms should provide and conduct effective cross-cultural training to ensure that participants can perform as effectively as they would in a more familiar realworld collaboration. Different skill components can be assembled into an effective cross-cultural training program that will prepare people to participate in distributed or virtual collaborative projects or assignments, such as assembling international product development teams or contributing as international policymaker teams. Second, there is the question of culture vs. task vs. technology fit. In designing and implementing culturally sensitive IT applications, many cultural characteristics need to be evaluated and incorporated into the design. Organizations need to reassess their technology investments in relation to their users' cultural values so that the two are compatible and congruent. Not only the challenges but also the consequences are intensified when all three dimensions must be integrated. Since GVTs rely heavily on technological platforms and virtual work structures for communication and collaboration, congruence among all three aspects is necessary for successful culturally-sensitive IT design.

As a conclusion, evidently patterns of switching behaviors were clearly demonstrated by GVTs in which team members showed some level of flexibility and adaptation in their behaviors when they are in a culture-sensitive context. Yet, to date, switching behaviors have not been observed in a decision-making context, in particular in GVTs. This emergent pattern of switching behaviors in GVTs is important because it shows that communication styles are fluid rather than fixed, and that behaviors are accommodative rather than rigid. In essence, people from different cultural background use different strategies, approaches, and manners when they communicate their decisions. But what is most interesting in this finding is that both cultural behaviors showed signs of adaptation or acculturation in this new mediated environment. Each of the cultural groups seemed to maintain their cultural values and intercultural communication styles, but at the same time they also adapted to other cultural values and intercultural communication styles.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study's limitations fall into two areas: scope and methodology. First, the study examined only one form of globally distributed collaboration (a GVT using an email list) and one venue (WSIS). Second, I also limited my analysis to participation in decision-making activities, excluding the many other activities apparent in the data source, such as sharing administrative information, discussion of social events, and so on. Given the magnitude of the data (172 MB), some limitation was unavoidable in order to conduct a more focused and in-depth study within a reasonable amount of time. Finally, this study limited its examination to Phase One of the WSIS in Geneva, excluding Phase Two. Phase One was deliberately chosen as it best exemplified the phenomenon that this study attempted to understand.

Stochastic Modelling and Computational Sciences

However, the foremost limitation of this study lies in its research design: a content analysis that is exploratory in nature. Because of this, its findings cannot be generalized to all conferences, or to venues or participants with different characteristics from those of the WSIS. Its conclusions are valid only for groups closely resembling the WSIS Civil Society Plenary – that is, groups with a non-hierarchical organizational structure, consisting of informal groups of individuals who collaborate on a voluntary basis, come from different organizations (inter-organizational rather than intra-organizational), have diverse cultural backgrounds, form a networked team of experts to accomplish common goals, and use asynchronous computer-mediated communication technology as their primary communication mode.

The findings of this study suggest that communicative behaviors of GVTs fall into three distinct patterns: high context, low context and switching. However, between these two extremes lies an entire continuum of context which offers great potential for researchers to look further into the diversity of and variations in communicative behaviors all along this continuum. By doing so, they could add more richness and depth to our picture of GVT communicative behaviors, depending on situations, roles, tasks and relationships.

Future studies might also take into consideration the role, utility, and functions of social media such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Line, Weibo, QQ, and WeChat in influencing how GVT members communicate. People may acculturate, or fail to acculturate, not merely for situational reasons, but also depending on the platform and tools they use to communicate and collaborate. For example, given that high-context individuals tend to be more circumlocutory in their speech, what effect might Twitter's 140character limit have on their communication behaviors? People may alter their behavior based on the ease and usefulness of the tools they use are given; thus, it is important to understand both how different cultural values influence the way social network tools are designed, and how the interface and design of social network tools can shape our behaviors.

Future research should also explore the extent to which cultural values can be adapted in an online environment (i.e., switching behavior) and if whether or not such behavior can transcend one's normative communicative behavior. Another area that needs attention is leadership's role and behaviors, and its flexibility in GVTs. Thus, two questions need to be addressed: 1) How do we develop culturally competent leaders capable of confronting and dealing with virtual and multicultural teams who have diverse communicative behaviors? 2) How do we encourage leaders and team members to be flexible, open and accommodative to the many idiosyncrasies of behavior, the turmoil of emotions, and the unpredictable patterns of thought that may arise from divergent culturally-rooted behaviors?

The challenge for MNCs today is for global leaders to have the right mindset, an open heart, and appropriate behavior to be culturally competent—they must be willing to accept all the possibilities inherent in cultural complexity. MNCs must educate their human resources at the managerial and team level to develop competent global leaders who understand the uniqueness of working with a team comprised of people from different cultural backgrounds, who are working together at a distance. To be successful and effective, GVTs need an active leader, one who fully understands and attuned to their different cultures and ways of working in terms of cognition, emotion and behaviors.

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