Chapter 7.2
Classifying Web Users:
A Cultural Value–Based Approach

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ABSTRACT

In today's global environment, a myriad of communication mechanisms enable cultures around the world to interact with one another and form complex interrelationships. The goal of this chapter is to illustrate an individual-based approach to understanding cultural similarities and differences in the borderless world. Within the context of Web communication, a typology of individual cultural value orientations is proposed. This conceptualization emphasizes the need for making distinctions first at the individual level, before group-level comparisons are meaningful, in order to grasp the complexity of today's global culture. The empirical study reported here further demonstrates the usefulness of this approach by successfully identifying 16 groups among American Web users as postulated in the proposed typology. Future research should follow the implications provided in this chapter in order to broaden our thinking about the role of culture in a world of global communication.

INTRODUCTION

As the adoption of media technology such as the Internet rapidly spreads around the world, communication across cultures increases. Individuals from diverse cultural groups interact with each other regardless of physical distances. On the one hand, such increased communication between cultures might facilitate cultural convergence on the global scale (Kincaid, 1988; Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). On the other hand, online technology's capability to offer individualized communication might further fragment the global culture as people with similar values, outlooks, and interests across the world pursue their personal agendas via the decentralized electronic media (Choi & Danowski, 2002).

Culture has been a focal issue in global communication. More specifically, cultural similarities and differences have been considered the key to understanding cross-cultural human interactions. Extensive research to date has provided ample evidence of differences between cultures in terms

of communication styles and messages. Implicit to this line of research is the assumption that members of a culture are likely to exhibit a pattern of social perception and behavior common within the culture, but different from that of another culture. Given this paradigm of conceptualizing culture, most cross-cultural comparisons are made at the national or cultural level, that is, between nations or cultures, while overlooking potential variations among individuals within a culture.

In today's fast-changing media environment, people are exposed to various cultures through a multitude of channels and formats. While still adhering to the dominant values of the culture in which they belong, people these days rely on multiple frames of cultural reference simultaneously to construct their individual cultural orientations. For these reasons, it would be too simplistic to assume that everyone in the same culture displays the same pattern of thinking and behavior. In fact, individuals' cultural orientations within the same culture could vary widely (Campbell, 2000). Therefore, a thoughtful investigation of today's technology-mediated global culture needs to start from exploring fundamental cultural value orientations at the individual level.

Foremost among the major dimensions of cultural orientations are individualism and collectivism. Generally considered as polar opposites of each other, individualism emphasizes the concept of self, whereas collectivism focuses on other-directedness. Departing from this dichotomous view, recent research has suggested a more in-depth conceptualization of individualism and collectivism where, depending on whether equality (horizontal) or hierarchy (vertical) is underscored, the following four types of orientations can be identified: (1) *horizontal individualism (uniqueness)*, where one can be unique and independent while still maintain status equality with others; (2) *vertical individualism (achievement)*, where one strives to be the best and enjoys privileges that come with it; (3) *horizontal collectivism (cooperativeness)*, where interdependence and

equality in status are valued; and (4) *vertical collectivism (dutifulness)*, where people submit to the social hierarchy ascribed by their in-groups (Triandis, 1995, 2001; Triandis & Suh, 2002). Initial empirical evidence supports the viability of this four-way typology in detecting differences across national cultures (Nelson & Shavitt, 2002) and individual differences within a single culture (Lee & Choi, 2005).

Understanding similarities and differences in cultural orientations is the key for successful global online communication. Since the Web has emerged as an ideal medium for tailored communication for people across the world, it is imperative to obtain a baseline understanding of cultural values held by those who are users of the Web. As cultures increasingly interconnect on the Web and national borders gradually vanish, these insights will help prepare us for a future world community that is likely to be dominated by technology-mediated communication. At this juncture, research on cultural values in global communication should focus on the individual, not the nation or culture. Therefore, based on the aforementioned four-way typology, the goal of this chapter is to propose and empirically demonstrate a comprehensive classification framework for assessing cultural orientations at the individual level.

To accomplish the goal, this chapter first explains individualism and collectivism as dimensions of culture, and reviews relevant research developments in this area. Then, a thorough explication of an in-depth typology that encompasses sufficient complexity to reflect cultural differences among individuals is provided. Next, this chapter reports results from an empirical study that classified and compared Web users in the U.S., using the proposed individual level typology. This chapter concludes with implications of the findings and directions for future research.

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