Hyper-Sensitivity in Global Virtual Teams

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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly multinational enterprises are implementing global virtual teams. In such online collaborative settings, developing shared understanding and managing interpersonal conflict may be constrained by the fact that members have little of the traditional mechanisms that are used to engage in personal interactions with others, observe fellow team members at work, or develop a shared history of professional accomplishments. In addition, members of virtual teams may be thousands miles away from each other and possess different cultural background. Due to the absence of proximal interactions, virtual team members are likely to evaluate others based on amplified perceptions of their computer-mediated social interaction (Walther, 1996). This chapter examines hyper-sensitivity in virtual teams and its consequences to team's relational interactions and outcomes. Specifically, the following research question is addressed: *What are the mechanisms that influence levels of engagement and interpersonal conflict in global virtual teams?*

BACKGROUND

Typically, global virtual teams employ web-based collaboration tools such as Trello, Basecamp, and Sync.in, to name a few (Gilson, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015).While recent web-based technologies provide a great deal of functionalities, anecdotal and empirical evidence suggest a number of challenges faced by teams who rely on computer-based technologies to communicate and accomplish their tasks. Some of the challenges include overcoming isolation among team members, cultural differences, less time for relationship building, lack of participation, conflict management, and building trust.

This chapter broadens our understanding of this phenomenon by integrating two theoretical approaches—the Hyper-personal Perspective and the Social Constructionist Theory—to examine how members of global virtual teams develop relational interactions. Specifically, the integrated research model presented here suggests that global virtual team members are hyper-sensitive to their computer-mediated interpersonal interactions in that individuals' socially constructed perceptions of the context influence their relational development and judgments much more intensively than those of collocated members.

In this study, the key components of the context are the task-at-hand and shared identity, while relational interactions are defined in terms of interpersonal conflict and level of engagement. Thus, how members of global virtual teams perceive their task and their team will profoundly affect their relational interactions, including how much conflict they experience and how engaged they view their team members as being. Over time, the amplification of these affective elements will affect their judgments about their fellow members' trustworthiness. The main components of our research model and its relationships are depicted in the Figure 1. In the following sections we describe the research model (Figure 1), its components, and their combined impact on relational interactions in global virtual teams.

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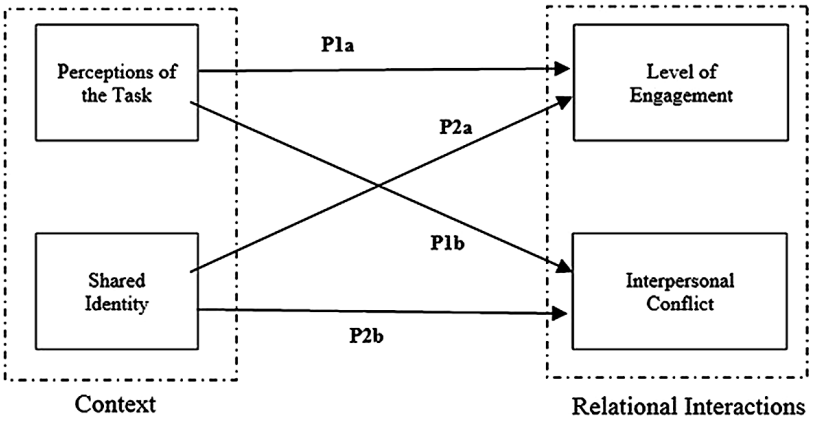
Figure 1. The research model



RESEARCH MODEL

The Hyper-Personal Perspective

Walther (1996) suggests that the meaning inherent in messages is amplified when individuals have limited physical contact with each other and therefore develop perceptions about others and their relationships based on the available mechanisms at hand, e.g., electronic communication exchanges. In other words, in computer-mediated settings, any piece of information exchanged between team members is likely to take on a significance of its own and is subject to over attribution.

This perspective helps explain why members of distributed groups have the potential to profoundly amplify interpersonal exchanges between the sender and receiver, thereby offering important insights to relational development in virtual teams. For instance, Jones (1995) reported that individuals who participated in online groups exhibited feelings of closeness due to the warmth conveyed in their communication exchanges, compared to collocated groups even though the virtual context would imply physical isolation. These results suggest that members of virtual teams enhanced the meaning of their communication exchanges (beyond the mere messages), thereby enabling them to develop emotional ties that exceeded those in collocated settings.

Social Constructionist Theory

The social constructionist perspective suggests that human social order is produced through interpersonal negotiations and implicit understandings that are built up via shared stories and experiences (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Thus, beliefs held by members of a group determine to what extent meanings of terms are invented and sustained. In other words, how members interpret their context and social interaction processes helps to predict individual cognitions and behavior. An important aspect of the social constructionist approach is its distinction between objective and subjective reality. While the objective reality refers to facts of everyday life that are real or apparent to those who 'inhabit' it, the subjective reality is constructed and reproduced over time. Consequently, given that these subjective interpersonal perceptions help to define reality, perceptions developed over time by members of work groups influence how individuals "objectify" organizational elements around them.

When applying social constructionist notions to virtual teams, "reality" is realized through interpretation whereby team members develop patterns of meanings from their electronic interactions with others. In other words, members' views and perceptions in computer-mediated settings evolve and change over time (Walther, 1996)