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Charlotte Nirmalani Gunawardena

Chapter 4
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Introduction

The increasing interest in developing online learning communities and communities of practice (COP) has generated the exploration into issues of identity that impact online communication. "As we engage in communities of discourse and practice, our knowledge and beliefs are influenced by those communities. So is our identity formation, which is also a major outcome of learning" (Jonassen & Land, 2012, p.x).

Shuter (2012) observes that cultural identity, according to social identity theory, is derived from membership in social groups, the self in relation to others, and a social identity that is based on group contact fixed in space and time, producing "discernable social identity(ies) that varies in salience depending on the social context(s)" (p.221). However, he notes that in this age where people live in virtual spaces with myriad others, this perspective may not be relevant and sufficient for explaining the development and maintenance of cultural identity. Shuter offers three areas for consideration when studying twenty-first century identity theory, that go beyond past cultural identity theory studied in face-to-face communities: 1) How are cultural identities constructed in virtual communities? 2) How are hybrid cultural identities created in virtual and face-to-face communities? 3) Compared with face-to-face, what are the differences in the dynamics of maintaining cultural identity in virtual communities?

This chapter aims at developing our understanding of Shuter's first question, that of identity creation and negotiation in virtual interaction by reporting on a study the author conducted to examine the sociocultural processes of synchronous online communication from the perspective of two different cultural contexts: Morocco and Sri Lanka. To better understand the sociocultural processes that play a role in identity formation in online interactions, it is important to examine the informal use of the medium in different cultural contexts. Determining how identity is negotiated in informal Internet interactions enables us to infer how various individuals will adapt their communication styles to more formal computer-mediated, text-oriented communication.

The study discussed in this chapter asked: What happens when individuals whose self-images are characterized by a sense of group identity (mainly in face-to-face contexts) based on factors such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, language, and socioeconomic status, use the culturally

heterogeneous and technically ephemeral forums of the Internet to pursue personal communication goals? It was undertaken with the intention of understanding the sociocultural environment of an online community based on factors that emerged from the communication processes employed by Internet chat users in Morocco and Sri Lanka. Such a framework would enable us to suggest implications for online interaction and community formation in more formal academic settings. The study discussed in this chapter was conducted collaboratively with colleagues in Morocco and Sri Lanka. An initial analysis of the data can be found in Gunawardena, Idrissi Alami, Jayatilleke, and Bouacharine (2009). This book chapter draws on a modified analysis of the data, focusing on identity and interaction.

Design of the Study

The study adopted a qualitative ethnographic perspective when conducting interviews with participants and examining their communication processes in synchronous chat. Grounded theory building (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to develop a conceptual framework for understanding expression of identity and the role it played in online interactions. This collaborative design involved four researchers who offered an interdisciplinary perspective, and understood the cultural contexts studied. Interview questions were translated into Moroccan Arabic, French, Sinhala, and Tamil. Interviews were conducted in these languages and English.

Individual and focus group interviews were conducted in Internet cafés and university computer labs in four different locations in the Middle Atlas region of Morocco between September and January 2004, and in small and large towns in the western, southern, and eastern parts of Sri Lanka from February to July 2005. This study focused primarily on participants who used chat forums to engage in conversation and build relationships with people they did not know. Data were gathered from fifty-five adults in Morocco, which included 36 males and 19 females, and from fifty adults in Sri Lanka, which included 33 males and 17 females. At these given points in time, Internet adoption in these two countries was in its early stages.

Morocco and Sri Lanka exemplify two very different cultural contexts. Morocco is an Arab, Berber, Muslim and Mediterranean African country, more recently colonized by the French, speaking standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, Berber, and French. Sri Lanka is a Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim country, which is predominantly Buddhist and more recently colonized by the English, speaking Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Both countries are similar in that they have diverse minority groups with different languages and religions represented in the population. In both these countries, fewer women frequented Internet cafés, reflecting social taboos. In Morocco, cafés were the domain of men, which applies to Internet cafés as well. In Galle, a mid-size, fairly conservative town in Sri Lanka, only one in ten users were women.

Definition of Culture

Although Sri Lankan and Moroccan societies would be classified in Hofstede's (1980) framework as high power distance societies, participants from these countries look to the online medium as a liberating environment that equalizes status differences, thereby providing them with a level playing field. Therefore, their interactions online would not necessarily reflect high

power distance communication. Graiouid (2005) takes this point further by stating that Internet chat and discussions are dismantling the traditional power structures in Morocco by allowing previously disenfranchised groups to publicize their concerns. The use of social media during the more recent "Arab Spring Movement" exemplifies this phenomenon.

Very often, those who communicate online identify with multiple frames of reference. Ess and Sudweeks (2005) note that Hofstede's (1980) framework and to a lesser extent Hall's (1976) conceptualization of culture appear to be limited to national cultural differences and thus less well-suited for understanding and researching multiple cultural differences within nation-states, including the 'third' or hybrid identities that are themselves fostered by the cultural flows facilitated by the Internet and the web.

However, for our study, we found Hall's (1976) conceptualization of high-context (direct) and low-context (indirect) communication styles useful for analyzing cultural differences in communication online. Both Morocco and Sri Lanka are described as high-context cultures (Hall, 1976). In both Moroccan and Sri Lankan cultures, context is important in understanding messages and their connotations. Many Moroccans and Sri Lankans adopt an indirect communication style in face-to-face interactions.

Coming to terms with the complexity of online culture meant that we had to define it in its own right. Therefore, we adopted the definition of 'idioculture' cited by Cole and Engestrom (2007) as our definition of online culture. This definition includes multiple cultural selves and hybrid identities on the Internet that interact with each other cross-culturally to form unique cultures online.

Emerging Themes and Conceptual Framework

Expression and formation of identity online emerged as a major theme when examining the sociocultural processes that shaped informal online interactions in Morocco and Sri Lanka. Associated with this major theme were three sub-themes: trust building, self-disclosure, and face negotiation. Gender differences were observed in the expression of identity in these sub-themes. The following sections discuss these themes in detail. The results of our analyses indicated that men and women employ and value different communication styles when chatting. The online environment gives them the anonymity and freedom to act out gender roles and experiment with gender identity.

Identity online

In chat sessions, identity was expressed by asking for the communicator's ASL (Age, Sex and Location). Depending on the context, chatters either reveal their true identity, create a different identity, blend or communicate their identity using a pseudonym (referred to as an ID) that expresses their true or imagined character. The chatter uses this information to create an image about his/her interlocutor. Ahmed stated that the revelation of his identity depends on the first question. If he feels the chatter is truthful he would give his real name. It appears that of the three elements of identity expression, age and sex are more important than location. Hamid gives his real age and sex. 'If the other person is not interested in your location, you do not tell.'

Giving the location can sometimes hinder access to chatters. Lal, a Sri Lankan male noted that although he wanted to chat with Western females, they would not respond, only women from the Philippines did.

Cultural and social stereotyping occurs through names, nicknames, and pseudonyms. Mohammed used to have an ID 'Mohammed', but decided to change it because when he entered American and British chat rooms, he was accused of terrorism and was verbally assaulted. He feels his new ID 'green Python' is attractive enough to gain access to people. Other IDs used by female participants included: 'Scarlet', 'Diva', and 'Tzay'. Sarath, a Sri Lankan male, noted that to appeal to different audiences, he changes his identity. As in the example of 'Mohammed,' disclosing real names that are strongly associated with a religious, racial, or ethnic group could hinder communication online, whereas a nickname can enable a chatter to stay in an online relationship. Joinson (2003) has observed that constructing identity through text provides opportunity for people to craft an identity that exists quite apart from the usual pressures of real life and impression management.

In both countries, chatting is perceived as playful activity, a form of entertainment, a therapeutic agent, and a game that does not require the disclosure of true identity from the beginning. It is also perceived as an addiction as many were described as 'chat addicts.' Graiouid (2005) showed that for some Moroccan study participants chat had become an essential part of life, and like morning coffee a chat session was necessary to start the day. On the other hand, asynchronous discussion forums, on a topic of interest, are regarded as more serious since they represent an arena for debating ideas and defending opinions. Therefore, respondents would feel more comfortable divulging their true credentials in such forums. The participants made a clear distinction between identity expression in anonymous chat vs. a more serious forum discussion.

The sociocultural context influences online communication, which in turn is influenced by the virtual culture that develops online. "Whereas the Western concept of 'self' is based on the individual, the Moroccan concept of self is based on the Islamic notion of jamaçah 'community/group' and is, thus inherently plural" (Sadiqi, 2003, p.65). One aspect of the collective self is the difficulty that Moroccans have in talking about themselves in public as it is generally considered as a 'lack of modesty' (p.67). Sadiqi notes that the language of introductions reveals many aspects of a Moroccan's self. Introductions involve interplay of cultural, social, situational, and identity variables, which range from gender, local geographical origin, class, setting, participants, age, and self interest. In Sri Lanka, the major forms of social identity are Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim, and in addition hybrid identities signaling a mix of these three, even though there are other forms of identity meaningful to people such as caste, region, and religion (Silva 2004). Given the two sociocultural contexts, it was interesting to observe the freedom with which many participants played with their identity online.

Identity and gender

Sadiqi (2003) points out the dichotomy between public and private space in Morocco. Public spaces; the streets and the market place, are the domain of men, while women are expected to remain in private spaces, the home. In general, though women have access to public spaces, stepping out into the street is still considered by many as an act of trespassing, into a hostile male

domain. Sadiqi further elaborates that Moroccan culture strongly constrains the behavior of men and women and lists eight influences on gender perception, gender subversion, and language use: 1) history, 2) geography, 3) Islam, 4) orality, 5) multilingualism, 6) social organization, 7) economic status, and 8) political system. Given this sociocultural context, Internet communication provides tremendous opportunities to create virtual identities that can breach the dichotomy of public and private space that exists in Moroccan society. Graiouid (2005) notes that this may explain why female chatters enjoy the anonymity of the Internet, which allows them to build relationships without compromising themselves.

As reflected in the following perspectives from Moroccan participants, gender stereotypes prevail in the creation of identity. Jamal admits that it is easy to disguise himself as a woman. In posing as a woman, he talks about women's topics such as dress and fashion. Hamid thinks that women rarely discuss social issues. They are mostly interested in personal experiences, and love affairs. When asked about how he can tell if a man is posing as a woman, he says that exaggeration is what gives away a man posing as a woman. Hassan thinks that women tend to discuss their daily schedules and errands more than men. He thinks that chat is like a game that could turn into a healthy relationship or end quickly.

Analysis of interviews from Sri Lanka also indicated gender differences in the expression of identity. Generally males disclose their true identity (age, sex, location) from the start, irrespective of the purpose and type of the communication (chat or academic forums). A 23 year old male student observed:

> I'll tell that I am a webmaster from Sri Lanka and this is my website. I also tell my age and gender. Usually when males get to know that I am a male, they won't continue. But if someone is interested in my research area then they will continue. Usually chatting among males is less. But females prefer to chat with females.

Sri Lankan females were much more cautious than males, and did not reveal their true identity in unknown communities. They either give their first name or use a pseudonym and do not reveal much personal information. They tend to talk more about their personal lives once they have established the relationship. On the other hand, if women are chatting to get academic help, then, they usually reveal their true identity. Women in both Morocco and Sri Lanka were more cautious than men in revealing their identity online for fear of being harassed. This seems to be a cultural feature of online communication that transcends nationality. Harassment online is a serious concern not only for women but also for children.

A majority of Sri Lankan females prefer to communicate only with females. They are reluctant to talk with unknown male counterparts unless they have been introduced by one of their friends or relations reflecting social norms and practices. Most of them chat with local and Asian communities, as they feel more secure in these circles.

Gender differences emerged in establishing social presence. Many felt that you need to choose adequate and suitable topics when communicating one's presence to someone of the opposite sex. Tone is also important. Male participants claim that they do not talk in the same way to males and females. With females they are more cautious and more flattering. As to

communicating with females, most respondents suggest that they depend on establishing social presence by asking about tastes in music, movies, reading, sports and dress styles. They feel that women tend to communicate their presence through description of their daily lives and their personal problems. When males chat with other males, subjects of discussion tend to be about political, social, and abstract problems.

Therefore, the expression of identity online showed the interplay of real and imagined identities, and gender differences in the projection of identity based on the context of the communication.

Trust building

Identity is closely linked to building trust. Many will not reveal their true identity until they feel they can trust the other person. From the initial encounter chatters spend their time trying to determine the trustworthiness of the other. The most common trust building technique is to ask a series of questions in the initial online contact and ask the same questions again later to determine the consistency or inconsistency in the answers. Many mentioned time as an important factor for building trust.

If in the same country, some chatters will give out their mobile phone numbers in order to verify the trustworthiness of the other. Most respondents prefer e-mail when the online relationship grows stronger over time. They feel that email communication is more 'serious' and 'honest' than chat. Another advantage of e-mail is that there is less time pressure to answer immediately. The speed at which chatters type affects the flow of communication and possibly the chatter's level of interest and trust. The use of mobile phones and e-mail is significant because it suggests the ways in which chatters view the development of cyber relationships and how they 'heirarchize' the methods of communication: Chatting – low risk and easy to dismiss; email - more personal involving larger risk; mobile phones - higher risk, requiring a degree of trust.

Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure was associated with trust-building and the expression of identity. Many participants indicated that the trustworthiness of others is expressed through their disclosure of private life. They insist that the disclosure of personal experiences and intimate problems allows people to get to know each other better and strengthens the relationship. Anonymity increases the ability to self-disclose. Joinson (2003) confirms this by showing how visually anonymous computer-mediated communication (CMC) leads to higher levels of self-disclosure. Where there is an unequal distribution of power in society, such as in Sri Lanka and Morocco, anonymous online communication equalizes participants. Respondents felt that talking online can break barriers of communication between people of different classes, professions, and sexes. On the other hand, anonymity also encourages relationships that are superficial. A male participant noted that it is not necessary to reveal the truth, because he does not have any intention of continuing the friendship. When trust is established, participants are more likely to reveal their true identity.

Self-disclosure and gender

Generally, both females and males have reservations about revealing their personal details to an unknown person or group. Both do not reveal their personal information till they build up the relationship. Relationship-building takes time and several messages. Much of the relationship building process is based on intuitions, as it often relates to the 'feelings' participants get from reading others' messages. The extent to which they 'feel' the other or their 'social presence' in mediated communication.

Some males do not hesitate to place their own photograph on the web. One particular male uses different font sizes and colors to make it more attractive: ' I use a webcam and give a profile with the picture. I usually use 14-16 font with shaded colors.' Females hardly ever send their photographs. But some who are familiar with computers use different fonts, colors and emoticons (smileys) when they send messages. 'I use emoticons. Those are quick. Use font like Comic Sans for friends and Arial and Centre Gothic with official group. Use short cuts like Y, U etc; Different techniques for different people.' Chat users have developed various conventions to present their identity and persona in chat sessions and will reveal their true identity depending on the context.

Face negotiation

Face is an identity phenomenon. Ting-Toomey (1994) defines face as "the presentation of a civilized front to another individual within the webs of interconnected relationships in a particular culture" (p.1). In this study, face negotiation is defined as the individual's intentions to portray his/her self-image in a positive manner to others by utilizing verbal, nonverbal, and self-representation methods to support his/her conception of face.

In online chat sessions, the nature of the relationship determines reactions to insults and the negotiation of face. Chatters will close the window if the relationship is weak and employ a variety of techniques to resolve misunderstandings and negotiate face, if the relationship is strong. A 35 year old Sri Lankan male respondent observed: 'It depends on the friendship…If the friendship is deep then you feel that the person is next you. In that instance you would like to continue the friendship.'

Generally, respondents first seek an explanation, if they felt insulted. Then they decide on other courses of action, such as shutting down the communication, ignoring the person, insulting back, or asking for an apology. An apology is requested if the person or the relationship is valued. E-mail is resorted to in order to clarify the situation, settle misunderstandings, and present apologies. Email is preferable if the relationship has been going on for a long time and if the insulted person thinks that it is not intentional but a result of a misunderstanding.

In Morocco and Sri Lanka, face-to-face communication patterns are more high-context and less direct than in the US. Generally, it is difficult to communicate context in an online medium. In Morocco, for example, there are many taboos and behaviors which imply "hchouma" or "shame" and should be avoided during communication. Many questions do not get answered because chatters cannot be very direct and tell them to the face of the other. This opens up room for interpretation and sometimes miscommunications. Sadiqi (2003) observes that the concept of collective self is so rooted into the Moroccan psyche that an individual's self-image is not

cultivated internally, but rather derives from others' opinions and attitudes, which is manifested clearly in the concept of 'hchouma' or 'shame' which may be defined as the "fear of losing face in front of others" (p.67). This explains the heavy pressure within Moroccan families to protect all its members because bad behavior from one member affects the reputation of all. To avoid 'shame' Moroccans may refrain from admitting blatant realities in public if it involves a risk of losing face.

According to Ting-Toomey (1988), low-context cultures emphasize individual identity, self-face concern, and direct verbal and nonverbal expression. In contrast, high-context cultures emphasize group identity, other-face concerns, and indirect verbal and nonverbal expressions. However, when online, whether a person is from a high-context or low-context culture, is not critical as anonymity is a factor in the attempt to negotiate face. The elimination of title, gender, and other status cues can create a more neutral atmosphere. If a stranger threatens the concept of face, he or she will be ignored. Therefore, attempts to negotiate face depend on the strength of the relationship that has been built. Face-saving strategies are adopted when there is a bond and when there is an interest in maintaining the relationship. If this is not the case, in the real-time world of chat, the general tendency is to close the window and forget the person.

Gender and face negotiation

Both female and male respondents in our study noted that they take extra care to resolve their online misunderstandings and negotiate face if the relationship is strong. If they fail online, they will telephone and explain the situation. Females are more likely to negotiate even when the relationship is not that strong. Usually males chat for entertainment and do not expect long lasting relationships online. Therefore, when there is a misinterpretation, they do not make an extra attempt to resolve the conflict. On the other hand, females take the extra initiative to resolve the misunderstanding. Davidson and Schofield (2002) support this finding by showing that women are more relational than men in virtual interactions. They highlight that women are more likely to approach the world as an individual within a social network; more likely to acquire skills in developing and sustaining personal connections; and more likely to seek out situations and develop behaviors that foster relationships.

Implications for Designing the Social Environment for Online Learning Communities

From these findings of informal synchronous communication in the early days of Internet adoption in two different cultural contexts, we can draw implications for designing the social environment in transnational online learning. Results showed that CMC is not a mere neutral technological innovation. Rather, it is a practice affected by the culture and society of its users. Expression and formation of one's online identity emerged as a major theme when examining the sociocultural processes that influence informal online interactions in Morocco and Sri Lanka. Associated with this major theme were three sub-themes, including: trust building, self-disclosure, and face negotiation. Gender differences were observed in the expression of identity. Given the unique online cultures developed by interacting groups, and the themes that emerged, we draw the following implications for designing the social environment to foster online learning communities.

- The creation of identity and playing with one's online identity enables participants to learn about themselves. It is a psychological tool that helps one to experience the real world in a new way. The ability to change one's environment and try out different ways of being lends itself well to role-play activities and computer simulations as learning strategies in online learning environments.
- The expression of self-identity through introductions is important for relationship-building, and generating social presence in online learning communities. However, since self-disclosure and posting photographs may not be easy for some participants, protocols should be provided for how introductions should be done, allowing for some degree of anonymity. Alternative techniques include having participants introduce each other online, or, posting an image that represents them, along with an explanation of why the image represents them.
- Building trust and relationships is crucial for the health and well being of an online learning community. Pre-course activities or an orientation can help participants build trust and become more comfortable interacting with each other.
- Attempts to negotiate face and resolve conflict depend on the strength of the relationship that has been built. Therefore, face saving strategies should be part of the communication protocols developed for online learning communities. Women are more likely to make an attempt to resolve misunderstandings and negotiate face and should be encouraged to take up facilitating roles in team interactions.
- Netiquette (a communication protocol) that is both culture and gender sensitive should be developed for online learning communities. This protocol must clearly define what is expected in academic discussions, versus informal chat or virtual spaces such as a "Cybercafé," and delineate what tools or medium to use for different communication functions.
- Online designs should allow for an element of multi-lingual communication and diversity in the expression of English, which will promote cross-cultural understanding and increase comfort levels.
- The distinction between public and private space in Morocco highlights the extent to which cultural context is an important factor in understanding messages. Therefore, participants should be encouraged to provide context for their messages, enabling others to easily decipher them.
- Moderators or facilitators should play an active role in the relationship- building process. Frequent online presence and one's ability to nurture a healthy and productive online community can maintain a safe and conducive environment for all participants. Where there is unequal power distribution in a society such as in Sri Lanka and Morocco, online communication equalizes participants. Moderators should pay attention to power dynamics among participants and try to maintain an equitable learning environment that encourages everyone to participate and contribute.
- In many developing countries, the Internet café maybe the only resource center where learners can gather to participate in online learning. Academic institutions wishing to provide access to learners in geographically isolated locations should make arrangements with Internet cafés to provide technology access and resources necessary for their academic programs.

These implications provide guidelines for the development of conducive social environments to

support online learning. Issues of identity, gender, and language will continue to provide impetus for further research in our efforts to understand the cultures that develop in virtual environments. The data reported in this study was collected in the early days of Internet diffusion. It would be worthwhile to engage in studies to determine how communication patterns have changed with the advent of social networking sites and the impact of this change on the creation of online identity and virtual cultures.

Acknowledgements

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