

## Chapter 8

# Knowing Through Asynchronous Time and Space: A Phenomenological Study of Cultural Differences in Online Interaction

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter reports the results of a study that employed phenomenological and dialectical perspectives to explore cultural differences in computer-mediated communication. An analysis of the dialectic of minimization and amplification manifested in students' online experiences and the significance of contextual variations, power structures, and other features of online interactions allow us to see the processual, relational, and contradictory nature of cultural differences online. They also provide information that can facilitate more effective intercultural online interactions in the future.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

We are all global villagers. Since McLuhan (1962) coined the term “global village” over 40 years ago, residents of the world are becoming increasingly connected via communication technologies – particularly online communication

technologies. Intercultural interaction through computer-mediated communication (CMC) is no longer the privilege of some. Rather, it is now a necessity for all. Increasing worldwide access to cyberspace has introduced a favorable online environment for the frequent occurrence of communication across cultures. The internationalization and interdependence of people from every part of the world, moreover, makes cultural

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differences in online interaction a fascinating research area for scholars of communication and many other disciplines to investigate. Within this context, understanding cultural differences in computer-mediated communication might play a significant role in increasing cultural sensitivity and communication effectiveness in international interactions.

Originated in the 1950s, the Internet has become a mass medium and created a new dimension for global communication (Barnes, 2003; McPhail, 2006). Statistics, furthermore, indicate a rapid increase in international online access. For example, as of September 2009, Internet users have reached approximately 1.8 billion worldwide (Internet World Stats, 2009). The growth of the worldwide online environment has, in turn, influenced people's communication experiences in a variety of fields including the professional and private, the economic and political, and the academic and educational. In today's fast-developing and highly competitive world, studies on intercultural communication in cyberspace have great potential for helping individuals across all of these spheres interact more effectively with each other.

Many studies investigating computer-mediated communication in relation to culture focus on cross-cultural comparisons and identifying variations in communication behaviors (Kim & Papacharissi, 2003; Smith, Coldwell, Smith, & Murphy, 2005; Vishwanath & Chen, 2008). While these studies have contributed to our understanding of online communication and cross-cultural differences, a growing number of scholars have challenged the practice of essentializing cultural differences through uncritical acceptance of dualisms and logical positivism. These individuals have recognized the importance of engaging context and power in studying culture and communication (Chuang, 2003; Martin & Nakayama, 1999; Collier, 2005; Martinez, 2008; Halualani, Mendoza, & Drzewiecka, 2009). Characteristics of computer-mediated communication such as

the common lack of nonverbal cues, ambiguity, anonymity, and pseudo-anonymity present new scholarly challenges (St. Amant, 2002; Shim, Kim, & Martin, 2008).

To adequately describe the complex realities of online interactions, the study presented in this chapter uses phenomenological and dialectical perspectives to explore the dynamic and dialectical nature of cultural differences as they are experienced online. In so doing, the study draws upon the dialectical approach previously used by Martin and Nakayama (1999; 2011). The chapter reports the results of a study on college students' consciousness and pre-consciousness in experiencing cultural differences online within the framework of phenomenology and the dialectical approach. Such scholarly work on cultural differences helps provide suggestions to increase communication effectiveness and develop a sense of knowing through asynchronous time and space.

## **CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION**

Two sets of research are related to the study on cultural differences in intercultural online interactions presented in this chapter. These sets of research are studies on cultural variability and studies on computer-mediated communication. These two strands of previous research provide the theoretical foundation for the research examined here.

Many existing studies focus on communication between people from different cultures and attempt to describe or explain intercultural communication behaviors (Gudykunst & Lee, 2002; Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Several of them are based on the assumption that cultural values influence these communication differences. As a result, the related researchers employ traditional social science quantitative methodologies to examine such situations (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). For example, Hofstede (1980, 1997) has identified

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