# ONLINE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract**

*Online Intercultural Communication (OIC), related to the development of the Internet, digital environments and new media technological advancement, reflects the complexity of cultural contacts in the contemporary world. Without time or space limits or of any borders, OIC is enhanced by the creation of multilingual and multimodal contents, accessible to Internet users. However, it is of great interest to investigate how a specific situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in which way this situation allows a thorough redefinition of OIC due to the complexity of the means and values engaged. COVID-19 led to both the creation and the revelation of multiple expressions of cultural contacts in a virtual, as well as a real environment.*

**Keywords:** *Online Intercultural Communication, Internet, means, content, contexts, expressions*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Online Intercultural Communication (OIC) is related to the development of the Internet as part of digital environments that accommodate interactions between users, abolishing every kind of barriers between cultures. Academic researchers in this field focus on specific aspects of OIC such as intercultural education, cross-cultural collaborative learning ([1] Kumi-Yeboah 2018), the role of new media studies ([2] Shuter 2012). Nevertheless, specific situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic reveal the complexity of what is called online intercultural communication: continuous online exchanges between users of different cultures depending on specific contexts, obviously, blending with, deforming or recreating reality online. The question that arises is in which way can-we investigate OIC without neglecting the plurality of the means and contexts which emerge. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic allows us to examine in a new way the specificities of OIC by taking into consideration its intrinsic properties in WEB 2 dynamic environment. Furthermore, investigating the different usages of OIC and how these usages are influenced by specific contexts, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, will enable an understanding of the necessity and the importance of examining OIC in respect of a broader socio-political and cultural context. In this perspective, we must reconsider OIC in relation to multiple factors, sectors and contexts.

## 2. OIC: MEANS & SPECIFICITIES

Marcoccia ([3] 2012 353) states that "[t]he internet affords its users an unprecedented level of contact with people from other cultural and social groups. It is often assumed that because of this it can facilitate intercultural communication". The rapid advancement of electronic communication technology enhances globalization and interconnection between different cultures. Around 60 percent of the world population uses the internet today. This signifies an enormous amount of interactions and a vast generating of data, hardly limited in time and space, since, precisely, WEB 2.0, as participative and social WEB, has a dynamic character, constantly evolving, in terms of means, applications and outputs. This is due to various dominant factors such as the means used as wireless computers or smartphones while global mobile data traffic increases constantly ([4] Clement 2020). This development is inevitably associated with different types of consumption, such as media consumption, mass consumption or even consumption of goods as well as to various factors. The study of OIC cannot, therefore, focus only on language or Social Networks Sites (SNS) and cannot be analyzed as a face-to-face contact.

OIC researchers expand on intercultural communication perspectives. Ingrid Piller ([5] 2011) shows that, in order to understand intercultural communication, we must analyze it in specific contexts and situations. It is not only a pragmatic or a sociolinguistic approach of intercultural communication but also a need to take into consideration various factors of a complicated interaction in a given period. If intercultural communication raises these matters, then the online intercultural communication is characterized and defined by the digital environment called computer-mediated communication, implicating the electronic devices usage and their potentialities. That is, the online intercultural communication is a dynamic multimodal process, e.g. text, image, video, and their combinations, access to unlimited content and creation of new content, involving multiparticipant actions in an electronic environment, thus it can be interpreted in different ways ([6] Macfadyen et al. 2004).

Networking allows the communicating of meanings that are not supported only by languages but also by multimodal features of the online medium. The Internet "has become a multilingual arena with cultural diversity" ([7] Sangiamchit 2017, p.1) promoting different languages. Over 50 percent of WEB pages are in English but only 25 percent of users speak English. "The English language has 25.3% of internet users worldwide" ([8] *Internet world users by language* 2020). Nonetheless, WEB pages content can be instantly translated into other languages, as a scroll-down menu option on the menu bar of a WEB page, and the user can access the same content in different languages, or have access to instant translation tools. Thus, the same content is accessible to users from different cultures. Furthermore, many companies have many sites in different languages (e.g. Google site in English, Google site in French, etc.). So, we assist in the creation of a new multilingual content which is at the same time multicultural, because the same tools create various language contents. At the same time the SNS, mobile phones, tablets, internet environment and networking promote intercultural communication, as new means make it easier. Robert Shuter ([2] 2017, pp. 219-220) states that: "increased contact between individuals and groups from different cultures [is no] longer restricted primarily to face-to-face encounters, people worldwide use [new media] to communicate instantaneously with others regardless of geo-political boundaries, time, or space". Not only face-to-face encounters are not necessary in OIC, but the same WEB content, accessible to multiple language users, constitutes the perfect place of OIC.

The complexity of online interactions between participants, contents and contexts would be interesting to be investigated by an interdisciplinary research project. Actually, OIC researchers investigate selected criteria linked to subjects, means, tools and goals, implicating a variety of disciplines discourses ([6] Macfadyen et al. 2004, pp. 27-29). Thus, it is necessary to extend research fields. Internet, as a new digital communicative space, functions as a space of multiple encounter. We will focus on the dynamics of the COVID-19 context in order to understand how intercultural communication as a broader concept, appears in a specific context and how it can be defined.

## 3. OIC: CONTEXTS AND CONTROVERSIES

Online intercultural communication during COVID-19 can be studied through different research perspectives such as the anthropologists' point of view. Manderson and Levin ([9]2020) show how COVID-19 influenced all human activity and behavior. An unprecedented situation that concerns not only human perception and behavior in a global environment, but also closely connected to exceptional organized nation-states' actions to contain the viral spread. "Yet the institution of quarantine practices, lockdowns, and border controls, and the insistence on adherence to hygiene practices (handwashing) highlight how human practices and behaviors are implicated, and foreshadow a global humanitarian crisis as community transmission takes hold in global south communities" ([9] Manderson & Levin 2020, p. 1). This approach demonstrates that what is defined as culture is the total of organized and non-organized human habits and even though this is "happening in a new context of a new restraint away from blame" ([9] Manderson & Levin 2020, p. 2). Human behavior is related to the real environment, and the pandemic threat requires an organized political intervention, closely connected to network.

Official policies constitute a cornerstone of intercultural communication. One can refer to institutions, such as European Commission, UNESCO that promote intercultural communication in different ways (research programs cultural activities and events…). Nevertheless, lack of official EU policy concerning

online intercultural communication activities is evident, since EU focuses on existing programs which promote intercultural communication in cities or societies e.g. Intercultural Cities Program.

In the same way, European Commission ([10] European Commission 2020) Supporting Europe's cultural and creative sector demonstrates that the measures taken compliment and support the Members States' actions. So, the European Commission actions during COVID-19 can be considered as complementary, without an immediate character, and the inter/cultural communication is being prompted, indirectly. UNESCO's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as it appears in the official home page of the organization, also demonstrates its priorities concerning a. public health, b. education, c. culture, in relation to different practices and activities:

> The COVID-19 outbreak is a global public health crisis. It resonates deeply also at the heart of UNESCO's mission. COVID-19 tells us scientific cooperation is key when dealing with a global public health issue. It tells us that continued education must be ensured when so many children today cannot go to school. It is a stark reminder of the importance of quality, reliable information, at a time when rumours are flourishing. It tells about the power of culture & knowledge to strengthen human fabric and solidarity, at a time when so many people around the world must keep social distance and stay at home. UNESCO is fully committed to supporting governments for distance learning, open science, knowledge and culture sharing, as fundamental means to stand together and tighten the bonds of our shared humanity ([11] UNESCO 2020).

Moreover, the European Union response ([12] European Union 2020) to COVID-19, can be considered as the response of all States nations all over the world and as an economic and financial argument:

> We are taking resolute action to reinforce our public health sectors and mitigate the socio-economic impact in the European Union. We are mobilizing all means at our disposal to help our Member States coordinate their national responses and are providing objective information about the spread of the virus and effective efforts to contain it" ([13] European Commission 2020).

Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic official cultural policies were absent, since the pandemic was and is above all a political and a health issue. But, as in every crucial event, it is difficult or even impossible to isolate culture from political and social issues. Social distancing, social isolation, for many people, fear of the unknown, financial crisis, have given a different dimension to OIC.

Indeed, OIC during COVID-19 demonstrates the intricate relations between official and unofficial cultural policies, since OIC concerns also cultural interactions among individuals. Different cultural activities represent a very important part of OIC. The cultural promotion in its broader acceptance brings forward the artistic expression as an individual engagement, but also as the expression of the current situation that leads to a new behavior and new practices in OIC. All human activities related to the government nation-states, during and after COVID-19, are, partly or entirely, connected to the spread of the virus over the world, and the means of physical communication are reinvented in a digital environment, online.

Cultural activities also encompass the promotion of digital forms of culture (virtual museum visits, access to literature or art archives, concerts and other) by many institutions (museums, national orchestras, libraries, universities, etc.). The online access and sharing of different kinds of cultural events and products strongly contributes to the reinforcement of intercultural relations and communication. Consequently, online intercultural relations during COVID-19 demonstrate the importance of the context in the promotion and evolution of intercultural communication.

Online communication during COVID-19 replaces conventional communication. The synchronous and asynchronous modes of online communication help people come together finding new ways to communicate and to get closer. Online communication functions as a constructive dialogue between people all over the world. In this special context a new kind of images, symbols, alternative greetings are invented and exhibited online. Nonetheless, online communications during the pandemic, do not present an isolated character. People not only seek to communicate with members of their families or friends. The pandemic is a worldwide experience, an experience shared similarly by the whole planet.

New universal values are promoted such as respect to health care and to human life. Internet becomes the media that strongly promotes and reflects the universality of experience, reinforcing OIC in that respect.

Every common or individual activity becomes a collective activity, since it is taking place in an unlimited online space: education, professional as well as different kinds of social activities. In the field of education, the dominant purpose was the development of an efficient online education. This objective, among others, encouraged international collaborations, in the field of higher education for instance, and the promotion of new education programs, such as Young Universities for the Future of Europe alliance, or even the conservation and the reinforcement of existing ones such the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. In all levels of education, schools all over the world were closed, however, the lessons continued. Using the Internet, all lessons programs, even laboratory classes, are accomplished successfully. The students were attending their classes through online courses. The classrooms were transferred to a virtually constructed environment, a sort of online simulation of the classroom and the class lesson. In order to achieve that, many webinars took place using different platforms (which prior the COVID-19 pandemic were hardly used and known to many people), e-discussions, through live streaming that different social media can offer (Instagram Live, Facebook Live, etc.), concerning various subjects and in different languages, thus accessible to different users all over the world.

In view of the above, one can observe the evolution of means and applications in WEB environment. How language is related to our experience of the Internet is a central question. “Language is the vehicle for ‘culture’” ([14] Dervin & Liddicoat 2013, p. 33). Thus, language and culture coexist and they are mutually influenced and redefined. The online environment and the computed-mediated communication during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown point to the multiplicity of means which amplify language potentialities. It is not only a multimodal online environment with different kinds of expressions concerning words, images, videos, etc., it is also a dominant subject of the period COVID-19. Different forms of language show this critical global state, like COVID-19 image, the worldwide spread of the virus, or the masks and gloves, all becoming symbols of a particular period.

Work, in general, an important part of someone's life, is reinvented during COVID-19. Intercultural communication becomes essential in this sector, since it demonstrates the individual, group and systems’ ability to shift his/her/their point of view from a closed standpoint to one which admits cultural differences, allowing interaction with people of different cultures especially during extremely difficult and dangerous periods. OIC increases the adaptability of workers and develops an intercultural competence that can help raise work productivity ([15] Bendaravičienė et al. 2019, p. 404), when the goals of an enterprise should go beyond cultural boarders and beyond general lockdowns. This competence increases productivity, since there is openness and connection with the other, while big companies and enterprises all over the world are cooperating with each other. In this case individual competences concern not only “knowledge of different cultures, which is identified as an intercultural competence characterized by an ability and appropriately react to cultural diversity” ([15] Bendaravičienė et al. 2019, p. 405), but it concerns also all the means of communication which define the expected results. The most efficient method is through “group meetings or ever trainings” ([15] Bendaravičienė et al. 2019, p. 408), through team remote collaboration which overgoes every obstacle.

Even though, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a large member of enterprises and companies all over the world shut down, and employees could not go to work because of the pandemic, the operations of the enterprises continued. The employees were transferred into a virtual, digital working environment, and world teleworking was implemented. Enterprises and companies continued their operations throughout the time of Coronavirus, and employees were working remotely from their homes. Meetings were held in order to keep the employees updated through video conferences. Nothing has stopped because the Internet makes remote collaboration easier and it shows the abolition of all boarders. So, working remotely gave the opportunity to avoid total collapse of the global economy and the opportunity to nation-states, organizations, groups and individuals all over the world to cooperate and to overcome this difficult situation. Eurogroup teleconferences during the lockdown demonstrate this possibility.

During this period online intercultural group work proved to be a successfully applied strategy to enhance research, innovation and international cooperation. If we consider the proven benefits from online intercultural group work that enable the members of a group to "benefit from diversity among" ([16] Poort et al. 2019, p. 218) the other members, then this practice will be facilitated and expanded in the near future. We must underline that most of these projects concern education and a well-structured collaborative business frame ([16] Poort et al. 2019, [1] Kumi Yeboah 2018). Nonetheless, participants can experience different collaborative environments with other people from different cultural backgrounds. By this cultural interaction they develop skills and relationship and could propose drastic solutions to difficult and ongoing problems. Different work groups appear online especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting the same characteristics in online environment and with a dynamic prospect due to the internet possibilities, which allow the participation of multiple users with infinite possibilities. For example, First Intercultural Citizenship Education Virtual Exchange organized by Anna Lindh Foundation in April 2020 intend to offer educators "a space to encourage discussion and reflection on how the current pandemic has affected the work of educators and to share ideas on how the pandemic's consequences on intercultural exchanges/dialogue can be minimized" ([17] Anna Lindh Foundation 2020).

Furthermore, the online dialogue between different countries enhances not only cooperation, security and development but also humanitarian values. The COVID-19 pandemic was affecting countries one by one all around the world. The governments of countries were cooperating and helping each other to fight this virus. They were communicating online and discussing possible solutions ([18] Malmvig 2005, pp. 349-350). This period could be characterized by no discord and less conflicts, as a period of peace and social cohesion. Unfortunately, intercultural communication depends also on diplomacy.

In the age of Coronavirus, the cultural diplomacy became more humanly based, it became more or less public diplomacy. Multilateral relations were based on a humanitarian aspect. Bilateral and multilateral relations taking place in a virtual, constructed environment, through internet, were developed in order to make joint purchases of medical equipment and drugs. At the same time, countries, like China and Cuba, are trying to develop humanitarian aid all over the world during the pandemic. In addition, around the world, Asians have been discriminated, threatened, or blamed for the coronavirus outbreak (United States Vs. China). Unfortunately, it was not the only incident (United States Vs. World Health Organization).

In this sense, even though the pandemic was and still is a worldwide experience that could / should be considered as an opportunity for mutual understanding and respect, online communication during the pandemic reminds us what has always been an obstacle to an efficient intercultural dialogue: xenophobia. We still can't realize that the epidemic evolves differently all over the world, and blaming others cannot change anything. In this perspective one might wonder "Can the coronavirus pandemic be used as an opportunity to study the effects of scapegoating, social distancing, and mass anxiety on intercultural relations?" ([19] Schwartz 2020, p. 52). In fact, we found the chance to blame other people and countries, e.g. China did not react sufficiently in order to stop the spread of the epidemic. But at the same time accusations concerning the spread of the virus dominate online political, public and individual conversations. This argument concerns a nation or a culture and at the same time a limited appreciation of the situation. That is why online intercultural communication promotes or destroys humanism values throughout multiple channels, for example artistic, and it shows the real impact of online intercultural relations during difficult times.

Moreover, nationalist standard practices reveal the necessity of the creation of a strong intercultural education. Through this term, we bring to the discussion a way to perceive nationalist essentialism as a contextualized social process that "brings order to pervasive cultural and linguistic diversities" ([14] Liddicoat & Dervin 2013, pp. 31-32) Furthermore, on the online digital environment these practices are reinforced because of the WEB liberty, diversity and impossible order. It is also important to note political oppositions and provocative political moves and offensive measures during this period, like Turkey turning Hagia Sophia back into mosque, action which divides even social media and public opinion in Turkey ([20] Umut 2020).

Through the study of the online intercultural communication, we can understand ourselves and the world because the world includes this diversity. So, OIC constitutes the expression and the proof of the acceptance of diversity. It can be useful in education and can help us "move beyond seeing cultures as discrete, static entities and see cultures as varied, subjective and power-based constructions of lived experience" ([14] Liddicoat & Dervin 2013, p. 7). Different forms of internet digital language contribute directly in the process of making sense in an intercultural dialogue, but we have to take into consideration that online intercultural communication implies a variety of elements, yet is mainly expressed through language, images and practices, but also their interpretation. All those elements constitute not only the representation of the other culture, as a form of belonging and a form of identity but also as a form of understanding ourselves and the others ([14] Liddicoat & Dervin 2013, p. 9). In this perspective, we must understand what is connected to and influences intercultural dialogue as a dynamic process in evolution where every element is contributing to a meaning in a complex world. So online intercultural communication is based on interactions between different elements exchanged concerning specific contexts and situations enacting intercultural communication. All these point to an expanded intercultural exchange facilitated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the core factors of constructive communication can be the adaptation ([21] Bilotserkovets et al. 2020, p. 180) of the participants in an evolving online process. Online intercultural communication then can be motivated in specific contexts and situations and a key analyzed element which concerns how communication is established and maintained in a particular online environment. If one's culture is evident through many different elements, for instance language, behavior or habits, OIC enables participants to be adapted in the internet host evolving environment. We can also mention plural artistic projects as a sign of this diversification and divergent countenance of the pandemic, expression, engaged mainly online, involving artists and individuals from all over the world e.g. Corona Haikus Collaborative Project ([22] Gaudenzi 2020).

Tourism constitutes also an intercultural activity, which can be conceived as a cultural product, but also as encounter with others with the same or different culture. It is connected, among others, to different experiences related to languages, images, places and cultures. The study of tourism as a form of intercultural communication could be instructive in relation to the notion that "tourism involves, to repeat, a quest for a participatory set of interactions-in-the-world, *and not, importantly, for authenticity*" ([23] Gavin & Phipps 2005, p. 6, emphasis in the original). During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the online environment we observe the development of a great marketing promotion during and after the first general lockdown and the reopening of the national and international borders. In this perspective, online advertising cannot be analyzed as an "interaction between members of different cultures" ([23] Gavin & Phipps 2005, p. 6) which tempts to show how the exotic can offer a unique relaxing and safe experience but as the opportunity of an encounter with our own culture, which might have been forgotten. Furthermore, COVID-19 forces the development of the internal European tourism project. Europeana, the European platform for Digital Cultural Heritage "further develop its tourism angle showcasing European cultural jewels and hidden gems" ([24] European Commission 2020). So, intercultural is closely connected to real socio-political context and OIC reflects this close relationship, which enacts encounters and dialogue between cultures.

The fact that internet facilitates communication establishes a new system of values constantly renegotiated. This period, during and after COVID-19, shows the necessity of a constant dialogue in order to prompt solutions in a changing world of challenges, where internet features seem to characterize our new era, when notions of time, space and action are relatively fluctuating, attached to new networking and media-created communication and a tremendous reality.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

OIC, related to Internet expansion, digital environment and new media technological advancement, reflects the complexity of cultural contacts in the contemporary world. Thus, the study of OIC must not neglect the plurality of means and contents that emerge. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic makes evident the specificities of OIC, interacted with a broader socio-political and cultural context. In the real

world and in the virtual world of Internet, the coronavirus pandemic led to both the creation and the revelation of multiple expressions of intercultural contacts.

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