

## **Cross-Cultural Comparisons of User-Generated Content: An Analytical Framework**

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This article presents a broad framework for the cross-cultural analysis of user-generated content (UGC). Building on veteran concepts used in comparative studies, as well as on literature focusing on attributes unique to UGC, I suggest that global and local aspects of digital cultures can be identified by analyzing four dimensions: values, frames, emotions, and communicative stances. A further principle is using genres as prisms through which the four dimensions are evaluated. The utility of this framework is demonstrated through a cross-linguistic analysis of two genres: notecard confessions and recut trailers. An examination of the manifestations of these genres in English, Arabic, Spanish, German, and Chinese provided insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the proposed model. In particular, I argue that previous theories of values should be reconsidered when analyzing the new landscape of UGC, because they fail to fully account for the multifaceted and fragmented ideals embedded in these content types.

*Keywords: comparative analysis, globalization, notecard confessions, recut trailers, user-generated content*

In the past few decades, digital media has given rise to new modes of transnational, translanguistic, transcultural, and practically trans-anything, flows. These currents have been moving in many, often contrasting, directions: Gigantic corporations such as Facebook and Twitter operate across growing chunks of the globe; online communities of fans and other interest groups transcend national borders; at the same time, individuals use digital media to connect with their closely geolocated friends. The global and the local, which have always been intertwined, unstable, and co-constructed imagined entities, seem more entangled than ever. Although it is tempting to simply accept as a truism that today everything is hybrid, the proliferation of new digital environments invokes some profound questions: Is it possible, in the midst of the constant and rapid cross-national flows, to identify nascent global digital

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cultures that are shared across vast geographical and linguistic regions? And conversely, can we detect unique, local, digital cultures?

This article is premised on the assumptions that these questions can be successfully addressed through comparative studies of user-generated content (UGC) and that such analyses would require the development of a conceptual model for cultural comparison. To elucidate the first premise, the opening part explores the largely unfulfilled potential of UGC as a leverage for understanding contemporary globalization processes. I then introduce an integrative framework for the cross-cultural examination of UGC, combining the cognitive-oriented veteran notions of *values* and *frames* with two affect-oriented criteria: *emotions* and *communicative stances*. Next, I demonstrate the implementation of this framework in a cross-linguistic analysis of two user-generated genres (notecard confessions and recut trailers), informing a conclusive evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses.

### **User-Generated Content as a Prism for Studying Globalization**

The meaning of the term *user-generated content* has been subject to extensive scholarly debate (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), but for the purposes of this discussion, I will follow Östman's (2012) functional definition, which depicts UGC as media texts produced by amateur (or "professional-amateur") actors and circulated through digital platforms such as Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube. This type of content involves "vernacular creativity" (Burgess, 2007)—everyday innovative and artistic practices that can be carried out using simple means of production. Whereas in the past such creative acts were confined to the domestic backstage, in the digital age they have become highly visible cultural practices, carried out by a wide spectrum of users, from a casual participant who engages in vernacular creativity to achieve an array of social and personal goals to the growing class of professional-amateurs (Bruns, 2013) who use digital platforms as a source of monetary revenues and/or as a springboard to mainstream media fame.

The production of UGC is not uniform: Studies in various countries have found that only a small proportion of users (between 10% and 15%) is involved in the creation of such content (Eynon & Malmberg, 2011; Dijck, 2009). These so-called digital elites are not representative of their respective homeland populations; they are relatively educated, savvy, and profess a more cosmopolitan outlook than average. Thus, they may have more in common with one another than with their compatriots (Jenkins et al., 2013). This seeming drawback, however, may afford an advantage when studying globalization: Because we expect digital savvies across the globe to be quite similar, differences that may emerge in a comparative analysis of UGC can be plausibly regarded as indicators for cultural distinctiveness. This approach renders UGC a valuable resource in exploring what we have previously termed "user-generated globalization" (Shifman, Levy, & Thelwall, 2014)—a process of cultural globalization through the mundane spread of content by Internet users.

But when browsing Google Scholar for cross-cultural analyses of UGC, one faces suspicious silence. To be precise, there are quite a few cross-cultural comparisons of digital environments focusing on important topics such as digital divides (e.g., Schroeder, 2015), usage patterns (e.g., Cardoso, Liang, & Lapa, 2013), perceptions of new media (e.g., Campbell, 2007), and education (Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). The vast majority of the studies, however, do not deal specifically with UGC. Two important recent

exceptions are Daniel Miller and colleagues' (2016) ethnographic study exploring various aspects of new media use (including user-generated images), and the Selfiecity project led by Lev Manovich (<http://selfiecity.net>), which compares selfies from five cities across the world.

This dearth of comparative studies on UGC is surprising, on the one hand (because there seems to be so much to gain), but almost expected, on the other hand. Such studies are extremely difficult to execute for at least two reasons, one of which is the fuzziness of the comparison unit. In a world characterized by "cultural sedimentation" (Straubhaar, 2013)—the emergence and constant intersection between various layers of identity—it is almost impossible to disentangle locality from features such as ethnicity and language. Moreover, while nation-states still play important institutional roles in the production and regulation of media content (Flew & Waisbord, 2015), in the seemingly "borderless" Internet sphere, users are often unaware of texts' geographic origins. In this context, language emerges as a powerful, and probably methodologically feasible, anchor for cross-cultural comparisons. However, this approach is fraught with problems, if only because the same language may be used in various geopolitical settings. Another obstacle in conducting meaningful comparative UGC studies relates to analytic criteria. Simply put, it is unclear what can be construed as "culture" in such texts. It seems that we still lack a framework that allows us to conduct large-scale systematic comparative explorations of this new "screen ecology" (Cunningham, Craig, & Silver, 2016).

This article is a foray into this conceptual and empirical minefield. Rather than attempting to provide a definitive answer to the (indubitably overambitious) question of which criteria should be applied when comparing user-generated texts, it seeks to outline some broad directions for further explorations, which hopefully can be tailored to address specific research questions. The suggested framework is based on a combination of new criteria and veteran concepts that have been widely used for the analysis of news and advertisements, but much less of digital cultures.

### **Good Criteria Never Die: Values and Frames**

One of the most prominent concepts applied in cross-cultural/national comparisons in a variety of disciplines is *values*, defined as core enduring beliefs that guide the ways in which social actors behave, evaluate the world, and explain their actions and assessments (Rokeach, 1979; Schwartz, 2012). Values function as moral compasses for people to judge "what is good or bad, justified or illegitimate, worth doing or avoiding" (Schwartz, 2012, p. 4). They have been studied both as individuals' *personal* attributes and as *cultural* properties shared by collectives (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005).

Perhaps the most influential work on personal values is Shalom Schwartz's (2012) universal model. In a series of comparative studies, he identified 10 distinct values that can be found across the globe: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism. Schwartz locates each of these values within two axes: openness to change versus conservation and self-enhancement versus self-transcendence. In this model, some of the values are taken to be conflicting (for instance, seeking personal power may entail less benevolence), while others are compatible (for example, conformity and security). The perceived hierarchical order of

these values varies greatly not only among individuals but across groups; in fact, preferences of specific sets of values may even be embedded in nations' institutional structures.

These dissimilarities among groups have given rise to theories of "cultural values." Perhaps the most influential is Geert Hofstede's (2011) model, which maps national cultures along six dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term versus short-term normative orientation, and indulgence versus restraint. According to Hofstede, nations can be differentiated by their combined scores on these six axes. Another prevalent theory of cultural values, developed by the political scientist Ronald Inglehart (2006), follows a similar rationale. Inglehart identified two major dimensions of cross-cultural variation: traditional versus secular-rational values and survival versus self-expression values. These scales, and their variants, serve for value-based mapping of the entire globe.

Overarching theories of values have been criticized extensively, mainly on the grounds of reductionism and sweeping generalizations. Moreover, critical approaches would submit that these theories are often blind to questions related to cultural hierarchy and power. For example, the modifiers "masculine" and "feminine," used in Hofstede's theory to label certain types of social behaviors, can be criticized as essentialist from a feminist perspective in that they associate men and women with distinct and fossilized sets of features. However, if used as flexible analytical guidelines rather than rigid, definitive schemata, such theories may provide us with valuable conceptual tools for the analysis of UGC.

A broad and open-ended evaluation of UGC will not only explore the text with regard to the existence—or absence—of values but also probe their modes of expression and the relationships, trade-offs, and possible conflicts among them. In fact, putatively conflicting values may be the rule rather than the exception in digital environments. This stems, to a great extent, from the meta-division between individualism and collectivism. Indeed, as Daniel Miller and colleagues (2016) have argued, the assumed association between new media and self-enhancement (or narcissism, in lay terms) is problematic, because social media is inherently about connecting and maintaining relationships with others. Although an investigation of the intersection between values and digital media is still fraught with many questions, one can be certain on at least one point: the unexpectedness and variety of values that may emerge from such an analysis. At the same time, it is also clear that values are particularly difficult to pin down.

In many fields of the social sciences, the elusive nature of values has been dealt with through the more tangible concept of the "frame." Yet, somewhat ironically, no single agreed-upon definition of this term has been documented in the literature, and recent scholarship has deplored its "conceptual fuzziness" (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2016). For the purposes of this article, I will rely on two general understandings of the term. The first definition is rather broad, describing frames as "central organizing ideas" that help people make sense of events (Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974). As such, frames are characterized as "interpretative packages" (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) incorporating interconnected symbols and messages that work together to enhance a particular perception of an issue. The second approach to framing, which is often applied to the analysis of news, is problem-oriented. Entman's veteran (1993) definition states:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. (p. 52)

Frames may be issue-specific or generic in the sense that they are broadly applicable to a variety of different news topics (Baden & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016; Iyengar, 1994).

Comparative studies of media frames have tended to utilize the second, problem-oriented, definition of the concept and have proven it useful for revealing cross-cultural differences. Such studies have often focused on the coverage of specific issues in the news and have consequently investigated both national and journalistic cultures as sources of possible differences in framing (e.g., De Vreese, Jochen, Holli, & Semetko, 2001; Saguy, Gruys, & Gong, 2010). Although framing to date has been analyzed mainly in relation to mass-mediated news, the few studies that have applied it to UGC have demonstrated that it is a fruitful approach for understanding collective perceptions of core issues (e.g., Kligler-Vilenchik & Thorson, 2015). At the same time, such studies also highlight the necessity of using criteria tailored more specifically to UGC.

#### **User-Oriented Criteria: Emotions and Communicative Stance**

Although UGC encompasses a vast variety of genres, they are all governed by logics of “participatory culture” (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009) and thus share certain features. According to Johan Östman (2012), these include *expressivity* (crafting ones thoughts and emotions into visual/verbal texts), *performance* (formulating texts for potential audiences), and *collaboration* (producing texts communally). Theoretically, these general principles may be incorporated in a wide array of textual types. Yet, in the evolution of social media, some modes of expression have become more normatively accepted than others. Marwick and boyd (2011) highlight *authenticity* and *consumability* as particularly prominent in this respect; UGC is often meant to represent an “authentic,” “true” version of their creator’s selves, and at the same time maintain “an easily-consumed” mode of public presentation by using “tropes of consumer culture” (p. 119).

The combination of authenticity and consumability is conducive to the powerful affective flows characterizing social media. Affect, or “the sum of—often discordant—feelings about affairs, public and private,” has been described by Zizi Papacharissi (2015) as “the energy that drives, neutralizes, or entraps networked publics” (p. 7). This concept has become central to the analysis of contemporary media landscapes, since it encapsulates both the strong emotional basis on which social structures are formed in digital media and the rapid, constant and intense process through which these emotions are shaped. Because affect is a complex, broad, and at times evasive notion, I break it down into two tangible dimensions: *emotions* and *communicative stance*. Building on Papacharissi’s argument that affect involves not only emotions but their “pulse,” streaming, and intensity of expression, I use the term *stance* to capture some of the meta-emotional aspects of this multifaceted concept.

Any comparative study of emotions in UGC would greatly benefit from drawing on the rich tradition of sociology of emotions. This discipline assumes that sentiments are not only properties of individuals but are socially constructed. Thus, if psychological accounts of emotions tend to focus on processes related to individuals, the sociology of emotions focuses on the contexts in which emotions are created and manifested. A key role in this process is assigned to language; societies construct distinct vocabularies to depict emotional experiences (Turner & Stets, 2005).

At the same time, sociologists generally acknowledge that not everything associated with emotions is socially constructed and that some basic emotions are shared worldwide. The exact list of these so-called primary emotions is still being debated, but scholars tend to concur that six can be considered as fundamental: happiness, fear, anger, sadness, surprise, and disgust (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). In addition, researchers have formulated a long list of “secondary emotions”—amalgams of two or three primary ones. For example, shame is construed as a combination of sadness (at the self) for failing to meet expectations, anger (at the self), and fear (of the consequences) (Turner & Stets, 2005). Like primary emotions, many secondary emotions are also found universally, yet the ways in which they are experienced and expressed are culture-dependent. Thus, shame might be experienced by people in many countries, but the behaviors that lead to it and the ways deemed appropriate to express it vary across cultures.

Emotional expression in UGC is intimately related to live, ongoing interpersonal social interactions (Benski & Fisher, 2013). Some fundamental components of these interactions are captured by the fourth analytical dimension, labeled here as *stance*. The sociolinguistic study of stance has centered on positionality—the ways in which communicators position themselves in relation to their utterances, their audiences, and the sociocultural contexts they simultaneously respond to and construct (Englebretson, 2007; Jaffe, 2009). Following this approach, and in light of my previous elaboration of the concept (Shifman, 2013), I will focus on three sub-dimensions of stance that relate to a person’s position vis-à-vis other potential speakers (participation structure), the addressees (conative function), and the text (keying):

- *Participation structure.* This dimension of stance relates to the question of who is entitled to participate in an interaction and how they are expected to do so (Goffman, 1981; Phillips, 1972). Relating to forms of UGC, this issue has a bearing not only on existing and long-lasting identity categories such as gender and ethnicity but on dynamic and narrowly contextualized aspects associated with identity—for example, familiarity with memes’ modes of use as a prerequisite for participating in communities such as 4chan’s /b/ board (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2015).
- *Conative function.* Borrowed from Jakobson’s (1960) functional model of language, the conative dimension directly relates to the addressees and to the linguistic means through which they are approached and called to act (for instance, imperatives and vocatives). As elaborated subsequently, user-generated genres vary in the conative appeals they incorporate.

- *Keying*. This aspect of stance, initially conceptualized by Erving Goffman (1974) and further developed by Blum-Kulka and colleagues (2004), has to do with the tone and style of communication. Participants in discursive events use various framings to “pitch” their communication as funny, ironic, mocking, pretend, or serious. Each of these modes encapsulates a distinct relationship between a speaker and the text. For example, if serious communication utterances reflect speakers’ intentions, ironic communication involves a gap between their semantic and intended meaning. Keying is closely related to another parameter that should be taken into account in the analysis of UGC: the polysemic potential of texts. As texts veer from serious to other, more playful keyings, the possibility of reading them in multiple ways increases (Fiske, 1986).

So far, I have surveyed each of the four analytical criteria separately. Yet the most valuable insights are to be sought in their interaction. To understand the ways in which values, frames, emotions, and stance relate to one another, focused studies of specific texts would be required. As detailed next, I suggest using genre as a starting point for such investigations.

### **User Generated Genres as “Operative Signs”**

Like earlier forms of mediated communication, digital communication is based, to a large extent, on the crafting of “genred” messages. In other words, most exemplars of UGC are not merely random bursts of creativity; rather, they are modeled to meet well-known formulas, also known as genres. Although widely used, the term itself is contested: In some definitions, genres are clusters of texts with shared form- and content-related features, whereas in others they are depicted as context-specific modes of social action (Kwasnik & Crowston, 2005). Yates and Orlikowski (1992) combined textual and performative dimensions to describe genres as “socially recognized types of communicative action” (p. 299) that are based on shared structures, themes, expectations, and intended audiences. Because genres serve as “models of writing” for authors and as “horizons of expectations” (Todorov, 1976, p. 163) for readers, they are formed through a constant interaction of all actors involved. This nuanced negotiation, which is molded by social, cultural, and political processes, renders genres revealing sociocultural testimonies.

Digital environments are particularly promising sites for genre-based analysis, since the communities that produce digital content are also often the ones that consume and interpret it (Jenkins et al., 2009). In this sense, digital culture may be construed as an amalgamation between top-down mass-mediated genres (e.g., romantic comedies) and bottom-up mundane types of rhetorical actions (e.g., love letters). As crystalized products of multiparticipant negotiations, digital genres provide participants with “keys” that enable them to take part in the activities of a community (Brown & Duguid, 2000). Building on Frosh and Pinchevski (2014), I have previously analyzed photo-based meme genres as “operative signs”—namely, texts that are designed as an invitation for (creative) action (Shifman, 2014). A broader perception of this functional category is encompassed by Mizuko Ito’s (2006) concept of participation genres: conventions of engagement crafted around mediated artifacts by various actors, which are anchored in, and constructed by, social and economic structures.

Because it is impossible to look into each and every text produced by users, the analysis of genres provides valuable road maps for the exploration of the ostensibly chaotic world of UGC. It may also afford a mesolevel analysis of social media, situated on a middle ground between close reading of specific texts and large-scale investigations of big data. As exemplified in the following analysis, each genre comprises a unique combination of values, frames, emotions, and communicative stances. A nuanced comparative analysis of genres thus may be particularly useful as a tool for cross-cultural studies.

### **The Universe Between Notecard Confessions and Recut Trailers**

To demonstrate the utility of the proposed four-layer model and its application through the lens of digital genres, I will focus on two that, at first glance, seem to adhere to the criteria of “most different” cases: notecard confessions and recut trailers. Both have attracted attention in the English-speaking world, including some academic research. While I am aware of the biases entailed by choosing English as a starting point (and highlighted it in the discussion), this language’s pivotal role in digital flows makes it a useful anchor for exploratory forays such as this one.

In light of the model, I will first compare notecard confessions and recut trailers as two distinct UGC genres. I will then proceed to a cross-cultural comparison to establish the presence or absence of these genres in English, Arabic, Spanish, German, and Chinese—languages that are both prevalent on the Internet and spoken in various geopolitical and cultural settings. Using systematic search procedures on YouTube, as well as local platforms, a group of research assistants (native speakers of the languages) and the author addressed three main questions: Do these genres exist in languages other than English? If so, to what extent do they retain the original features of the English variants? If they do not exist in the languages investigated, can we find functionally equivalent genres? A central premise of this analysis is that the absence of a genre from a particular linguistic setting may be as revealing as its presence.

#### ***Notecard Confessions***

The genre labeled as *notecard confessions* (alternatively, *notecard stories*, *my secrets*, or, most dominantly, *my story*) features a teenager or a young adult relaying a harsh autobiographical story using handwritten cue cards. The narratives depict traumatic experiences of bullying and harassment, often by family members or trusted “friends,” which in some cases lead the victim to self-harm or suicide attempts. The protagonist is silent; only melancholic music is heard, adding to the clip’s emotional appeal. Although meticulously mediated, the genre grants viewers a sense of accessing the protagonist’s most private experiences, creating an atmosphere of intimacy and authenticity (Hall, 2016). Examples of notecard confessions could be found on YouTube as early as 2009, yet this genre did not gain substantial ground until 2011 (Misoch, 2014). One of the most well-known and tragic examples of this large corpus is a clip created by Amanda Todd, a 15-year-old Canadian girl who committed suicide shortly after releasing her video. While each video reveals a unique and heartbreaking story, their distinctive discursive formula lends them to a holistic examination. I have thus used a four-dimensional framework for an integrative evaluation of notecard confessions, based on a qualitative analysis of 20 of the most viewed exemplars of the genre and the two academic articles that focus on it (Hall, 2016; Misoch, 2014).

Perhaps the most striking feature of notecard confessions is their emotional charge. The clips strongly convey two basic feelings: sadness and anger. Whereas anger is expressed mostly in the written text, sadness is articulated through both the soundtrack and the protagonist's facial expression. Yet the combination of these two emotions does not project as self-shaming; on the contrary, one of the main messages of the text is that it is not the protagonists but their tormentors who should be ashamed. As shown subsequently, emotional work is also expected from the audience, who is called on to express empathy toward the narrators and their suffering.

The frames used in the videos likewise lend themselves to a rather straightforward analysis. The texts clearly indicate a concrete reason for the protagonists' suffering, which in most cases is prolonged harassment and bullying, either at school or in online environments. Verbal bullying of women is often directed at their appearance ("ugly") or sexual behavior ("slut"). These attacks lead the victims to engage in self-destructive behaviors such as addiction and self-harm, which fuel the aggression. By posting their videos and exposing the perpetrators, the protagonists reframe their live narratives—rather than being "sluts" or "whores," they become victims. In some of the videos, the protagonists relay how they had resolved the problem, mostly by finding new friends or help from religious organizations. Interestingly, the majority of these solutions resonate with self-help discourses rather than challenging larger social structures or calling for profound institutional changes.

Yet the centrality of social structures becomes obvious if we consider the dimension of communicative stance. Specifically, within the participation structures of these texts, the "entitled" speakers who experienced suffering and abuse tend to be young people from disempowered groups: mainly women, but also people of color and queer youngsters. The strong political message permeating these videos, which was identified by Hall (2016), is often generated by the aggregation of their participation structures rather than by their explicit content. Invoking the ethos of "the personal is political," these notecards demonstrate how a phenomenon formerly thought of as an isolated individual property is, in fact, a systematic social problem.

The keying of these videos is extremely serious, and their polysemic potential is limited: The clips propel the viewer toward a specific reading, which is meant to elicit sympathy toward the victim. The conative function of notecard confessions appears to be threefold at least. As already mentioned, they solicit sympathy. Furthermore, in many cases, narrators directly address other victims of bullying/harassment, urging them to seek help, to be kind to themselves, or to accept the speaker's empathy. Finally, as Hall (2016) notes, these videos also call for "mediated witnessing as a form of ethical engagement" (p. 1). That is, spectators are expected to not only validate the experience relayed by the protagonist but acknowledge some forms of bullying and sexual assault as identity-oriented and thus inherently political.

Evaluating notecard confessions using the proposed criteria reveals both the strengths and the weaknesses of existing concepts for the analysis of UGC. In this context, analyzing the values incorporated in this genre has proven the most complex task. A striking observation emerging from this analysis is that values portrayed in previous models as conflicting or contradictory actually work in tandem in confession notecards. This is particularly true for two pairs of values: survival/self-expression and self-

transcendence/self-enhancement. According to Inglehart's model (e.g., Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), values that emphasize economic and physical security intrinsically contradict those centered on self-expression (which are the linchpin of civil and political liberties). Based on historical analysis, Inglehart and Welzel (2005) link the polarization of these values to the transition from industrial to postindustrial societies. The latter, goes the argument, are wealthier, so people take survival for granted and focus on subjective well-being and self-expression. Yet in notecard confessions, both security and self-expression figure as core values. In fact, personal security is supposed to be achieved through self-expression, for the exposure of wrongdoing is framed as the most effective means of resistance.

Similarly problematic is what Schwartz (2012) pronounced as the dichotomy of self-transcendence versus self-enhancement (which resonates with the juxtaposition in the literature of individualism and collectivism). Notecard confessions tend to express benevolence and universalism, values that Schwartz associates with self-transcendence; they condemn those who are cruel and malevolent toward people close to them and at the same time make a broader, universal claim against bullying and harassment. They also call for empathy and support, thereby invoking benevolence. At the same time, the videos also promote individuality. Yet the kind of individuality they highlight does not adhere to Schwartz's depiction of self-enhancement as related to achievement, power, and hedonism, but rather stresses the importance of the individual's sense of well-being.

Overall, in notecard confessions, the four dimensions—values, frames, emotions, and communicative stance—are complementary and work together to create a coherent genre. The spectator is appealed to as a witness of a moral misdemeanor framed as a case of bullying that has led to severe emotional and behavioral consequences. To be sure, as with any discourse, different people may read different meanings into the text; yet the combination of the four dimensions forcibly directs the audiences of notecard confessions toward a particular interpretative path.

### ***Recut Trailers***

At first glance, the genres of recut trailers and confession notecards seem to be utterly remote from each other. The latter are earnest representations of traumatic events, while the former are fake movie trailers produced by re-editing existing film footage to create a comic effect. In many cases, such edits reframe the genre of the original film as a completely different one, resulting in a "new" movie, such as the horror version of [Mary Poppins](#) (also known as Scary Mary) and the gay romance version of [Top Gun](#). The genre was popularized in 2005 with the posting of [The Shining](#) trailer, which reframes the classic horror film as an enchanting family comedy about father-son bonding. The following analysis of recut trailers is based on a qualitative examination of 20 most-viewed YouTube videos as well as the on the insightful works by Kathleen Williams (2012) and Jonathan Gray (2010).

If, as described, the analysis of confession notecards is best anchored in emotions, the most effective path to explore recut trailers is through framing. In fact, Jonathan Gray (2010) argues that trailers are all about framing. As audiences' initial encounter with a mediated text, trailers (and other forms of paratexts; e.g., "promos") provide an evaluative prism that builds and shapes expectations. The very term *recut* alludes to framing (or rather, reframing), as recut trailers accentuate the packaging of

stories in generic bundles by juxtaposing a movie we relegate to a specific genre with the conventions of another. Enjoying recuts requires an understanding of the framing strategies involved, and in that sense, the texts both reflect and strengthen our fondness for pop culture. Yet, as Williams (2012) suggests, this genre can be perceived not merely as parody of formats and generic conventions but as satire leveled against the economic and social forces shaping them. The clips criticize the crude marketing strategies used by trailer production industries, mocking their formulaic and mechanistic manipulation of the audiences' emotions. The videos do not offer explicit solutions but imply that the very exposure of the situation could be a path to resolving it.

This analysis of the frames used in recut trailers leads to a complex interpretation of the emotions associated with this genre. On the surface, these emotions are uniformly positive: The texts are cued to cause pleasure and amusement, and, as noted in the following discussion, they are also designed to generate admiration toward their creators. At the same time, as already stated, these videos can be perceived as incorporating negative emotionality—scorn toward the film industry's packaging and marketing strategies. Yet the strongest affective response that these videos seem to elicit is emotional deactivation. Indeed, the parodic focus on elements that are supposed to trigger certain feelings (for example, dramatic music that is used to arouse fear) exposes the constructedness of emotions invoked by trailers and the specific genres they promote, thus blocking our inclination to experience these feelings during the viewing.

This oxymoronic combination of emotive and anti-emotive aspects is achieved through the clips' ironic keying. Although the visual and verbal rhetoric of these videos adheres to the trailer genre, they actually do not aim to sell the movies that are being presented. As in other instances of irony, this gap between expressions and intentions creates a polysemic potential (Fiske, 1986; Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman 2014). The authors' words are clearly not meant to be taken at their face value, thus requiring audiences to engage in intensive interpretative work, whose outcomes vary according to their background and identity needs. Indeed, some viewers may read recut trailers as critical reflections on the industry (as suggested earlier), while others may perceive them as merely playful. Another sub-dimension of stance, participation structure, seems to be less ambivalent. To both create and appreciate recut trailers, one needs to be thoroughly familiar with the movies they feature as well as with film genres in general. The production of such videos also requires substantial editing skills; in fact, professional editors often create recut trailers to showcase their expertise and talent.

As with notecard confessions, the most difficult dimension to analyze in recut trailers is values. On the surface, the values anchoring such videos seem to reflect what Schwartz (2012) terms "self-direction": The clips give expression to individual creativity; their major purpose is enjoyment; and sometimes they are also achievement-oriented, being designed to promote their creator's career. Yet the analysis of these videos' frames and emotional dimensions suggests that individualistic endeavor may not be their only objective or characteristic. Indeed, the cultural criticism of marketing strategies these clips project may be associated with other-directed values such as universalism, which are ultimately conducive to a more just society.

An overall assessment of the four dimensions as evident in the recut trailers genre reveals possible contradictions. In particular, the interpretation of their frames and emotive elements as a critical comment on commercial culture does not align with their projected stance. The genre's ironic keying allows for various possible interpretations, and its participation structure involves semiprofessionals, some of whom aspire to work in the same industry they appear to criticize.

### **Lost (and Found) in Translation? The Wandering Genres**

In addition to our analysis of the English variants of the two genres, we have traced their appearance in four other languages: Chinese, Arabic, German, and Spanish. An integrated analysis of the results for these linguistic settings reveals a number of patterns. In some cases, the genres were imported to other linguistic environments without significant changes; alternatively, they were modified to fit local needs; and in some languages, one of the genres (confession notecards) did not exist at all. The analysis also demonstrates that types of alternations differ across genres: Whereas notecard confessions were either copied as is or absent altogether, recut trailers manifested varied incarnations in different languages.

Notecard confessions were found in both Spanish and German. A close analysis of the videos revealed the frames, emotions, values, and stances to be very similar to those found in the English texts. In Arabic and Chinese, confession notecards were not found at all. Because these societies undoubtedly have their share of harassment and bullying, a possible key to evaluating the absence of notecard confessions would be examining how such issues are negotiated within other realms of the Chinese and Arabic digital spheres. Our initial exploration revealed that, in the Arab world, sexual assault is responded to by targeting and shaming offenders who have attacked women in public places (rather than domestically), and online discourse about such issues is often mediated by local or international organizations, which plan marches, protests, and other events to combat sexual harassment. In China, accounts of assault are often reported by the news media rather than by the victim directly. Recently, however, some cases of self-reports of attacks and continuous harassment have appeared in digital spheres, often in anonymous appeals. Overall, our preliminary analysis of the Chinese and the Arabic-language digital environments finds that stories of domestic harassment or ongoing bullying appear less than stories about harassment by strangers, and they are rarely presented as audiovisual personal accounts of identified victims. As noted in the concluding section, this absence may be linked to values and communicative norms in these cultural spheres.

Whereas notecard confessions were found to be either copied from English or completely absent in the languages investigated, the patterns with regard to recut trailers were more varied. In its English formulation as scenes from a movie re-edited into a trailer according to the requirements of a different genre, the recut trailer genre was scarce in other languages. The few examples that we did find were all in Spanish—for example, a recut of the award-winning Spanish prison drama *Celda 211* [as a comedy trailer](#). However, we discovered many examples of playful engagement with trailers as well as other paratexts (Gray, 2010) such as promos and opening credits. These humorous clips involve a wide array of cultural contexts, which are often overtly juxtaposed. A telling example is the reediting of *The Godfather* as the opening credits of an Egyptian TV drama series, where a humorous effect is achieved through the

encounter between an American iconic text and Egyptian drama conventions. This Egyptian variant of *The Godfather* incorporates emotions, values, and communicative stances similar to those characteristic of the English recut trailer genre, but its framing is different: While mocking industry-based templates (in this case, the overdramatic presentation of the cast in the opening credits of Egyptian series), the video also conveys a polysemic message about cultural similarities and differences. On the surface, the clip's comic effect stems from the apparent incongruity between its Arab and American aspects. Yet this reading is problematized if we take into account Eliot Oring's (2003) notion of "appropriate incongruity," which sees humor as deriving from a perceived connection, or similarity, between categories that are usually treated as incongruous. In light of this approach, I claim that by re-editing scenes from *The Godfather*, the video actually exposes the "inner" Egyptian drama within this iconic American movie. In other words, the clip essentially demonstrates that these two ostensibly distant cultural universes are made up of similar emotive building blocks. Another example where two cultures are juxtaposed is the Chinese recut of the Indian comedy [Three Idiots](#) as a historical drama taking place in China. As with *The Godfather*, this clip's comic effect derives not only from its contrasting two divergent genres but from highlighting cultural differences between Chinese and Indian societies.

Although such uses of re-editing were relatively limited, other forms of tampering with trailers, such as dubbing, subtitles, or remakes, were quite prevalent in all languages. A preliminary examination of these videos suggests that their participation structure is less constrained than that of recut trailers (because they require fewer technical skills) and that the shift in framing they display is primarily not in terms of genres but of cultures (often in juxtaposing an American text with local conventions). They do, however, seem to share with recut trailers the ironic stance (and the consequent polysemic import) as well as the ambivalence vis-à-vis the consumer culture. This duality is further emphasized in clips that overtly mock American business strategies (e.g., Disney's takeover of the Star Wars series). Such videos signal familiarity with (and often appreciation of) American/global pop culture while simultaneously challenging it, both through explicit criticism and by using local vernaculars rather than English. Thus, these clips' overall message is multifaceted: They reference and at the same time mock American popular culture, and thereby promote and subvert cultural globalization all at once.

### **So What, What Next**

This article introduces a four-dimensional framework for a cross-cultural examination of UGC. Incorporating both established principles and new criteria, the combination of *values*, *frames*, *emotions*, and *communicative stances* is suggested as a prism for assessing cultural differences and similarities. The application of this system in a comparative analysis of recut trailers and confession notecards, and of their variants in five languages, reveals its analytical strengths as well as some shortcomings, which may be addressed in future research.

The model has emerged as a valuable tool for a nuanced analysis of digital genres. It has allowed identifying the contrasting features of the two genres in question, revealing differences in their frames of reference, emotional *palette*, participation structures, and overall keying. The genres were also found to differ in the interaction of the four dimensions. In confession notecards, all four aspects appear to work together, complementing one another to create a coherent core of interconnected meanings. In recut

trailers, on the other hand, the contradictory import of the four dimensions results in polysemic texts that easily lend themselves to multiple interpretations.

Operationalizing the two genres according to the four dimensions has also brought to light some unexpected similarities. The analysis of the frames and emotions reveals that both genres tend to foil some prevalent expectations about culturally appropriate responses to social situations. Both these genres are based on defiant reframing: In an ironic contrast to its label, the notecard confession genre actually reframes confession as accusation, while recut trailers expose the trailer industry's crude marketing tactics. Such counter-framing leads to a subversion of default emotional reactions: The victims of bullying resist feeling ashamed; the creators of recut trailers deactivate emotional responses to trailers that the industry seeks to elicit.

The four-dimensional model was also shown to be useful for exploring the patterns of genres' cross-cultural migration. First, this approach helps to identify components that are modified in translation. For example, the Arabic versions of recut trailers appear to change mainly with regard to framing, giving rise to new meanings that relate to cultural comparisons. In addition, more general patterns have emerged with respect to cultural flows. Thus, genres that are arguably more cohesive to begin with (e.g., confession notecards) tend to remain relatively unaltered in their new linguistic destinations, while genres that are polysemic and less circumscribed (recut trailers, in our case) are more receptive to cultural modification.

The analysis has also uncovered some conceptual and methodological limitations that must be considered in future applications of the proposed framework. These problems have to do mostly with interpreting the absence of a genre in a given culture, the validity of existing tools, and the meaning of meaning.

As already stated, one of the main assumptions in using the suggested framework is that the absence of a genre in a certain cultural or linguistic setting may be as revealing as its presence. This trajectory of genre-based examinations may have many departure points. Although here I have explored genres that exist in English but not, say, in Chinese or Arabic, it may be particularly intriguing to discover genres that appear in those languages but not in English. Yet even if scholars were to succeed in charting this vast, global map of digital genres, we would still need to learn to listen to the sound of silence. Fathoming voids is hard: The reasons for the absence of notecard confessions in the Arabic and Chinese digital spheres may derive from many factors, including historical, cultural, or religious perceptions regarding the speech act of confession, attitudes toward gender and sexuality, and broader cultural differences that relate to identity politics and its implementation (or absence) in various parts of the globe.

A fruitful path to understanding silence may be listening to the voices surrounding it—or, in concrete terms, exploring genres that have similar emotional, frame-oriented, or value-oriented roles. This would require, for example, finding genres in Arabic and Chinese that allow expression of anger and sorrow. Comparisons can be drawn along each of the four dimensions, and the integrative-comparative evaluation of the entire generic matrix on the margins of the void may help explain it. It goes without

saying that such an analysis needs to take into account the industries and the broader political climates within which video creators operate.

Another question raised by this analysis is the compatibility between established theories—particularly those relating to values—and digital culture. Existing frameworks can serve as starting points for inquiry, but they usually do not account for the richness of principles guiding UGC types. As highlighted by this analysis, in the digital sphere, values described in previous research as mutually conflicting seem to work in tandem. The question arising from this investigation is, thus, by what means do UGC genres combine contrasting values such as individualism and collectivism. A systematic analysis of these new combinations may help identify new sets of values that operate in digital environments. To make a more radical claim, we may eventually need to reexamine the prevalent notion of enduring core values, possibly supplanting it with a less overarching idea of a more flexible range of “mini-values” or “low-intensity values,” which need not necessarily constitute long-lasting commitments.

Last but not least, there is the meaning of meaning. The analyses presented in this article focus on the textual properties of two genres (as evaluated by the author), but in real life, meaning is a product of the encounter between texts and audiences. A full implementation of the proposed framework would thus involve an analysis of participants’ interpretations of its four dimensions, as formulated when they address divergent audiences via social media (Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Moreover, such an analysis should take into account the ways in which these notions about values, frames, emotions, and stances shift, drift, and consolidate over time.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the proposed framework enables a holistic evaluation of user-generated genres as amalgamations of cognitive and affective dimensions. Indeed, while frames and values are intrinsically connected to cognition and moral evaluations, emotions and stance are strongly associated with affect. This division, however, is not clear-cut, as values incorporate important emotional aspects, and stance involves cognitive/evaluative elements. Moreover, the analysis of notecard confessions and recut trailers demonstrates that those two pillars of human nature—cognition and affect—cannot be separated. For example, certain frames, such as bullying, incorporate substantial emotional aspects; they both result from emotions and ignite them. While strongly suggesting that cultural analysis must take into account both the cognitive and affective aspects of human interaction, the model is by no means designed as a definitive, closed, set of criteria. Rather, it is meant to open a window for further comparative explorations that may broaden our understanding of complex digital environments in a so-called global age.

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