ABSTRACT
Anonymity is an important aspect of group support systems (GSS). However, as to the overall effectiveness of the use of anonymity, findings have been inconclusive. Some studies show positive effects in the number of ideas generated, quality of ideas, and uniqueness of ideas, whereas other studies show negative or neutral effects. An examination of social psychology literature indicates that the effect of public self-awareness on evaluation apprehension in different cultural groups may play a crucial role. Thus, social psychology and Hofstede’s model of cultural differentiation are used in this chapter to explain the different effects of anonymity on the behavior of Hong Kong and Canadian groups during GSS sessions. It is hoped that understanding the effects of anonymity in different cultural contexts will better inform the design and facilitation of GSS in increasingly diverse global settings.
INTRODUCTION

Group support systems (GSS) are an increasingly popular means of aiding decision-making in a variety of organizational settings, by combining the computer, communication, and decision technologies to improve the decision-making process (Briggs, Nunamaker & Sprague, 1998). Such technologies make use of anonymity as a key tool to improve the quality of decisions (Nunamaker et al., 1991; Pinsonneault & Heppel, 1997; Postmes & Lea, 2000). However, with globalization, it is becoming increasingly important to adapt this tool to the cultural background of the organization or group that intends to use it effectively.

Group work is often inefficient and unproductive, suffering from a number of process losses. Inhibition and evaluation apprehension are considered as among the biggest problems that are known to hamper the active participation of group members. By allowing anonymous communication, GSSs are expected to reduce inhibition and evaluation apprehension, leading to process gains and better performance outcomes.

However, the findings from empirical studies into the use of anonymity in decision making show conflicting results (Pinsonneault et al., 1999; Chun & Park, 1998). It seems that anonymity is appropriate in some contexts, whereas it is not appropriate in others. The objective of this chapter, therefore, is to examine the effects of anonymity on specific cultural groups during activities using GSS, as this may help to clarify some of the inconsistencies in GSS research.

BACKGROUND

GSSs are usually employed with the intention to increase the effectiveness of groups by alleviating aspects of group dysfunction, and improving heuristics of individuals and groups when solving problems. Group dysfunction can be divided into process dysfunction and social dysfunction. Process dysfunction includes production blocking due to unequal participation, which is the result of unequal air time. Social dysfunctions may hinder group productivity through undesirable social processes that are present in the group. Examples of these are free riding, cognitive inertia, socialising, and domination due to status imbalance, groupthink, and incomplete analysis.

Managers spend a considerable part of their work in meetings and participating in group decisions. Anonymity is generally believed to create an environment that improves group participation, communication, and the objective evaluation of ideas, enhancing the productivity of groups and their decision-making process. Anonymity, as a distinct aspect of GSS, was expected to increase productivity by