

# What We Talk About When We Talk About Culture

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## ABSTRACT

There is growing interest among HCI and accessibility researchers in highlighting the importance of culture in computing research, as evidenced by works that engage with culturally aware or culturally informed frameworks. However, there is a fair amount of ambiguity around the notion of “culture” as it encompasses a diverse range of *orientations* to culture and *ideas* about what culture means. It is thus important to clarify the different senses of culture we may operationalize in our work. In this workshop paper, we draw a distinction between four interpretations of culture, (1) culture as belonging, (2) culture as heritage, (3) culture as difference, and (4) culture as attitudes. We examined different uses of the term ‘culture’ in ASSETS papers to explore how these varying interpretations shape and structure research. We propose that HCI and accessibility researchers can benefit from a reflexive approach to culture.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; *HCI design and evaluation methods*; **Accessibility**; *Accessibility design and evaluation methods*; *Accessibility technologies*;

## KEYWORDS

Culture, Accessibility

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Culture is an expansive term, one which HCI and accessibility researchers are using increasingly to refer to a range of concepts: origins, heritage, community, artifacts, practices, norms. These works play an important role in highlighting the importance of culture and the relationship between culture and technology i.e., the impact of technology on cultural life as well as the impact of culture on perceptions and use of technology. This recognition of the importance of culture has then led to interest in cultural computing – *culturally-informed, culturally-diverse, culturally-aware*

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and *culturally-competent* are some of the terms researchers and technologists use. Yet, these terms encompass different orientations to culture as well as different ideas of what culture means. It is necessary we articulate what we mean by culture in our work.

The definition of culture has been one of much debate in fields like anthropology and sociology. One definition suggested by Gideons is “Culture consists of the values the members of a given group hold, the norms they follow, and the material goods they create” [12]. These groups can be regional or tied to nations and ethnicities (e.g., Indian culture). They can also correspond to other identities – for example, disability culture is said to “celebrate a positive disabled identity and consciousness” [7]. Deaf culture refers to the “set of beliefs and practices shared by a group of deaf people who also share a common signed language” [22]. There is also Black culture and queer culture [23]. But even amidst these definitions, differences in how these identities are conceptualized and realized impacts the means by which values, norms, and materials are mediated. Additionally, these identities are not siloed – an individual might claim multiple identities. Engaging with intersections requires we attend to all meanings of culture.

Previous work has shown how tracing the meaning of terms can be illuminating (e.g., [2, 3, 28]). As preliminary attempt to do this, we conducted discussions amongst ourselves to figure out what we mean by culture. We aimed to gather different senses of the word [34] i.e., different meanings of the word based on different contexts of use. For example, while the above examples attend to ideas of culture tied to identities, they miss out on terms like ‘tech culture’ [25] or ‘corporate culture’ [27]. Below we share the results of our thinking exercise, and highlight how they have or have not been explored in HCI or accessibility research.

## 2 NOTIONS OF CULTURE

In our discussion, we came across different senses of culture: related to belonging, experiences, knowledge, attitudes, aesthetics, otherness. Through the process of writing and further discussion, we organized / collapsed these into four different senses: (1) identity (2) heritage (3) difference (4) attitudes. We elaborate below.

*Culture as belonging.* This sense of culture corresponds the closest to identities individuals claim for themselves (e.g., ‘I’m from a Culture’). These do not have to be origins (nations or ethnicities), but rather any group where someone does not feel “othered”.

*Culture as heritage.* This sense of culture maps to two different senses: experiences and knowledge. Experiences consist of art, craft, food, music, and tie to ideas of culture as something one partakes in. One does not have to be a part of ‘a culture’ or ‘the culture’ to experience these. Knowledge, on the other hand, ties to practices and traditions one participates in that stem from shared beliefs

or learnings, perhaps those they pass on to others. Both senses of culture as experience and knowledge yield cultural heritage.

*Culture as difference.* This sense of culture is primarily a lens of difference. It stems from uses that do not comment on what culture “is” and rather compare and contrast two groups or peoples. Often, the practices/beliefs/attitudes/norms/artifacts of the dominant group are invisibilized and (minority) culture is seen as that otherizes a group or a person.

*Culture as attitudes.* Here we consider senses of culture that are not situated within a group of people and rather situated within sociopolitical infrastructures e.g., ‘corporate culture’ or ‘tech culture’ or ‘culture of microwork’. These notions of culture have practices and attitudes associated with them, but are derived from the systems we exist in rather than people and histories. The resulting norms/attitudes get solidified to be easily recognized across different contexts as a culture.

### 3 REFLECTING ON RESEARCHERS’ ORIENTATION TO CULTURE

The above four senses (belonging, heritage, difference, attitudes) are not mutually exclusive and play against each other in interesting ways. For example, identity facets can be constructed through the experiences one partakes in or the traditions they uphold. *Belonging* and *heritage* thus shape each other. *Culture as difference* is perhaps the one that is most directly in contrast to the sense of *culture as belonging*, in how it has the potential to create relations of othering. But in bringing differences to light, it also has the potential to surface practices of oppression and help resist tides of assimilation and integration. *Culture as attitudes* is deeply shaped by the systems/sociopolitical infrastructures one finds themselves in the present, rather than practices and knowledge of the past (*heritage*).

The senses of culture we extracted from our discussions were based on single, sentence-level contexts of use, and the above paragraph shows they are not really ‘separate’. What, then, do we get out of this thinking exercise? We argue these senses of culture can also signify one’s orientation to culture. Specifically, researchers who use the term are often approaching culture in different ways: through a lens of identity, heritage, difference, or attitudes.

To explore this further, we examined the use of the word ‘culture’ in ASSETS papers. We conducted a search of the ACM digital library for the word ‘culture’ in titles, abstracts, or keywords. We reasoned that this would allow us to find works where culture plays a central role. This resulted in 25 papers, which included full papers, posters, and experience reports.

We find that these works explored culture from a range of perspectives: disability cultures [29], Deaf culture [9, 11, 14, 15, 31], regional cultures [1, 6, 10, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 26, 30, 33], blind culture [24], visual culture [35], maker culture [24], makerspace culture [4], phone culture [6], as well as cultural experiences such as sports [5], video games [17], food [8], language [32], and museums [13, 19]. Here we see that some perspectives on culture have received more attention than others in accessibility research – regional cultures in comparison to disability or Deaf cultures.

Our preliminary exploration shows that a work can take multiple orientations at the same time. For example, Race et al. share experiences of designing a nonvisual soldering workshop, and reflect on intersections of maker culture and blind culture. They discuss how tools and activities in makerspaces are geared towards able-bodied individuals (*culture as attitudes*), as well as how they trained sighted volunteers for a nonvisual workshop “*by offering an introduction to blind culture techniques for BLV travel and communications*” (*culture as heritage/knowledge*). By bringing together two different ideas of culture (tied to blind identity and maker spaces) as well as orientations to culture (attitudes and heritage), they presented a fascinating space for inquiry.

In another example, Spiel et al’s [29] work on collaborative design critiques explores how we might draw on the knowledges and experiences (*culture as heritage*) of disability cultures in developing technologies with disabled communities i.e., position research in the context of “*disability cultures and the situated practices and relations therein as they pertain to the construction and negotiations of different knowledges*”. In discussing research with Deaf communities, they highlight how current approaches follow “*hearing logics*”, a contrast that suggests examining differences (*culture as difference*), as well as dominant hearing attitudes (*culture as attitudes*). Thus, in different points of the paper, they take different orientations to the concept of culture.

While only preliminary, our exploration indicates there are rich insights to be unearthed in more closely reflecting on what we mean by culture, and why it is important to us or the work we do. We argue that it would be valuable for researchers and writers to be explicit about their definition of culture. Teasing apart different senses of the word in their ideas, analysis, and writing can be a valuable exercise in deepening engagement with the concept. It can also open avenues of research for us to explore such as how these different senses and perspectives collide and conflict. For example, how do individuals negotiate all of their identities in cultural contexts? How do knowledges and experiences of disability and deafness interact with those of different regions and infrastructures? How are practices of Deaf and disability culture realized across the world? We argue that this reflection and exploration is particularly relevant for those who aim to advocate for a culturally inclusive or culturally informed agenda.

### 4 WORKSHOP CONTRIBUTIONS

In this workshop paper, we propose to explore culture as a critical site of contestation. We would like to contribute to the workshop by first discussing with the community about how culture is taken up in their respective works. We propose to use the senses of culture articulated in this workshop paper to ground the discussion. In doing so, we hope to uncover additional interpretations of culture and make explicit the nuances of the term. This will help accessibility and HCI researchers better contextualize their work in cultural computing.

Additionally, we would like to highlight opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaborations. Some of the interpretations of culture connect naturally to postcolonial critiques of technology and development, while others call for deeper engagement with longstanding inequities present in digital infrastructures. Others additionally call

for us to explore how disability are construed amidst material, economic, and colonial violence and thus shape our very notions of access. We hope that by clarifying what we mean by culture, we also clarify the type of frameworks we choose to structure our investigations and collaborations.

## 5 BIOS

**Aashaka Desai** is a PhD candidate at the Paul G. Allen School of Computer Science and Engineering at the University of Washington. Her work examines ways in which technology and people mediate access, particularly in communication contexts. By focusing on language practices that are minoritized (such as multilingual and multimodal communication), she aims to explore how technology might support all ways communicating.

**Stacy Hsueh** is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Washington's Center for Research and Education on Accessible Technology and Experiences (CREATE). She is a designer and computer scientist focusing on understanding experiences of precarity in historically underserved communities and the role of technology in challenging or reinforcing social inequities. Her research uses design methods to explore concepts of intersectionality, cross-movement coalition, and disability-led design.

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