OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON CROSS-CULTURAL IMPACT ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Elena Vitkauskaite

Kaunas University of Technology, Lithuania, elena.vitkauskaite@ktu.lt

Abstract

Such social networking sites as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo since the moment of their introduction have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices. However none of these sites are equally popular across cultures. This article analyses research which was carried out up to date in the area of cross-cultural issues in social networking sites. Cross-cultural research about the use of social networking sites up to date mostly involves analysis of only one or few social networking sites, most often analysed audiences are universities and students, in many cases only few users of websites surveyed or observed per website and or country. Thus larger scale research is needed to research significant results in area of evaluating cross-cultural issues in social networking sites across the world.

Keywords: social networking sites, culture, cross-cultural difference, e-commerce.

Introduction

The role of information and communication technologies has been growing in the economic and social life recently. Development trends show that the sector is not only the main stimulus of global business, but also an important part of the global industry (Gatautis, 2008).

Social networking sites, as new trend in ICT world, have come a long way since the initial efforts of computer-mediated social networking such as USENET, LISTSERV and Bulletin Board Services. Such social networking sites as MySpace, Facebook, Cyworld, and Bebo since the moment of their introduction have attracted millions of users, many of whom have integrated these sites into their daily practices (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Quite a number of these websites became international and are used widely across the world. What is interesting to note, however, is that none of these sites are equally popular across cultures (Marcus & Krishnamurthi, 2009). For example MySpace is very popular in the USA, with about 74 % of the market share despite its famously cluttered layout, but captures only 2.9% of the Japanese market share (Marcus & Krishnamurthi, 2009). Could this fact be attributed to differences in American and Japanese culture?

K. Keršienė and A. Savanevičienė (2009) claim that national cultural differences are critical in investigating the cultural diversity influence on international organizations. L. Žitkus and A. Junevičius (2007) claim that in the context of organizational and management science, culture most often occurs as an independent variable, which, together with economic, social, political, technological and other factors affects the development of the companies as well as the solutions and actions of the managers. According to B. Melnikas (2007), the attitudes to the significance of equal rights principle characterize the society and its culture. Scientists proved that culture not only affects various areas of human activity but depends on economical growth as well (Übius ir Alas, 2009).

Any website has to choose a course of actions when entering to international market. Possible traditional marketing strategies are (Alimienė ir Kuvykaitė, 2008): standardisation, localisation (adaptation) strategy or compromise approach between standardisation and localisation.

Previous studies on whether websites should be localised or standardised (Faiola & Matei, 2005; Singh, Zhao & Hu, 2005; and other) point to one general conclusion — that web content needs to be adapted to the different cultures of its targeted consumers (Singh, Kumar & Baack, 2005). Supposedly this statement includes social networking sites as well.

Currently not much research is carried in respect to cultural differences in social networking sites as to date, the bulk of social networking site research has focused on impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, online / offline connections, and privacy issues (boyd & Ellison, 2008). In addition a growing body of scholarship addresses other aspects of social networking sites, their users, and the practices they enable but more work in this area is needed.

**Goal of the article** is to identify gaps of research performed regarding cross-cultural differences impact of social networking sites and to define areas and directions for future research.

*Methods used:* A literature review is undertaken into research performed in area of cross-cultural differences impact of social networking sites.
Definition of Social Networking Sites

According to J. A. Ryan (2008) the concept of “the virtual community” had been introduced in Howard Rheingold’s (1993) landmark novel by the same name, though he would later suggest the more apt term “online social network” (2000). Researchers use quite a number of terms, which are related to social networking sites:

- **Internet Social Networking**, which can be understood as the phenomenon of Social Networking on the Internet. Hence, the concept subsumes all activities by Internet users with regard to extending or maintaining their social network (Richter et al, 2009).

- **Social Web sites**, defined as those Web sites that make it possible for people to form online communities, and share user-created contents (Kim et al, 2010). Authors researched social networking sites and social media sites as two distinctive groups of social web sites, though they acknowledge that the distinction between the two types of sites is fast disappearing. Their definition of social Web sites, although fairly loose, does exclude certain types of Web sites and parts of Web sites that allow people to post UCCs and share them. For example, the groups in portal sites (such as Yahoo Groups, South Korea’s Naver cafes), blogs, online news sites, and dating sites do not, at least today, meet the definition of social Web sites, since they do not allow the users to form communities.

- **Social networking services**, are online communities that focus on bringing together people with similar interests or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others (Marcus & Krishnamurthi, 2009).

Most popular definition is proposed by d. m. boyd and N. B. Ellison (2008):. Social Network Sites are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). D. Beer (2008) criticised this definition on the grounds that it is too wide and includes all sites that feature social network of any kind (and not just as core features). He also disagreed that social networking sites are only for making new relations.

As it is not intended by this article to propose ultimate definition of social networking sites, it will be d. m. boyd and N. B. Ellison (2008) definition that will be used as basis in this paper, though term of social networking sites is used instead of social network sites (SNS), as I agree to D. Beer (2008) opinion, that networking is not limited to extension of ones’ network with only new acquaintances.

Research on Cross cultural differences in Social Networking Sites

Most studies on cross-cultural difference impact on various online activities are based on G. Hofstede’s (1980) culture dimensions (power distance, individualism / collectivism, masculinity / femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and Confucian dynamism), as well as E. T. Hall’s (1976) dimensions (high / low context and polychromic / monochromic cultures).

According to P. Y. K. Chau (2008), individualism / collectivism of those dimensions is supposed to be particularly relevant dimension in studying the use of services built around Web 2.0, including SNSs. Individualism means that loosely connected social relationships are valued in which individuals are expected to care only for themselves and their immediate members, while collectivism means that tightly knitted relations are valued in which individuals expect to look after their extended social relations (Hofstede, 1980). Prior studies have identified four important distinctions between individualism and collectivism which provide a good theoretical foundation to examine the Web 2.0 adoption issues: first is an individual’s personality orientation (idiocentric and allocentric), second difference is self-construal (independent and interdependent), third and fourth differences based on E. T. Hall’s dimensions – communication style (low context communication and high context communication) and time orientation (monochronic and polychronic). Though he explained fairly well that those distinctions between individualism and collectivism mean, P. Y. K. Chau (2008) did not provide any assumptions of how this dimension and particular distinctions could be related to some particular features of Web 2.0, which also includes SNSs. Thus not much research done so far fits these predictions anyway.

In following sections of article there are brief descriptions of research related to cross-cultural issues in social networking sites provided in order to highlight scope of research and limitation of each study. This article covers only those research articles which could be found online.
Research mentioned in other sources. This part covers studies which there mentioned in other scientific articles, but there not otherwise accessible online or by other means to me.

d. m. boyd and N. B. Ellison (2008) in their article mentioned research of S. Fragoso (2006). She explored the cultural differences between Brazil’s and America’s appropriation of the SNSs Orkut. Orkut is a social network site created by Orkut Buyukkokten and launched by Google in 2004. Although originally an English-only platform, Orkut was quickly adopted by Brazilian users and became a major phenomenon in the system (by 2005, over 75% of Orkut users were Brazilians).


According to J. Kent (2008) Asian and Anglo Saxon differences are a specific challenge, by means of language and social protocols. Social Networks based around regional Korean relationship protocols were analyzed by Kyung-Hee Kim and Haejin Yun. Their work on how Cyworld.com supported both interpersonal relations and self-relation for Korean users traces the subtle ways in which deeply engrained cultural beliefs and activities are integrated into online communication and behaviours. Findings of this study show, that in Cyworld architectural social networking site features are adapted to match the cultural norms of the users and the high-context relational dialectics of Koreans (Papacharissi, 2009).

Language use and SNSs. S. C. Herring et al. (2007) analysed language use on LiveJournal.com. From 1000 randomly selected journals, according to the findings from the coding of the random sample four non-English languages were selected: Russian, Portuguese, Finnish, and Japanese. Selection was supported by the fact that these languages were among the most common non-English languages used on LiveJournal.com. Afterwards authors selected total 24 journals (6 journals per language analysed). Study suggested that trends towards English language use and other language use co-exist on the Internet, along with the tendency for bridging individuals to blur the boundaries between language groups. S. C. Herring et al. (2007) identified these limitations of their study: findings are based only on LiveJournal.com; they may not apply to other blog hosting services in the U.S., or to similar services in other countries; only four languages on LiveJournal.com were examined; further research is needed to determine the robustness of other languages.

User goals and behaviour on social networking sites across countries. C. N. Chapman & M. Lahav (2008) study was supposed to identify differences in the SNSs user goals and behaviour across four different locations: USA, France, China and South Korea. As a result of study three dimensions emerged to characterize social network interaction by culture, which were described in terms of user goals and expectations; typical pattern of self expression; and typical interaction behaviours. Authors claimed that to their knowledge work they did is the first large-scale project to investigate SNSs in the United States, Europe, and Asia. However they analysed profiles and observed behaviour directly of only 36 users in total and it was only SNS that particular user visited the most that was analysed.

C. C. Lewis & J. F. George (2008) based their research on G. Hofstede’s (1980) dimensions (as independent variable), but their study was more focused on how cultural values of particular country affect deceptive behaviour (dependent variable) on SNSs. This study not only found differences in deceptive behaviour for the two cultures, but there were also differences associated with the topics of deception. For instance, Koreans were apt to lie about their salary and their physical appearance, whereas Americans were more apt to lie about their age and where they lived. Study was carried out by using online questionnaire posted in two SNSs: MySpace and Cyworld. Only two countries respondents were questioned: US (99 responses) and Korean (94).

A. Dotans’ (2008) study sought to explore cultural differences in user content driven website by focusing on Flickr as a case study. The primary research question was: To what extent does cultural background impacts the use of a user content driven website? In order to answer it the research approach was to collect and compare different data from five national cultures and observe if there are any noticeable patterns that could be attributed to cultural background. Once any differences were encountered the task was to try and explain them. This was attempted partially by applying G. Hofstede’s (1980) cultural model. For the research there were 5 countries chosen according their rank on G. Hofstede’s (1980) individualism index: Taiwan and Peru (low Individualism value), Iran and Israel (medium Individualism value) and the United Kingdom (high Individualism value). 50 users from each culture were selected manually based on the location and description specified in their Flickr profile and had to have a minimum of 100 public photos. Data provided by users on 40 randomly selected photos in their profiles was analysed and users were interviewed via online questionnaire. According to author the data analysis revealed noticeable and consistent trends and patterns; however most were too contextualised and sometimes general to be
interpreted using Hofstede’s model. They were more about “Flickr culture” than national culture and the correlations with most of the quantitative data were very weak. A. Dotan (2008) suggested that in future following aspects on Flickr and other user content driven websites should be explored: private versus public, visual content analysis, extending current study by either adding more users from the current five cultures or introducing new ones. However author did not seem to recognise that criteria he used in methodology employed for this research are very Flickr oriented and most probably could hardly be used in analysis of other user content driven websites.

**Online privacy and communication on SNSs across countries.** B. A. Marshall et al. (2008) aimed to make cross-national comparison of Indian and American university students’ attitudes toward and usage of SNSs. The research was focused on online privacy and communication issues. An online survey was created based on a survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project among American teenagers. Altogether, 366 university students in India and 272 college students in the United States took the survey. Results did not really mach expectations of authors which they had according to values of individualistic/collectivistic countries they build their hypothesis on. Such results led to suggestion that cross-cultural research about the use of SNSs is required for several reasons. First, this research illustrates that online privacy and communication behaviours do not match traditional understanding of cross-cultural differences. Second, the appeal of SNSs among university students indicates that such technologies will be increasingly important tools for the workplace.

Ch. Guo (2009) investigated the combination effects of privacy and trust on SNSs in a cross-cultural context. Cross-cultural aspects of research based on G. Hofstede’s (1980) individualism dimension. Author chose to carry out research with social networking users in USA and China. First there were focus groups organised, there were 7 people in USA group and 6 in China group. The respondents were encouraged to freely discuss and exchange their personal experiences of using SNSs in detail, including privacy, trust, social awareness, familiarity, etc. Afterwards there was quantitative survey carried out. 321 usable entries were identified in the U.S. data and 773 were recorded in the Chinese data. The study shows critical differences exist within the process of trust formulation between American and Chinese SNSs users. For instance, Chinese users have different perceptions on social awareness than U.S. subscribers; hence, they generate different expectations of what makes a SNS provider trustworthy. Thus, the study helps to better understand factors that influence individual’s general perception of SNSs and how such perception differs in the East and West cultures.

**Cross cultural differences in appeal of SNSs.** A. Marcus & N. Krishnamurthi (2009) analysed sample of SNSs, basing analysis on G. Hofstede’s (1980) dimensions, but limited only to three countries: Japan, South Korea and USA. Besides, their study is limited by observation of only interface of websites: first page, home page, sign-up and sign-in pages. They found some apparent cultural differences in SNSs, but recognized that more research needs to be done to obtain clearer picture of the cultural artefacts involved in the different SNSs. Authors as well recognized that inclusion of Europe into the study would also help give a clearer picture of how cultural differences affect patterns observed on SNSs across the world. However it seems that authors do not deem it important to analyse how well users from different countries perceive appeal of different social networking sites.

### Conclusions

Researchers use different definitions of social networking sites which mainly results in different scopes of research, - in some cases it means excluding sites mainly meant for sharing user generated content, as Flickr (photo sharing), YouTube (video sharing).

Most of the studies on cross-cultural issues in social networking sites analyse only few social networking sites and/ or in respect of few countries, in most cases involving only very limited numbers of users, if not involving them at all. As noted by A. Marcus & N. Krishnamurthi (2009), it is important to not over-generalize and assume that all design elements [and I think it fits for other aspects as well] of social networking sites successful in one of countries is guaranteed to provide the same results in other countries ranking similarly on G. Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions. Thus larger scale research is needed to rearch significant results in area of evaluating cross-cultural issues in social networking sites across the world: there should be more countries involved and more social networking sites taken into consideration, their list should not be limited to only most popular ones, but could also include few more of less popular per country.
References


