CULTURAL ADAPTATION ISSUES IN SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

Elena Vitkauskaitė
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 provides overview of research which was carried out up to date in the area of cross-cultural issues in social networking sites and explains approach offered for further research in this area. Approach is basically build on seven building blocks of social media (social networking sites is a part of social media) proposed by J. H. Kietzmann et al. (2011) and individualism – collectivism dimension of cultural values proposed by G. Hofstede (1980).

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

JEL Classification: M31, M39.

Introduction

Social networking sites 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?

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 how culture could affect adaptation of social networking sites.

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

Definition and development 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 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).

Currently most popular definition is one proposed by d. m. boyd and N. B. Ellison (2008). They define Social Network Sites as “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, as I agree to D. Beer (2008) opinion, that networking is not limited to extension of ones’ network with only new acquaintances.

The first well-known social networking site is SixDegrees.com, which was launched in 1997; its name originates from the six degrees of separation concept. Six degrees of separation is the theory that anyone can be connected to any other person through a chain of acquaintances that has no more than five intermediaries. SixDegrees.com users could create their profiles, have a list of friends and contribute information to their community. Although this site attracted million of users, it could not evolve into a sustainable business and closed down in 2000. Since 2003 there was a revolution and uptake of social networking sites that. This revolution has brought a dramatic shift on the business, the cultural and the research landscape of the world wide web (Pallis et al., 2011). Figure 1, presents a timeline that shows the evolution of social networking sites during the last decade.

According to study carried out by InSites Consulting (2010) 72 % of worldwide population of Internet users are users of at least one social networking site (most of them are users of at least two social networking site). According to NielsenWire (2010) average user spent 5 h 35 min on social networking sites in December 2009. These numbers indicates that social networking sites have become an important part of the online experience worldwide.

Cultural localisation in virtual environments

There is plenty of definitions for term “culture” though purpose of this article is not defining culture, so it will only one definition provided – one of M. J. Herskovits (1955) which states that culture “man-made part of the human environment”. This definition fist well for describing world wide web as well as it is also a „man-made part of the human environment“. Culture and social world has an impact on values of people. Those values has an impact on attitudes and behaviour in turn (Alas and Tuulik; 2007). There is empirical
evidence that culture not only has an impact on various activities of humans but depends on economical growth itself (Übius and Alas, 2009).

Companies which decide to move their e-business efforts into international virtual market, have to decide which strategy to choose as well: standardise or localise its website to the users of different cultures. Marketing theory isolates such possible strategies (Alimienė and Kuvykaitė, 2008; Virvilaitė and Šeinauskienė, 2008):

- Standardisation strategy uses promotional messages internationally, translating but not otherwise modifying headings, illustrations or copy.
- Localisation (or adaptation) strategy posits that consumer difference may have been widening and that messages should be tailored according to culture, media availability, product life-cycle stages and industry structures.
- Third school of thought offers a compromise (or contingency) approach– appropriateness of standardisation depends on the product, consumer characteristics and environmental factors.

These strategies did not lose its importance in the context of digital environment as well. There is a number of studies carried out in order to find out whether users prefer localised or standardised websites. Few of those studies focused on defining characteristics of websites in different cultures (Faiola and Matei, 2005; Zahir, Dobing and Hunter, 2002; Marcus and Gould, 2001). D. Cyr and H. Trevor-Smith (2004) surveyed 30 websites in Germany, Japan and US in order to systematically check website differences in various countries. During the survey special attention was paid to the use of symbols and graphics, colour chose, website attributes, language and content. According to all criteria there were significant differences found, which shows design chose differences across cultures. Other research results also indicate significant differences in design of websites across cultures. (Simon, 2001; Singh, Zhao and Hu, 2005). Yet another research revealed that users prefer to visit more frequently and stay longer on websites if those are localised (Barber and Badre, 1998; Evers and Day, 1997). Few studies are performed using eye-tracking software and it revealed that users from different cultures tend to browse websites in different sequence (Seidenspinner and Theuner, 2007; Dong and Lee, 2008). All this research leads to one common conclusion – websites should be localised (Singh, Kumar and Baack, 2005).

### Previous 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 / monochronic cultures). This applies to researching cross cultural issues on social networking sites as well.

Table 1 summarizes research related to cross-cultural issues in social networking sites. Table includes data on studies which were published in scientific articles that could found online (in Science Direct, Springer, Emerald, ProQuest and other databases, as well as using Google Scholar search engine). Queries used for search were “cross cultural” or “cultural differences” in combination with “social network site”, “social networking site”, “online social networking”, “social networking service” and similar.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Social networking sites</th>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>Object of research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S. Fragoso (2006)</td>
<td>1 (Orkut)</td>
<td>2 (Brazil &amp; USA)</td>
<td>the cultural differences in appropriation of SNS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L. Hjorth and M. Yuji (in press)</td>
<td>2 (Mixi &amp; Cyworld)</td>
<td>2 (Japan &amp; Korea)</td>
<td>differences in usage of SNS across cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. N. Chapman &amp; M. Lahav (2008)</td>
<td>5 (Facebook, MySpace, SkyBlog, QQ &amp; Cyworld)</td>
<td>4 (USA, France, China &amp; South Korea)</td>
<td>differences in the SNS sites user goals and behaviour</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Authors of these articles 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 mentioned above 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 research 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.

**Proposed approach for further research on cross cultural differences in Social Networking Sites**

As said earlier in this paper, 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). 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).

N. Singh et al. (2005) identified website elements relevant for each of cultural values dimensions of G. Hofstede (1980) and E. T. Hall (1976). For individualism- collectivism they identified such elements:

1. **Collectivism:**
   - community relations – presence or absence of community policy, giving back to community, social responsibility policy;
   - clubs or chat rooms – presence or absence of members’ club, product-based clubs, chats with company employees, chat with interest groups, message boards, discussion groups, and live talks;
   - family theme – pictures of family, pictures of teams of employees, mention of employee teams, emphasis on team and collective work responsibility in vision statement or elsewhere on the web site, emphasis on customers as a family;
   - loyalty programs – frequent miles programs, customer loyalty programs, and company credit cards for local country, special membership programs; and
   - newsletter – online subscriptions, magazines, and newsletters.
(2) Individualism:

- Independence theme – images and themes depicting self-reliance, self-recognition, achievement;
- Product uniqueness – unique selling points of the product, product differentiation features; and
- Personalization – features such as gift recommendations, individual acknowledgements or greetings, web page personalization.

Only recently main elements or building blocks of social media sites were identified (which also applies for social networking sites) by J. H. Kietzmann et al. (2011). The authors use (see Figure 2) is a honeycomb of seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups. Each block allows to unpack and examine (1) a specific facet of social media user experience, and (2) its implications for firms (see Figure 3). These building blocks are neither mutually exclusive, nor do they all have to be present in a social media activity. They are constructs that allow us to make sense of how different levels of social media functionality can be configured.

![Figure 2. Building blocks of social media: social media functionality (Kietzmann et al., 2011)](image)

These building blocks have some relevance and resemblance to previously mentioned traditional website elements identified by N. Singh et al. (2005) as ones related to cultural dimension of individualism – collectivism, so we can try link it with rate of this dimension.

Assumptions about relation between social media building blocks and individualism-collectivism cultural dimension are listed below (see Figure 3).

(1) Collectivism:
- Conversations – this block represents the extent to which users communicate with other users in a social media setting. Many social media sites are designed primarily to facilitate conversations among individuals and groups. These conversations happen for all sorts of reasons. People tweet, blog, etc. to meet new like-minded people, to find true love, to build their self-esteem, or to be on the cutting edge of new ideas or trending topics. Yet others see social media as a way of making their message heard and positively impacting humanitarian causes, environmental problems, economic issues, or political debates (this aspect could be linked to cultures with low rate of masculinity as well);
- Sharing – represents the extent to which users exchange, distribute, and receive content. The term ‘social’ often implies that exchanges between people are crucial. In many cases, however, sociality is about the objects that mediate these ties between people; the reasons why they meet online and associate with each other;
- Relationships – block represents the extent to which users can be related to other users. ‘Relate,’ we mean that two or more users have some form of association that leads them to converse, share
objects of sociality, meet up, or simply just list each other as a friend or fan. Consequently, how users of a social media platform are connected often determines the what-and-how of information exchange;

- **Groups** – The groups functional block represents the extent to which users can form communities and sub-communities. The more ‘social’ a network becomes, the bigger the group of friends, followers, and contacts.

(2) Individualism:

- **Identity** – this functional block represents the extent to which users reveal their identities in a social media setting. This can include disclosing information such as name, age, gender, profession, location, and also information that portrays users in certain ways;

- **Presence** – building block represents the extent to which users can know if other users are accessible. It includes knowing where others are, in the virtual world and/or in the real world, and whether they are available. In the virtual world, this happens through status lines like ‘available’ or ‘hidden.’ Given the increasing connectivity of people on the move, this presence bridges the real and the virtual;

- **Reputation** – the extent to which users can identify the standing of others, including themselves, in a social media setting. Reputation can have different meanings on social media platforms. In most cases, reputation is a matter of trust, but since information technologies are not yet good at determining such highly qualitative criteria, social media sites rely on ‘mechanical Turks’: tools that automatically aggregate user-generated information to determine trustworthiness.

**Figure 2.** Building blocks of social media: implications and relevance to individualism – collectivism cultural dimension (adopted from Kietzmann et al., 2011)

As not all social networking sites pay equal attention to all building blocks (in some cases even do not implement all blocks on platform), similarly, assumption relating to cross cultural differences would be that creators of social networking sites should emphasise different features for users from different cultures. For example, Facebook focuses mostly on relationships building block, which supposedly appealing for cultures ranking low on individualism-collectivism. Though we could assume that Facebook should rather emphasize identity, presence or reputation blocks then presenting site for users of cultures ranking high on individualism-collectivism dimension.

**Conclusions**

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.

Though first well-known social networking site is SixDegrees.com was launched in 1997 already, 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 and there is not much not much research is carried in respect to cultural differences in social networking sites.

Previous studies on whether websites should be localised or standardised point to one general conclusion – that web content needs to be adapted to the different cultures of its targeted consumers. Supposedly this statement includes social networking sites as well.

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 / monochronic cultures). This applies to researching cross cultural issues on social networking sites as well. Though most of the studies on cross-cultural issues in social networking services 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.

This paper proposes new approach to research researching cross cultural issues on social networking sites basing on seven building blocks of social media sites (identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups) and cultural dimension of individualism – collectivism as this dimension of all defined by G. Hofstede (1980) is supposed to be particularly relevant dimension in studying the use of services built around Web 2.0, including SNSs.

References


