

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND SOCIAL NETWORKING INFORMATION SHARING

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ABSTRACT

This research proposal uses the five cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede to analyze differences in cultural values of social networking users. These values have potential to affect the type and depth of information that individuals share on social networking web sites. Site selection for the study includes criteria such as number of users, language, and country of origin. Representative web sites for six countries for each of Hofstede's dimensions constitute the framework for the study. Findings of the study can help social networking sites and developers to flesh out appropriate strategies for promotion of information sharing. Results can also help with web site design that better meets the needs of the user and offers site features that the user wants. In general, this study has value in helping global users of social networking sites better appreciate and understand how to communicate effectively and professionally with those in another culture. This gives individuals a better background to be competent in the global virtual environment of today.

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNS) have become one of the most popular mediums to share different information (Strater & Richter, 2007). For instance, prior research indicates that SNS have become a popular way to meet new people, to stay connected to family and friends, and to stay up to date on the world's current events (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). More specifically, people share different types of information which include personal, social, and professional information (Vasalou et al., 2010; Narayanaswamy & McGrath, 2011; 2012). Thus, the success of social networking sites depends on how well people use them for information sharing (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Vasalou et al., 2010).

Several different factors affect an individual's information sharing behavior. For example, previous research has indicated factors such as privacy settings, SNS design/features, gender, social pressures, and site popularity influence information sharing behavior (Grant, 2005; Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Vasalou et al., 2010; Narayanaswamy & McGrath, 2012). Preliminary research suggests that a person's motivation in using a particular social networking site is rooted in his or her personal experience (Vasalou et al., 2010). In particular, it has been noted that social experiences influence a user's preference of a site and, more specifically, what kind of information they choose to share. Personal and social experiences are formed based on the cultural values held by individuals (Hofstede, 1980; 1991). Thus, it is rational to argue that cultural values can influence the individual's intention to share information, including its type and depth. For instance, prior research has shown that certain countries are more reserved in disclosing informal information (Chow et al., 1999). Accordingly, this study explores how an individual's culture can influence his or her intent to share personal, social, and professional information. The five cultural dimensions proposed by Hofstede, namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, long vs. short-term orientation, individualism vs. collectivism, and masculinity vs. femininity (Hofstede, 1991), are considered to analyze the differences in cultural values. Given the effort rendered by SNS to promote users to share

information successfully on their sites (Tufekci, 2008), the findings from this study can help both developers and SNS not only to determine strategies that will help promote information sharing but also to enrich the site features and design to better suit their customer needs.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Prior studies have noted that cultural differences impact individual preferences and behavior (Hofstede, 1980; 1991). Hofstede (1980, p.5) describes culture as “a collective programming of mind which distinguishes the members from one group or category of people from another.” He captured cultural differences using the five dimensions of power distance, collectivism/individualism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance and long term/short term orientation (Hofstede, 1980; 1991).

Power distance (PDI) refers to individuals behavior regarding their interactions with elderly members - autocratic versus paternalistic (Hofstede, 1991). Individualism and Collectivism (IDV) represents a continuum defining the preference of people to belong to a loosely versus a tightly knit social framework. Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) is defined as the extent to which members of the society feel threatened by uncertain situations. It explicates the individual’s willingness to accept risk (Hofstede, 1980). Masculinity/femininity values concern the extent of emphasis on work goals (earnings, advancement) and assertiveness, as opposed to personal goals (friendly atmosphere) (Hofstede, 1991). Finally, long-term vs. short-term orientation refers to how a society makes decisions and structures itself.

Previous studies have examined these cultural dimensions in various contexts. For instance, it has been noted culture values influence an individual’s intention to accept and use technology (Venkatesh et.al, 2012). Within SNS research cultural values have been found to impact an individual’s motives to join SNS, privacy controls preferences, and commitment to belong to a particular SNS group (Fogg & Iizawa, 2008; Joinson, 2008; Vasalou et al., 2010). However, none of the prior studies on SNS have examined the direct influences of cultural values on information sharing behavior. The information sharing literature reveals that individual information sharing behavior is influenced by various factors (Constant et.al., 1994). In particular, it has been noted that attitudes about information sharing depend on the form or type of information. Individual attitudes are formed based on their cultural values (Hofstede, 1991). For example, collectivist countries like China intend not to divulge information in openly sharing informal information venues compared to western countries (Chow et al., 1999). Similarly, individuals in countries with high PDI scores are hesitant to share openly sensitive information because they are respectful to the elderly members of the society (Frenandez, 1997). In addition, the members of high uncertainty avoidance societies exhibit more dependence on experts and prefer a more structured and rule oriented environment; thus they tend to share information only when they are sure that it is safe to do so (Hofstede, 1980). This study extends these perspectives to SNS and examines the impact of cultural values on individual information sharing behavior in SNS.

METHOD

The first step is to identify a list of the top SNS based on various criteria such as the number of users, language (English-speaking), and country of origin among other things. The identified list will be verified with similar studies (Bonneau & Preibusch, 2009). The users will be categorized based on the country of origin, and the countries will be identified using Hofstede’s index scores. Each cultural dimension has a high/low score. Three countries representing each “high” and each “low” will be chosen. This means that six countries represented each dimension from Hofstede’s framework. Fifteen observations from each country will be recorded; thus a total of 90 observations will be collected for each

cultural dimension. Overall the analysis will be based on a total number of 450 observations. The total number of observations was determined based on prior studies (Vasalou et al., 2010).

POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS AND DISCUSSION

It is crucial for SNS to understand how different people use their sites to share information. It is expected that cultural values will influence individual information sharing behavior. In particular, each cultural dimension should display different information sharing patterns. For example, users from a higher UAI index culture would post a personal achievement or accomplishment as their “status.” SNS could benefit from the information contained in this study in order to customize groups, site features, and even terminology to their various users. Individuals and companies alike can also be more sensitive to a user’s preferences and ideas if this information is known. In conclusion, not only will users have a better appreciation for the global users of SNS, but they will also have a better understanding of how to communicate across cultures more effectively and professionally. From a broader perspective, the results of this study can help individuals to become more competent in the global virtual environment.

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