

Chapter 9

Cultural Differences in Social Media Usage and Beliefs and Attitudes Towards Advertising on Social Media: Findings from Dubai, United Arab Emirates

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ABSTRACT

Social media use is quickly integrating into the daily lives of consumers in the Middle East, where a large number of users represent a variety of cultural milieu. This chapter examines differences between Arab and non-Arab social media users in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with respect to usage, beliefs, and attitudes towards social media advertising. The chapter also examines managerial and theoretical implications for communication across culturally diverse audiences via online media.

INTRODUCTION

Social media have become one of the foremost online communication venues, attracting millions of global Internet users (Global faces, 2009). Given the huge potential of social media

for intercultural communication in the global marketplace, marketers attempt to use this new mode of online communication to augment brand awareness, create brand loyalty, and establish long-term relationships with global consumers. According to eMarketer (2008), advertising spending on social networking sites (SNSs), one

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of the major applications of social media, will reach \$2.6 billion worldwide by 2012. Despite the global prevalence of social media and its impact on marketing communications practices, little investigation has been done on how individuals beyond the United States perceive and use social media (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Prior research on new communication technologies suggests individuals' usage pattern and outcomes vary from culture to culture. Indeed, a few studies have suggested that communication online is culturally contingent (Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Ang, 2007; MacKinnon, 2008). Individuals' cultural backgrounds play a crucial role in determining online usage patterns and preferences toward culturally customized web designs (Gevorgyan & Manucharova, 2009). As social media is becoming prevalent on a global scale, an investigation of if social media usage reflects distinctions in cultural values should shed deeper light on computer-mediated communication (CMC) across cultures and advertising practices within the emerging media.

The growth of social media across geographic and cultural milieu, coupled with increased marketing messages within social media, raises questions as to beliefs and attitudes towards advertising on social media among culturally diverse users. Undoubtedly, these beliefs and attitudes mediate the effectiveness of any promotional attempts within social media, making it imperative to understand cultural differences in beliefs and attitudes towards marketing messages within this vehicle of communication. Thus, the objective of this chapter is to examine usage, beliefs and attitudes of consumers towards advertising on social media among Arab and non-Arab consumers. Using an online survey, two primary research questions are proposed for a fuller understanding of the roles of the online social medium in the particular cultural setting: 1) what are the differences in overall social media usage, beliefs, and attitudes toward advertising in social media between Arab versus non-Arab social media users in Dubai? 2) Do non-Arab social media users exhibit higher

levels of independent self-construal values than their Arab counterparts? Do Arab users exhibit higher levels of interdependent self-construal values than their non-Arab counterparts? Results of this study could help marketers develop promising communication strategies and target diverse cultural groups effectively.

CONSIDERING CULTURE AND MEDIA

A cultural dimension that distinguishes people from different cultures is Markus and Kitayama's (1991) *independent* and *interdependent* self-construal. Markus and Kitayama (1991) defined self-construal as "the relationship between the self and others and, especially, the degree to which they [people] see themselves as separate from others or as connected with others" (p. 226). Two prominent aspects of self-construal are independence and interdependence. The distinction of self-construals corresponds to Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of individualism and collectivism. Individuals with an independent orientation, view themselves as unique from others, are more likely to be observed in Western cultures. Whereas interdependent individuals consider themselves as part of an interconnected social relationship, are more prevalent in Eastern cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). Kim and Yun (2007) noted that self-construals have a mediating role in the influence of culture on users' behavior and communication patterns. Accordingly, the current study incorporates self-construals into our analysis.

Due to the potential influence of culture on social media usage, the study presented here examines social media usage among a culturally diverse group of participants in Dubai, an Emirate of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Given the growing popularity of social media in UAE, rapid growth of regional Internet users, and increased spending power of UAE consumers (Dubai economy,

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