Chapter 4
Cultural and International Aspects of Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social software provides powerful tools for people to communicate and interact. Social software networks are popular around the world but there are many differences between tools, functions and their use. The international application of these global tools even bears the risk of misunderstandings between individuals. This article discusses differences between social software from various countries concerning design, functions, use, opinion expression and the perception of social capital. First, a theoretical culture model is presented to provide one potential framework for the analysis. Subsequently, the relation between culture and information technology is explored. In particular, user interfaces need to be adapted to national preferences and cognitive styles. The influence of culture on social networks is then discussed for several aspects of social media.

INTRODUCTION

Recently, social software has received great attention. From 2008 to 2009, the time spent with such systems has increased by 82% (Nielsen, 2010). Many social networks are successfully used by large scale international communities. Even business portals are now using the appeal and the simplicity of social software for knowledge management or they extract relevant business information by text mining (Sohns & Breitner, 2009). Social software tools with their ease for publishing on the web and the creation of virtual networks seem to be of universal appeal and may be used on a global level. Social software appeal to users from many cultures and some might even think that the Internet leads to one unified world culture. However, humans are often unaware of cultural habits and values which have a strong impact on the individual behavior. We see culture as observed human behavior without expressing

any preference for a particular culture. A definition will be given in the following chapter.

Culture has a great impact on the development and use of IT. Virtual chats are a good example for cultural habits and values in a new environment. In real face-to-face communication, standards and conventions have been established to signal that a partner wants to end the communication. For virtual chats, these signals are not yet established. This lack leads to uncomfortable situations for many users from cultures with an emphasis on politeness. There are also cultural factors which need to be considered when designing social software for economic and community development.

The following naive questions could arise:

- Are there differences between the use of social software in individualistic and collectivist cultures?
- Do individualistic cultures use social software more because it serves as a means of individual expression?
- Do collectivist cultures use social software more because it serves for entering in virtual social interaction?

This article explores the relationship between culture and information technology for social networks. First, the culture model of Hofstede is presented and other culture definitions are shown (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). These are applied to information technology in general and to social media in particular. For several examples and based on a few studies we show how the functions of social networks are quite different. One chapter shows how discussion patterns and opinion expression can be influenced by the communication style of a culture.

BACKGROUND: CULTURE MODELS

There are many definitions of culture. The influential Dutch anthropologist Hofstede defined cul-

ture as learned patterns of "thinking, feeling, and potential acting" that form the mental program or the "software of the mind" (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) of an individual. As "software" it affects our way of thinking and acting in the world. National or social cultures define how people interact with each other, e.g. in groups and their environment.

Culture is often illustrated by using the metaphor of an onion: the most visible outer layers are easier to access than the hidden inner core, which is difficult to identify (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). Visible aspects of a culture are easily recognizable for anyone. The invisible ways of thinking and dealing with the world are much more difficult to access. This leads to many misunderstandings in intercultural encounters. For example, while the greeting behavior can be easily observed in a different culture, it is much more difficult to find out how a culture deals with unavoidable uncertainties of our existence.

Cultures are often classified in accordance to their relative positions on a number of polar scales which cultural anthropology commonly calls cultural dimensions. The position of a culture on those scales is determined by the dominant value orientations. Such quantified models of culture are difficult to find. Hofstede originally defined four dimensions of culture (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005):

- Power distance measures the extent to which subordinates (employees, students) respond to power and authority (managers, teachers, parents) and how they expect and accept unequal power distribution. In high power distance cultures, individuals pay more respect to superiors. Guidance from elderly and experienced people is expected and not regarded as patronizing,
- Individualism vs. Collectivism: these value orientations refer to the ties among individuals in a society. In collectivist cultures, individuals define themselves more as members of a social group. They are ex-

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