

Chapter 5

Culture–Laden Social Engagement:

A Comparative Study of Social Relationships in Social Networking Sites among American, Chinese and Korean Users

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ABSTRACT

In today's online environment, social networking sites (SNSs) flourish across the globe as an effective venue for social engagement. The objective of this chapter is to conceptually discuss and empirically demonstrate how social interactions within SNSs are still culturally bound and mirror the users' prevailing cultural orientations. After discussing a conceptual framework for illustrating cultural forces in social relationships within SNSs, the authors present findings from an online survey of SNS users from three cultures: the US, China, and South Korea.

INTRODUCTION

With the evolution of information and communication technologies, computer-mediated communication among individuals from different cultures continues to increase and transpire in

diverse forms. In recent years, social networking sites (SNSs) have shown exponential growth and currently serve millions of Internet users across the globe as a popular online venue for social engagement (Nielsen Online, 2009). A growing roster of SNSs includes diverse platforms that range from MySpace and Facebook to Orkut, LinkedIn, and

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Cyworld. Although the focus and architecture of SNSs are increasingly diversifying as they are designed to fulfill different networking needs (e.g., LinkedIn for business-oriented networking and Flickr for picture sharing and movie-focused Flixter), those sites catering to general audiences such as Facebook and MySpace remain among the most popular and most pervasive (Papacharissi, 2009).

At the heart of SNSs is the practice of using “friends” lists that connect people across space and time as well as using the friend finder and invitation features. Within the realm of SNSs, individuals can build, maintain, and enhance their personal networks by reconnecting with old contacts and making new connections. SNSs also allow users to freely interact with others in their networks through a multitude of communication means such as bulletin boards, emails, and instant messengers. The architecture of SNSs that facilitates and cultivates social navigability and sociality is what makes these sites unique and different from other technologies used for computer-mediated communications.

The objective of this chapter is to conceptually discuss and empirically demonstrate how culture shapes computer-mediated social interaction in the emerging online environment, namely in SNSs. To accomplish this goal, this chapter first presents a review of the distinctive architecture and development of SNSs. Then, the authors provide a thorough review of related constructs and conceptual framework that might explain different norms and approaches in technology-mediated communication across cultures, especially in the SNS environment. Next, the authors use online survey data of college-aged SNS users from three culturally divergent countries (the United States, China, and South Korea) to discuss cross-cultural similarities and differences in the characteristics of social relationships and magnitude of social capital in SNSs. The authors then conclude the chapter with a discussion of the implications of the findings and present directions for future re-

search in the area of intercultural communication in the growing online environment. Given the mounting popularity and pervasiveness of SNSs on the global scale, this chapter advances our knowledge of cultural impact on social interaction in the technology-mediated environment. It also offers useful insights into how to facilitate online communication across cultures.

BACKGROUND

In theory, SNSs enable users to transcend geographical borders and encourage intercultural communication among them. While SNSs are seemingly ideal for communication among individuals from different cultures, computer-mediated communication does not occur in a cultural vacuum. Thus, such interactions might still be influenced by cultural factors (Halavais, 2000; Orgad, 2006). That is, social interaction within SNSs might operate within the spatial, structural, and cultural perimeters of the societal milieu by which the users are surrounded. Such interactions might also reflect the dominant values and norms of the culture to which participants belong (Boyd, 2008). Within this context, an important question to address is

Do cultural forces impact on the nature of social connections in SNSs?

Although the burgeoning body of academic research on SNSs has examined SNSs as a new virtual sphere for identity construction, self-presentation, and social capital generation (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Jung, Youn, & McClung, 2007; Livingstone, 2008), the investigation has largely been limited to users from a single nation and little is known about the applicability of its findings to other cultural contexts. Yet a few recent studies suggest cultural influences on social relations and interaction within SNSs (e.g., Kim & Yun, 2007; Lewis & George, 2008).

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