Chapter 101

Will Social Media and Its Consumption Converge or Diverge Global Consumer Culture?

Yowei Kang

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7060-194X

National Taiwan Ocean University, Taiwan

Kenneth C. C. Yang

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4176-6219

The University of Texas at El Paso, USA

ABSTRACT

Social media have been claimed to homogenize human and consumer behaviors around the world – in other words, to make people think, feel, and act alike regardless of national borders. Scholars often debate this claim from either a convergence or a divergence perspective from the marketing and consumer behavior literature. The theoretical foundation will be based on the convergence-divergence debates that postulate universal consumption patterns and values are made possible, due to the industrialization, modernization, technology, and wealth accumulation. The authors use perceptions of online privacy among users of privacy-invasive technologies as an example to discuss why people will think the same about their own privacy could be a myth for the failure to consider the unique socio-cultural characteristics of each nation. This study begins with a global consumption analysis of social media around the world. Then, they examine how privacy concerns may help account for the homogenization or heterogenization trend of global consumer culture. Discussions and implications are provided.

INTRODUCTION

The Rise of Social Media Ecosystem

Advances in contemporary Information-Communication Technologies (ICTs) are predicted to increase connectivity among consumers and lead to their spending behaviors (Ozturk & Cavusgil, 2019). The term, ICTs, often refer to technologies such as the Internet, World Wide Web, mobile technologies, even smart TV that have included social shaping and consequences (Dutton, 2001; Irion & Helberg, 2017). Recently, the popular Chinese mobile app, Tiktok, has been said to collect users' location, social media contacts, age, and phone contact information (Luna, 2020). These technological developments have led to the rise of a global market where consumers are exposed to similar lifestyles (Frith & Mueller, 2003 cited in Choi & Ferle, 2004; *We Are Social*, 2020). Social media, like many of these contemporary technological innovations, has been claimed to affect consumer behaviors (Voramontri & Klieb, 2019). In a similar vein, social media are likely to homogenize global human and consumer behaviors around the world--- in other words, to make people think, feel, and act alike regardless of national borders (De Mooij, 2019). This claim is in line with what many media and communication scholars have proposed to emphasize the role of media on the emergence and homogenization of global culture (Mustapha, Azeez, & Wok, 2005).

According to Statista (2018, May), the number of social media users around the world has grown from 0.97 billion in 2010, 2.14 billion in 2015, to 2.96 billion in 2020. The number is expected to grow to 3.09 billion in 2021 (Statista, 2018, May). The average worldwide penetration rate of social media has reached 49% (*We Are Social*, 2020) to generate potential and widespread impacts on society. *We Are Social* (2020) has also reported the global Internet users have surpassed over 4.5 billion, while the number of social media users around the world is 3.8 billion, suggesting the rapid rise of social media to influence human society to the extent that the Internet has created. The social media ecosystem is composed of various interconnected applications, including blogs, consumer opinion platforms, micro-blogging sites, social networking sites (Han et al., 2019). The rapid development of social media ecosystem has led some industry pundits to observe the homogenization among social media companies that offer overlapping features in their respective applications (Morgan, 2016).

According to *We Are Social* (2020), the most popular social platform is Facebook, with its global users of 2,449 million users, followed by *YouTube* (2,000 millions), *WhatApps* (1,640 millions), *Facebook Messenger* (1,300 millions), *Weibo/WeChat* (1,151 millions), *Instagram* (1,000 millions), *Douyin/Tiktok* (800 millions), and *QQ* (from China) (731 millions). A report by eBizMBA (2017) observes that the top five most popular social media platforms, on the basis of estimated unique monthly visitors, are *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *LinkenIn* (cited in Koohang, Paliszkiewicz, & Goluchowski, 2018).

The growing importance of social media as part of contemporary human experiences is also attributed to their widespread applications in many marketing activities (Burton, Mueller, Gollins, & Walls, 2017; Grewal, Stephen, & Coleman, 2019; Ham, Leee, Hayes, & Bae, 2018). These scholars have observed that social media have played an essential role as part of the integrated marketing communication platforms to foster relationships with consumers by providing entertaining and informative contents (Burton et al., 2017). For example, Grewal et al. (2019) employ five experiments to examine whether product postings on social media can reveal consumers' own identity to help marketers increase their subsequent purchase intention. Other marketing researchers have also explored the underlying motivations that consumers simulcast branded contents across different social media platforms (Ham et al., 2018). Their

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