

Chapter 4.11

Culturally Unique Social Patterns in Computer-Mediated Social Networking

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ABSTRACT

People from distinct cultural backgrounds communicate and manage their interpersonal relations in systematically different ways. The current chapter utilizes a survey of young adults to examine the social patterns of culturally influenced differences in online behavior. Results show that individuals that identify with individualistic cultural backgrounds have larger networks of friends on social network sites (SNSs), have a larger proportion of these friends that they have not actually met face-to-face, and share more photos online, opposed to individuals

that identify with less individualistic cultural backgrounds. The size of an individuals' offline social support network size was a significant predictor of satisfaction with life, while SNS network size was not. Findings suggest that individuals who identify with more individualistic cultural backgrounds tend to be better connected, self-promote, and are more satisfied with their social lives.

INTRODUCTION

As our communicative environment continues to be influenced by the introduction of new computer-mediated communication (CMC) applications, the

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effects of these applications are impacting the social world in complex ways. Communication technologies, such as social-networking sites (SNS), are being used in a number of ways to navigate and mediate the environment of personal identities and relationships. Since these applications are being used with increased frequency, using technologies like SNS has become an important skill when managing relationships online (Stefanone & Lackaff, 2009, Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2008). As a result of the frequency and importance of CMC applications in our relationships, the instrumental decisions one makes when deciding how to behave in these mediated environments becomes an important element in managing our social world.

A unique aspect of these new computer-mediated technologies is that spatial and geographic boundaries are no longer barriers to interaction, allowing people from a diverse set of cultures to interact with each other with increased ease and frequency. Given that many of the new CMC applications require people to establish an online identity with personal profiles, earlier findings indicating that impressions formed in CMC environments can be more intense than offline (see Hancock & Dunham, 2004), it is important to understanding how individuals who identify with different cultures use the CMC platforms to present their identities. This chapter presents an investigation into the relationship between computer-mediated communicative behaviors and culture to explore whether culturally influenced behaviors normally associated with face-to-face communication emerge as patterned behavior in CMC.

In this chapter, literature on culture-specific communicative styles and behaviors frames an investigation into the use of specific Web 2.0 technologies: SNSs. Literature on broad cultural differences in behavior is reviewed, followed by a review of research on CMC technologies with emphasis on SNSs. The literature review concludes with hypotheses and research questions about

the different uses of SNSs as related to culture. Methodological procedures will be discussed, followed by results, discussion of limitations and implications for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture as Individualism and Collectivism

There are a number of distinct research streams investigating the various ways that culture can be categorized and conceptualized. Much research has been conducted in an effort to understand how people from different and distinct cultures behave in a plethora of situations, from which several seminal concepts were established. One of the most investigated areas of cultural differences relates to individualism and collectivism as associated with national cultures.

A principle amount of the initial conceptualization of cultural differences was done by Hofstede (1980), who defined four basic dimensions for characterizing cultures: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and individualism / collectivism. Hofstede defined decreased individualism as a tendency to place the needs of one's in-group above one's own needs, and increased individualism as the tendency to place one's own needs above the needs of one's in-group. Triandis and colleagues (Hui & Triandis, 1986; Triandis, 2001) have shown individualism to be multidimensional and identified key features of increased individualism like tendencies toward self-reliance, self-promotion, competition, emotional distance from in-groups and hedonism. Collectivism is also a complex construct and can be characterized by closeness to family, family integrity, and sociability.

National identity has been used to study cultural concepts such as individualism and collectivism and is associated with a diversified field of research, drawing some criticism and parallel

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