Cultural differences in social networking site use: A comparative study of China and the United States

Linda A. Jackson [a,*], Jin-Liang Wang [b]

[a] Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, United States
[b] Center for Mental Health Education, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

A B S T R A C T

This research compared social networking site (SNS) use in a collectivistic culture, China, and an individualistic culture, the United States (US). Over 400 college student participants from a Southwestern University in Chongqing, China, and 490 college participants from a Midwestern University in the US completed a survey about their use of SNSs – time spent, importance and motives for use. They then rated themselves on a variety of personal characteristics, namely the Big Five Personality factors, Loneliness, Shyness and Life Satisfaction. Results revealed cultural differences in SNS use. US participants spent more time in SNS, considered them to be more important and had more friends in SNSs than did Chinese participants. Self-ratings of personal characteristics also differed in the two cultures as did the personal characteristics that predicted SNS use. In general, personal characteristics were less effective in predicting SNS use in China than in the US. Findings suggest that in collectivistic cultures the importance of the family, friends and one's groups may be partly responsible for Chinese participants' lesser use of SNSs, whereas in individualistic cultures the importance of self and having more but less close and enduring friendships may be partly responsible for US participants' greater use of SNSs. Personal characteristics predicted SNS use in both cultures but were stronger predictors in an individualistic culture than in a collectivistic, consistent with the emphasis on self in the former and on family, friends and one's groups in the latter. Future research is needed to identify whether cultural values always take precedence over personal characteristics and motives in determining behavior in the virtual world.

© 2012 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

We begin this discussion of culture and SNSs by first defining each term. Neither is easily defined, particular the concept of culture. Nevertheless, research on culture is abundant, with entire journals devoted to the topic. The research on SNSs is growing at almost as fast a rate as the growth in SNSs themselves.

Culture has been defined as a constellation of loosely organized values, practices and norms shared by an interconnected group of people in a given nation (Chiu, Leung, & Hong, 2010; Leung, Chiu & Hong, 2010). Much credit for our current understanding of culture goes to Geert Hofstede who, in 1980, published the results of a study of more than 100,000 employees of the multinational IBM corporation in 40 countries. His research was motivated by an interest in identifying basic value dimensions that exist across cultures and vary among cultures.

Hofstede's initial research identified four basic value dimensions which he labeled collectivism–individualism, masculinity–femininity, power distance (equal–unequal), and uncertainty avoidance (present or absent; Hofstede, 1983). Shortly later Hofstede and Bond (1984) identified a fifth value dimension, which they labeled orientation toward life (long-term versus short-term). Hofstede has since elaborated these dimensions, attempting to characterize dozens of nations along them (Hofstede, 1991, 1997, 2001; Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, 1995, 2001, 2008; Triandis & Trafimow, 2001).

Research indicates that the most important of Hofstede's dimensions for distinguishing among national cultures is collectivism–individualism (Hofstede, 2001; Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibase, Choi, &Yoon,1994; Oyserman et al., 2002; Triandis, 1995, 2001, 2008; Triandis & Trafimow, 2001). Eastern cultures, China being a prototypic example, are collectivistic. They value family, friends and their groups over self. They are more likely to engage in self-effacement than self-promotion, and value modesty over pride. Members of Eastern cultures tend to have fewer, closer and more enduring friendships than members of Western cultures. Eastern values and friendship patterns are rooted in the historical, political, and religious foundations of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism (Chiu et al., 2010; Fu, Xu, Cameron, Heyman, & Lee, 2007).

In contrast, Western cultures, the US being a prototypic example, are individualistic. They value self more than family, friends and their groups. They are more likely to engage in self-promotion than self-effacement, and value pride over modesty. Members of Western cultures tend to have more friends but looser connections to them and friendships are less enduring. These values are rooted in the rugged individualism and freedom of choice that are the foundations of Western cultures (Wang & Leichtmann, 2000).

Other value dimensions of culture identified by Hofstede (1983, 1991) are more difficult to apply to characterizing nations. This may be attributable, in part, to the evidence of variability within cultures and over time on these dimensions, compared to the collectivism–individualism dimension (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 2001). It may also be attributable to how these dimensions are defined. Briefly, in cultures with low power distance, power is distributed about equally among members whereas in high power distance cultures inequality in the distribution of power is expected and accepted, as are steep hierarchies. Uncertainty avoidance refers to cultural members' lack of tolerance for ambiguity and need for formal rules and policies. The masculinity–femininity dimension refers to a culture's emphasis on either masculine work-related goals and characteristics (e.g., income, assertiveness) or feminine interpersonal-related goals and characteristics (humanism, agreeableness). Long term versus short term orientation refers to whether the culture views its members and events in the long run or as they presently exist. To date, China and the US have yet to be reliably categorized on these dimensions, with findings indicating inconsistencies within each nation and changes over time.

Another but often neglected way to distinguish among cultures, particularly between Eastern collectivistic cultures and Western individualistic cultures, is parenting style (Baumrind, 1971, 1991; Chao, 2001; Dewar, 2011; Zhao, 2007). Research has examined the claim that parenting style may be an explanation for why Chinese children are, on average, more accomplished and academically successful than US children. Chinese mothers are more demanding and strict with their children than are US mothers. Chinese mothers and fathers set high standards for their children and spend more time "pushing" their children to study, practice and achieve (Zhao, 2007). According to the parenting style models developed in the US (Baumrind, 1971), these practices sound like authoritarian parenting, a style of child-rearing that emphasizes high standards and a tendency to control the child, often through shaming, withdrawal of love, or other punishments. In contrast, an authoritative parenting style in the US, also emphasizes high standards, but includes high levels of parental warmth and reasoning with the child. The best academic and psychological child outcomes in the US are usually associated with an authoritative parenting style and the worst outcomes are associated with an authoritarian parenting style (Baumrind, 1991; Leung & Kwon, 1998; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992).

Summarizing the results of research on parenting style in China, Dewar (2011) drew the following conclusions: (1) Researchers of Chinese parenting styles have argued that the authoritarian label does not fit the Chinese parenting style. Although the style is strict and controlling, this is accompanied by warmth and caring, unlike authoritarian parenting in the US, which is cold and distant (e.g., Chao, 2001; Chao & Tseng, 2002); (2) Chinese parents feel a warm closeness to their children, which is reciprocated by their children. Thus, children in Chinese culture may interpret their parents' strict and controlling behavior as an indicator that they are loved (Chao, 2001); (3) Chinese parents put more emphasis on effort as the cause of achievement whereas US parents put more emphasis on innate ability (Stevenson & Lee, 1990). Research indicates that children and adults learn more when they believe that effort and not innate ability is the key to achievement (Dweck, 2006; Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2006); (4) Chinese children have peer support

for achievement (Zhao, 2007). Studies in the US suggest that children may pay a "nerd penalty" for working hard in school. When they perform well they are rejected by their peers. Chinese children are less likely to face a choice between academic success and social success. Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, and Darling (1992) speculated that this "pro-achievement" peer pressure may protect Chinese children from some of the adverse effects of authoritarian parenting, if this label is even applicable to Chinese parenting style.

A SNS has been defined as an online service platform or site that focuses on facilitating the building of social networks and social relations among people who share interests, activities, backgrounds or real-life connections (Wikipedia, 2012). A SNS consists of a representation of each user (often called a profile), his/her social links, and a variety of additional services. Most SNSs are web-based and provide a means for users to interact over the Internet, such as postings, e-mail and instant messaging. SNSs may contain category places (such as school year), a means to connect with friends (usually with self-description pages) and a recommendation system linked to trust. Popular SNSs combine many of these features. Excluding dating sites, there are approximately 200 active SNSs worldwide (Wikipedia, 2012).

Social networking is now the most popular online activity worldwide (ComScore, 2011; Royal Pingdom, 2011). Approximately 1.2 billion people – 82% of the world's Internet population over the age of 15, now log into a SNS. In October 2011, SNS users spent close to 1 of every 5 min online in a SNS. Close to 65% of all smartphone users in the US visited a social networking site in October, 2012 (New Age, 2012). Two in 5 use their mobile device to connect to a social network nearly every day. "The emergence and widespread global adoption of social networks has vastly influenced human interaction on an individual, community and larger societal level, and underscores the convergence of the online and offline worlds," says Linda Boland Abraham, ComScore Executive, in a December 21, 2011 report. "Regardless of geography, social networks are weaving themselves ever more intricately into the fabric of the digital experience ..." (ComScore, 2011).

According to a Pew Internet and American Life Project (PEW) report titled "Adults and Social Network Websites" (Pew Internet, 2009), "One third (35%) of American adult Internet users have a profile on an online social network site, four times as many as 3 years ago, but still much lower than the 65% of online American teens who use social networks." Facebook, is the most popular SNS in the US and worldwide. It alone has 845 million active users (ZDNet., 2012), 70% of whom live outside of the US. In terms of its registered user population, "Facebook is now the third largest country on earth." (Stengel, 2010).

According to the Alexa Global Traffic Rankings (2012) the next four of the top five US-based SNSs are Twitter (250 million), LinkedIn (110 million), MySpace (75 million) and Google + (65 million). In a 2011 report, titled "China's Top 15 Social Networks" (Lukoff, 2011) the top five most popular China-based SNSs are Ozone (190 million), Renren (95 million), Pengyou (80 million) and Sina Weibo (70 million), with Kaixin and 51.com tied for fifth place (40 million active users in each). According to China Internet Watch (2012), in 2012 approximately 307 million Chinese Internet users used a SNS.

1.1. Culture and SNS use

Are there reasons to expect cultural differences in SNS use – time spent in SNSs, the importance of SNSs to the user and motives for using SNSs? The definition of culture and cultural differences in parenting styles, discussed earlier, together with theory and research on motivations for media use, discussed later, suggest that the answer to this question is "Yes."