Do cultural norms affect social network behavior inappropriateness? A global study

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ABSTRACT

There is a substantial body of literature on behavior inappropriateness in face-to-face social settings; however, not much is known about what individuals consider inappropriate (or appropriate) on Internet-mediated social networks. Although online social networks enable the exchange of ideas between and among geographically and culturally diverse individuals, cultural differences across countries will likely affect individuals' perceived appropriateness of social network behaviors. To better understand this phenomenon, this study proposes a new construct of social network behavior inappropriateness (SNBI) and tests its relationship with a recently proposed national cultural dimension of personal-sexual attitudes, which captures country-level cultural norms.

1. Introduction

The advent of the Internet-mediated social networking tools has fundamentally changed the ways in which individuals interact in today's world. While a physical social network can be defined in numerous ways, it is actually an integrative mechanism that allows "the movement of knowledge in, out, and around" a society or an organization (Welch & Welch, 2015; p. 12). Similarly, *online social networks* (hereinafter social networks), such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, provide individuals with a global platform on which they can socially interact with others and, in the process, create and disseminate new knowledge (Scheibe & Gupta, 2017). Unlike face-to-face social interactions, which are primarily dyadic in nature, social networks support a mode of many-to-many communication in which individuals can

interact with others regardless of their physical location and time. This unique characteristic of social networks has led to the utilization of a social brain instead of an individual brain (Anderson, Potočnik, & Zhou, 2014). However, with benefits come challenges.

The major challenge with social networks is the lack of understanding of behaviors that may be considered appropriate or inappropriate on social networks. Quite often, we come across social network behaviors that cause major embarrassment to individuals as well as organizations. For instance, a radio host was dismissed from a job for posting revealing images of himself on Facebook (Kovacs, 2015). A restaurant owner in England lost significant business because of swearing at his dissatisfied customers in a Facebook post (Hartley-Parkinson, 2017). Some schools have recently rescinded acceptances of students for posting insensitive content on Facebook (Miller, 2017). HP,

a multinational technology company, lost substantial competitive advantage after a senior employee revealed major details of a soon-to-be-released product on his LinkedIn account (Rosoff, 2011). McDonald's, one of the world's largest fast food restaurant companies, was severely condemned for a political tweet criticizing Donald Trump, the current president of the United States (Ohlheiser, 2017).

While we have a subjective impression of the appropriateness of most face-to-face social behaviors (Price & Bouffard, 1974), that is not necessarily the case with behaviors on social networks. Moreover, unlike face-to-face social interactions, interactions on social networks are recorded and are thus reproducible because once the content is published, whether inappropriate or appropriate, it will remain on the Internet forever (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008). In addition to this, the posts on social networks can reach an unprecedented global audience in no time. Thus, even an inadvertent indiscretion from individuals or organizations on social networks can have severe repercussions, as noted above, such as getting "Facebook fired" (i.e., losing a job because of one's inappropriate social network behaviors), being refused admission by a school, having firm's products or services boycotted, or witnessing a fall in a company's stock prices (Schmidt & O'Connor, 2015; Willmott, 2013). Additionally, in some cases, such behavior can lead to arrest and sentencing (Mascarenhas, 2017). Thus, it is imperative for both theoretical and practical reasons to understand what constitutes and affects inappropriateness on social networks.

To do so, we propose a construct, *social network behavior inappropriateness* (SNBI), which refers to the extent to which individuals find the social network behaviors of others inappropriate. We base SNBI on the prior work of Price and Bouffard (1974), who studied the acceptability of social behaviors in a face-to-face setting. Recently, Gelfand et al. (2011) extended the work of Price and Bouffard (1974) and highlighted the role of cultural norms in understanding the differences in the face-to-face social behaviors of individuals across countries. In the same vein, due to differences in culture, what may be viewed as completely acceptable social network behavior in one country may be regarded as highly inappropriate by individuals of another country. Thus, while social networks are capable of converting the intelligence of globally distributed individuals into their collective intelligence (Borgatti, Mehra, Brass, & Labianca, 2009), cultural differences will likely affect individuals' acceptability of social network behaviors, which in turn will likely affect their participation in social networks. This has important implications for multinational companies, which are trying to reach and engage existing and potential customers worldwide using public social networks such as Facebook and Twitter (Hansen & Levin, 2016). For instance, Pampers, a brand of baby and toddler products, uses social networks such as Facebook and Twitter to engage soon-to-be-parents and new parents in conversations with each other around the world (SocialTimes, 2015). Additionally, interactions facilitated by social networks allow individuals to socially connect with one another who otherwise may not have had an opportunity to interact and share their expertise (Palacios-Marqués, Merigó, & Soto-Acosta, 2015). Consequently, in this study, we examine the role of cultural norms as measured by a recently proposed cultural dimension of personal-sexual attitudes in the acceptability of social network behaviors across different countries.

Specifically, by proposing the construct of SNBI and investigating how cultural differences across countries affect SNBI, this study attempts to fill a significant gap in the literature pertaining to the understanding of barriers that may inhibit (or promote) participation in social networks between and among individuals, especially those who are globally and culturally diverse (Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016). Our focus in the remainder of the paper is to explore the literature that informs our theory development and testing as well as methods we use to collect and analyze our data and to examine and discuss the results of our investigation. We conclude the paper with the implications of our research for theory and practice.

2. Literature

2.1. Social networks

With the recent advances in information communication technologies, technology-enabled interactions have been gradually replacing the reliance on face-to-face social interactions (Scheibe & Gupta, 2017). Social networks are such technology-enabled communication platforms that provide a new frontier of organizational and societal dialogue that "set[s] the stage for continuous knowledge creation," while providing flexibility in communication such that the need for participants to be in the same physical space and time is not necessary (Jue, Marr, & Kassotakis, 2009; p. 105). There are several examples of individuals and organizations using public social networks in ways that have previously been unheard of.

An unprecedented example was the use of Facebook by young Egyptians to socially connect with one another and revolt against the then-dictatorial Egyptian government (Vargas, 2012). Neverthirst, a nonprofit organization, uses Facebook to interact with people, especially mothers, in underdeveloped countries that are without access to clean drinking water (Chan, 2016). Another example is Procter and Gamble, which uses its internal and public social networks to help its employees collaborate with and identify experts around the globe (Lai & Turban, 2008). Salesforce.com uses popular social networks to interact with recent college graduates around the world to attract the best talent. In addition to the corporate world, low-ranking higher education institutions have been found to attract top students by enhancing their brand perception through their social network activity on Facebook (Rutter, Roper, & Lettice, 2016).

We know from the prior research that social interactions are critical for fostering creativity (Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000). This is because social interactions are informal and rather unorganized in nature. As a consequence, they allow individuals to put forward their perceptions, views, and ideas without any hesitation or fear of being judged by others (Csikszentmihalyi & Sawyer, 1995; Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000). At the same time, to obtain effective communication on social networks, it is important to be respectful of and not offend other participants. While there is a significant amount of research (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011; Price & Bouffard, 1974) that has considered the acceptability of face-to-face social behaviors, there is a lack of theoretical and empirical work on behavioral inappropriateness on social networks.

This becomes particularly important because inappropriate social network behaviors can lead to negative emotional contagion, which refers to the transfer of adverse emotions to others (Subramony & Pugh, 2015). Interestingly, to experience emotional contagion, an individual may not necessarily need to electronically interact with others, as it can happen by viewing the social network posts of others (Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014). Specifically, the prior research has found that, when individuals came across more negative content on their social networks, they generated more negative content and less positive content. Some have also suggested that employees are likely to feel distressed and emotionally exhausted when they encounter inappropriate work e-mails (Y. Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2015; Van Jaarsveld, Walker, & Skarlicki, 2010). While e-mails are normally used for private communication involving a limited number of participants, social networks are public platforms where anyone can post new and/or view existing content. This unique characteristic of social networks can be used to build online (global) collaborative communities of knowledge; however, it also demands an understanding of inappropriate behaviors on social networks, especially since an individual's own emotional state will likely be affected by the (positive or negative) behaviors of other social network users (Subramony & Pugh, 2015).

2.2. Social network behavior inappropriateness (SNBI)

Four decades ago, Price and Bouffard (1974) proposed behavioral