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Culture and Social Media

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Culture and Social Media (Dissertation by Adam Acar).

Results of oral defense

1. Introduction

This thesis is an important and innovative contribution to the field of social and cultural studies. It contains an extensive review of the existing literature on the use of social media and several studies carried out in and outside Japan that throw some light on the differences between the use of social media in the East and the West. The dissertation provides a new approach to the study of social media, through a) a detailed analysis of its use by people from different cultural backgrounds, b) a study about culture and social media use intensity, c) the first ever assessment of the correlations between social media use and social phenomena such as suicide, corruption, happiness and income inequality, and d) the development of a cross-cultural computer-mediated communication framework that is likely to be adopted by researchers from various disciplines including anthropology, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and information technologies. The most important contribution of this dissertation is that it is the first scientifically solid study of the use of social media in Japan and the first to assess the impact of social media in social problems that affect all cultures, like suicide, corruption, etc. The committee assigns a high value to this intellectual contribution, which has potential and immediate social applications, if governments are willing to implement its conclusions in the form of social policies.

2. Summary of the contents of the dissertation

Cultures differ in their socialization ways, as the dissertation explains through a thorough review of the relevant theories. Since social media is a new way of socializing, building and maintaining relationships with one's network of family and friends, it is important to understand the role that culture plays in the use of social media around the world. Social media, being such a recent phenomenon, is a field that has been little explored, which makes the contribution of this dissertation even more valuable. Some works have been published in relation to social media, most of which are reviewed by the author. However, and even though social media is related to the collapse of governments and the birth of new social movements, only individual variables have been analyzed (who uses social media, for what, how, when...), as the author notes. This dissertation addresses the issue of how different societies face this new communication channel and how their cultural values are reflected in its use. Misunderstandings between users of social media from different cultures are expected, and therefore their potential needs to be analyzed. Furthermore, it is possible to think that cultural differences are blurred in this way of communication (i.e., this is a globalized tool and therefore cultural differences are irrelevant), but the topics that this dissertation addresses and analyses prove that this is a fallacy.

The work is divided into 15 chapters. The first one sets the background of how social media has become part of our lives and its potential for influencing them. Chapter 2 contains a theoretical description of what standard social networks consist of, how they work, how they can be estimated, the motivations to form them, their types and especially their regular size. This serves as a necessary

preliminary to chapter 3, where an extensive description of social networks and social media is offered. Without understanding standard social networks, it is difficult to evaluate the virtual ones considered in this research. Components like identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups are evaluated, before enumerating the current social platforms that are available for different purposes. This chapter also describes the rules of social media, and thus it is of value to those people who are not very familiar with the use of these platforms.

Chapters 4 through 12 present a thorough review of social theories concerning human communication and the impact of social media in social innovations, business, etc. In particular, chapter 4 deals with eight theoretical explanations of social media use that have been proposed in the literature. This constitutes a solid justification for the conclusions of this dissertation and makes the reader aware of the place that it occupies in current sociological studies. Chapter 5 introduces a key concept in analyzing social media: communication. Taking as the basis the common communication schema that assumes a sender, a receiver, a message sent through a channel and feedback, the discussion focuses on the notion of *noise* that surrounds the communication act, since this is most important in analyzing communication through social media, where a lot of “noise” from unsolicited messages is a reality. Then, the author discusses the factors of relationship and context, adapting them to these new forms of virtual communication. The author claims that social media can be considered a combination of interpersonal (one-to-one) and mass (one-to-many) communication. Whereas it is not purely interpersonal, it is also not purely mass communication, because all members are active and can actively respond to messages. This mixed character is what makes this dissertation all the more necessary, since a deep understanding of the parameters of social media interactions has not been achieved as of yet. A detailed discussion on non-verbal communication (present in real communication interactions) and the dangers of computer interaction due to the lack of these clues is included in the chapter.

Chapter 6 discusses both the positive and the negative aspects of the influence of social media in societies, and chapter 7 focuses on the social innovations that stem from the use of social media. The argumentation is substantiated in current models of analysis. Degrees of influence are described in a discussion that bears interest for companies, since it becomes clear how brand talk takes place online. Chapters 8 and 9 offer a detailed description of the use and properties of Facebook and Twitter respectively, as main representatives of the currently used social media platforms.

Chapter 10 delves into business uses of social media. As the author notes, “Social media can be used for many different commercial purposes, including advertising, promotions, educating consumers, educating personnel, customer service, market research, new product development, public relations, human resources management, investor relations, and so on”, and thus companies are getting more and more interested in understanding how it works. An insightful comparison between social media and more traditional channels like TV, magazines and newspapers concerning factors like ability to control the effects, attention-grabbing, emotional stimulation, etc., is presented in the form of a table that companies can use for insights in order to make their decisions about the use of social media.

Chapters 11 and 12 serve as a transition to the main study of the dissertation, the use of social media in Japan. Chapter 11 is very important, since it introduces the topic of culture and social media, the fundamental theme of the dissertation. Values and cognition are evaluated in relation to culture. Cultures are described on the basis of the high-low context typology, which is based on the role that the immediate environment and social roles play in daily conversations and business interactions. To this, the author adds an analysis of high-low individualism societies, high-low uncertainty avoidance societies, high-low masculinity countries, and high-low long-term orientation countries. This discussion constitutes a highly intellectual analysis of factors that need to be taken into consideration in understanding social media use.

In chapter 12, the current situation of social media use in the world is presented. Then, the author contrasts the figures of use with the social parameters that define the different societies, as described in the previous chapter and with regards to the parameters of individualism, intellectual autonomy, conservatism, traditionalism vs. rationality, emotional expressiveness, collectivism, happiness, corruption and suicide rates. The graphs provided are a source of insight and a clear way to get a picture of the relationship of culture and the use of social media, and the first of its kind in the world. The data are of enormous interest and value for a variety of social researchers, companies and governmental institutions.

Chapters 13 and 14 compare the communication styles both in regular settings and in social media between Japan and the United States, through a review of theories (chapter 13) and the data analysis of a large-scale original study carried out by the author in both countries at issue (chapter 14). The thoroughness of the survey and the rigorous procedures followed to carry it out make the conclusions sound and important.

The conclusions of the different parts of this dissertation are that people share things in social media mainly to improve their self-images, rather than because they care about others. Most important of all, the study proves that culture influences enormously how people use social media and how much they use it. The core concept of each culture, the self versus other orientation, individualism vs. collectivism, explains most findings in social media use, from how often people use it to what they do on it.

3. Results of the dissertation's oral defense held on February 19th, 2014.

The dissertation defense was held on February 19th, 2014, at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies, from 10:00 to 12:30. The committee was presided by Prof. Montserrat Sanz, a full professor at the Department of Spanish Studies of that University, and was composed by Prof. Ken Tamai, a full professor at the Department of International Relations and Prof. Atsushi Mishima, a full associate professor at the Department of English Studies and by Prof. Takashi Nakamura, a professor at Niigata University. The candidate discussed his findings for 30 minutes, after which questions were posed by the members of the committee.

All members coincided that the dissertation presents a comprehensive and impressive study of how culture relates to social media use all over the world. The work is innovative, pioneering, and easy to read for a wide audience. In particular, the first half constitutes a good textbook, since it offers a comprehensive review of social media studies to date, of concepts that have been used to describe culture

traits and of communication theories in relation to culture. The second part contains original data, since the author contrasted the available data on social media use with the cultural dimensions of the different models available to explain the differences among cultures.

The questions and comments can be summarized and classified as follows:

3.1. Questions about methodology and statistical analyses

- The validity of the predictor that combines conservatism and self-esteem, which the author presents on page 89, was considered to be in need of a deeper explanation than what is currently offered in the dissertation. On the one hand, the candidate was asked about the choice of multiplying and not adding both variables. On the other, about the way to interpret this combined variable (its “semantics”). In particular, self-esteem can be an individual and/or a societal trait, and it is unclear how it is taken in this context. The author answered that the scales being different prevented addition, and that even by adding the variables, the results were similar. He justified the presence of that predictor because both variables are also individually presented in the dissertation, and the combination of both increases their visibility.
- The candidate was asked about the possibility of statistical analyses that go beyond the correlations offered in the dissertation in order to elucidate cause and effect. The candidate stated that it would be desirable to conduct longitudinal analyses of the evolution of social media use in different countries for a period of 4 or 5 years (in order to point out causality, one would need to do experiments in the lab, but this research is at country level, so this cannot be done). The author mentioned other analyses that he had performed on the data (partial correlations, t-tests, etc.).
- He was also asked to clarify the comparison between the strength of the different culture models, like those of Hofstede, Hall or Schwartz, since the different percentages of the variability that they explain could be related to the fact that some models include more dimensions than others. The author answered appropriately about the value of each dimension and the rationale for his claims on the basis of the statistical analyses performed.

3.2 Questions about interpretation

- The author was asked why some cultural models are argued to be more adequate to explain the data on social media use. Hofstede’s dimensions were argued by the candidate to be worse predictors because of their own nature as loose and vague. He claimed that the way these dimensions measure cultures is questionable (for instance, collectivism is shown in company behavior in Japan, but the same people do not show collective behavior with regards to friends and family).

- The candidate was asked about the influence that the image that standard mass media reflects about social media poses on social media use in a country.
- The issue of the divide between Catholic and Protestant countries that seems to correlate with individualism was raised. The author believed that the correct interpretation is not the divide between the two groups within Christianity, but between degree of religiosity, which in turns correlates with conservatism. In any case, the core dimension in order to analyze culture and social media was argued to be collectivism as in Schwartz's model.
- Alternative explanations of some of the data were considered during the questioning period: the tendency of Japanese students to befriend their professors on Facebook, the correlation between the quality of the standard mass media and the preference for social media in certain countries with corruption, etc.
- The author was asked about the blank group in his data: low self esteem and low conservatism.
- He was also asked to enlarge the research about LINE in the future, in order to explain why the preference that Japanese show for this channel of communication is not spread to other countries.
- He was asked to evaluate how will social media affect culture in the longer term. The candidate pointed out that social media affects lifestyles, but changes in values are more profound and occur through societal traumatic experiences. This indicates that the impact of social media will only be partial: it does not have the power to change ingrained values.

The candidate provided appropriate and insightful answers to all the issues mentioned above, among others that were raised in the course of the discussion.

3.3 Issues about format and style

- It was stated that the dissertation is dense and in need of some softening in some places in the form of insertion of explanations, linking sentences, or inclusion of conclusions at the beginning of a section.

The committee felt that the candidate presented his data well and answered the questions in a self-confident manner that showed his mastery of the topics at hand. As stated at the beginning of this report, high value was placed upon the work, and therefore the dissertation was passed with the full consent of all members of the committee.

Kobe, February 21st, 2014