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Culture and Social Media

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SUMMARY

Studies show that more than half the population in developed countries has experienced online social networking. What is more, a quarter of the world citizens now have a profile in social media, whose users number 1.47 billion[1]. Although English-speaking countries top the list of active social media–using nations, people from all around the world are represented on online social network channels. Social media obviously is a global phenomenon; however, we don't know much about how each nation uses this tool and whether cultural values and demographic factors impact the usage behavior[2].

Despite the fact that a number of scholars indicated the need for additional studies on this topic3, currently none of the top twenty academic papers on Google Scholar and the top twenty books on Amazon in the social media category has anything to do with culture. On the other hand, this may also be the result of the fact that popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and LinkedIn do not localize their interfaces, processes, and formats. People naturally may consider culture to be irrelevant, as social media users from different countries are getting along on these mediums and happily using the platforms, contrary to past studies that suggested culture impacts online interface preferences and online behavioral tendencies[3].

I believe there is a specific reason to explore the relationship between culture and social media because culture itself is related to sociality and socialization. A number of well-known scholars suggested that the most important dimension of culture is the relationship between individuals and society. The working hypothesis of this dissertation is that the role of social media in the shaping of contemporary society must be explored in relation to culture. This thesis contains an extensive review of the existing literature on the use of social media and several studies carried out both within Japan and outside the country that throw some light on the differences between the use of social media in the East and the West. Hence, the thesis is a contribution to the field of social and cultural studies and provides a new

approach to the study of social media, by analyzing its use by people from different cultural backgrounds. As indicated in the following chapters, this dissertation includes the first study that has ever been conducted about culture and social media use intensity in addition to the first ever assessment of the impact of social media on social phenomena such as suicide, corruption, happiness and income inequality. With the help of this original study we were also able to develop a cross-cultural computer-mediated communication framework (p. 90) that is likely to be adopted by researchers from various disciplines including anthropology, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and information technologies.

Previous works have analyzed cultural differences in the way people socialize. Hofstede[4] focused on individualism versus collectivism (whether an individual's priority is self-achievement or group achievement); Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner[5] similarly drew on communitarianism versus individualism (whether people socialize as a group or as individuals); Schwartz[6] pointed out embeddedness versus autonomy (whether people's lives are influenced more by social relationships or individual pursuits); and Markus and Kitayama[7] talked about how certain cultures promoted independent-self versus interdependent-self (whether the concept of self depends on one's own judgment or reactions from others). This particular aspect (socialization) of culture explains many things, including why people in some cultures stand very close to each other when talking, why people in some cultures call their family members every day, and why in some cultures people take many risks by thinking that their network members will take care of them3. Since social media, by definition, is about building and maintaining relationships with one's network members and influenced by collective self-esteem and the need to belong[8], we must clarify what role culture plays in what people do in social media and how intensely they use this particular communication tool.

Furthermore, even though social media is reported to be associated with the collapse of governments and the birth of new social movements, most of the past research focused on the individual predictors of social media[9] (who uses it, for what, how, when, etc.) rather than the mass-level use of this

communication channel. Currently, there has been little attention paid to how different societies adopt it and how cultural values influence the use of it. During the age of globalization where billions of people from different cultures interact via social media 24/7, we claim in this dissertation that not knowing how culture contributes to social media behavior may create serious misunderstandings between people from different cultural backgrounds, and may constitute a barrier for effective communication in this supposedly hyper-connected world. On the other hand, some may claim that because of the global nature of modern social media channels that increased cross-cultural interactions dramatically, social media actually eliminated cultural differences in self-presentation and online information sharing. This dissertation was written to find answers to all these questions and fill the literature gap in order to help communication practitioners and cross-cultural researchers improve their understanding of the relationship between culture and social media. Particularly, this thesis examines the influence of cultural values on social media use intensity and investigates whether Eastern and Western societies use social networking platforms in the same way.

Followed by this introduction, Chapter 1 summarizes the recent impact on social media on our lives. Chapter 2 describes what social networks are and introduces online social networks. Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 focus on the theoretical aspects of social media. While Chapter 5 connects social media use and human communication, Chapter 6 looks at the effects of social media on society. Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 provide some basic information about Facebook and Twitter: the two popular social media platforms and Chapter 10 looks at the business aspects of social media. Chapter 11 reviews past studies on social media and culture and Chapter 12 assesses how different country-level variables impact global social media use. Different from a typical academic paper, Chapter 13 once again talks about Eastern and Western communication styles and how people in the East and West use social media. Chapter 14 compares and contrasts the way Americans and Japanese have been using social media. The last chapter provides a very brief summary of the dissertation.