Cultural Differences in Diffusion, Adoption, and Infusion of Web 2.0

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Cultural issues have been an important topic in the study of global information management. With the rapid growth of Web-based services around Web 2.0, understanding how and what cultural differences may influence the diffusion, adoption, and infusion of this type of service in both a social setting and the workplace becomes imperative in global information management.

Most cross-cultural IS studies are based on Hofstede’s culture dimensions (Myers & Tan, 2002; Ford, Connelly et al., 2003). According to Hofstede (1980, 1991), national differences could be understood in terms of national culture—“the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (Hofstede, 1980). Among the four dimensions of cultural difference (i.e., power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance), individualism/collectivism is particularly relevant in studying the use of services built around Web 2.0. Individualism means that loosely connected social relationships are valued in which individuals are expected to care only for themselves and their immediate members, while collectivism means that tightly knitted relations are valued in which individuals expect to look after their extended social relations (Hofstede, 1980, 1991).

The difference between individualism and collectivism can influence and determine individuals’ cognition, emotion, motivation, and social behavior (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1994, 1995). Social behavior in the individualistic culture is driven by attitude, personal values, and cost-benefit analysis, which emphasizes objective rules and principles rather than subjective experiences, processes, and specific contextual information (Fried, 1995). In the individualistic culture, social relationships are more formal and distant, with a focus on activities and work. Collectivism culture, on the other hand, tends to provide approval and emotional support so that conversations are likely to revolve around feelings. Prior studies have identified four important distinctions between individualism and collectivism which provide a good theoretical foundation to examine the Web 2.0 adoption issues.

The first is an individual’s personality orientation (idiocentric and allocentric) (Triandis, 1989). People from individualistic cultures are idiocentric: they regard it as natural to “do their own thing” and disregard the need of the group (Triandis, Bontempo et al., 1988). These people place higher value on achievement, affluence, productivity, and individual responsibility. They are also emotionally detached from the groups. Their behaviors are regulated by their attitudes and cost-benefit analysis, which relies on objective and empirically validated data (Triandis, McCusker et al., 1990). In collectivist cultures, on the other hand, most people are allocentric: they value sharing, cooperation, and social responsibility. There is a collective conceptualization of the society in which allocentric people...
function as interdependent members of a group. An allocentric individual defines himself/herself in terms of ingroups and cannot be understood separately from others in his or her social group. There is no perceptual, cognitive, or emotional separation between the individual and others in the group.

The second difference is self-construal (independent and interdependent) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These two views account for cultural differences regarding construals of the self, others, and the interrelationships between the two. The independent view of the self, mostly found in the individualistic cultures, emphasizes “attending to the self, the appreciation of one’s difference from others, and the importance of asserting the self” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 224). Often reviewed as independent, self-contained, and autonomous, individuals of the independent view are believed to have unique internal attributes such as traits, abilities, motives, and values which provide the basic rationales for each individual’s cognition, emotion, and motivation. Social interactions and responsiveness result from the need to express their internal attributes. Others and the social context surrounding the self are less important. On the other hand, the interdependent view, exemplified in collectivistic cultures, such as in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and many southern European countries, is focused on “attending to and fitting in with others and the importance of harmonious interdependence and relationships with them” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 224). Connectedness of the self and others is at the center of the culture. Individuals are not separated from social contexts and relationships with others, but are embedded with each other. Others become an integral part of the social contexts to which an individual is linked. The focus of this culture is the relationships of the self and others, without whom the self could not be understood.

The third difference lies in communication style (low-context communication and high-context communication) (Hall, 1976). According to Hall (1976), communication context implies information which provides meanings to a task and activity, and the amount of implicit information embedded in the context of communications is different across cultures. Individualistic culture is low context while collectivism is high context (Triandis, 1995). In the high-context culture, meanings in communication are not only found in the content, but also in the nature of the situation and relationships. People take for granted that a lot of information is latent in the structure of messages, assuming that their communication partners understand most of what they want to communicate without being told directly. In contrast, the low-context culture sees little or no information embedded in the context, but emphasizes more explicit verbal communication. The meanings to be conveyed between each other are found in the words, and little is left to the imagination or intuition. Thus, the low-context culture values straight talk, assertiveness, and honesty in order to avoid misunderstandings or differing interpretations. Collectivistic cultures need face-to-face contact because people depend on context more than do individualists who are quite satisfied with written communications (Triandis, 1994, p. 190).

The fourth difference is related to time orientation (monochromic and polychromic) (Hall, 1976). Individualistic culture is monochromic, which means that only one task is undertaken by an individual at any given moment. People want to finish what they have started before beginning something new. At the same time, they are less invested in the activity and more concerned with the outcome or product of the activity (Hall, 1982). On the other hand, collectivism culture views time holistically and polychromic, which means that people engage in many tasks at any given moment (Hall, 1976). People pay attention to the activity of the moment, and the emphasis is on people, not on schedules (Samovar & Porter, 1994). Because of multitasking, people in polychromic cultures are more concerned with the activity itself than with the outcome.

To summarize, the distinction between individualism and collectivism may be a driver for people from different cultural backgrounds to express different technology adoption behaviors. As said at the beginning of this editorial, it is imperative to develop research projects to help us understand how and what cultural differences may influence the diffusion, adoption, and infusion of
this type of service in both a social setting and the workplace. Specifically, it may be useful to conduct research on the following areas:

- Of the four distinctions, which ones are more significant in explaining the differences in adoption behaviors, and how?
- Are there any differences in these influences between social setting and the workplace?
- What theoretical models/theories, such as the Technology Acceptance Model, Theory of Planned Behavior, Motivational Model, Critical Mass Theory, Expectation-Confirmation Theory, and so forth, or an integrated model of these theories, can better explain the phenomena?

Hofstede (1991) added a fifth cultural dimension into his cultural framework and suggested that the fifth dimension, namely long-term orientation (vs. short-term orientation), plays a more important role in Asian countries than their Western counterparts. Research in how this fifth dimension, in addition to the individualism vs. collectivism, may influence the adoption behaviors should also be an interesting area.

REFERENCES


