Cultural Differences between American and Japanese Self-Presentation on SNSs

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ABSTRACT

The present study compared American and Japanese user practices on social networking sites (SNSs). Analysis focused on self-presentation such as posting party and drinking pictures on SNSs. A total of 1,079 college students (583 American and 496 Japanese) participated in the survey, which provided the basis for analysis. The results of the study demonstrate cultural and SNS platform differences in self-presentation on SNSs. After controlling for preexisting conditions (gender, extraversion, offline popularity, and the length of membership with the SNS), Japanese Facebook users posted party and drinking pictures most frequently, followed by Japanese Mixi users and American Facebook users. In addition, the study found that Japanese dual-users changed their behavior according to the SNS. The implications and the underlying mechanism of Japanese users’ behavioral switching on SNSs are discussed.

Keywords: Behavioral Switching, Cultural Difference, Facebook Media Ecology, Mixi, Self-Presentation, Social Networking Sites

INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades researchers have increasingly focused on online social networking which is truly becoming a global phenomenon. Social networking sites (SNSs) have been defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (a) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (b) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (c) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211). While a variety of SNSs became available and prevalent in societies, the influence of culture and platform differences remains relatively unknown. Despite the increasing interest in SNSs, the impact of cultural differences on SNS user behavior has not received sufficient attention from scholars (Baym, 2010).

Two SNSs with similar functions, Facebook and Mixi, are both popular in Japan, with Facebook having 17 million Japanese subscribers (Internet World Stats, 2012) and

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Mixi having over 15 million users (Mixi, 2012). Both of these social networking platforms provide a venue for sharing profiles, comments, and pictures as well as connecting with friends (Park, Jin, & Jin, 2011); however, they also make sharing undesirable content possible. One study (Kolek & Saunders, 2008), for example, analyzed Facebook pages of more than 300 undergraduate students, and reported a high prevalence of party and drinking photos. About a half of all profiles analyzed contained at least one picture of someone consuming an alcoholic beverage. This can be seen as a reflection of a college culture, where partying and drinking are considered an important part of college socialization. Japanese Internet news media report that only a small number of college students in Japan make such postings on SNSs (J-CAST, 2012), although this may not be the case in Western countries.

The present investigation had three main purposes. Because few studies compare user behavior on Facebook with the Japanese social networking site, Mixi (e.g., Barker & Ota, 2011; Lee & Tanuguchi, 2012), by looking at Japanese users’ self-presentation through party and drinking photos on SNSs such as Facebook, this study aimed to explore the impact of cultural differences in American and Japanese self-presentation on SNSs. Secondly, the majority of existing research has focused on global SNSs such as Facebook, but not on “language-and-national-identity-specific” SNSs (Siibak, 2009). As noted, “a study of non-American practices would introduce entirely different dynamics” (boyd, 2006, p. 12). Therefore, the current study examined the role of platform-specific SNS differences—Facebook and Japanese native Mixi—on online behavior. Finally, prior research has presented evidence of behavioral change among Japanese SNS users due to the global nature of interaction on social networking sites (Thomson & Ito, 2012). Qiu, Lin, and Leung (2013) requested more studies of the “underlying mechanism that motivates individuals to switch their online behaviors” (p. 117). The present study sought to answer this request by evaluating behavioral switching by Japanese Facebook and Mixi users. The results contribute to a better understanding of social media influences on users from different cultural backgrounds.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Presentation on SNSs

According to Goffman (1959, 1961), human beings try to make a positive impression on others in everyday life by stressing positive aspects of about themselves. People present their “ideal” self, according to the situation, and play a role assigned by society (Goffman, 1959). Therefore, the ideal self should vary across cultures. For example, in East Asia people tend to exhibit public modesty as the ideal self to avoid conflict with other members in the society by “playing down one’s performance” (Akimoto & Sanbonmatsu, 1999, p. 160). Akimoto and Sanbonmatsu (1999) found Japanese Americans reported performance more modestly in public than European Americans, even though they actually performed much better than European Americans. As a consequence, Akimoto and Sanbonmatsu (1999) found European Americans perceived Japanese Americans as performing less well and being less competent. Japanese self-effacing tendency is not limited to the public context (Kitayama, Markus, Matsumoto, & Norasakkunkit, 1997). Instead, Japanese self-effacing tendency becomes stronger in front of friends rather than strangers (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). Thus, maintaining harmony or “not standing out” is valuable in Japan.

As opposed to the Japanese self-effacing tendency, Americans try to promote their social status within one’s social group (Tice et al., 1995). For example, Mehdizadeh (2010) reported undergraduate students used Facebook to promote their self-image. Barker and Ota (2011) argued that Japanese SNS users utilize SNSs to communicate with “close” friends, and not use SNSs to self-promote. Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1998) argue that an individual from the West and East perceives the self differently.
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