Social Media Intelligence in the Exploration of National Cultural Dimensions for Online Social Communities

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ABSTRACT

Companies are increasingly embracing the use of social media in global online communities as an important part of their business strategies. Use of social media enables organizations to extend their reach and engage with customers in a shared community. These provide forums for interacting with customers and collecting information so that companies can better make informed decisions that directly relate to customer needs. However, effective use of social media requires matching both organizational and user requirements with the features of the social media. To support the development of successful social communities, this research uses Hofstede’s dimensions to examine the impact of user’s national culture on social media feature preference in a global international scuba diving online community. Specifically, this paper focuses on the Hofstede’s Individualism and Collectivism (IC) dimension which the study found is a significant determinant of feature preferences.

Keywords: Cultural Dimensions, Global Social Community, Hofstede, Online Community, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Companies are increasingly embracing the use of online social community sites like Twitter, Facebook, MySpace and Friendster as an important part of their business strategies (Kaplan & Haenleina, 2010; Li, 2010; Safko, 2010; Misra, Mukherjee, & Peterson, 2008). Not only do social media enable companies to extend their reach and engage with customers in a shared community, they provide a forum for interacting with customers, collecting information, and making informed decisions that directly relate to customer needs. However, effective use of social media requires matching both
organizational and user requirements with the features of the social media. As Bowes (2002) observes, there is not a “one size fits all” when it comes to social media, and the selection of features should be based upon the preferences of the organization’s stakeholders.

With international participation in virtual communities, users are especially likely to have diverse needs and social media designed based on one nation’s culture may not optimally meet the needs of users from other nations. Speaking about a planned research project using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to study social media in Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC countries), Gaurav Mishra (2008), Fellow in International Values, Communications, Technology, and Global Internet at Georgetown University, purports that the social web has been designed around a US cultural context, and the difference in orientation from the US to BRIC country cultures has a profound significance for social media usage in BRIC countries. In other words, Mishra contends that social media usage is likely enhanced when social media are designed to fit the cultural context of the community members.

The research described herein uses the well-known cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede (1980) to study user preferences and national culture. Hofstede conducted surveys of IBM employees from 40 different countries between the years of 1967 to 1973 and used that data, along with review of thirteen other studies and secondary data, to identify four cultural dimensions that describe national cultural norms. Since publication of Hofstede’s original work, studies (Keil, Tan, Wei, Saarinen, Tuunainen, & Wassenaar, 2000; Straub, 1994; Tan et al., 1995; Watson, Ho, & Raman, 1994; Marcus & Gould, 2000; Choi, Lee, Kim, & Jeon, 2005; Lee, Choi, Kim, Kim, Lee, Kim, & An, 2008) have validated and provided support for Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. More recently, Mishra (2008) chose Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to study social media in BRIC countries, as she purports Hofstede’s contribution to be a significant actionable model for the study of cross-cultural communication.

Researchers determined that the Hofstede’s Individualism and Collectivism (IC) dimension was likely to produce valuable information on how to optimize social media effectiveness, and this paper begins a series of articles reporting the study’s results with findings related to how social media can be designed to meet the needs of users from both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Hofstede’s Individualistic/Collectivist (IC) dimension appears to be a key factor in understanding the impact of culture on the design of websites (Marcus & Gould, 2000; Ahmed, Mouratidis, & Preston, 2008) and social media (Mishra, 2008). Highlighting the relationship of the IC dimension of culture media to social media design, Mishra (2008) speculates the differences that would be found regarding web designs of individualistic cultures verses those of collectivistic, paternalistic, status-oriented cultures. Most notable in individualistic cultures are the organizing principles of consultation and reciprocation which is unlikely to be found in the less normative collectivistic culture found for example in BRIC counties.

As described below, the study has important implications for both the theory and practice in the areas of social media and virtual communities. First, the work extends one of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, Individualistic/Collectivist, to online social communities. Second, the results provide insight into how information technology can be better designed to meet user needs given the national and cultural diversity of 21st century global communities. This paper presents preliminary findings in light of related prior research using Hofstede’s dimensions to study cultural preferences. The findings will be elaborated in more detail in subsequent articles in this journal.

**Definition of Terminology**

Throughout the paper, the terms social media and virtual community are used interchangeably and are defined for the paper as they are by Lee et al. (2008), who analyzed past research on virtual communities to develop a shared definition of virtual community. They also studied the use...
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