Online Social Networks: Student Perceptions and Behavior Across Four Countries

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that many college students in the United States post content to social networking sites that they know would be considered inappropriate by employers and other authority figures. However, the phenomenon has not been extensively studied in cross-cultural context. To address this knowledge gap, a survey of college students in Australia, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the United States was conducted. The study found a universal tendency among the four groups: students knew the content they were posting would be considered inappropriate by employers and other authority figures, but they chose to post it anyway. The article also reports on differences in the way this tendency was manifested and on related aspects of social networking across cultures, including decisions about privacy and information disclosure.

Keywords: Careers, Culture, Global Business Communication, Information Systems, Privacy, Social Networking Sites (SNS)

INTRODUCTION

Today’s college students are the first generation to form online habits while in adolescence (Tapscott, 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008), and they will be the first to go on the job market en masse with an online history. As such, they will also set the future trends and expectations in the diverse spheres of finance marketing, education, technology, and government policy. Their behavior today provides a window into online social networking behavior of tomorrow (McCreary, 2008; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). At the same time, this history may have a proportionally larger effect on their career prospects than for older individuals (Gray & Christiansen, 2010). Older adults also use online social networks, but college-aged students are building their online history at a time in their lives when their online behavior may reflect a more experimental and less guarded lifestyle than would an older adult’s (Gray & Christiansen, 2010; McAfee, 2010; Clark & Roberts, 2010; Livingstone, 2008). Also, college students entering the job market lack work experience and extensive employer references, so their online history may play a proportionally larger role in an employer’s evaluation.
College students also have the opportunity to take an active role in using online social networks to influence their career prospects (Roberts & Roach, 2009). As the overlap between professional and personal life has increased through online social networking (Snyder, Carpenter, & Slauson, 2007), students must consciously shape the image that employers and others see or risk missing out on job opportunities (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). In a recent survey by Harris Interactive, nearly a quarter of hiring managers said they use online social networks to screen candidates, and 24% said what they found out about candidates through online social networks confirmed a hiring decision (Grasz, 2008). Social networking sites might also play a role in Career Preparation. Although Facebook use has been linked to lower student GPA and hours of study (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010), students might also choose to use online social networks to connect with other students for studying and build an academic network, potentially enabling them to achieve better academic results (The Science of Class Collaboration, 2009). Students can also use social networks outside of formal classes to pool their creative efforts and promote events or causes they care about (Shirky, 2008, 2010).

Yet, students often only belatedly see that online social networking is a form of career building and marketing (Roberts & Roach, 2009; Jue, Marr, & Kasotakis, 2010; Brogan, 2010). In a study exploring student use of online social networks, Miller, Parsons, and Lifer (2009) identified what they called a “posting paradox” in American college students’ online behavior: the students believed the content they were posting would be considered inappropriate by authority figures such as parents or potential employers, but they chose to post it anyway. However, the closer these students were to college graduation and being on the job market, the more likely they were to self-censor the content of their online social networking accounts, suggesting an increasing concern over time about the negative effects of inappropriate content.

While such studies have deepened our knowledge of the online behavior and perceptions of college students in the United States, research that includes only college students in the United States is too narrow. About 70% of the over 500 million users of Facebook live outside the United States, and the site is used in more than 70 languages (Facebook, 2010). Other social networking sites such as Orkut in Brazil and India and Mixi in Japan claim millions of users (Naone, 2008). The global scale of markets—for jobs, products, and education—and of social networking sites themselves means that comparative studies of social networking behavior across cultures must also be performed. Behavior of populations has been shown to diverge markedly by national culture (Hofstede, 1996; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Lewis, 2002), as have approaches to media use, technology, and rhetoric (Thatcher, 1999; 2006; Connor, 1996). Social networking is global in scope—and relevant research that is global in scope is likewise needed. Although studies on aspects of social networking have been done in specific countries such as Japan (Takahashi, 2010), South Korea (Lewis & George, 2008) Pakistan (Wan, Kumar, & Bukhari, 2008), and India (Agarwal & Mital, 2009; Wan, Kumar, & Bukhari, 2008), as well as the United States (Roblyer et al., 2010), comparative studies of college students’ online social networking across multiple cultures have to date been scant. No cross-cultural studies of the “posting paradox” (Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2009) have been done.

A comparative, cross-cultural research framework would be ideal to study the social-networking-related perceptions and behaviors of college students in different countries. Such an approach, as used in this article, promises findings that can build on and extend current findings while also exploring where cultural differences are apparent. Key questions include the following:

• Does the posting paradox hold across cultures?
• To what extent is online social networking behavior universal, and to what extent is it influenced by culture?