Social Media and its Influence on Culture

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Abstract
In this paper, I will briefly discuss the need to investigate the influence that social media has on non-western cultures. The findings of an ongoing Facebook usage study in a non-western culture are discussed where Facebook is not only influencing the online and offline cultures, but Facebook is also re-appropriated to fit existing offline cultures and in other instances new practices are introduced to cope with missing features. There are however instances where the offline culture is not yet extended to Facebook.

Author Keywords
Social Media; Facebook; culture; developing countries

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Introduction
Facebook adoption is not studied much in non-western countries [2], despite high adoption rates where over 80 percent of Facebook users alone [1] reside outside the USA and Canada. However the introduction of Facebook, as originating from an individualistic culture, into a non-western collectivistic culture does seem to have an impact on the culture of people. Copyright is held by the author/owner(s). CHI’13, April 27 – May 2, 2013, Paris, France. ACM 978-1-XXXX-XXXX-X/XX/XX.
Background  
I propose to discuss in the workshop the implications of social networks on culture. As background to this discussion, I elaborate on some findings from ongoing research that examines the influence of an individualistic tool such as Facebook on a collectivistic culture. A comparative study is carried in the US and Namibia among undergraduate college students. I will discuss only findings from the Namibian sample group.

Methods  
A mixed-methods approach was used. Initially a content analysis was carried out on Facebook data, then an online survey coupled with individual interviews took place. Thematic extractions were done, but due to the small sample size (ten in each group) in the pilot phase, more participants (100+) were then solicited for an online survey. Focus groups were conducted both in Namibia (seven groups) and the US (six groups) to further explore the themes extracted.

Findings  
During the research, some examples were found of instances where the user’s culture is:

1. Influenced on Facebook, but not extended to the offline world

2. Influenced on Facebook and extended to the offline world

3. The offline world’s culture is extended to Facebook

4. New rules are adopted on Facebook to compensate for the lack of the necessary features

5. Offline culture is not extended to Facebook

The Namibian sample group cited the primary reason for adopting Facebook as connecting to both old friends and making new friends [3][4]. Since the Namibian sample group considered it “rude” to decline friendship requests, they accept all friendship requests, even from unknown requestors [3]. Almost all participants from the seven focus groups had unknown friends.

One of the examples of Facebook influence on culture is that many of the focus group participants indicated that they share their culture and cultural practices with Facebook friends and learn likewise about the culture of others. One participant related how he asked an American friend who posted a picture in a funny costume about it and she told him about Halloween during October and the habit of dressing up. Some also mentioned that they share their culture even with fellow Namibians of different ethnic decent.

An example of a perceived negative Facebook influence of culture sharing is that participants mentioned that sharing of new born baby pictures on Facebook is received with mixed feelings as it contradicts the offline cultures.

Although the participants were of different ethnicities, the traditional practices regarding newborn baby viewing were largely similar. Newborn babies may only be seen by immediate family members and must stay inside the house for a certain period of time before they are taken outside the house and viewed by other relatives and friends. This event of taking the baby outside and showing him/her off to the outside world is usually accompanied by a celebration.
While participants loved being able to post newborn baby pictures on Facebook, this practice is frowned upon in the off-line world and one participant related how he felt disappointed because his friends told him that his mother and sister posted pictures of his newborn baby sister on Facebook, but he was not allowed to see the baby in real life until the baby was at least 9 weeks old, yet strangers could look at the baby.

Likewise an example of where the online culture was introduced by Facebook and extended to offline cultures was that participants related that people were walking around with newborn babies in the city without swaddling or covering the baby against the "strange winds" in the city. This is believed to be initiated indirectly via Facebook where some western people walk with newborn babies around outside of the home and do not swaddle them in blankets.

Other areas of life where cultural practices seemed to be influenced include deaths and political expression.

There are also examples of where participants wanted to extend their offline practices such as a “guys’ talk” (men talking only among themselves) to Facebook, but feared that they cannot adequately control membership of the group as they would in an offline world so they keep this offline.

Friendship relations were found to be controversial as in some instances off-line power relations are extended to Facebook friendships and in other instances those very same power relations are done away with since Facebook calls everybody “friends” and participants found it strange and funny to call your parents, relatives or elders “friends” [4]. However, new hierarchical power structures and rules seemed to be introduced to compensate for the lack of “friend” and power relation differentiation [4].

In all focus groups, participants discussed the economic advantages of owning a Facebook account. Many participants advertise their goods, services or themselves on Facebook and one participant mentioned that Facebook contributes to a “cleaner city” because it gets rid of paper ads. Words like “mass customization” were also used and of course, this advertising space is “free”. Selling on Facebook also extended beyond the geographic borders of participants and new methods of dealing with foreign traders/sellers and currency transfer take place. Different mechanisms are implemented to trade online beyond their own geographic boundaries.

Participants also discussed how they used Facebook as e-learning platform by forming class and course groups, sharing assignments, asking and answering questions and since most of them access Facebook via cellphones and often cannot access other internet sites, they would collaborate with friends who have access to computers to look up information.

**Implications of the mixed method approach**

While analyzing survey data and even Facebook activity data, the most value and insight was gained from the focus group discussions. The focus group discussions were initially meant to serve as a member-check mechanism, but led to very rich discussions and further insights previously undetected in the online surveys or data streams. Participants could explain the unwritten social rules and traditions that governed their behavior on Facebook, but it was invisible in their activity...
streams. Another benefit from the focus groups was that participants interacted more with each other during the discussions, i.e. participants were more confident and thus more willing to speak out or disagree/agree with each other, and also helped each other to explain phenomena or behavior. A drawback was that dominant speakers had to be carefully managed and since the participants were of different ethnic groups, the dominance/submissiveness between ethnic groups was also a factor to be managed. These factors caused longer discussion time to solicit all viewpoints in a single group. These forms of interactions would not have been the case if individual in-depth interviews were conducted individually.

**Conclusion**

The examples mentioned above gives a clear indication that there is a need to examine how cultural practices and social norms are influenced, how the world is increasingly becoming a smaller global village and how social media can be used to influence positive behavior.

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**References**


