Social Networking Profiles & Cultural Dimensions: an Empirical Investigation

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In recent years social networking has become very popular and has propelled websites like MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn into the mainstream. As this phenomenon grows and becomes an even larger part of people's lives, it is extremely important for marketers to understand this new medium. This research investigates the extent to which an individual’s culture is evident in their social networking profiles. To test this we analyzed profiles from three different countries using three of Geert Hofstede’s Five Cultural Dimensions: individuality, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance.

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In recent years social networking has become very popular and has propelled websites like MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn into the mainstream. MySpace, one of the most popular of these social networking sites, was founded just six years ago and already has over 253 million user accounts worldwide (Alexa 2009). As this phenomenon grows and becomes an even larger part of people’s lives, it is extremely important for marketers to understand this new medium and currently there is little research on the subject (Wallace, Walker, Lopez, and Jones 2009; Poynter 2008).

Schau and Gilly’s (2003) research on motivations, intentions, and strategies for constructing personal Web spaces found that many individuals construct their digital selves referencing only the intangible concepts, things like ideas, beliefs, and values. If culture is defined as everything that people in a society learn in relation to values, norms, customs, traditions, and beliefs (Terpstra & Sarathy 2000), then Schau and Gilly’s (2003) findings seem to indicate that individuals actually construct their digital selves referencing their culture. Therefore, this research investigates whether an individual’s culture is evident in their social networking profiles.

For this study we analyzed profiles from the social networking site MySpace from three different countries with respect to three of Geert Hofstede’s Five Cultural Dimensions: individuality, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. We reviewed 300 customized profiles by looking at the “About Me” section, where users write their personal information. The three countries under investigation were Australia, Ireland and the United States (US). These countries were chosen because of the US and Australia’s similarity on the dimensions Individuality (IDV) and Masculinity (MAS), and their dissimilarity with Ireland on those dimensions, as well as the dissimilarity of the three countries on the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI). These similarities and differences will act as our hypothesis of whether or not culture manifests itself in these profiles. If culture does play a role we should expect parallel results in terms of similarities and differences among cultural dimensions in personal profiles as we do among the countries.

The country-specific MySpace sites were used to identify the sample of 300 profiles consisting of 100 Australian, 100 Irish, and 100 US profiles with an equal number of male and female profiles for each country. Each profile page was individually printed and then specially coded on the back to indicate the country of origin. All 300 profile pages were randomized and we ensured the judges were not aware of the country coding on the back during the analysis. The “About me” written description on each profile was then evaluated on all three cultural dimensions.

An individualist (IDV) is one who exists in society only seeking their own self-interest and maybe that of their immediate family (Kale 1991). Therefore profiles were rated high on the IDV dimension if the individual primarily wrote about themselves, including but not limited to their career, hobbies, self-description, and their personal likes and dislikes. Profiles were rated low on the IDV dimension if the individual wrote about themselves but also mentioned others in their profile, including but is not limited to family, friends, and/or significant others.

Distinctive Masculine (MAS) traits are assertiveness and competitiveness, and typically dominant masculine societies emphasize wealth and success (Geert-Hofstede.com). Therefore profiles were rated high on the MAS if the writing was very unemotional and the individual wrote about “liking” or “enjoying” their career, cars, and/or school but with little or no mention of or emotion towards family,
friends, and/or significant others. Whereas, profiles were rated low on the MAS dimension if the profile section the individual primarily wrote very emotionally, writing about “liking” or “loving” their family, friends, and/or significant others but with little or no mention about “liking” or “enjoying” their career, cars, and/or school.

In strong Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) societies people attempt to predict the future in order to minimize the possibility of new, unfamiliar, unexpected, unusual circumstances (Kale 1991). Therefore if the individual wrote about their future goals and plans whether it concerned the immediate future, a month, six months and/or a year, or their long term/ life goals they were considered high on UAI. Conversely the individual was considered low on UAI if the person made no mention of any future goals and plans.

To establish reliability, a test of reproducibility was applied to the coding system (Mueller 1987). A total of 90 MySpace profile were selected randomly from the original sample by two new experimenters. Next each of the two new experimenters independently coded their random selection of 90 MySpace profiles (Mueller 1987). The results of the reproducibility test showed that the two new experimenters coded their 90 MySpace profile with an 84.2 percent similarity as the original judge.

As expected, the results showed that the US and Australia’s were not significantly different on the dimensions of Individuality and Masculinity ($p$ $.2$. Surprisingly, there was also no significant difference on the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) ($p>.2$). When compared to Ireland both the US and Australia showed differences in these cultural dimensions. For Ireland, their Individuality rating was significantly lower ($M=2.07$) than the US’s ($M=2.44$; $t(198)=2.918$, $p<.005$) and marginally significant to Australia’s profiles ($M=2.33$; $t(198)=-1.779$, $p<.10$). For Ireland, their Masculinity rating was significantly higher ($M=1.99$) than the US’s ($M=89$; $t(198)=2.909$, $p<.005$) and also significantly higher to Australia’s profiles ($M=.89$; $t(198)=2.321$, $p<.5$). Lastly, for Ireland, their Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) rating was not significantly higher ($M=1.85$) than the US’s ($M=1.65$; $p>.1$) but was significant to Australia’s profiles ($M=1.61$; $t(198)=1.973$, $p<.05$).

Since these results, for the most part, paralleled the similarities and differences among cultural dimensions in personal profiles as they do among the countries, these results confirm our expectations that culture is indeed present in individual’s personal descriptions. This research helps to build a better understanding of this growing phenomenon of social networking and we hope to build upon this knowledge base in future research.

References

Combining High-Scope and Low-Scope Retail Cues: An Integrative Perspective
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While consumer research has paid significant attention to how product cues signal product quality (e.g., Bakamitsos 2006; Roggeveen, Grewal, and Gotlieb 2006; Zhang and Sood 2002), researchers have allocated fewer resources investigating how cues affect the places where consumers procure these goods. This relative lack of focus is surprising because consumer research into retail cues has a rich history (e.g., Grewal et al. 1998; Gupta and Cooper 1992; Srivastava and Lurie 2001). Yet in the past ten years, the number of publications examining how consumers react to product cues outweighs those on consumers’ reactions to retailer cues by a wide margin. The issue becomes even more important when one considers the expanding channels of retail, including the internet, kiosks, and mobile shopping to name but a few. Thus, examining how recent theories and applications in consumer behavior apply to consumers’ reactions to retailers is a timely issue. We take on that challenge by integrating research on cue-scope, congruity, and valence to test consumers’ reactions to multiple retail cues.

More specifically, our research examines how low-scope cues interact with high-scope cues to affect consumers’ evaluations. Previous research in schema-based processing suggests that the manner in which these cues interact in determining evaluations may not

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