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Over 80% of Facebook's 1 billion [2] users are located outside of the US and Canada, but little is understood of how Facebook is used or impacts the lives of users, especially in collectivistic cultures. We address this question by conducting a comparative study of Facebook users from a collectivist culture, Namibia, and an individualistic culture, the United States. Although our study is continuing, we have identified several areas of difference that illustrate why and how culture influences users' appropriation of this social network. Specifically, in this paper we examine differences in how friendships are made, maintained, and power relations assigned and discuss the importance of these differences in relation to the cultural context.

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Abstract

Over 80% of Facebook's 1 billion [2] users are located outside of the US and Canada, but little is understood of how Facebook is used or impacts the lives of users, especially in collectivistic cultures. We address this question by conducting a comparative study of Facebook users from a collectivist culture, Namibia, and an individualistic culture, the United States. Although our study is continuing, we have identified several areas of difference that illustrate why and how culture influences users' appropriation of this social network. Specifically, in this paper we examine differences in how friendships are made, maintained, and power relations assigned and discuss the importance of these differences in relation to the cultural context.

Author Keywords

Social Networks; Facebook; Namibia; Culture

ACM Classification Keywords

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

Introduction

Lately, there have been numerous calls to investigate the use of social networking sites and, in particular, Facebook usage in non-western or developing countries [1, 4, 6]. The objective of our study is to investigate how individual users in a southern African collectivistic culture such as Namibia [7] appropriate and use a technology that was originally designed for users in a highly individualist western culture, the United States [3]. Our research initially concentrated on how privacy perspectives changed with the introduction of Facebook and other online social networking sites. We specifically focused on how attitudes about and use of Facebook developed and evolved with respect to life-change events such as births, deaths, career moves, religion, and politics. As is often the case with research that uses open-ended questions, we were able to extend our original research focus into the domain of friendship ties and relationships by interjecting questions that asked focus group participants to describe their attitudes about Facebook in general and to characterize the types of activities in which they engage on Facebook.

Background/Related Work

Our work parallels prior research that examines privacy issues with social networks that was conducted among US, Indian, and Chinese users [6]. In their study, Wang, Norcie and Cranor [6] found that there are important differences in how users from the United States, India, and China view privacy on social networking sites. Specifically, users from the United States are more concerned about privacy in general but, in contrast, Chinese users are most concerned about identity representation and impersonations. In many ways, their findings about Chinese users'

attitudes towards social networking sites correlates with the attitudes of our Namibian users, especially with regard to self-representation. Our study complements and extends Wang et al.'s research by examining a users in a unique cultural context and by examining at a finer grain issues related to social ties and privacy perspectives. In this regard, we take up the call offered by Wang and colleagues, who suggested that future research should examine how privacy concerns differ in other non-western developing countries [6; see also 4, who call for research of Facebook usage in collectivistic countries].

Methods

Our initial pilot study started with a content analysis of Facebook data such as wall posts, pictures, friends, and profile content of Namibian and US users. This analysis led us to identify thematic areas to explore, which we incorporated into our interviews and online questionnaires. We first conducted interviews with ten participants from the United Stated and followed this with online open-ended surveys of Namibian Facebook users. The Namibian interviewees consisted of two groups: one group made up of expatriate Namibians studying abroad and a second group composed of ten individuals who were resident in Namibia. We used a snowball sampling method among the three groups. Subjects in the three groups were similar in education, career interests, and Internet usage [5].

Nevertheless, while the original group of participants shared similarities, we were also concerned about the sample size and the potential that the small number of participants might not be representative of the broader population of interest (in the case of social network sites, we consider the population of interest to be late

adolescents to mid-30 in age). As a result, we conducted a larger study that involved the use of focus groups for both Namibian and US subjects and coupled this with an online survey. We sampled undergraduate students in a variety of disciplines at universities in Namibia and the US. At this time, we are still collecting data using the online survey; therefore, our focus in this paper is reporting on our findings from the focus group discussions.

In Namibia, we conducted seven focus groups, six of which included participants who used Facebook regularly and one group comprised non-Facebook users. In total, 49% of the participants were female and group sizes varied between 3 and 12. For the US, we conducted six focus groups with group sizes ranging from 3 to 10. In the United States sample, only 25% of the participants were female and none of the groups included participants who were not active Facebook users.

Results
For the Namibians, Facebook was the first social networking site that they had encountered and used. Namibian participants indicated that one of the reasons that users quickly adopted Facebook was that it offered them a way to chat with friends without incurring charges for text messaging. In other words, they would use Facebook on their mobile device as a way to circumvent the charges otherwise imposed by their mobile network operator. Connecting and sharing with old friends, making new friends from around the world, online chatting, marketing of one's products were cited as the top reasons for Facebook adoption. However, participants indicated that they also used it for as an e-learning platform for their studies.

We identify five key areas of difference between Namibian & US users: a) motivations for joining Facebook and activities; b) attitude toward Facebook connections; c) self presentation and photo sharing; d) communication about births, death, religion & politics; and e) general privacy definitions [5]. How the two groups maintained their friendships on Facebook is of interest for this paper.

Namibian participants tend to accept all friendship requests whether known or unknown. Reasons that were frequently offered were that they wanted to make new friends since the world is a global village, they wanted to learn about other cultures and share their own culture with others, they did not want to be "rude" by not accepting the requests, and that they wanted to make people happy by accepting their requests. Except for connecting with known friends and family, they described Facebook as a fun place to make new friends and get away from the real world.

In contrast, the US participants indicated that they would regularly reject friend requests from people they did not know in their existing face-to-face social network and they purge friends who had grown distant or with whom they were no longer relationally close. On the other hand, the Namibian participants indicated that they would seldom delete friends, but that they would threaten friends with removal if they commented negatively on their photos or behaviors. Participants from the United States often perform a "friend cleaning" to remove friends with whom they do not have frequent contact or if they have moved or changed careers. They tended to evaluate friends according to the benefit that the friendship brings. Namibian participants indicated that were more likely

than participants from the United States to restrict the views of friends and block unwanted friends.

Namibians indicated that pictures are very important for validation on Facebook. Profile pictures are important as "faceless" profiles, celebrity pictures or cartoons used as a surrogate for a "real" profile picture is viewed with suspicion because they interpret this to mean that the person is hiding something. Nevertheless, friends also verify the person's looks against other pictures they find on the site through tags. Participants indicated that they are selective in their use of pictures, with most selected to portray a polished image of their identity. A common theme is that they would often include pictures in which they were the only person in the frame. Friends are expected to comment on pictures, but participants mentioned that negative comments on one's pictures are grounds for friend removal, restriction of views, or, at the very least, a personal phone call or private message to address the negative comment. Pictures also serve as validation for posts. For example, when someone claimed (e.g., boasted) to have been present at an event (e.g., a place or a party) with a popular person (e.g., a celebrity), participants indicated that they would use the pictures to verify claims. Many users indicated that they took particular pride in and made extra effort to make poses for pictures they knew were destined to be posted on Facebook [5].

The participants from the United State indicated that they frequently uploaded pictures of themselves in group settings and seldom featured themselves in their own pictures of travels or events. This result is similar to that observed by Wang et al. [6], who found that Chinese users also uploaded stylized self-images while

users from the United States mostly posted in group settings. Interestingly, male participants from the United States indicated that self-portrait images is primarily a "girls' activity", which suggests that there may be a difference in attitudes across the sexes when comparing Namibians to US users. Specifically, males and females in Namibia both indicated that both men and women commonly used individualized stylistic pictures; however, in the United States this practice might be more common for women, but this needs to be confirmed. One of the reasons for the lack of picture uploading or tagging on Facebook for US participants was the fear of prospective employers looking at Facebook profiles. US participants indicated that when they undergo university freshmen orientation, they are told to keep their Facebook profiles "clean", so their behavior changes from what they did in high school to what they do in college. This means that they engage in purges of friends, pictures, and profile content. The US participants also indicated that they open multiple profiles, or aliases, which are used to present different persona to different intended audiences. Furthermore, many US participants indicated that they were increasingly "disconnecting" from active participation in posting on Facebook, implying that they were become passive followers of others' activities on Facebook (i.e., "lurking").

Most of the Namibian focus group participants had at least one parent or elderly relative as a friend, but found it strange that all connections are considered as being equally labeled as "friends". Nevertheless, certain rules govern friendships on Facebook and these depend on who sent the friendship request. Although most participants indicated that negative commenting on posts or pictures is followed up with a personal private

message, it depended heavily on who was the friendship requestor. The person who first sent the friendship request has to assume a less dominant role and can, for example, not follow up on negative comments. Another example of the status that is assigned to who initiated the interaction is also exhibited in "poking". If someone pokes a person repeatedly, it means that they want him/her to send a friendship request instead of the poker sending the friendship request him/herself. Nevertheless, some participants mentioned that they do not know why there is this status assigned given that Facebook does not report who requested whom as a friend. This suggests that there is an inference of hierarchy or dependence associated with the initiation or reception of friend requests and, while this is not documented in the timeline represented on Facebook, it is relevant to the ongoing peer-to-peer relationships established through this site. In other words, people use these friendship requests as a means of establishing and communicating dominant and submissive roles in the relationship.

Most Namibians access Facebook from their cellphones and participants had mixed feelings about the status symbols portrayed on Facebook such as Facebook's display of which type of device was used to upload the post (e.g. via MobileWeb, Iphone, Blackberry or other type of phone). Some participants indicated that friends sometimes borrow each other's phones to upload a post to Facebook in order to have the phone's characteristics displayed. While this was not always mentioned by Namibian users, it suggests that there may be a status associated with the use of certain devices (e.g., using an iphone would be preferred to using an Android device and an Android device would

be preferred to using a device that was not a smart phone). Future research should examine whether and how the characteristics of the device used for posting content to Facebook influences attitudes and behaviors of users.

Most Namibian focus group participants did not want to display their partners' names under their relationship status or change their status from "single". They indicated that having multiple partners is not easily reflected on Facebook. Some indicated that they would commonly set their status to "in an open relationship". The Namibian focus group participants indicated that sex is discussed quite frequently on Facebook, but lamented that the numerous explicit pictures (i.e., images of naked or scantily clothed users) should be done away with on Facebook. Nevertheless, Namibian users indicated that they would seldom report nude pictures. This is in contrast to the US users, who indicated that they commonly report other users for posting explicit pictures. The US users also indicated that relationships are discussed less frequently and males more often expressed the opinion that although they deemed their relationship status as less important, women with whom they were in a relationship often pressured them to change their relationship status. This indicates that Facebook is being used as a tool for making statements about pair-bonding status, similar to the way holding hands would be used as a sign in public displays.

Conclusion
We envisage that this research would make an important contribution to the existing literature on social networking and how Facebook contributes to social change in diverse cultures. Follow-up focus group

interviews will be conducted with more female US users and the online surveys for both groups will be completed to deepen the understanding of these preliminary results.

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