

8-2015

# Cultural influences on Facebook practices: A comparative study of college students in Namibia and the United States

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## Abstract

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## Keywords

Facebook, Culture, United States and Namibia, Cross-cultural, Social networking sites

## Disciplines

Management Information Systems | Social Media

## Comments

This is the accepted manuscript of an article from *Computers in Human Behavior* 49 (2015): 259–271, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2015.02.065. Posted with permission.

**Cultural Influences on Facebook Practices: A comparative study of college students in Namibia and the United States**

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## Abstract

Facebook has been adopted in many countries with over 80% of its user-base being outside of the US and Canada. Yet, despite this global dominance, not much is understood of Facebook usage by individuals in non-western cultures. A cross-cultural study was conducted with undergraduate students in the United States and Namibia to examine Facebook use. The study used a mixed method of an online surveys and focus groups in both countries. The research examined issues such as motivations for use, friendships, privacy and trust, and life changing events such as relationships, births, deaths, religion and politics. Findings suggest cultural influence on both online and offline practices as well as appropriation and re-contextualization to fit existing offline cultural practices. While we find that participants from the United States are changing their online behavior toward self-censorship, more users from Namibia, where family and community structures are tighter, continue to engage in online behavior that is more open and transparent. Findings also suggest an expressive privacy paradox for United States participants, who are generally less concerned with updating their privacy settings while simultaneously practicing self-censorship.

*Keywords:* Facebook; culture; United States and Namibia; cross-cultural; appropriation

Abbreviations<sup>3,4</sup>

### 1. Introduction

With a worldwide monthly user base of over 1.39 billion monthly active users of whom 1.19 billion are mobile monthly users (Facebook, 2015), Facebook has shaped perspectives on and policies about privacy and cultural practices in the United States (US) and connected people across the world (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2008; Kerr,

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<sup>3</sup> United States abbreviated to US

<sup>4</sup> Focus Groups abbreviated to FGs

2013). In 2006, Facebook moved beyond the college campus and welcomed the world into its network. As a result, not only has the technological capabilities and affordances of the site evolved, so too has the demographic characteristics and geographic diversity of the Facebook community. Furthermore, the applications for which Facebook are used have expanded to commercial activities, employers scanning profiles, mining data, and analyzing contents (Chauhan, Buckley & Harvey, 2013; Kerr, 2013), with the result that the growth and diversity of Facebook users, employer activity, and the well-publicized commercialization of Facebook has led to demonstrable changes in attitudes and practices by many college-aged users in the US (Stephenson-Abetz & Helman, 2012). Nevertheless, while some research examining Facebook has been done in non-Western countries and in particular some African countries (Bosch, 2009; Uimonen; 2013, Wyche, Forte & Schoenebeck, 2013; Wyche, Schoenebeck & Forte, 2013), there is still much to learn about how these and other factors influence attitudes about Facebook and cultural practices associated with use in countries outside of the US and Canada.

This is an important issue given that Facebook was developed in a western context and as a technology platform has embedded in its assumptions and structures affordances that are largely derivative of western prerogatives and values. This is so because we must acknowledge that the philosophies and perspectives that inform developers and researchers in the West are influenced by Western values and history, as noted by Winschiers-Theophilus and Bidwell who observed that "...HCI paradigms are deeply rooted in a Western epistemology and intrinsically privilege certain assumptions, values, definitions, techniques, representations, and models..." (2013, p. 243). As a result, we assume there will not only be design differences structured into the Facebook environment by the developers but that there will also be a different set of appropriations of Facebook affordances by users in other cultural, language, communication, and historical contexts. This raises the specific research question we seek to examine in this study; that is, how are social technologies like Facebook appropriated by users from non-western cultures and how does this compare to users from a western culture such as the United States? To examine this issue, our general focus is on the continent of Africa and specifically on the country of Namibia. To understand how these appropriations and influences affect use, we compare college-aged users of Facebook in Namibia to college-aged users of Facebook in the United States.

We chose Namibia for a number of reasons. First, Namibia is characterized by having a modern lifestyle in urban areas, which is where 43% of the Namibian population resides (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2015). At the same time, Namibians maintain traditional and indigenous values and practices as encountered in everyday life because many in the urban setting were raised in rural settings and maintain close relationships to their rural families. This is important because in this paper we compare Namibian users to users in the United States who also reside in an urban setting and many also share a history of having non-urban roots (i.e., the US participants attended a large

state university in the Midwest that is characterized by being located in a city situated in a rural agricultural setting). Our samples from both countries also have other similarities. For example, while it is a given that most college-aged students in the United States have Facebook accounts, Namibians also have a relatively high Facebook adoption rate in comparison to other African countries (Internet World Stats, 2015). Although, Namibia has a rich diversity of multiple ethnic groups and languages, much of the population of Namibia speaks English, which is the official language of the country, medium of instruction from secondary school onwards and language of the government and commerce (Government of Namibia, 2015). Thus, the participants in Namibia are similar to those in the United States in their use of the “native” language of Facebook, English, in both online and offline social and cultural exchanges. Furthermore, as is increasingly the case in the US, in Namibia Facebook and other social media sites are often accessed via mobile Internet and 85% of mobile Internet users are located in rural areas (Stork and Calandro, 2014). While we don’t seek to suggest that the US and Namibian users are similar in every respect, the similarities that do exist related to usage rates, access, and modes of use offer a unique and useful baseline that allows us to compare these two sets of users on important cultural dimensions to uncover their respective attitudes about and behaviors with Facebook use, privacy, and information disclosure.

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we review the literature associated with culture and Facebook use. Following this, we describe the methods used in this research. Next, we discuss the results in the context of cultural practices and conclude the paper exposing its limitations and transferability of results

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Facebook research in non-Western contexts**

One of the challenges with Facebook research is that it has almost exclusively focused on users in Western countries and, particularly, the US. For example, after performing a meta-review of Facebook research conducted up until that time, Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) determined that not much is known about how collectivistic cultures use social media sites. Similarly, Wang, Norcie and Cranor (2011) conducted a study on privacy issues and social network use among US, Indian, and Chinese users, and they noted that there is still a need to examine how privacy concerns differ in non-Western, collectivist, and developing countries such as those in Africa (see Kumar, 2014 for recent work in other developing countries). Nevertheless, a few scholars have begun to examine social media use on the African continent. For example, Bosch (Bosch, 2009) has studied the application of Facebook as a tool for teaching and learning among college students in South Africa. She found potential applications for Facebook use amongst the groups she examined, but also noted that there are challenges with

applying the technology in the South African context because of technological and language barriers. Wyche and her colleagues have examined Facebook use in rural Kenya and have identified factors that influence commercial uses where resource-constraints impose limitations on use (Wyche, Forte & Schoenebeck, 2013; Wyche, Schoenebeck & Forte, 2013). Uimomen (Uimomen, 2013) analyzed visual identity portrayal in Facebook among Tanzanian Art students and found that users in Tanzania could "... feel as if they are part of an interconnected world" (134). Interestingly, their connection to those in other countries was interpreted to be "miles apart" from their connected friends in the West even as they can attempt to use Facebook to seek inclusion in a global society because of the differences in networked access (i.e., access through an "Internet room") and their rural setting. Finally, in research examining the way social media use is redefining Nigerian culture, Asmah and colleagues (Asemah, Ekhaeafu and Olaniran, 2013) found that Nigeria's core cultural values were being redefined amongst the youth in the country by their use of social media. While they offer suggestions for stemming this change, the important finding from their study for our research is that they demonstrate that social media are having an important impact on the way the users view themselves in relation to their own cultural background and that this is largely driven by their own comparisons of their culture with that of their perception of Western cultural values.

## 2.2 A perspective on culture

Culture is a complex construct that is both difficult to define and also crucial to understanding and framing how and why people behave as they do in the context of their situated actions. A commonly used perspective on culture that has been applied to cross-cultural studies in HCI and technology adaptations is Hofstede's model of national culture (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). A challenge associated with Hofstede's model is that it was originally promoted and continues to perpetuate a cross-cultural view that examines culture purely from a Western viewpoint. Furthermore, this model has also been criticized because of its choice of narrow and rigid categories, its relevance to and application with understanding technology adoption, and because of the limited conceptualization of local cultures in favor of national-level measures (Winschiers-Theophilus et al., 2010).

So, while Hofstede's model is useful as a starting point, we think it is important to also take a richer and more nuanced view of culture, one that captures a representation of behavior that is enacted in everyday practice and is active in producing everyday experience (Irani et al., 2010). For example, while broad national cultural patterns may be considered and evaluated, we also recognize regional and cross-country cultural influences such as, for example, Ubuntu, which is an African philosophy deeply embedded in the daily practices of many Namibians (Winschiers-Theophilus & Bidwell, 2013). Ubuntu is characterized by generosity, love, maturity, hospitality, politeness, understanding, and humility (Mkabela & Luthuli, 1997), which are values that are reflected in social

interactions and maintained through face-to-face as well as mediated communication (Baran, 2002). In this light, it is important to understand how social media might influence or be influenced by cultural artifacts such as Ubuntu because, as demonstrated by Asemah and colleagues (2013), cultural values can be carried over and influenced by technology mediated communications and these media can also have a profound influence on attitudes about and the evolution of culture (Asemah, Ekhaeafu, & Olaniran, 2013).

We present a multi-cultural perspective and interpretation of the study at hand. Considering that the first author is a female Namibian and a member of the Rehoboth Baster ethnic group, but has been studying in the US; The second author is a female Namibian of European decent, but resident to Namibia for more than two decades; The third author is a male Caucasian from the US.

### 2.3 Culture and Life in Namibia

Namibia is a country in southwestern Africa with a population of 2.1 million and a land area of 318,696 square miles (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2015). The country is stable politically, economically and socially with a multi-party democracy. About 90% of Namibians are Christian and the bulk of the remaining population practices indigenous beliefs (CIA, 2015). The literacy rate is 89% and is equal for both men and women (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2015; CIA, 2015). The World Bank classifies Namibia as an upper-middle income developing country, but the disparity between rich and poor is very high (The World Bank, 2015). Despite its small population, the country is among the 10 richest countries in Africa (Davis, 2015).

Namibia became a German colony in 1884, and became a South African mandate from 1920 until 1990. The country waged a War of Independence against South African occupation between 1966 and 1990, at which time it became an independent country (BBC, 2014). Although more than 11 different indigenous languages and 3 Indo-European languages are spoken in Namibia (Government of Namibia, 2015), English is the sole official language. In fact, English is the language of instruction from secondary school level onwards and, as a result, it is widely spoken throughout the country and is required for official communication within government agencies, educational organizations, and public information dissemination (Government of Namibia, 2015). The country include 11 different ethnic groups that each have different cultural practices; however, since independence most Namibians identify first and foremost as Namibians in pursuit of a national identity that includes a unified political, cultural and ethnic identity (Mans, 2003; Namibia Endless Horizons, 2015).

The country's Internet penetration rate was 16% in 2014 and the Facebook users were at 11% of the population in 2012 (World Internet Stats, 2015). Comparing these statistics to other African countries for context, it means that the Internet penetration rate is 25<sup>th</sup> highest and the Facebook rate is the 12<sup>th</sup> highest in Africa. Facebook and other



social media sites are primarily accessed via mobile Internet (Stork and Calandro, 2014). Namibia has relatively high mobile Internet use, which is made possible by low-cost mobile prepaid business models. In fact, mobile rates are among the lowest in Africa; hence, even rural users can afford mobile devices, which has resulted in Namibia having a relatively high penetration rate for mobile Internet (85%) (Calandro, Gillwald and Stork, 2012; Stork and Calandro, 2014). For example, in 2012 98% of students at the Namibian university where our study was conducted had cellphones and 69% had mobile Internet access. Furthermore, 7% of Facebook users in Namibia were above 65 years of age in 2011, and this is largely due to their desire to connect with their children who have relocated to urban areas (Stork and Calandro, 2014)

### **3. Methods**

While a variety of research methods could have been applied to understand Facebook use in each cultural setting (e.g., see Spiliotopoulos & Oakley, 2013), we determined that a mixed-method data collection methodology was the best way to conduct the research. This is because this is an exploratory study that has as its goal an understanding of the factors that influence Facebook use in two distinct cultures and, as a result, more than one method offers opportunities to approach the complex dynamics represented in each setting with a methodological lens that is more likely to help us understand the factors influencing behaviors and attitudes.

Pilot studies were initially conducted in both countries to identify and document major areas of similarity and difference across each sample (Peters, Oren & Bidwell, 2012). The pilot phase comprised an exploratory content analysis of US and Namibian participants' Facebook wall contents, an online survey, and interviews. Namibian and US participants provided the researchers with their exported Facebook wall contents, pictures, and profile information covering a six-month period. A content analysis of this data revealed differences between local Namibians resident in Namibia and expatriate Namibians, who were studying outside of Namibia. We also identified topics to be included in our instruments for an online survey and interviews. Using a snowball sampling method, data were collected from ten participants in each of the three sample groups: Namibian participants resident in Namibia, expatriate Namibian participants resident in a variety of western countries, and US participants resident in the US. Expatriate Namibians were mostly graduate students studying in countries such as the US, Canada, Germany, India, and Malaysia. The content analysis of the Facebook user data informed the creation of an online survey instrument. The online survey measured orientation to collectivism/individualism, general social networking exposure and usage, Facebook usage and privacy views, and the impact on life-change events such as births, death, career moves, religion and politics.

Similarities were found for most Facebook activities such as frequency of access and use, number of friends, awareness of privacy settings, and actual privacy setting adjustments. No statistical differences were found in the collectivism orientation for the pilot study groups, although this is likely because the sample size was not sufficiently large. However, five main areas of difference were identified such as 1) motivations for joining Facebook; 2) attitude toward Facebook connections; 3) self presentation and photo sharing; 4) communication about death, religion and politics; and 5) general privacy definitions. The areas of difference identified during this pilot study informed our primary study's questions and choice of methods.

For our primary study, we used a mixed-methods approach, which comprised an online survey and concurrent focus groups. A total of 354 undergraduate college students from the US and Namibia participated in our surveys and focus groups. Separate participants were used for the online survey and focus groups and the language used in all sessions was English, the official language of Namibia and the US. The first author conducted all focus groups in the pilot study as well as the primary study. Participants consisted of undergraduate students at either a major University in Namibia or a large midwestern university in the US. The mean age in years for survey respondents was 21 for the US group and 22 for the Namibian group. Many participants were recruited from introductory technology courses at each university. It is interesting to note that a higher percentage of Namibian participants are female, which is due largely to the fact that, unlike the US, women make up a large percentage of technology majors in Namibia (e.g. women enrollment in technology majors at the participants' Namibian university is 36%; Polytechnic of Namibia, 2015) (see Table 1).

| Participants  | US               | Namibia         |
|---------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Online survey | 166 (29% female) | 97 (68% female) |
| Focus groups  | 32 (31% female)  | 59 (53% female) |

*Table 1: Participants (Seven focus groups each)*

We used a 70-item online survey instrument that included questions about demographics, general social network sites usage, motivations for use, activities, friendships, pictures, privacy, life-change events (career moves, politics, religion, death, and relationships), a measurement instrument for collectivism/individualism ([Wagner, 1995](#)), and a social desirability scale ([Crowne & Marlow, 1960](#)). The collectivism/individualism scale is a validated 20-item, 7-point Likert scale designed to evaluate group cooperation. The social desirability scale is a validated, 10-item, seven-point Likert scale, which was used to measure self-representation response biases (i.e. how likely will participants be to answer questions in a socially favorable way). All other questions were a mixture of multiple choice, binary, closed-ended, and open-ended, but no other Likert-scale questions were included. We include an outline of major survey topic categories in Appendix A (detailed survey items are available from the authors upon

request). The survey was administered online, participants maintained anonymity, and all questions were presented and responded to in English.

A total of seven focus groups were conducted in each country with a sample of participants who did not complete the full survey. The focus group protocol explored certain themes in more depth after we identified the primary areas of difference between members of each culture. The focus groups explored motivations of use, identity performance, privacy, and life change events such as births, death, relationships, politics and religion, and how cultural practices were influenced. Groups varied in size from two to 12. Namibian participants belonged to various ethnic groups namely Ovambos, Hereros, Namas, Damaras, Okavangos, Rehoboth Basters, Coloreds and Caprivians. The US participants included Caucasians, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Hispanics.

We analyzed survey data and focus groups thematically. We transcribed focus groups interviews and open coded data to derive themes and categories iteratively until we identified no new themes (Saldana, 2009). Corresponding open-ended questions from the survey data were then coded according to themes and categories identified in the focus group discussions. Survey and focus group data were compared to identify difference and to triangulate across each sample.

#### **4. Results & Discussion**

The results are organized such that under each topic the survey results are presented first, followed by the focus group findings for each country, and supplemented with a discussion of the findings. We have at times also complemented our findings with a cultural context to enhance interpretation of the data for readers not familiar with the Namibian culture.

Interestingly, the results show that the participants were not significantly different in their responses to the social desirability scale (*t-test: p=.221, mean difference = -.045, R-squared=.008*). This is important because it suggests that the participants from these two countries are likely to divulge information and respond to socially sensitive questions similarly.

##### *4.1. Nature and Frequency of Facebook Activity*

The Namibian participants were active for an average of 3 years, indicating that most users became active on Facebook when entering college (Table 2). However, the range of the first date of use of Facebook was as early as 2006 to as recently as three months prior to the survey. Namibian users did indicate that they are active on a variety of social media sites (Table 3); however, Namibians spent more active time on Facebook than did their US

counterparts (Table 2). This difference is likely the result of several reasons: 1) a smaller percentage of Namibian users are active on alternative sites such as Twitter and LinkedIn (Table 3); 2) Facebook served as an introduction to social media networking because Namibian users had not been active on earlier popular social media sites like MySpace; and, 3) Namibian participants mostly accessed Facebook from their cell phones while US participants reported that they were more likely to access Facebook from their desktop computer, laptop, or iPad (e.g., 81% of US participants accessed Facebook from their desktops, laptops or ipads versus 36% of the Namibians sample group). Both groups indicated that Facebook was their second highest source of news (Table 4).

| Facebook Use                              | US         | Namibia   |
|---|------------|-----------|
| Mean length of time on Facebook           | 6 years    | 3 years   |
| Mean active time per day on Facebook      | 1.35 hours | 2.6 hours |
| Daily postings of Facebook status updates | 5%         | 23%       |
| Deactivated Facebook at least once        | 31%        | 31%       |

*Table 2: Mean amount of time on Facebook, active time on Facebook, daily postings*

| Social Media Usage | US  | Namibia |
|--------------------|-----|---------|
| Facebook           | 96% | 80%     |
| Google+            | 18% | 29%     |
| Twitter            | 67% | 20%     |
| LinkedIn           | 34% | 7%      |
| Other              | 11% | 15%     |

*Table 3: Which internet sites do you use for social networking? (multiple answers possible)*

| News sources        | US  | Namibia |
|---------------------|-----|---------|
| FB                  | 83% | 64%     |
| Phone (voice, text) | 86% | 85%     |
| Email               | 42% | 37%     |
| Newspapers          | 29% | 48%     |
| Radio               | 18% | 46%     |
| Television          | 45% | 43%     |
| Word of Mouth       | 33% | 39%     |

*Table 4: Through which medium do you hear/read about news from home, friends and family relations?*

#### 4.2. Motivations for Use

We asked each focus group participant to discuss why and how they used Facebook and what motivated them to join. The results from the analysis of the open-ended questions offer interesting insights regarding motivation for Facebook use. For example, Namibian participants adopted Facebook primarily to connect to both old and new friends (Table 5). Facebook was perceived to be more fun (Table 5) as well as less expensive than local

SMS/texting (Table 7), which generally charges users a fee for each text message. Other features of Facebook that users describe include advertising, information and news sharing, cultural learning, gaming, e-learning, and entertainment/socialization (Table 7). Cultural learning means sharing their cultural practices with different ethnic and geographic friends and learning things about other cultures and practices. An example of cultural learning is captured in what Petrus<sup>5</sup>, a Namibian participant observed,

*I saw [a picture of] a person dressed up in like sort of a skeleton costume, then she told me what was happening, it was somewhere in October, I can't remember, but they are celebrating Halloween and she explained to me what was Halloween and how it came and something like that.*

Another participant shared how she was able to use Facebook to learn about specific cultural practices in another Namibian ethnic group when she observed,

*... those events that mostly happen in our country because each tribe has got its own category of things, so somebody can post on Facebook they do this, some of the things like in their culture, they prefer doing this and this and this unlike in the other cultures, so they have different activities from others (Namibian participant Bertha).*

Namibian participant Colin signified the importance of chatting on Facebook by saying the following,

*it's more of posting and chatting, chatting is very... I think it is the hallmark of Facebook, where you can chat with people online and it's much more cheaper than making an actual call.*

The activities mentioned most frequently by US participants overlapped somewhat with Namibian activities, but there were also numerous unique uses highlighted by users from the US. For example, the most common activities listed by US participants included “creeping” (watching others’ newsfeeds without actively participating or posting), posting photos, reviewing other users’ photos, chatting, and keeping up with friends/family with whom they had irregular contact or from whom they were separated geographically (Table 6). US participants joined Facebook because their friends were on it (Table 5) and the migration from MySpace to Facebook was often mentioned as the reason why they originally joined Facebook. FG participants also included connecting to old friends, albums, birthday wishing, and the convenience of signing into other websites and services (Table 7). Participants were mostly concerned with employer activity on Facebook and one US FG participant, US participant David said that Facebook is used “...as a way to control their employees...” The observation about employers is interesting

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<sup>5</sup> Here and elsewhere, names are presented as pseudonyms

because this was not a specific question posed to users, but it was mentioned during each of the US FGs by at least one participant and then echoed by other participants.

| No.   | Description  | Frequency |
|---|--|-----------|
| Responses from Namibian Survey Respondents          |  |           |
| 1.  | Connecting with family and friends                           | 24        |
| 2.  | Connecting to new friends globally (unknown friends)         | 23        |
| 3.  | Peer pressure  | 22        |
| 4.  | Fun and enjoyable  | 6         |
| 5.  | Information sharing and news (including "gossip openly")     | 6         |
| Responses from US Survey Respondents                |  |           |
| 1.  | Peer pressure  | 116       |
| 2.  | Connecting with friends (staying in touch after high school) | 27        |
| 3.  | Curiosity  | 7         |
| 4.  | Popularity   | 4         |
| 5.  | To be "cool"   | 3         |
| <i>Table 5: What motivated you to join Facebook</i> |  |           |

| No.  | Description                                | Frequency |
|--|--|-----------|
| Namibian Survey Respondents                            |  |           |
| 1.   | Chatting and private messaging             | 24        |
| 2.   | Comments, likes, posting on friends' walls | 20        |
| 3.   | Checking friends' status updates           | 17        |
| 4.   | Posting own photos                         | 11        |
| 5.   | Posting own status update                  | 8         |
| US Survey Respondents                                  |  |           |
| 1.   | "Creep"                                    | 42        |
| 2.   | Newsfeed reading                           | 37        |
| 3.   | Posting own photos                         | 37        |
| 4.   | Chatting and private messaging             | 33        |
| 5.   | Viewing others' photos                     | 30        |
| <i>Table 6: What activities do you do on Facebook?</i> |  |           |

| No.                              | Namibia Focus Group Respondents                        | Frequency |
|----------------------------------|--|-----------|
| Namibian Focus Group Respondents |  |           |
| 1.                               | Connecting to known and unknown friends and family     | 36        |
| 2.                               | Information and news sharing                           | 17        |
| 3.                               | Economic gain:   | 14        |
| 4.                               | Cost: lower cost to use Facebook for texting/messaging | 9         |
| 5.                               | Intercultural exchange                                 | 6         |
| US Focus Group Respondents       |  |           |
| 1.                               | Connecting to known friends and family                 | 31        |

|   |                              |    |
|---|------------------------------|----|
| 2.  | Convenience factors          | 24 |
| 3.  | Information and news sharing | 5  |
| 4.  | ELearning                    | 4  |
| 5.  | Economic gain                | 2  |
| <i>Table 7: What type of activities do you personally participate in on Facebook?</i> |                              |    |

Interestingly, 31% of both US and Namibian survey participants had deactivated Facebook at one time or another since they first signed up for the service. They cited reasons for discontinuing their usage such as the distracting nature of Facebook (e.g., when they needed to study for exams), their distrust of Facebook “spying”, Facebook fatigue, they were tired of Facebook “drama”, and religious reasons (e.g., giving up Facebook for Lent).

#### 4.3. Friending Activities

The results suggest that Namibian and US participants engage in different friending activities. On average, US survey respondents had an average of 584 friends while Namibian participants had 708 friends. In general, Namibians indicated that they were more likely to offer friendship requests to relatives as well as strangers. Specifically, we found that 79% of Namibians reported friending strangers while 56% of US users did so. Most US participants indicated during focus group sessions that they do not befriend strangers (e.g., only one focus group participant had ever befriended a stranger). Upon further enquiry to determine the source of the discrepancy between the survey and focus group results, we found that US participants were more likely to friend “known strangers”, but not completely unknown strangers. “Known strangers” are people that they are not acquainted with, but they have seen them in shared places such as classes, institutional settings, in friendship circles, or they share mutual friends.

Members of Namibian FGs said that they accepted strangers’ friend requests because it is considered to be “rude” to ignore a friend request. They did this because they sought to make others “happy” and they wanted to encourage an inter-cultural dialogue (Peters, Winschiers-Theophilus, & Mennecke, 2013). For example, Namibian participant Petrus said: “... I just confirm them for the sake of Facebook, it’s kinda rude just denying them”. While Namibian participant Erastus said: “I just accept them for the sake of accepting, making friends, so I hate ignoring people”.

Almost all FG participants had befriended people they did not know offline who were located outside of Namibia, but almost none of these participants had family / friends outside of Namibia.

During FG sessions, many US participants indicated that they do not want to befriend acquaintances or known strangers, because they do not want to be 'fake' and also mentioned risks of deceit, privacy and security. The term "fake" was defined by participants as meaning they were being polite and friendly, but they were not seeking or participating in a deeper friendship relationship. Instead US participants indicated that they were being more selective in that they increasingly only want to befriend "real-life" close friends and family. The general sentiment about friending strangers was captured by US participant John who noted, "*I do not know why you would befriend people you don't know on Facebook. So I don't friend them*". Furthermore, US participants indicated that when they did accept acquaintance requests, it served a specific purpose (e.g., classmates or assignment partners) and these *functional friends* were often subsequently deleted (i.e., defriend other users) when the function for which they were added was completed. Defriending other users en masse, otherwise known as *friend cleansing*, was considered a regular and normal activity, but it also represented a personal act as it signifies a cut in real-world connections.

Namibian survey responses indicate that while Namibian users generally did not cleanse large numbers of friends at once from their lists, almost two-thirds (61%) of Namibians reported that they had defriended at least one person at some time in the past. The 61% of Namibians who had defriended people in the past had been on Facebook for an average of 4 years, while those who did not engage in defriending behaviors were on Facebook an average of 2.7 years. It is noteworthy that Namibians who had used Facebook longer were more likely to defriend others because this pattern was also seen in the data from US survey respondents. Specifically, the 84% of the US survey respondents who did practice defriending behaviors were on Facebook an average of 6 years while those who did not delete friends had been on Facebook for an average of 4.8 years.

Some of the reasons for these friending and defriending behaviors surfaced in the FG interviews. Namibians indicated that they were unlikely to delete friends en masse due to their concerns about being polite and not being rude. They indicated that they were more likely to selectively manage privacy settings so as to restrict some friends from seeing all posts rather than delete them as friends. In fact, 50% of Namibians reported that they restricted some friends from seeing all posts. Namibian participants' defriending criteria was specific and included behaviors such as postings that they found to be useless, objectionable, or unethical. For example, Namibian FG participants indicated that many people were annoying them because they posted comments or pictures that were nonsensical, irrelevant, or caused them to waste time. Objectionable posts generally included gossip, insulting comments about other people, and comments that included profanity and expletives. Finally, many times Namibians reported in FGs that a common reason that they would defriend others was because of posts involving objectionable pictures (e.g., derogatory photos, nudity, and obscenity).



The FG interviews revealed a different set of behaviors for US users. Specifically, the majority of US FG participants indicated that they would generally remove friends rather than use settings to restrict visibility. This finding is similar to findings from Wang, Norcie and Cranor (2011) that showed that US users had the least desire to restrict friends' views. While Namibian FG participants overtly stated that they were concerned about offending those who they might remove from their friend's list, US FG participants did not raise any concerns about this issue. They would most likely remove friends because of posting behavior, lack of or discontinuation of real-world friendships (e.g., cleansing High School friends), or posting of advertisements or products they were selling. Research has shown that defriending does influence the attitudes of the person being removed from a friends list and that the strength of the valence associated with this behavior depends on the "closeness" of the users, but the reasons cited by our participants suggest that US users take a functional view of defriending by associating this behavior with "just causes" or how close the individuals are in offline settings (Bevan, Ang, & Fearn, 2014). Interestingly, US participants indicated that negative or insulting comments were less likely to trigger defriending behaviors.

#### 4.4. Privacy

Our interviews suggest that the concept of privacy is interpreted slightly differently by US and Namibians participants and as such they would be expected to have different norms and expectations. This is probably due to the different cultural attitudes held by most people in each country. For example, in Namibia the sharing of time, space, and stories is a norm that is commonly expressed in daily social exchanges. In many respects, the concept of individual privacy does not exist in the same way that individuality and privacy are defined in Western countries. The Namibian participants' attitudes are reflective of Ubuntu, a widely held African philosophy, which focuses on humanness and togetherness. Ubuntu emphasizes the idea that the concerns held by one individual should also be concerns held by all members of an entire village or community. In other words, the identity performance of Namibian individuals on Facebook appears to be consistent with and reflective of the perspectives held by large numbers of individuals in Namibian society (Bidwell, 2010). In line with this, Namibian participants tended to have only one profile, and 79% of the respondents posted their real names. Namibian FG participants thought it was difficult to post false information on Facebook when you are Facebook friends with real life friends or family because it is highly likely that these social and familial contacts already know the true nature of the information.

These differences in perspectives about the concept of privacy in the community versus individual privacy are manifested in the variant practices on Facebook. Although many Namibian participants considered individual privacy to be the right to keep "one's stuff" secret, privacy within the broader Namibian community is regarded as

non-existent because everybody already knows quite a bit about other community. Namibian FG participants further mentioned that Facebook solicits private information by asking questions such as “what is on your mind”. Participants indicated that this influences whether, what, and how they post content on Facebook and how they interpret other people’s postings.

For US FG and survey participants, individual privacy means that one needs to exercise control in sharing one’s personal life experiences, attitudes, and images. US participants generally felt that privacy does not exist on Facebook because it is on the Internet and this means it is ultimately open to everyone. An important point of contrast is that US participants were more likely to say they would self censor content, which is different than how Namibians approach posting content. Consistent with Aquisti and Gross (2006), we found that almost all US participants reported that they post their real name on their Facebook profiles (Table 8). However, similar to previous research, US participants indicated that they do open multiple profiles or use aliases to separate their social and professional identity and avoid unwanted viewing (Skeels & Grudin, 2009; Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). We found that users tended to suppress their date of birth more than in earlier studies; that is, in our study it decreased from 87.7% (Aquisti & Gross, 2006) and 92% (Young & Quan-Haase, 2009) to 72% (Table 8), which may be due to fears of identity theft.

As noted above, US participants do not routinely update privacy settings explicitly but, rather, they manage privacy mindfully. Only 43% of the US participants surveyed updated their privacy settings while 54% of Namibians regularly do so. However, 53% of the US survey participants updated their privacy setting when looking for or after finding a job and they frequently mentioned that self-censorship, updating privacy settings, friend-cleansing, clearing old posts and photos, or recreating their profile was associated with updating their “professional appearance” on Facebook. No Namibian participants indicated that they engaged in such activity when they sought or after they found employment. Very few Namibian FG participants thought that employers should or would scan Facebook or they speculated that even if they did engage in scanning that they probably would already know about much of what they would find.

| Real information posted   | US  | Namibia |
|---|-----|---------|
| Name  | 96% | 79%     |
| Email   | 61% | 79%     |
| Cell phone  | 37% | 46%     |
| Address   | 10% | 45%     |
| DOB   | 72% | 56%     |
| Religion  | 52% | 85%     |
| Politics  | 36% | 43%     |
| Home Address  | 71% | 71%     |
| Current Address   | 79% | 69%     |
| Language  | 72% | 89%     |
| Education   | 91% | 79%     |
| Employer  | 72% | 57%     |
| Relationship status   | 73% | 36%     |
| Partner name  | 62% | 67%     |
| <i>Table 8: Real information posted (or any information posted)</i> |     |         |

Namibian participants rarely changed their partnership status because relationships can be complex (e.g., some Namibian ethnic groups practice polygamy). However, Namibian FG participants felt that relationships are private and would not update their relationship status, but they would often described this topic as being something they thought is public information. On the other hand, male participants from the US said that females insist on having the relationship status posted to their profiles, but males do not care about it. A US participant named Tony summarized a sentiment commonly expressed when he noted, “*it is not official until you put it on Facebook.*” This is similar to other research that has shown that relationship status updates are important for US users and can also cause problems, but our results also show that these patterns of use by US participants don’t necessarily extend to other cultural settings (e.g., see Fox, Osbord, & Warber, 2014)

Both the US and Namibian FG participants indicated that sex talk, naked pictures, and HIV/Aids status did not belong on Facebook, although Namibian participants were slightly less concerned about this topic. A US participant named Tom captured the sentiment of many in his group when he said,

*I know a few guys in the past [who posted naked pictures], I was like, really, you are an idiot, I had immediately reported them.*

Namibian participants did not like to see postings of explicit content. Based on discussions of sexuality and relationships with Namibian participants, we think that it would be unlikely that Namibians would report such activity due to social norms.

The chief concern of US FG participants that was commonly voiced related to employers' activities and particularly the sense that they felt that it was an invasion of privacy when employers check on prospective candidates' Facebook profiles. Participants felt that because Facebook is perceived to be both a private and public space, there is no expectation of privacy. Furthermore, they frequently noted that although settings might be restricted to friends only, nothing is really private on Facebook. Participants also discussed how they became passive users whereby they engage in self-censorship. For example, they said they would not post or tag anything on Facebook that will violate their own privacy. This self-censorship is likely one of the primary reasons that US participants indicated that they did not actively manage privacy settings on Facebook. FG participants from the US only mentioned employer activity, politics, and religion as being topics that are not appropriate for Facebook.

Many of the reasons for these differences are likely due to the increased scanning behavior exhibited by employers in Western countries. On several occasions, employers have asked prospective and current employees to hand over their Facebook login credentials to employers, and only six US states have enacted legislation to prohibit such practices (Kerr, 2013). Nevertheless, stories such as this are salient and, as a result, many individuals in the US indicated that they have begun to use Facebook profile pages as tools for presenting career information, organizational connections, for self-promotion, and for identity management (see Eftekhar, Fullwood, & Morris, 2014; Frampton & Child, 2013; Lee, Kim, & Ahn, 2014). In other words, many users have recognized the importance of using Facebook for managing their professional as well as personal identities and, as a result, engaged in identity management using the site.

#### *4.5. Photos and Identity Performance*

For Namibian FG participants, photos are a very important aspect of identity performance. In fact, most participants indicated that they dislike it when users have faceless profiles, cartoons, or celebrity pictures depicted as their profile picture. The number of photos uploaded depends on the type of cellphone the user possesses; smartphone users post many more pictures than do users of less sophisticated phones. Most profile photos of Namibians as well as other posted photos are usually highly staged and stylized so that the individual is represented in a flattering manner (i.e., a "polished" pose). This finding is similar to what Zhao and Gonglue (2011) found for Chinese users. Frequently, participants indicated that they would see posts of people near their valued items, such as their village, car, or their cattle (i.e., cattle represent a symbol of prestige and wealth in some Namibian ethnic groups). Namibian participant Belinda noted,

*Some would actually upload photos to show off what they just most recently bought, sometimes it is not even true, they just go into OTB [shop] and take pictures of a nice dress... or car..., [and post] 'ah, I just bought this one'.*

Self-portrait photos (i.e., “selfies”) were not considered to be self-centered and, instead, posing for Facebook pictures is deemed as a regular or normal activity (Peters, Oren & Bidwell, 2012).

FG participants indicated that a person will not be trusted if he or she is “faceless” (i.e., they display no profile picture). Most Namibian participants did not think that other people would Photoshop their pictures. This was highlighted by Namibian participant Mbuenga who said, “*It’s the ultimate truth [photos on Facebook].*” Pictures were generally seen as serving as evidence that you were where you said you were or had what you said you had. Tagging is also a useful feature to establish the person’s character or whereabouts or to prove that they were not unfaithful in a relationship. Nevertheless, participants indicated that there were important norms about commenting on photos. Specifically, positive commenting on photos is important because it serves as external validation; however, negative commenting on pictures is not tolerated because it is thought to reflect directly on the character or reputation of the individuals represented in the photo. The FG participants from the US do not place as much emphasis on stylized or polished “selfies” and indicated that pictures mostly serve as a reminder for the person that you are with or at an event; therefore, ad lib group photos are the most common photos reported to be uploaded. This confirms earlier findings by Zhao and Gonglue (2011) that US social media users tend to upload more group pictures as opposed to Chinese users who uploaded many polished solo images. Most male participants expressed a dislike for “mirror pictures” or selfies, and these were seen as self-centered and a “female activity.” US participant Josh said:

*No offence, but when people are constantly taking pictures of themselves in mirrors and stuff like that... I can't stand it, I hate it, it is so self-centered...<sup>6</sup>*

Photos are reported to be an important aspect of the Facebook experience for US users and albums are often created for reminiscence. This was expressed well by US participant Deshaun who stated,

*I had it [Facebook] since 2006, so I go back and look at it and it is almost like a photo album. I can look back and see how things used to be. You see old pictures of your friends and you get to reminisce on past things.”*

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<sup>6</sup> A bit of a selfie craze has arisen in the US in the early part of 2014; however, these data were collected prior to 2014.

#### 4.6. Religion and Politics

Our survey results show that 50% of Namibian survey participants post religious opinions or information while only 25% of US participants are comfortable posting content related to religion. In general, the US FG participants indicated that they avoid posting religious thoughts because they recognize that their friends are of a variety of different faiths and they fear it may offend others or they may be viewed as judgmental. Also, many respondents expressed the opinion that religion and politics should be avoided in public discourse (e.g., at the dinner table). Given that Facebook is seen as a public space, they felt that religious and political discussions should be avoided. Namibian FG participants indicated that they generally do not comment negatively on religious posts, but they either ignore such posts or indicated that they like the post. The differences in attitudes about religious expression in the two countries is likely due to different historical perspectives on religion as well as broader trends related to religious expression present in each society. Up to 90% of Namibians describe themselves as Christian (The World Bank, 2015) and an overall respect for religious practices can be observed in everyday activities and discourse.

The results for politics run in the opposite direction to that of the attitudes about religion, with 17% of Namibian survey participants saying they are comfortable posting political ideas versus almost a quarter (24%) of the US group. The focus group discussions, however, were not entirely consistent with the survey findings because most US participants indicated that they avoided posting political thoughts on Facebook. The increased openness to politics appearing in the survey results might be due to the fact that data were collected at a time close to the US Presidential election; however, it may also be the case that people are more willing to express attitudes about politics in a written format compared to in an open focus group discussion. In general, Namibian participants indicated that they felt like they had more freedom on Facebook to openly express opinions, speak their mind, and use like buttons to agree with controversial political topics. Many Namibian FG participants indicated that they discussed controversial government decisions or proclamations intensively on Facebook and that this was an extension of their level of comfort with discussing such topics openly in the real world. Namibia enjoys a multi-party democracy with presidential elections held every five years. However, Namibia has had one majority ruling party since its independence in 1990, with a few opposition parties struggling to position themselves. Most participants in both countries indicated that any reservations they had came from their perceptions about how peers would react rather than from oversight by governing bodies.

#### 4.7. Baby births

About 33% of Namibians survey participants have seen newborn baby pictures and posted a comment. These types of pictures generate much controversy because of cultural practices, as a Namibian named Tuhafeni explained,

*In our culture we are not allowed to see, I mean to see the baby, those who are not very close are not allowed to see the baby for a certain period of time, I'm not quite sure, but I'm like, my younger sister, when she was born, I hate to see her first on Facebook, that was when she was uhm... I only saw it [the photo of the newborn] on Facebook when it was uploaded by my mother and sister, but there were comments, only positive comments, yes, but from a cultural background, it is not very good, because the baby is not allowed to be seen by any other people for at least two weeks or three weeks.*

Traditionally, in many ethnic groups, newborn babies may only be seen by certain immediate family members and are expected to stay inside the house and out of sight for a certain period of time. Once this period has ended, babies are taken outside and viewed by relatives and friends. This event of taking the baby outside and showing him/her off is considered to be quite an important event and, in fact, the event is usually accompanied by a celebration. No pictures of the newborn baby are usually taken nor would they be shared in congratulatory notices in the newspapers or other public venues, except in white Namibian cultural practices. Participants indicated that they expected almost anyone older than 30 years of age in their communities would generally have a negative view of the public display of newborns.

Attitudes about newborn baby pictures were starkly different among US participants. Most US participants reported that they liked to see and, in fact, expected to see newborn baby pictures displayed on Facebook. For example, this is illustrated with US participant John's comment,

*A lot of people like to see babies too, so it is kinda a two-way street I mean like especially relatives, friends, they like to see every moment of it but they can't be around it."*

Similar to findings by Ammari and colleagues (Ammari, Kumar, Lape and Schoenebeck ,2015), US participants did note that nude baby pictures are not well received as Kelly explained, "One of my friends had a baby boy and they had a picture of him naked. I just thought that was a little inappropriate" Nevertheless, the perspective held by every US respondent was that they not only tolerated but also expected pictures of babies to be

displayed on Facebook and that they expected this would be the case for people in both older and younger age groups.

#### 4.8. Deaths

The results of the survey indicate that both Namibians and US participants thought that Facebook was useful in updating others about the death of a loved one, acquaintance, or celebrity. Specifically, Facebook was identified as the third most commonly used method to conduct discussions or post updates about death (Table 9). Namibian participants indicated that a designated family member usually does all the notifications and information is also distributed via radio. Death notification on Facebook takes four forms: a) on the deceased's wall, b) on the bereaved family member's wall, c) on their own wall, and d) as a private message.

| Deaths   | US  | Namibia |
|--|-----|---------|
| Call   | 55% | 29%     |
| Visit in person  | 23% | 21%     |
| Facebook   | 23% | 17%     |
| Text/SMS   | 19% | 7%      |
| Card   | 7%  | 2%      |
| Email  | 6%  | 5%      |
| <i>Table 9: How do you notify about deaths? (open-ended)</i> |     |         |

Surprisingly, the vast majority of participants in both cultures indicated that Facebook was both effective and efficient in distributing information about a death. For example, 79% of Namibians and 92% of US survey participants indicated that Facebook had evolved over the time they had used it and that they had recognized and seen a change in how death notifications are exchanged. Specifically, they thought that Facebook use for death notifications was good because it gave people the ability to reach family and friends more quickly, that they could be better informed about the deceased and the family, that they could more easily offer condolences, and that it allowed them to better express their emotions and grief. Nevertheless, both groups saw both an upside and a downside to the immediacy of death notifications. Namibian participant Paulina summed the negative aspect of death notifications on Facebook as follows,

*Maybe they should create something that can just stop all the death notices that are coming on Facebook, cause it is not good just to go on Facebook and you say: 'eto [Namibian expression], when last did I speak to Hanna?' and then you just see: 'in memory of Hanna we do what, whatever...', like hallo, what happened, it is not good like that. It's really not a good thing.*



Similarly, a US participant named Tony noted,

*I was disappointed it [the death] happened like an hour earlier and I mean you don't expect to get a phone call, you should at least give like 12 hours for something like that, but when it is so immediate on Facebook, you are just like, ah... well, I guess, I don't want to say it is nice to know sooner like someone told you, it gets to you faster than a phone call, but it is really impersonal and it kinda ticks you off when it happens.*

In general, even though death is a perceived to be an emotionally taxing and negative topic, we found that most people recognized that Facebook could be used to help the family and to deal with their own grief by sharing information and communicating with others. In many respects, the Facebook environment functions similarly to the way a wake functions wherein participants convene to comfort the family, share remembrances with friends and family, and engage in shows of emotion and grief.

#### 4.9. Careers/Employers

Despite the fact that there were no explicit questions about employers included in the survey or in the focus groups, US FG participants discussed the topic spontaneously. Many US FG participants expressed anger with employer activities on Facebook because they felt that the environment was no longer a fun space and that they had to alter their Facebook behavior. A US participant named Robert summed up some of the sentiment expressed as follows,

*I think that it is a huge invasion of privacy. Employers have done it for 6,000 years without having Facebook and I think they can keep going without it, because they do not need to know every personal detail about you. And I think what employers need to know is what they can do a background check on. And is where I will leave it. Employers have no room there. Law enforcement that is a different story, I mean I think they can get into your Facebook if they really need to, but I think employers need to stay out of it.*

Similarly, a US participant named Joceline participant added,

*I think employers should refrain from asking you for your password or even adding you as a friend in a lot of cases as well. Because I'd like to keep my personal life private. I feel like just because of my worries, I refrain from like taking a lot of photos or any photos at clubs or parties because I am so afraid of who will see my pictures. So, in a way I feel like it limits my privacy.*

Heather also noted,

*I think I've been solely Facebook renovating over the past couple of years by changing my name and things like that. Unfortunately Facebook's privacy settings are harder to figure out. It's not like you can just do it with a single click. Everything is in a different location, it's really frustrating. But definitely jobs and I know that when we entered this program [summer project], I changed my name back to my real name so that I can find people, but then I switched it to like a nickname so that employers or like someone looking for me can't necessarily find me. It's just, it's my personal life I have with my friends and so I keep... so I don't have my phone around there and I use an email that I don't use that often. Over the next like year or two with like grad school and things like that, I'll clean it up a lot more. Just because more people will be looking for it or having unnecessary information I guess.*

As illustrated by these comments, the negative attitudes about employer activities on Facebook largely stem from the perception of FG participants that Facebook is primarily a social site and, therefore, the use of the site by employers for background checks and placement activities was perceived to be out of bounds. This is illustrated by the usage rates for Facebook for career activities. Specifically, 36% of Namibian participants used Facebook to find a job while only 13% of US participants used it for this purpose. The lower US use of Facebook for job searches is accounted for by the fact that the majority of US participants indicated that they were using LinkedIn rather than Facebook for career purposes. Joceline explained the role of LinkedIn:

*I feel that LinkedIn has kinda helped. I feel that most employers are shifting towards adding people on LinkedIn rather than Facebook. It's like how I'm using LinkedIn.*

Interestingly, many US participants indicated that they viewed Facebook as being the “fun” place while LinkedIn was for business and, as a result, they liked keeping the roles these two environments had distinct. This attitude about the purpose of each site may help to explain why US users were more concerned about employer use of Facebook. It is interesting to consider the lack of concern expressed by Namibians in light of their perspectives on privacy and their expectation that everyone knows about you already. In this light, separating out career and personal information would likely be less relevant because most Namibians considered their postings on Facebook to already be public knowledge. This is reinforced by the finding that 53% of US participants updated their privacy settings after finding a job, but no Namibian participants engaged in this behavior.

## 5. General Discussion of the Interplay between Cultural Practices and Facebook Usage

In order to address our research question, we examined how Facebook usage is influenced by and influences cultural practices in Namibia. We consider US users to be the baseline when looking at cultural differences between these two groups because the Facebook platform was designed in and for users operating within Western culture. In what follows, we offer a general discussion of our observations about the findings from the data collection and analyses.

### 5.1. Deviations between off-line and on-line cultural practices

Facebook use in Namibia seems to both be reflecting as well as influencing deeply rooted cultural practices. For example, although Namibians generally respect and maintain high power distance with, for example, elders (e.g. parents, older relatives, village elders, etc.) who they interact with in the real world, many of these social norms break down on Facebook. On the one hand, elders wish to maintain these distances, but at the same time they want to communicate with, for example, their sons or daughters who are separated while at the university. As a result, elders are often willing to be labeled as “friends” and subject themselves to the rules of “who requested whom” because they are driven by the basic utilitarian purpose of communication. An important point here is that the structure of Facebook, which was developed in and for a culture where high power distance is not necessarily respected or maintained, is changing the relations and structures in a non-Western country. This is consistent with findings by Asemah and colleagues (Asemah, Ekhaeafu and Olaniran, 2013) who observed similar findings in Nigeria. For example, many of our participants indicated that they commonly befriended their parents and other elders from villages. As they do so, we speculate that the labels and rules that are applied online will influence real-world behaviors (e.g., labeling one’s parents as “friends” in the real world).

Another example relates to major deviations in socio-cultural behaviors related to taboos that were reported by Namibian FG participants. For example, conversations that were generally considered by Namibian participants to be taboo in off-line dialog were reported to be commonly and openly discussed on Facebook. Talk of sexually explicit content, nude pictures, and HIV/Aids status were the leading topics that participants did not engage in offline (and often said they disliked on Facebook); yet, many Namibian FG participants said they observed and sometimes actively engaged in discussions of these topics on Facebook. Some participants blamed Facebook for this behavior because Facebook often posed questions such as “what are you doing,” “what are you thinking,” etc. This suggested to these participants that these solicitations for information about their behaviors deserved “honest” responses, which often were inclusive of intimate and pejorative content.

US participants also seemingly experienced a behavioral change in how they engaged with others on Facebook in comparison to their offline encounters. According to Hofstede (2014), the US is considered to be an open free-speech community, where members are expected to feel free to express themselves openly. However, participants related how they previously considered Facebook to be a fun space where they could express themselves openly, but it had recently changed such that they suppressed their true feelings, behaviors, and their “inner self.” Our interviews with US FG participants suggests that this is largely due to employer activities and, secondarily, to a diversification of the user base (e.g., “my Grandma is online”) that caused them to keep their profiles “clean” (i.e. they controlled how much activity show on their profiles). US FG participants frequently indicated that they would open multiple profiles or use aliases to circumvent employers and family from seeing their private information. Another behavioral change that US participants indicated was more common is the desire for smaller friend circles on Facebook, such as only including close friends and family. US FG participants attributed this change in behavior, at least in part, to increased ownership of smartphones, which makes Facebook browsing easier but, at the same time, it leads to excessive usage and a persistent online presence. With an increased exposure to Facebook, participants reached an oversaturation of postings, especially from non-close acquaintances. Another reason for this change was that they did not want to appear “fake”, which implies that they become friends with someone with whom they have no ties in real-life. They also thought that small talk and minute details about an individual made them feel awkward because it often made them feel like they knew too much about what was going on in other peoples’ lives. Thus we observed that a re-adjustment of friendship relations between the on-line and off-line world was taking place over time.

### *5.2. Cultural practices were influenced on Facebook and extended to the offline world*

As noted, the posting of newborn baby pictures on Facebook contradicts cultural practices of several Namibian ethnic groups; thus, it was surprising to see that similar Facebook behaviors would not only become accepted online but also translate into similar behaviors off-line. The majority of FG participants did not agree with posting such pictures and some felt that this new behavior was largely due to western cultural influences (i.e., seeing Western friends or acquaintances publicly displaying baby photos). We believe that this conduct in Namibia is driven largely by the desire to connect and share photos with older relatives who are in remote villages. Interestingly, this is the same reason that many older adults in the US join Facebook (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012). Moreover, some Namibian participants indicated that they observed a trend associated with people increasingly being willing to display newborn babies openly and with little protection for the baby against the “strange winds” that are present in the city. Several FG participants indicated that they believed this to be the result of observing Western Facebook users posting photos of themselves or others who are in public with newborn babies. For

example, when this topic was brought up by a participant during a FG, a Namibian named Anna remarked, “...now that’s the western influence.” Although participants attributed this to Facebook, we need to consider the multiple influences Namibians are exposed to such as urbanization and public media (e.g., Western television, international news, and Western movies). Nevertheless, while these and other influences do exist, we expect that Facebook reinforces these behaviors by highlighting when other Namibians are engaging in such behavior online. As such behavior proliferates amongst Namibians online, it would likely break down taboos related to offline behaviors.

### 5.3. *The offline world’s culture extended to Facebook*

Namibian participants have extended to Facebook communication behaviors that they also engage in on other media such as radio, television, newspapers, and public meetings. A number of offline social rules have been incorporated into Facebook usage. For example, Namibians indicated that most posts on Facebook are in English because they want to accommodate those who do not speak their native language and this was considered to be the polite thing to do. A similar pattern with speaking English in the public sphere is observed in everyday face-to-face conversations. Namibians do not commonly engage in language code-switching, but will only post in their native language when directly addressing speakers of the same ethnic group on matters pertaining to their group. This is reflective not only of cultural attitudes but also because of the need to effectively communicate within a multi-cultural society.

As alluded to above, the concept of a Facebook friendship is often thought to be controversial in Namibia because it does not conform to offline power relations that are deeply embedded in Namibian culture. Nevertheless, we observed that new hierarchical power structures and rules seemed to be introduced to compensate for the lack of “friend” and power relation differentiation (Peters, Winschiers-Theophilus & Mecnecke, 2013). For example, Namibian FG participants mentioned that Facebook does not report on who requested whom as friend, but that status is attached to the friendship afterwards. Friend requestees have certain privileges in the friendship such as being free to speak their mind without the requestor commenting or reprimanding since the requestor sought out the relationship. As is the case in many cultures, status is also made evident based on the number of friendship requests an individual receives.

For Namibian FG participants, several status indicators are derived merely because one uses Facebook. The use of Facebook and the Internet more broadly suggests that the user is technologically savvy and this is often emphasized by users who make certain that the name of a more expensive or prestigious phone is displayed when making a post. As a result, people often borrow other people’s phones for making status updates so that they can

“borrow” the brand of the phone for their own benefit. This association with status is reflective of behaviors in the offline world that demonstrate status and wealth (e.g., displays related to the number of animals owned or the nature of one’s property) and these displays play a significant role in social interactions both offline and online.

For US participants, there were fewer examples raised by FG participants or survey respondents of extensions of the offline world to Facebook (appropriation). There may be a number of reasons for this, but the overarching reason likely relates to the fact that Facebook was designed as a monolithic tool specifically for US users and, as a result, it was meant to parallel behaviors in the real world. Of course, we know that people almost always appropriate technologies in ways that extend the technology beyond its original design parameters; yet, it is likely that the closer alignment of Facebook with the culture of US participants made these appropriations less necessary and less salient to participants.

However, we suggest that there is something we label as the *expressive privacy paradox*, which occurs among US users because while it seems as if Facebook users are less concerned with updating their privacy settings they, at the same time, practice self-censorship. This self-censorship is enacted because US users perceive Facebook to be a public space and, as a result, they have few expectations of privacy. This finding is important in that it shows that the privacy paradox that has been discussed for much of the last decade (e.g., Barnes, 2006; Awad & Krishnan, 2006) needs to be reinterpreted in terms of the evolving attitudes about privacy held by the Net Generation. Specifically, our findings are consistent with prior research that shows that users are reluctant to manage privacy settings, but they differ in that our respondents indicate that they are aware of the lack of privacy on the Internet. A decade ago, many users expressed “surprise” when the information they posted online became public; these results suggest that this naiveté is less prevalent today and that users are fully aware of the transparency of Internet postings. As a result, they are much more likely to manage their online behaviors more carefully. This is consistent with other research on posting behavior that show that external influencers like parents change user attitudes about and behaviors associated with privacy management (Feng & Xie, 2014). Our results show that other socialization agents include past interactions with career advisors and anticipated future interactions with prospective employers.

## 6. Limitations

While we think there are many findings in this research that are relevant to understanding differences between the Namibian and US cultures, the results only pertain to our participant sample. We did not include all of Namibia’s ethnic groups, and our sample was limited to mostly college students, so these results should be interpreted given

the nature of the population we studied. Similarly, because the data from US participants were collected from a Midwestern university in a state with a largely Caucasian population, our US sample may not be representative of other regions or students in the US.

## 7. Conclusion

In summary, our findings suggest that Facebook usage does influence and is influenced by cultural practices, but social media can be designed to influence and extend positive societal values like staying connected with family and friends, encouraging the intercultural learning and tolerance which results from having diverse friends.

We took a broad look at the cultural and attitudinal factors by aggregating Namibian and US participants into homogeneous groups. We expect that as we take a closer look at specific cultural practices and norms held by different ethnic populations, we will see additional interesting differences in appropriation and use and we also expect that the translation of online attitudes and behaviors to offline settings will not be uniform. As a result, we expect that a closer examination of Facebook content in relation to different ethnic groups and cultures around the world will uncover interesting and important cultural influences on use and behavior on Facebook.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Outline of major topic areas in the online survey**

- 1) Instructions and informed consent**
- 2) Social networking site use and access**
- 3) Social networking site use and offline social networks**
  - a) Domicile (places previously lived, news sources and frequency of contact)
  - b) Familial relations and contact on social networking sites
- 4) Closeness to family and home communities**
- 5) Introduction to Facebook: Motivations for joining and deactivation**
- 6) Facebook access: frequency of use and devices**
- 7) Friending activities**
  - a) Number of friends/family/strangers & acceptance criteria
  - b) Unfriending activities: (unfriending/restricting/blocking activities & criteria)
- 8) Activities on Facebook (posting frequency, activities, language of posting)**
- 9) Perspectives of privacy**
  - a) Individual and community definitions of privacy and changes in perspectives

- b) Maintaining privacy settings on Facebook
- c) Displaying real information including relationships on Facebook

### **10) Perspectives of life-change events**

- a) Perspectives of sharing about births & deaths (individual & community)
- b) Facebook, births and death expressions
- c) Facebook and pets
- d) Religion and Politics
- e) Perspectives about career moves (changing privacy and networks after jobs)

### **11) Design implications (features desired to be changed or added)**

### **12) Demographics**

### **13) Collectivism/Individualism scale**

### **14) Social Desirability scale**